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Timothy C. Morris

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Timothy C. Morris

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Chivalric Schism: The Man Who Occupies the Masculine and the Feminine

Dr. Andre Harbin

### **Chivalric Schism: The man who occupies the masculine and the feminine**

Designated male and female gender roles have created a certain set of expectations that shape the lives of men and women. Although there are benefits and drawbacks for each of the sexes as a result of these sets of rules, males have unquestionably seen themselves the beneficiaries throughout the course of history far more often than their female counterparts. I would argue, however, that chivalric codes, behaviors ascribed to men of the knightly class in the Middle Ages, are confusing and even contradictory for their subjects, thus negating some of the advantage typically granted by virtue of being a male. This paper posits that these codes truncated the advantage that certain male characters received due to gender inequality, by creating a masculine/feminine dichotomy among men. I intend on examining two major Medieval themes appearing across three texts of the time to illustrate this dichotomy; the amorphous concepts of *rape* and *shamfastnesse*.

In the Middle Ages, the term *rape*, or *raptus*, was used to mean more than just sexual assault. It was also used in the context of the plundering of property. It is apparent when we look at the work of scholars such as Louise Sylvester and Rachel Wharburton that the discussion surrounding the legal definitions of the word in the medieval world relied solely on the interpretive meanings of men. There are many instances in legal documents of the time in which a woman was referred to as the victim of *rape*, and yet not the victim of a sexual assault. This would indicate that the medieval notion regarding the gender role assigned to women was largely concerned with females as property of their husbands. Similarly, as this paper intends on illustrating through the use of examples from *Sir Gawain and the Marriage of Dame Ragnell*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, certain male fictional figures (and perhaps some real life ones) fell into this same category as a result of the gender binary that the chivalric code

created among males. This will be the first example of male characters being described and treated as though they occupy the feminine sphere as it was perceived in Medieval thought.

The second example, as stated above, will concern the term *shamfastnesse* and the multiple connotations of the concept. Women who possessed a sense of *shamfastnesse* possessed a fear of public disapprobation and were considered to be “good women” because of their adherence to courtly love traditions of purity and chastity. Ironically, this approval also made them into potential victims of ravishment in that purity was a prize to be coveted. Conversely, women who did not exhibit an appropriate amount of modesty, those who were sexually promiscuous or *perceived* to be, were *shamed*, and in this case, that word is used to describe a state of disgrace.

Although at first blush it may not seem so, men involved in chivalric notions were also expected to exhibit a certain degree of *shamfastnesse*, though certainly not to the degree that women were. This, however, is where I believe my examination of the issues is unique. I contend that the confused notions of masculinity as presented in chivalric codes, holding that a man should be aggressive both sexually and in battle while at the same time possessing the political etiquette and restraint associated with courtly love traditions, mirrors Medieval ambiguity regarding the concepts of rape and shame, and I will point specifically to the treatment of the character of Sir Gawain in the eponymous titles mentioned above as well as examine the real life historical context surrounding *Sir Orfeo* and Edward II, an openly bisexual king of England who was dethroned and murdered.

## Raptus: Property Rights

As this paper is largely concerned with examining ways in which male characters in the three aforementioned titles are ascribed traits that typically are representative of the feminine, it is essential to understand what some of those female identifiers are. I maintain then, that the ambiguity of the medieval term *raptus* plays a significant part in defining and perpetuating male and female relationships to one another in medieval society, as well as informing both sexes as to the level of agency that they were allowed within the framework of this society. As men were solely responsible for defining these issues, it quickly becomes clear that the agency of women is severely limited. Many legal definitions of *raptus* referred more broadly to the plunder of property rather than the specific act of criminal sexual activity that we would connote in modern society.

Perhaps one of the most notorious examples in scholarship of the examination of the different usages for the word *raptus*, concerns a very short yet very thought provoking and mysterious poem written by none other than Geoffrey Chaucer; *Chaucer's words unto Adam, His owne Scriveyn*:

Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle  
 Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,  
 Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,  
 But after my makyng thow wryte more trewe;  
 So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,  
 It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,  
 And al is thorough thy negligence and rape.

What is interesting to note here is that the word *rape* is being used to indicate haste or carelessness which coincides with the poet's claim that his intellectual property has been marred by his scribe as a result. This is our first example of the multiple meanings assigned to *raptus*. It indicates that the Medieval thinker was drawing an analogy between the forcible sexual conquest of a woman (or man, as we will see later) with the destruction of property or, further trivially, the carelessness of a transcriptionist that, theoretically, could be subject to legally enforced recompense. This is important to note as it illustrates the necessity for modern readers to place themselves in the drastically different mind-set of the middle Ages regarding ideas of what it meant to *own* something and how that proprietary perception extended into the realm of male and female relationships, particularly from a legally binding standpoint.

In modern scholarship, the ambiguity of this medieval usage of the word is further complicated by the fact that contemporary western notions of egalitarianism and individual liberty are, particularly for women, virtually absent from Middle Ages legality. Louise Sylvester points out something similar about this subject in her essay, *Reading Rape in Medieval Literature*, by engaging in a very insightful discussion surrounding the multiple interpretations of the word *rape* and its different usages in the legal documents of the time. She makes the observation that "rape in the real world and rape in fiction are fundamentally enactments of male attitudes toward the female body" (Sylvester 123). This aggressive attitude will manifest itself whether there is a female character or not, however, for as we will see, what Sylvester points out as "male attitudes toward the female body" are actually masculine attitudes toward the feminine and there is a difference because masculinity and femininity are amorphous concepts not necessarily dependent on gender. Consequently, whether *rape* is used to describe forced sex or a consensual liaison, when the object of the term is legally considered to be property, there is little

difference. For example, we could say that, according to this Medieval proscriptive set of rules, my wife, who belongs to me in the same way that my manuscript belongs to me, is not subject to, or has no agency to, make a decision as to whether or not she (*it*, in this case) wishes to submit to the manipulation of anyone other than me. This is much the same as Chaucer's manuscript is his property and thus legally, it can be raped in the same way that a wife can (even if said wife was a willing participant in the sexual act.)

