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“The Sweetest Savor”: Active Male Penetrators and Societal Anxieties in Arthurian Legend

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

The expected gender dichotomy of medieval European heterosexual relationships was simple. There was an active male penetrator and a passive female acceptor. This dichotomy is supported by court records from late medieval France, analyzed by Joseph Roelens, in which two women are put on trial for female sodomy and much importance is placed on the masculine character of one woman and the submissiveness of the other. In this paper, I examine two different stories from Arthurian Legend, Sir Thomas Malory’s “Morte d’Arthur” and Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Wife’s Prologue and Tale” from *The Canterbury Tales*, that depict sexual relationships between the main male and female characters that function within the social norm of the gender dichotomy. In doing so, I argue that these stories use this active and passive gender dichotomy in an attempt to police men’s actions in their sexual relationships with women. I chose to examine these stories because they demonstrate the societal importance placed on this gender dichotomy in a very concrete way. The men in these stories who refuse to become passive, Sir Lancelot being the most prominent among them, are willing to sacrifice not only their life, but the life of the women they love (whether or not the women agree with this decision), in order to avoid breaking the gender dichotomy.

Keywords

medieval poetry, English literature, gender and sexuality studies, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Wife of Bath*, Sir Thomas Malory, Arthuriana

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On August 18, 1618, Maerten van Ghewelde, a man on death row for horse trafficking, confessed that his wife, Mayken de Brauwere, had been seduced by a woman named Magdaleene who, not coincidentally, was considered a hermaphrodite by community members. "This trial would last almost two years and bring to light a structure of "traditional gender hierarchies in which women were supposed to submit passively to an active male penetrator," which were standard in medieval communities like the one Magdaleene was forced out of under penalty of the gallows (Roelens 17). For the courts to make sense of the women's relationship, attention is brought frequently to Magdaleene's "masculine character" as well Mayken's ability to appear "submissive and somewhat naïve" (Roelens 19). Even sexual relationships that didn't involve men were couched as having an active male penetrator and a passive (and submissive) female acceptor. Although this case was recorded and took place in France, the precedent set is still applicable to medieval English romances of the period due to the cultural connection between France and England—namely, that England was under the rule of a French court.

This connection is made clear by comparison to the gender dichotomy illuminated by Sir Thomas Malory's "Morte d'Arthur" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The court case described above took place in the seventeenth century while the two tales come from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, respectively. These differences in time period show the breadth and duration of this gendered hierarchy within medieval English society. By extension, both of these stories and the court case teach their audiences what will happen to their communities if the expected gender hierarchy is challenged; particularly, what will happen if men abuse their privilege to become the passive partner in their sexual relationships with women. Male characters either become passive in their sexual relationships with women as a punishment for abusing their active roles, or face punishment for willingly giving them up. I argue that Arthurian Legend and Chaucerian poetry use this active and passive gender dichotomy in an attempt to police the range of socially acceptable male behavior in their sexual relationships with women.

King Arthur and the Disco Inferno

In Sir Thomas Malory's "Morte d'Arthur," Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere attest to Jonas Roelens's traditional gender hierarchies. The first people to know about the affair between the knight and the Queen are Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred; they are the driving force behind the reveal: "Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred had ever a privy hate unto the Queen, Dame Guinevere, and to Sir Lancelot, and daily and nightly they ever watched upon Sir Lancelot" (Malory 536). Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred are harboring "privy" (secret) hate of the Queen and Sir Lancelot, which leads them to tell the other knights what they suspect. At the beginning of the line detailing Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred's decision, the blame (and therefore the hatred) appears to be placed evenly on both parties. Sara McDougall suggests that this traditional gender dichotomy creates a perceived double-standard against adulterers in medieval France. Of this active/passive structure, McDougall observes "masculinity and masculine roles in Christian society cast men as the active, responsible parties in sex and in marriage" (208). Roelens and McDougall suggest that in Arthuriana, the man was understood by readers as the responsible, active member of a sexual relationship; this would explain why Sir Lancelot is watched daily and nightly, rather than Queen Guinevere: he is the instigator of the affair whereas she would be passively submitting to it.

This dichotomy of agency provided conventions that medieval audiences may have expected to encounter in the story of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. Those assumptions would have been reinforced by the legal structure of medieval France. Following court records from this, scholars have found it was a commonly upheld ideology that "a husband [should] have responsibility for his wife and himself. Whether a husband committed adultery or his wife did, the blame lay with the husband" (McDougall 208). This structure was extended to court cases concerning sexual

relationships that didn't include a male partner at all, like Mayken and Magdaleene's. Not only was a woman's role understood as a passive one, but if a married woman was to transgress these expectations, she was seen as particularly aberrant and a threat to the social order of medieval Europe's communities.