Perhaps even more interesting than Sylvester's notation of the ambiguity of the medieval definitions of the word, however, are her observations concerning contemporary critics regard of the rape accusation against Chaucer himself, for he was accused of *raping* a woman, the wife of another, with whom he was involved. Sylvester describes this event in Chaucer's life beginning with a legal document in which a woman named Cecilia Chaumpaigne releases the poet from any wrong doing regarding this accusation, at least as far as forcible sexual conquest is concerned. Sylvester tells us that this event was well known by Chaucer's reading public at the time, and points to many modern critics, (all but one of whom are male), who suggest that audiences most likely recognized, with *subtle laughter*, references to the event in the poet's later works, such as *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Legend of Good Women*. In the former, the protagonist toys with the notion of abducting the woman of his desires and in the latter, Chaucer sardonically castigates male violence against women. This illustrates that *rape* was something amorphous and more descriptive of a woman's lack of sexual agency in the Middle Ages than referring to the ravishment of said female.<sup>1</sup> Chaumpaigne's release of Chaucer from these charges calls the nature of the *rape* into question, indicating that what had transpired between the

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note also, as Sylvester points out, that even modern male critics seem apt to be dismissive of such accusations. Perhaps this is an example of hero worship at the expense of truth.



two had less to do with a forcible sexual encounter and more to do with Chaucer having violated what, in the eyes of medieval law, was another man's property.

Pointing this out does more than simply illustrate the desire of many modern male critics to diminish any particular crime against a woman that Chaucer may or may not have committed, it goes a long way in supporting Sylvester's overall argument regarding how a view of "woman", so objectivized, can bring about ambiguities in legal language relating to victimhood, the perpetration of crime against women, the social construction that teaches women that they are indeed subjects who can be terrorized depending on the good or ill graces of males, and finally, that the sexual agency of women is subordinated to the male dominated legal system. Sylvester states:

In fact, readers may find here (the instance of male interpretation) the familiar strategy of bringing into the evidence the previous sexual relationships of a victim, and especially of a previous sexual relationship between rape victim and rapist. This line of legal discussion has been explored most fully by Catherine MacKinnon, who suggests that from the decisions made in legal proceedings we may infer that some women are 'unrapable' in the eyes of the law. (Sylvester 122, Quotes mine.)

We can then reasonably infer that if certain women can never truly be violated because their sexual history, real or perceived, leaves them with little value to the male hegemon, that the question of sexual violence is subordinated to what is seen as the larger issue of property rights. As will be displayed below, this issue of property rights is woven into the chivalric system as well, and affects male players who fall into a similar subordinate, and ultimately feminine, role themselves.

Rachel Wharburton makes a similar observation, noting that such a legal framework is part of an overarching social construction that teaches women that they are without any real sexual agency; they are either “good women” and therefore “rapable,” or they are bad examples of women and therefore “unrapable.” She maintains that in this way, the interpretive act of deciding what constitutes sexual assault is firmly ensconced with the male perspective.

(Wharburton 2006) Mark Amsler puts it this way: “...the vocabulary mythographers and allegorizers used to describe sexual violence is replete with different kinds of ambiguities... [possibly] identifying the woman as someone else’s property and therefore subject to pillaging?” (Amsler 68).

Certainly Gawain’s situation in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* is analogous to this status of extreme disempowerment. He is a victim who, it seems, does not only suffer from the act of sexual violence, but also has no legal recourse. Gawain has no choice in the matter of whether or not he is going to be the marry Ragnell in order that Arthur may live to best the challenge presented by Gromer Somer Jour; Arthur, his lord, indeed all of Camelot, is in dire straits. Arthur has been found poaching on lands that do not belong to him and should he fail to solve Jour’s riddle, he will be killed. Ragnell holds the answer he seeks, but in order to obtain it, Gawain must agree to marry Ragnel who is described by Arthur as “ungodly a creature/ As evere man sawe, withoute mesure.”(228-9) To be sure, in the tale it at first appears that Gawain has a choice. This is perhaps why the lack of agency of the feminized male in medieval literature is so pernicious; the illusion of choice is provided by the code of chivalry. Gawain, is ostensibly given the “choice” by Arthur as to whether or not he wishes to marry the troll, but actually has *no* choice in the matter. He is bound by chivalric codes to accept the marriage or else cease to be; he would lose his identity by not fulfilling his knightly, chivalric, obligation to defend the life of

his lord. In this sense, Gawain is occupying a medieval feminine role in that he, as he exists as Gawain the perfect knight, is the property of his lord the code that holds that a knight will do anything, including laying down his own life, to protect his lord. We can see this false choice set up when Arthur responds to Ragnell's request that he give her Gawain's hand in marriage. He states, "Mary! Sayd the king, 'I maye nott graunt the To make warraunt Sir Gawen to wed thee; Alle lyeth in hym alon.'"(291-3) It is a foregone conclusion what Gawain's response to Arthur's request will be, however. This is a tale of a knight living the code of chivalry to perfection. In the context of the story, if Gawain were to do anything other than accept the request, he would be allowing his lord to die and would therefore cease to become an honorable knight, thereby losing his identity. At this moment in the text, Gawain's situation is analogous to that of a wife in the Middle Ages, who, although given something of an identity, lacks any real agency without a husband. If her husband were to die, for example, she would inherit a portion of his property, yet as soon as she remarried, that property would become owned by her new husband. This would be seen as a matter of course and it is echoed in the chivalric trope that Gawain is now forced to play out. Indeed, Gawain's acceptance of the offer is barely given much space in the tale other than to make it clear that he is doing his knightly duty. Gawain's response to Arthur's pleas indicate this:

"Ys this alle?" then sayd Gawen;  
 "I shalle wed her and wed her agayn,  
 Thowghe she were a fend;  
 Thowghe she were as foulle as Belsabub,  
 Her shalle I wed, by the Rood,  
 Or elles were nott I your frende.  
 "For ye ar my Kyng with honour

And have worshypt me in many a stowre;  
 Therfor shalle I nott lett.  
 To save your lyfe, Lorde, itt were my parte,  
 Or were I false and a greatt coward;  
 And my worshypp is the bett.” (342-53)

If Gawain does not agree to marry this creature, not only will his lord die and the round table be shattered, Gawain, the perfect knight, himself will no longer exist; he would cease to be as a result of his refusal to comply with the conventions of the chivalric code that is responsible for establishing who he is. So then refusal is not simply a matter of losing his honor, it is a matter of losing his identity. In this way, the chivalric code has created a character that cannot escape his fealty. Further, it is interesting to note here that not only is Gawain representative of perfect courtly behavior, he is “feminized;” he is represented as Arthur’s property, the object of Ragnell’s sexual desire, (which can be seen when she tells Arthur, “Now go home and speak fair words to Sir Gawain. Though I am foul, I am lusty, and through me he may save your life”), and, due to the inherent contradiction in the chivalric code that he has sworn allegiance to, completely lacking any sexual agency in this situation. Gawain’s perfection then *is* his femininity or the way his situation exists only to serve as a foil to Arthur’s masculinity. Gawain may be “unrapable” in that he is a knight of the round table but, as the tale is going to show us, he is indeed about to be raped by circumstance.

Gawain’s situation is almost chattel-like. As stated, he, or more specifically his sexuality, is nothing more than a piece of property that Arthur is signing over to another in order to save his own life. The question of whether or not Gawain accepts the situation is rendered moot by the fact that, as stated earlier, his very identity depends on his acquiescence. This perspective casts the text in an ominous and violent masculine over feminine light. Indeed the very riddle that Jour

has given to Arthur, to discover the truth of what women really want, which the narrative hinges on, could be described as a cruel mockery of the feminine. Amsler examines conceptualizations similar to this in *Rape and Silence: Ovid's Mythology and Medieval Readers*, assuming that medieval authors,

...by interpreting sexual violence as an allegory of creation or spirituality, or as a moral *exemplum* in which gender and sexual behaviors are subordinated to other sociopolitical codes [were] downplaying legal questions of rape, by silencing sexual violence (in the textual letter and the *literal* body) or by decoding rape narratives as *integumenta* structured around gendered binaries of virtue and vice. (Amsler 61-2).

From the Latin *integumentum*, an integument is “something that covers or encloses; especially: an enveloping layer (as a skin, membrane, or cuticle) of an organism or one of its parts (Merriam-Webster 2013). This is a particularly poignant definition to keep in mind when we consider the discomfort both medieval readers and writers certainly felt with the notion of male characters’ occupation of female roles, (as it applied to the lack of true sexual agency), despite the necessity of their doing so to maintain the structure of the narrative and support the nominal “meaning” of the piece. In the romances of this earlier time period, Gawain is still seen as one of Arthur’s most perfect knights, and yet he often is depicted not as an aggressive figure, but as gentle and humble, and he is often imperiled by these very traits. Certainly this is the case in *Ragnell* where he fills the role of victim; a surrogate for a female character. This creates the larger question of how can his adherence to a more feminine aspect of the chivalric code be portrayed without normalizing a male character occupying space that is traditionally devoted to a female. In other words, medieval writers were faced with the problem of presenting an effeminate male as being the embodiment of perfect knightly, read masculine, behavior. This is

quite the problem for a society that, on the surface, has a fairly fixed and myopic notion of what it means to be masculine. For these writers, this masculine schism must somehow be covered over with a narrative that is capable of illustrating it without having to explicate it in detail to the audience. Glossing over a male character's "femininity" thus alleviates the need for the text to have to address the fact that "femininity," whether displayed by a female or a male, is just as necessary to the social order as the masculine component of the same equation. What's more, it protects both the reader and the writer from having to grapple with the notion that these roles are, in fact, not dependent on *physical* gender identities. Again, to support this claim, I point to Amsler's assertions regarding medieval interpretations of Ovid's works as analogous to my own regarding *Dame Ragnell's* treatment of the masculine/feminine binary amongst male characters. Amsler states;

...outside this grammatical discourse of guided reading, medieval Latin and vernacular writers rehearsed Ovid's narratives without overt allegorical gloss or mythographic hermeneutics, leaving readers and listeners to interpret the intertextual relation between the medieval text and Ovid's underlying narrative (Amsler 63).

In other words, *Ragnell* is a narrative designed to poke fun at the notion that feminine concerns are something to be taken into consideration, and as such, the question of what women really want is diffused through the story of a male character being forced to adopt a feminine role. From this perspective, we can look at instances of rape (rape that is perhaps encouraged by chivalric demands on the display of manliness through aggression), or more particularly the almost matter-of-fact acceptance of instances of rape, as a form of obfuscation covering over a deeper issue of male discomfort with the dual demands of chivalry; that of battlefield acumen as well as perfection in the domestic or courtly spheres. Amsler continues by stating, "Medieval

grammarians' proscriptions of Ovid's writing were caught up in repetitions of desire and guilt" (63). This is the inherent conflict of the chivalric encouragements of aggression *and* courtly behavior. In the latter portion of the section subtitled, *Romance, Mythography, and Law*, Amsler, in a fashion similar to Sylvester and Wharburton, observes that there was a considerable amount of cognitive dissonance surrounding the legal definition of the word for rape as sexual violence and the word for rape as in the pillaging of property. Perhaps the reason for this difficulty is that at its core, to the dominant male hegemon which focused its definition of masculinity as aggression and dominance, there was actually little difference.

So there is a power struggle between the masculine and feminine binaries within the chivalric discourse, and it is clear that the ultimate victor of that struggle is the masculine notions of dominance and assertion. The restraint shown by the Gawain character in both *Dame Ragnell* and *Green Knight* places the character in the subordinate, feminine position, that is to say, a position that is one possessed by the hegemon. So then essential to the chivalric code is the success of Amsler's metaphorical integumenta that covered over the larger problem of a profound confusion among men regarding the definition of masculinity in a way very much analogous to the seeming inability or, more likely unwillingness, of medieval writers to come to an agreement as to how they would present rape of both male and female characters. Speaking to this within a broader discussion concerning medieval grammaticians' portrayals of rape in Ovid's catalogue, Amsler states:

Commentaries and mythographies appropriated Ovid's rape stories for cosmological, euhemeristic, or moral purposes, or in some cases simply omitted the rape narratives altogether. In other words, the mythographers tried to make Ovid's texts instructive, rather than pleasurable for readers, either by reading rape as a signifier of other behaviors

with other, frequently gendered, meanings (male cosmological creativity) or by rewriting Ovid and erasing rape narratives altogether from the mythographic landscape. (Amsler 67-8).