The story of Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot's affair continues to reinforce the active male, passive female dichotomy. After King Arthur leaves the castle, Sir Lancelot acts as Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred expected. He sneaks off into the night and the other knights find him and the Queen in her bedchamber. The knights do what they believe is right and threaten to kill Sir Lancelot, a member of their *comitatus*. While they listen to the commotion outside, the Queen tries in vain to save her lover's life even though she has no armor or weapons to aid him in the fight: "I would that they would take me and slay me and suffer [allow] you to escape" (Malory 540). Sir Lancelot does not know how to participate passively, and so responds to her proposition "God defend me from such a shame!" (Malory 540). Queen Guinevere makes an effort to reach outside of her passive role to save the man she loves, but Sir Lancelot immediately positions her back into it. He aligns himself with the very knights who are trying to kill him in this moment and stands firmly as the active member in their relationship. He will sacrifice himself or be victorious while she will stay in the room, wait to be taken, and then again wait to hopefully be rescued by her lover. In essence, Queen Guinevere attempts to save Sir Lancelot but the gender dichotomy is deemed so important that Sir Lancelot would rather sacrifice both his life and the Queen's if that means he could avoid undermining this social norm.

In order for King Arthur to avoid the blame that would have been placed on other husbands, like Maerten, he had to become the passive member of his relationship. Shortly after Sir Lancelot escapes, Queen Guinevere is scheduled to be burned alive for her betrayal of the King:

And then the Queen was led forth without [outside] Carlisle, and anon she was dispoiled [undressed down to] into her smock. And then her ghostly father [priest] was brought to her to be shriven of her misdeeds [confessed of her sins]. Then was there weeping and wailing and wringing of hands of many lords and ladies. (Malory 542)

Because his wife is being punished for her betrayal, King Arthur may appear to be maintaining his active role. Queen Guinevere is suffering for her own sins, however, while King Arthur remains untouched, placing him firmly in the passive role. As further proof of this change, the King makes his own family retrieve Queen Guinevere: "Dear nephew, I pray you make ready in your best armor with your brethren . . . to bring my Queen to the fire, there to have her judgement and receive the death" (Malory 541). This avoidance of action also seems to point to a larger political concern during this time period. As the ruler of a kingdom, it is King Arthur's job to organize and maintain a system for defending his people from harm, so he is defeating his own reason to exist by not protecting Queen Guinevere. This lack of punishment for the husband may also indicate that the King was above the law that would apply to someone like Maerten, which is inherently concerning for the community as a whole. Imagine what it means if a King cannot be bound by the laws he has created and sworn to uphold.

He's not a Knight, he's a Saint

Dependent upon the agency dichotomy of passive-active in sexual relationships is the social priority of virginity as a measure of both sexual and moral purity in Arthuriana. In a Christianized medieval England, it was a commonly held belief that not only could someone lose their virginity without having sexual intercourse, but that they could also regain their spiritual virginity despite this penetration (Harvey 275). While this phenomenon didn't just apply to the religious men of the

church, it did have a special connotation for clergymen. Later in "Morte d'Arthur," at the time of Queen Guinevere's death, Sir Lancelot has been a priest for about a year. Her death literally kills him: "when Sir Bors and his fellows came to his bed, they found him stark dead. And he lay as he had smiled, and the sweetest savor [smell] about him that ever they felt" (Malory 552). Sir Lancelot could have decided to become a priest to atone for his adultery, but he also could have taken the vow out of guilt for the lives he took, specifically the lives of his fellow knights. He could have also chosen this life as a way to work towards Queen Guinevere's forgiveness for his abandonment of her after his escape.

The smell of Sir Lancelot's body may seem like an odd detail to include, but it holds particular meaning for the audiences of the time. In this moment, the craft techniques of hagiographers (writers of religious biographies) were appropriated by those who recorded Arthuriana and secular, popular tales. While the knight turned priest may not be rotting, Sir Lancelot is very dead. Yet, he smells pleasant. As Katherine Harvey explains:

The condition of a corpse was believed to reflect the individual's conduct during his lifetime; rapid decay was indicative of sin, whereas bodily incorruption (especially when accompanied by the appearance of vast quantities of a sweet-smelling, oily liquid called balsam) was thought to reflect sexual purity. (281)

This was so important that hagiographers tried their best to show that their subjects were virgins, including vivid descriptions of the state of the body while it was being observed before burial (Harvey 278). Similarly, Sir Lancelot is said to not only smell fragrant, but that while his body remained under observation, there was no decomposition (Malory 552). By implying this kind of sexual purity through smell, Sir Lancelot has managed to regain his spiritual virginity between the time of his affair and his death.

The two men in Queen Guinevere's life betrayed her by becoming passive in different ways. King Arthur's passivity comes in the form of his absence at his wife's attempted burning. Sir Lancelot's is the abandonment of her after he fights his way out of the bedchamber. Because of their passivity in these moments and the active and passive system upheld in medieval courts, the reader is to understand that Sir Lancelot and King Arthur are to blame for Queen Guinevere's death. The main differences between their two instances of passivity have one defining difference: the absolution of blame. Sir Lancelot, as a new priest, manages to absolve himself of any blame by becoming a man of God and reclaiming his sexual purity. He regains his spiritual virginity by taking responsibility for his part in the Queen's death. It is Sir Lancelot who makes sure his lover's body is properly prepared and buried. After Sir Lancelot is symbolically forgiven through his death, the King is then left to assume all of the blame. This is the aspect of male sexuality that needs policing, the act of taking responsibility for one's actions. King Arthur's subsequent death and lack of absolution works to show male audiences that this is, in fact, a cautionary tale about the consequences of men remaining passive and not claiming responsibility for what they have done.

The Wife of Bath Strikes Back

A relationship that upends the traditional active and passive gender dichotomy is that of Alisoun, the Wife of Bath, and her fifth (and most recent) husband, Janekin. In *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, Alisoun gives a lengthy prologue about her different marriages before telling her tale while on pilgrimage. Her prologue ends with the description of a scene of marital violence. Janekin hits her hard enough in the head that she is now deaf in one ear. When she hits the ground, she pretends to be dead and claims that he must have murdered her for her land (that she inherited after the death of her previous husbands) which causes Janekin to quickly kneel beside her and begin apologizing. He

does attempt to blame her for the assault after the apology, saying

Dere suster Alisoun,
As help me God, I shal thee nevere smite.
That I have doon, it is thyself to wite [blame] (Chaucer ll. 810–12)

In doing so, Janekin goads his wife to take an active half of the fight. This would allow him to remain the passive and guiltless party in the act of violence. This fails, as it must because it disrupts the gender dichotomy, but eventually Alisoun says that:

We fille accorded by us selven two.
He yaf me al the bridel in myn hand,
To han the governance of hous and land,
And of his tonge and his hand also (Chaucer ll. 818–21)

At the end of this exchange, Alisoun has gained personal sovereignty. As Janekin has given up his active role in order to appease his passive wife, she has control over her his land, material possessions, and his actions. Janekin must appeal to the passive woman he is in a sexual relationship with, much like Sir Lancelot and King Arthur. He must take responsibility for what he has done—even though his actions are not sexual in nature—the same as Sir Lancelot, and also make a gesture to Alisoun to be fully forgiven. In this case of nonsexual action, the gesture has monetary value, unlike Sir Lancelot's more symbolic gesture. It also sets up the tale that follows insofar as it affirms the happiness Alisoun expresses when ostensibly given sovereignty in her marriage.

Following her prologue, Alisoun tells a story of a lusty (active) knight who steals the virginity of an unsuspecting (passive) maid on the road during the time of King Arthur's reign. Common Law held that the knight should be executed immediately after the rape and there is a call for the King to hold his knight responsible for his actions. The Queen begs for the knight's life because she has an alternative punishment in mind that involves a gesture to her, her ladies, and the victim of the rape in order to be absolved. The knight is brought before the Queen, who says "I graunte thee lif if thou canst tellen me / What thing is it that wommen moost desiren" (Chaucer ll. 910–11). Like Alisoun, the Queen forces the man to take responsibility and be active in his own forgiveness, instead of being a passive participant.