If rape can be so allegorized by medieval grammarians is it beyond the realm of possibility to allegorize the “punishment,” as we can see in characters like Sir Orfeo, whom I will discuss later in this paper, of male characters’ success in the domestic-political (feminine) sphere with male discomfort with sexuality or gender positioning that deviated too far from the dictates of the chivalric-based social construction?

### **Shame**

To understand this, we need to examine the fundamental characteristics that comprised the medieval definition of the feminine itself. Foremost among the traits of the medieval feminine is the overwhelming male concern with sexual propriety and self-control. An important distinction here is to note that determining female sexuality in this way is inherently based on male fears and desires; what is portrayed as proper and upstanding female behavior is the notion of the abstinence from sexual activity until it can be conducted within a relationship with a male who is in possession of a bona fide “masculine” identity, and that sexual activity is firmly under the possession of said male. Seen in this way, concepts of chastity and purity are therefore a male regulated response to female sexuality, thus placing any female who responds to her sexual impulses in a way that differs from such regulation in the role of the deviant. Mary C. Flannery, in her essay, *A Bloody Shame: Chaucer’s Honorable Women*, notes, “In the Middle Ages, one kind of shame (actual disgrace) was nearly always considered to be negative, whereas the other kind of shame (fear of public disapprobation) could be viewed as an honourable characteristic.



But a strong sensibility to shame was thought to be more appropriate for women and young people than it was for men” (Flannery 340).

Flannery explores the medieval concept of “shamfastnesse” and the role a woman’s honor and chastity played in defining her character. She is interested in the direct conflict that this expectation for demure shame among women creates when measured against the chivalric expectation of manly aggression. “Shamefast,” she states, “can describe someone who is ashamed of his or her behavior, as well as someone who is ‘afraid of being disgraced’.

Consequently, shamfastnesse is a peculiarly flexible term, capable of referring both to the fear of shame and to the *experience* of it” (Flannery 338) A recognition of the definition for the word as being one of humility at the expense of being publically shamed allows us to see how this word is directly applicable to Gawain’s situation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; he steps forward to confront the Green Knight because not doing so is an option that is unthinkable. Again we see how Gawain is trapped by his own adherence to chivalric perceptions. He is the embodiment of courtly perfection amongst the members of Arthur’s knights. As Arthur is about to confront the Knight, we get this reaction from Gawain:

Now hatz Arthure his axe, and the hame grypez,  
 And sturnely hit aboute, that stryke wyth hit thought...  
 Gawan, that sate bi the queen,  
 To the kyng he casn eclyne:  
 “I beseche now with sayez sene  
 This melly mot be myne.  
 wolde ye, worthilych lorde,” quoth Wawan to the kyng,  
 “Bid me boghe fro this benche, and stonde by yow there,  
 That I wythoute vylanye might voyde this table,

And that my legge lady liked not ille,  
 I wolde com to your counsel before your cort riche.  
 For me think hit not semly, as hit is soth knawen,  
 Ther such an asking is hevenedd so hyghe in your sale,  
 Thagh ye yourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourselven,  
 Whil mony so bolde yow aboute upon bench sytten  
 That under heven I hope non hagher of wylle,  
 Ne better bodyes on bent ther baret is rered:  
 I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feeblest,  
 And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes the sothe;...  
 Ryche togeder con roun,  
 And sythen thay redder alle the same,  
 To ryd the kyng wyth croun  
 And gif Gawan the game. (330-65)

So here is a display of Gawain's shamfastnesse. When it becomes apparent that his king is going to accept this suicidal task, Gawain steps in to offer himself up as a sacrifice.

For the masculine, it appears that "shamefastnesse" becomes almost metaphysical. True disgrace for the male in the romance is failure to act in accordance with predetermined male conventions as defined in chivalric discourse. While seemingly self-explanatory, this leads to some sexual tension between male characters as well. For instance, someone needs to pay for the decadence of the court of Camelot. From the earliest description of the behavior of the court, with its pomp and ceremony and celebration surrounding the holiday, it is clear that the austere, chivalric virtue of Camelot is being somewhat sullied through the almost child-like jubilation of celebration, and therefore, the appearance of the Green Knight and his challenge to Arthur to prove his, and thus his court's, knightly aptitude, is not unexpected but in fact warranted by the

rules of acceptable male behavior. What is important here, is the problem that arises for the narrative. The frivolity of the court needs to be punished, but at the same time, the chivalric tropes of heroic, masculine knight, which Arthur epitomizes, need to be preserved; someone has to be humiliated here, but it can't be Arthur, else the whole mystique of the perfect manly knight would be tarnished. Thus, enter Gawain. He is a perfect knight, but not necessarily in the way that the aggressive, battle hardened Arthur is. Gawain, rather, is perfect because of his courtly behavior rather than his battle prowess, as he himself admits. (This courtly perfection, by the way, is reflective of the emphasis on ceremony to the exclusion of maintaining that aggressive battle persona that got the court into this imbroglio in the first place). It is, therefore, moot, that Gawain should take the place of Arthur as the victim of the Green Knight; he is still considered a perfect hero, but one whose actions, in this case, are guided by the feminine. So in much the same way as we saw in *Dame Ragnell*, Gawain is prostituted out to save Arthur, and the court at large, from being victimized by the faerie world.