The knight begins to search for the answer to the Queen's question. He eventually finds a group of women dancing and decides to ask them, but when he approaches, all he finds is an ugly old woman. She agrees to give him the answer he seeks after he pledges himself to her with a promise. If the knight of Alisoun's story has learned his lesson right, "Wommen desire to have soverinetee," the passive-active agency dichotomy is put on its head: men, as the active partner, are responsible for their actions in relationships with women, regardless of the passive woman's behaviors—implying that women are typically not as active as society might hope (Chaucer ll. 1044). Like Sir Lancelot and Janekin, the knight is forgiven. To fulfill his promise, he is then married to the ugly old woman. In this trick ending, Alisoun's point is reinforced. That women want sovereignty in their relationship and are happier when they have it threatens the gender dichotomy as a whole.

To further enforce Alisoun's point, the old woman and the knight lay together in bed while he laments his fate. He believes it is shameful to have been married to a woman who is so ugly and from such a poor family. The knight's new wife finally tires of trying to convince him of his good fortune and finally offers,

"Chees now," quod she, "oon of thise thinges twaye:
To han me foul and old til that I deye
And nevre you displese in al my lif,

Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
 And take youre aventure of the repair
 That shal be to youre house by cause of me—" (Chaucer ll. 1225–31).

He ponders and eventually tells her that he isn't sure, that she should just choose whichever she thinks is best. Because the knight gave her what she most wanted, the answer to the Queen's previous question, her own sovereignty, she turns beautiful and good. They have a long and happy marriage, Alisoun ends the tale with the plea that Jesus send all women husbands who are young, meek, and fresh in bed who they may always outlive. She also asks that the Lord shortens the lives of those husbands "That nought wol be governed by hir wives" (Chaucer ll. 1268). Because Alisoun's original story is that of an abusive husband, it can be inferred that the reason this tale is able to ignore the gender hierarchy so staunchly is because of the man's abuse of his role. Each tale begins with the active man enacting violence against the passive woman, Janekin strikes Alisoun while the knight rapes an unnamed maiden. The swap of the roles between the active man and the passive woman is only acceptable because the man abused his role as the active half of the dichotomy. This tale polices the sexual actions of these men in very different ways than "Morte d'Arthur" did. Alisoun's story polices by displaying what may happen if the role is abused and must be taken from the man, while the previous tale describes what may happen when a man willingly gives up his role to avoid punishment.

The Politics of Policing Purity and Passivity

The variations on the theme of active and passive gender hierarchies in Arthurian legend suggest that such tales didn't merely reinforce male privilege, but used it to in fact police male sexual behaviors. The French medieval court case Roelens examined suggests that this dichotomy is not a modern concept, but rather that it had likely pervaded every aspect of Judeo-Christian male and female relationships in pre-modern England. Malory employs this dichotomy, with a particular emphasis on spiritual virginity, to suggest that this social norm was so important that men would rather sacrifice both their lives and the life of the women they loved if that meant they could avoid breaking it. By comparison, the Wife of Bath's prologue takes a similar issue out of the setting of a story and places it in the everyday situation of husband and wife. This story focuses solely on the punishment of the active husband and the resulting happiness the passive Wife expresses when ostensibly given sovereignty in her marriage. While Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere ultimately suffer (in different ways) for their betrayal of the dichotomy, Janekin and Alisoun seem to co-exist in their unprecedented roles after some sacrifice on Alisoun's part and the transference of Janekin's active role.

These stories do more than attempt to police medieval men's behavior. While they offer us a fascinating view into Arthurian legend and the stories that would have been told time and time again in social settings, they also reveal deeper concerns within these communities. Audiences can see the societal fears that prompted the creation and propagation of these tales. The fears are centered around the abuse of power that is inherent in the man's active role in a sexual relationship. Politically, the audience sees this abuse in King Arthur's avoidance of punishment for his wife's affair. Even his knight, who should have been beheaded according to the laws in the story, gets away with a special punishment and avoids the same blame another man would have faced. Socially, the audience would have been concerned with the passive men's unfulfillment of his marriage debt, his religious responsibility to provide children for his wife. If the man is no longer the active participant, there would be no children, and medieval English couples saw childbirth as an event that was inevitable and very important part of their relationship (French 139). This lack of fulfillment of such a prominent societal expectation would have been especially terrifying in a time when childbirth was

valued so highly (French 125–26). In the case of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere, sex was assumed to still be happening, but it was not between the King and the Queen. Any children produced by that active and passive sexual relationship would not benefit the community or continue the royal line. When men become passive in their sexual relationships, the community suffers for it both politically and socially. Passive men are a threat to the legal and social standing of their families. These stories show two different reactions, from both a “fictional” and “realistic” community, that occur when men decide to abuse their active position by either inappropriately enforcing their privilege or forgoing their active role entirely.

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