It is Gawain's sense of shame that puts him in the position of being Arthur's surrogate victim, and it is this humble offer to act in his lord's place that exhibits his feminine qualities. When we consider the idea that Gawain, wanting to retain his status as the perfect knight and remain "seated beside Guenevere" (262 ln. 109), has little choice but in enacting this humble request to take his lord's place, we can see the similarity between the position that the narrative in *Green Knight* establishes for a male character displaying a fear of public disapprobation and the argument that Mary Flannery makes regarding the Canterbury Tales and the attitude displayed by the Host toward the perceived effeminate behavior of Chaucer's narrator. This is emblematic of medieval readers' internalization of chivalric interpretations of gender qualities. Flannery points out that the Clerk's "shamefastness" is received by the Host as "behavior more

appropriate to a 'mayde' than to a man" Flannery goes on to note that, "shame (actual disgrace) was nearly always considered to be negative, whereas the other kind of shame (fear of public disapprobation) could be viewed as an honourable characteristic. But a strong sensibility to shame was thought to be more appropriate for women and young people than it was for men" (340-1). The tales, with all of their ambiguity of meaning regarding social roles, can be told safely from the perspective of a character that is himself ambiguous, thus shielding readers who may otherwise be offended by having to face the possibility that the masculine can function in more ways than just linearity and aggressiveness. In a similar way, *Green Knight* employs Gawain as the character to learn the lessons of the Green Knight so that the audience can witness the victimization of a man who falls technically into "perfect" example of chivalry category, (though his perfection is based on courtly behavior), without it happening to one, Arthur, who, due to his position as king, maintains a presumption of masculinity that is unable to be questioned, *Green Knight* avoids tarnishing the traditional masculine, while at the same time exposes the schism between this notion and the feminine male who occupies the same sphere of perfection.

There was a hierarchy for virgins, wives, and widows, promising heavenly rewards relative to the amount of chastity shown in their lives. Flannery discusses this in relation to the proscriptive set given by St. Jerome which delineated the level of reward received in the afterlife for the level of *shamnfastnesse* displayed in life. (Flannery 338-9) We see this idea as a factor in the hero's behavior in the narrative of *Green Knight* as well. Take, for example, Gawain's refusal of the sexual advances of the Green Knight's wife. While the typical knight would, in adherence with the proscribed behaviors of what it meant to be a truly masculine knight, would be aggressive in both combat as well as the sexual arena, (the two after all being considered little

different), find himself embroiled in a lusty affair with the lady, Gawain maintains his chastity, even deigning to kiss the lady only under fear of committing a trespass of protocol. We can see this in the following passage:

Thanne ho gef hym god day; and wyth a glent laghed,  
 And so he stod, ho stonyed hym wyth ful stor wordez:  
 “Now he that spedez uche speech this disport yelde yow!  
 Bot that ye be Gawa, hit gotz in mynde.”  
 “Querfore?” quoth the freke, and freschly he askez,  
 Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes;  
 Bot the burde hym blesses, and “Bi this skyl” sayde:  
 “So god a Gawayn gaynly is halden,  
 And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymselven,  
 Couth not lightly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,  
 Bot he had craved a cosse, bi his courtayse,  
 Bi sum towch of summe trifle at sum talez ende.”  
 Then quoth Wowen, “Iwysse, worthe as yow lykez;  
 I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knight fallez,” (1290-1303)

Indeed it is here implied quite blatantly that the behavior of a knight of such renown as Gawain, should be to have made a sexual overture by this point in their meeting. Furthermore, Gawain finds that his manhood, as a result, is suddenly suspect. As the audience is aware that this is a trick to lure Gawain into a transgression, it can, on the surface, be explained away why Gawain does not act as a “normal” knight would. However it is important to take into account that one of the things that makes Gawain so suited for this quest is his purity (read shamfastnesse). After comporting himself in a similar manner to two more such attempts by the lady, Gawain is rewarded for his chaste behavior with the girdle which will supposedly preserve him during his

encounter with the Green Knight. Thus Arthur's court escapes judgment through a display of courtly etiquette and protocol rather than a display of stereotypical masculine behavior. The cognitive dissonance of the narrative here is noteworthy in that it is implied at the beginning of the poem that this courtly behavior is the very thing responsible for the decadence that invokes the Green Knight's visit in the first place, whereas in the end, we see this behavior portrayed as redemptive.

A connection between this and the end result of *Dame Ragnell* is also apparent in that Gawain is rewarded for his deference regarding the form that his new wife should appear in;

"Alas!" sayd Gawen; "The choyse is hard.  
 To chese the best, itt is froward,  
 Wheder choyse that I chese:  
 To have you fayre on nyghtes and no more,  
 That wold greve my hartt ryghte sore,  
 And my worshypp shold I lese.  
 And yf I desyre on days to have you fayre,  
 Then on nyghtes I shold have a symple repayre.  
 Now fayn wold I chose the best:  
 I ne wott in this world whatt I shalle saye,  
 Butt do as ye lyst nowe, my Lady gaye.  
 The choyse I putt in your fyst:  
 "Evyn as ye wolle, I putt itt in your hand.  
 Lose me when ye lyst, for I am bond;  
 I putt the choyse in you.  
 Bothe body and goodes, hartt, and every dele,  
 Ys alle your oun, for to by and selle –

That make I God avowe!"  
 "Garamercy, corteys Knyght," sayd the Lady;  
 "Of alle erthly knyghtes blyssyd mott thou be,  
 For now am I worshyppyd.  
 Thou shalle have me fayre bothe day and nyghte  
 And evere whyle I lyve as fayre and bryghte;  
 Therefore be nott grevyd. (667-90)

Not only is the resolution of *Dame Ragnell* an example of the extreme sexism of the time; the male character, even though he is not traditional masculine is still able to avoid the “fate” of having to marry a woman who is anything less than a beautiful maiden, it further distances a “true” male from the situation of having to deal with the ugly troll by inserting a male character that possesses feminine, “rapable” characteristics as a surrogate. This is revealing of the role that violence plays here as a means to dealing with the schism between the masculine male and the feminine one. Carol Martin Grey discusses the issue of violence as courtly play when examining *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She contends that the Green Knight undermines Arthur’s court by first exposing their lack of knightly<sup>2</sup> behavior in the face of his sudden appearance, and then again by engaging Gawain, the best of them, in a suicidal quest.

In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we can clearly see both punishment and reward. The punishment, of course, is the confrontation with the Green Knight himself. He comes to Arthur’s court to illustrate that the inhabitants there have been forgetting to comport themselves as modestly as the code would dictate. We see examples of this in their feasting and merriment and their seemingly cloistered or microcosmic world. Little regard is shown to the

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<sup>2</sup> While the court is engaged in traditional festivities, the Green Knight’s appearance is representative of the unrelenting hegemony of the notion of what is truly “masculine”; even during holidays or celebratory periods, violence and aggression are never far from the fore.

implications of the Knight's appearance. Surely, everyone is aghast at the display that he puts on, but the deal that is struck with the knight is quickly forgotten once he disappears;

Thagh Arther the hende kyng at hert hade wonder,  
 He let no semblaunt be sene, bot sayde ful hyghe  
 To comlych queen wyth cortays speche,  
 "Dere dame, to-day demay yow never: Wel bycommes such craft upon Cristmasse,  
 laykyng of enterludez, to laghe and to syng,  
 Among these kynde caroles of knyghtez and ladyez.  
 Never to lece to my mete I may me weld res,  
 for I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake."  
 He glent upon Sir Gawen, and gaynly he sayde,  
 "Now sir, heng up thyn ax, that hatz innogh hewen."  
 And hit watz don abof the dece on doser to henge,  
 Ther alle men for mervayl might on hit loke,  
 And bi trwe tytel therof to telle the wonder.  
 Thenne thay bowed to a borde this burnes togeder,  
 The kyng and the gode knight, and kene men hem served  
 Of alle dayntyez double, as derrest might falle;  
 Wyth alle maner of mete and mynstralcie bothe,  
 Wyth wele walt thay that day, til worthed an ende  
 in londe.(467-86)

The court is thus portrayed as isolated and aloof even when its honor is challenged by outside forces. The Green Knight's game can be seen as a punishment as well, in that a sacrifice is demanded to prevent the knight from leveling the entire court. Once again, we see that Gawain is offered up to pay for the iniquities of Arthur; surely there is no hope that he is going to survive his encounter with the Knight at the Green Chapel when the time comes.



Most relevant to the discussion of shame, is that Gawain is saved, and Arthur's court thereby redeemed, not by his prowess in battle. In fact, the poem devotes merely a stanza to heroic exploits in battle, hardly the expectation of a narrative about a "manly" knight;

At uche warthe other water ther the wyghe passed  
 He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,  
 And that so foule and so felle that fight hym byhode.  
 So mony mervayl bi mount ther mon fyndez,  
 Hit were to tore for to telle of the tenthe dole.  
 Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolves als,  
 Bothe wyth bullez and berez, and borez otherquyle,  
 And etaynez that hym aneledede of the heghe felle; (715-23)

While this excerpt does indeed show the prowess of the knight, its relative isolation in the context of the overall narrative serves to highlight the fact that what is going to be tested here are qualities other than the stereotypically aggressive traits of the perfect male knight. It is instead his adherence to courtly protocol and thereby his more feminine side.

Gawain's adherence to the more "feminine" aspect of chivalry, the notion of shame or modesty, compels him not only to avoid a sexual relationship with the Green Knight's wife, but also to bestow kisses to the Green Knight in the same manner as he received them, thereby fulfilling the agreement the two made concerning the sharing with one another of gifts that they received during the period of Gawain's respite. (One has to wonder if Gawain, having acted differently with the lady, would have had to provide the Green Knight with something other than just kisses. Would this indicate that "masculine" knightly behavior would then trap Gawain into a homosexual relationship? Certainly, such a narrative would prove even trickier for medieval authors than even one that lionizes a male character for using traditionally "feminine" traits to

display his valor! In fact, seeing as how at this point in the poem the Green Knight is actively attempting to deceive Gawain through this tactic of seduction, it may perhaps be worthwhile to question the sexual motivations of the Knight himself.)

Ultimately, however, it is Gawain's employment of the feminine that leads him to success in the poem. His sense of shame and purity awards him with the belt that allows him to survive the encounter with the Green Knight, saving his life and redeeming Arthur's court in the eyes of the world of Faerie. This is yet another integument, and as we will see in the next section, the reality that is glossed over by romances of this type is far different for males who deviate from the established notions of the masculine.

### **To Be or Not To Be**

It is helpful to look beyond these romances for true life examples of this male gender binary, and perhaps the best historic example is the rule of Edward II. Looking at this historic example of a king that is more concerned with internal courtly behavior rather than the outward presentation of military prowess, we are afforded a glimpse into the reality of the life that is lived by the male who not only adopts the "feminine" aspects of social life, but one who engages in sexual activity that transgresses the boundaries put into place by these same gender biases. In his essay, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and compromise in a Middle English Romance", Oren Falk argues that the *Sir Orfeo* poem is allegorically connected to the chaotic and sedition-plagued rule of Edward II. Falk highlights many allegorical similarities between *Sir Orfeo* and the political situation of the time that educated and aware audiences would recognize and relate to as well as some significant differences that provide some political cover for the poem or perhaps even make it into a tribute to a martyr. In fact, the latter point is the first place to start in my analysis

of Falk's criticism. At the end of his essay, he suggests that *Orfeo* may have actually been penned in tribute to Edward II as the king seemed to shun the nobility in favor of fraternization with the middle classes, particularly Welsh bards. This put him at odds with many in the noble class. (Also, this gave Edward a reputation as a political and military bumbler, particularly in light of his defeat to the Scots at Bannockburn). Falk states:

Edward's patronage of musicians, among them many Welsh, may have won him the particular friendship of those best-suited to compose *lais* that could have reflected favorably on his popular tastes... It is tempting to imagine that *Sir Orfeo* may have been one such eulogy. (Falk 264-5)

A similar treatment occurs with the eponymous hero in *Sir Orfeo*. Orfeo's time spent in exile mourning, seemingly impotently, for his captured queen creates a character who becomes less interested in the nobility of his kingdom and puts him much more in *tune* with "the lower strata of society [in his kingdom]" (Falk 262). This would appear to be a very insightful observation on Falk's part if we are of the opinion that art does not take place in a vacuum but is inevitably affected in its creation by the societal events that produces it, in this case, the deposition of a bisexual king more attuned to courtly etiquette than he is skilled at displaying military acumen. As the creation of *Sir Orfeo* is often dated to the early fourteenth century, and Edward II was assassinated in 1327, it certainly seems quite plausible that the poem is indeed the eulogy that Falk indicates that it may be.

To further support the contention that *Sir Orfeo* is borrowing from political events contemporaneous to it, Falk points out that Orfeo's quest to save his Heurodis, while successful on the micro, or immediate, level, (he does indeed rescue her and return to reclaim his kingdom),

on the macro level destroys the episode him. Falk sees the usurpation of Orfeo's throne by the steward as sharing strong similarities to what happened between Edward II and Isabella, Bartholomew Badlesmere, and Thomas of Lancaster; between a rightful king and seditious nobility that works constantly to depose him.

As though facing a pack of hungry wolves, Edward II is almost immediately surrounded by opportunistic politicians for whom a populist king weakened by the seemingly intractable chasm between male and female gender roles is something of an easy target. Because of the precarious nature of Edward's responsibilities, his natural tendency to place more emphasis on the internal behaviors of his court, and his own sexual proclivities, he is off balance politically and vulnerable to rhetorical and literal attack. In *Sir Orfeo*, we can see a similar problem arising almost from the beginning description of the hero. We are told by the poet that Orfeo is: "A stalwart man and hardi bro," but also that: "Large and curteys he was also." The Middle English Dictionary notes that the word "curteys" does not simply refer to politeness it is indicative "(a) Of persons: courtly or refined in manners; well-bred, urbane; polite, courteous; considerate, kind; ~ **and hende**; (b) of behavior, actions, words, etc.: refined, well-mannered, polite." (MED, web). Further in this same stanza, we have this curious description: "His fader was comen of King Pluto, And his moder of King Juno," Obviously Juno was a goddess. Why then is she referred to as a king? If indeed the lai is analogous to Edward, the reference could certainly be a clue to the bisexuality of the King.

*Orfeo* rejects an important convention in romance poems and tales, as well. At the end of the poem, despite the fact that the king finally ceases his melancholic behavior and actually acts to rescue his wife, there is no "happy ending" as there is in other romances that portray a knight or king, having bested his enemies, settling down with his dotting queen to continue his line into

the future in the form of wealth and progeny. *Sir Orfeo* neglects to include an ending like this. Instead, we are left with a king who reclaims his throne, but lives out the rest of his days, apparently, in sterility and brooding silence with a wife that has been driven insane by her ordeal at the hands of the faery king who captured her. Falk makes the argument that here we see the detriment to a male that cannot manage the dichotomy of the masculine/feminine paradigm; the poem does not necessarily have a happy ending and instead punishes Orfeo for his deviation from accepted norms, just as Edward's deviation was something to be seized upon and wielded against him. On this point, Falk is arguing that Orfeo's lack of an heir apparent to his kingdom is the actual focus of the poem rather than the rescue of Heurodis. Falk argues that because of her capture, Heurodis has now become unfit to bear Orfeo a son that will inherit his kingdom. This is perhaps the most striking aspect of this article's analysis. In the section entitled *Consolidating Kingship: Resources and Constraints*, Falk speaks to the social structure that puts so heavy an emphasis on patrimonial lineage; a system based on codes of chivalry which actually prevents any prospect of a "happy ending" and create a catastrophe for Orfeo. The chance to succeed in the traditional romantic heroism standard of the genre botched, though whether this failure comes as a result of Orfeo's complacency.

As this essay is interested in how the Chivalric system privileges or, as seems to be most often the case, disenfranchises sexual agency for *both* male and female actors, Falk's discussion of Heurodis' rescue is particularly interesting in that certainly Orfeo will get to live out the rest of his life in peace with his queen, having stymied his rebellious barons yet, Falk argues, his diminishment into history, and the Steward's eventual rise to power, is a *fait d'accompli* as there will be no heir to continue Orfeo's line. Also, this could serve to make the Edwardian allegory more plausible in light of his son being placed on the throne by Isabella with the idea that the

child would be malleable to her persuasions. (Unfortunately for her this did *not* turn out to be the case.) Overall, this gives us an example of what was likely to happen to a male who transgressed established gender identity roles, despite the attempt the attempt of the literature of the period to cover over male behaviors that did not conform to those of the social construct as merely another form of masculinity; one that was defined by courtly protocols rather than aggressive actions. Sarah Lindsay elaborates on this topic with a focus on chivalric codes as agents of division between romantic characters. In *Chivalric Failure in The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, she states: “The failure of chivalric prowess in the *Jeaste* thus calls into question constructions of male and female roles, suggesting that a chivalry that insists on separating the two harms the establishment of social ties by preventing characters from accessing certain rational strategies” (24). In other words, and certainly this would seem to be the case with Edward, the male who is able to move between the two spheres of influence is actually hindered by the ability to do so. In *Jeaste*, Gawain is seen as less than the others because he possesses feminine attributes that allow him access into the tent. For Edward, we see this same stigma play out for a king that occupies both a commander-in-chief role as well as displaying skill in the courtly realm; displays a level of *curteys* that makes much of the nobility uncomfortable. If indeed the Edwardian analogy Falk presents was tempting before, this deeper scrutiny of chivalric codes makes the case all the more attractive. Certainly basing a character on a bisexual male would expose the limitations of individuals’ sexual agency under such an influence.

It light of this connection, a background discourse, one that runs concurrent to the primary and yet remains nearly unseen or is close to being imperceptible, needs to take place in order to reconcile the dichotomy between the dominant view of masculinity as one of prowess

and the need for chivalric discourse to maintain a masculinity defined by both traditional gender qualities; an adept warrior not unfamiliar with courtly etiquette.

It is interesting to note, however, that this hidden discourse is delicate, and if it does not remain a shadow of the primary, it almost certainly becomes a failure due to the conventions of romance. While Edward's difficulties bear this out in a real world scenario, it is fairly plain to see in the same disastrous consequences in literary analogues. Lindsay addresses this in her examination of *Jeaste*, in which she argues that the male characters fail to establish a truly civil relationship because of the inability to reconcile Gawain's occupation of both masculine and feminine social spheres with the dominant discourse of manly aggression. She rejects the notion that the female at the center of the dispute between Gawain and the girl's brothers is a failure of the woman-as-interlocutor meme, but rather an inability to incorporate the feminine politic into the larger discourse of the narrative. She states thusly:

As Gawain... moves between spaces coded in this romance as masculine (the battlefield) and feminine (the pavilion) and between relational modes similarly coded, he suggests that late medieval English society benefits from a chivalry that moves to integrate previously gendered roles, thereby checking a detrimental reliance on masculine prowess.

(Lindsay 25)

Falk's study is illustrative of the failure of this idea in that it seems to take for granted that women in Heurodis' post rescue state are already branded by their contemporaries as unfit, unreliable, or otherwise *damaged*. In what seems almost dismissive of the chattel-like nature of women read as insane, he states that, "[I]nsanity, at times a mode of assertion for medieval women, is, in a case like this, a fairly catastrophic stigma for a king's consort and projected

producer of offspring” (Falk 250). It is uncertain if Falk was referencing perhaps Margery Kempe, but certainly reading Kempe as insane would not be to provide her with a mode of assertion. This would demand that we interpret her actions, whether we believe them to be a true account or just accept them as a piece of literature, as something to be humored, or to give *The Book of Margery Kempe* a tongue-in-cheek, Chaucerian quality. This ignores that Kempe was highly effective in that she was able to not simply *convince* dominant male voices that she shouldn't be executed, she was able to consistently out-argue and silence those dominant voices.

Still, Falk points out that in *Sir Orfeo*, “Heurodis’s initial succumbing to the faeries’ insanity and her subsequent prolonged stay in their realm disqualify her...from becoming the mother of heirs. The fact that she does not utter a word from line 174 further indicates her profound trauma” (Falk 260). Clearly, in the chivalric structure of the world of Romance, Herodis is now a victim; pitiable. There is a striking similarity here, however, between Heurodis’ condition and how Orfeo is presented by the poem. To call him ineffectual would be an understatement. Orfeo is presented as effete and aloof. This characterization comes after Heurodis is captured. Rather than assume the expected role of the heroic, masculine knight, Orfeo, “into his chaumber is go, And oft swooned upon the ston, And made swiche diol and swich mon” (196-8). To be fair, such demonstrability was not an uncommon device used to illustrate woe and despair, and yet the fact that it is so protracted and so unaccompanied by the resolve of a rescue attempt flies in the face of the typical romantic conventions that were the norm. Furthermore, Orfeo’s reaction is almost petulant when he suggests that “Into the wilderness ichil te And live ther evermore With wilde bestes in holtes hore; And when ye understond that y be spent, Make you a than a parlement, And chese you a newe king” (213-17). He is hardly a king that matches up to the chivalric definition; to simply recede into the



wilderness to lament his situation and then sign over his kingdom to his enemies is certainly a departure from the hero whom this situation clearly calls for.

Falk explains Orfeo's attitude in the poem as a result of a "lingering hurt" stemming from Heurodis' prolonged absence. Yet from the very beginning Orfeo has been an ineffectual protagonist for a romance. Orfeo rather presents what could more accurately be seen as Shamefastnesse. If indeed the poem is a kind of elegy to Edward, the sense of shame he displays at losing his wife, whom we know understand is going to be rendered unfit by way of the Faerie king's conquest, is a reaction to public humiliation. Giving up his kingdom is another signal of his humility as well as his admittance of the defeat that he has suffered. We must question whether or not Orfeo had simply given up from the start, feeling that the delay in his discovery of the abduction had already put Heurodis beyond his reach, or is he simply disinterested in his wife (who happens to be the paradigm of the Lady archetype in a romance). It certainly opens the door to Falk's analogy of Orfeo to Edward II.

Whether or not *Sir Orfeo* is conscious of its similarities to its historical referent or is intentionally attempting to speak to, at least the tragedy, of how chivalric romance positions both female and male characters, creating an idealistic literary system that perhaps mirrors real life restrictions on the propriety of sexual identity is unclear. So while the female was bound by her "shamefastnesse" and relegated to the bowery of gentility and meekness, the male was bound to an idea of masculinity that required testing and competition; for the chivalric knight, bold action was requisite when dealing with the women around him. This required aggression seemingly stands at odds with the noble aspirations of chivalry as the chivalric knight must in some ways act akin to a rapist in his actions so as to maintain his honor. If he shows shame, he suffers dishonor.

Here, briefly, I refer to a section from James C. Scott's book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, which discusses the idea that because the dominant ideology in any social structure informs all discourses among its constituents, a certain performance is required of the subordinated groups; they must appear to behave in ways acceptable to the hegemon. Scott states, "With rare, but significant, exceptions the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful" (2). Going back to our historical referent of Edward II, we can see the consequences for not engaging in this performance.

The Chivalric system is certainly the dominant social discourse in medieval literature. Scott's article is most helpful in looking at how medieval literature deals with characters that are not successful in carrying out this performance, such as Orfeo/Edward, as well as examining how the literature navigates the paradox it has created among male characters, such as in *Jeaste*.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

It appears as though the ambiguity surrounding the word rape is a trait that is shared by the word shame, though their implications are the opposite for females and males, or the feminine and the masculine. It is apparent when we look at the work of scholars like Louise Sylvester and Rachel Wharburton that the discussion surrounding the legal definitions of the word rape in the medieval world relied solely on the interpretative readings of men. This naturally disenfranchised women and eliminated their sexual agency. This paper has contended that, because of the dichotomy created by chivalric tropes, that males who enact a more feminine role also fall into this category of those lacking sexual agency; Gawain is a prime example.

Regarding a sense of shamefastness, women who possessed a sense of shame, or fear of public disapprobation, were considered to be “good women” because of their purity and chastity. Ironically, this approval also made them into potential victims of ravishment because that purity was a prize to be coveted. Conversely, women who did not exhibit an appropriate amount of modesty; those who were sexually promiscuous, or perceived to be, were shamed or disgraced.

For male characters, this sense of shame was a necessity when enacting chivalric roles. Though still decidedly a female trait, medieval authors got around this paradox through the creation of the chivalric *integumenta* in their works. In this way, they were able to explain the dual nature of the knight in legend. These works however, were far from daily reality as the situation of Edward II clearly illustrates. In reality, males who deviated from dominant “masculine” notions were undermined and even killed.

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