

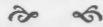
Creating *Amr*: Challenging the Concepts of Gender Identity in a Patriarchal Society

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Abstract:

The historical and social views explored within Arthurian literature create a medium where many cultural norms are either validated or challenged. The importance of the creative process forces the author to look to the psychological aspects of life at that time. By actively creating a poem and analyzing it, I will explore the ideals, social conflicts, cultural attitudes, and facets of character development that were pioneered long ago.



Throughout history, storytellers have crafted their art to convey historical and fictional events by oral or written word. This art form has evolved from the spoken word to the earliest Middle English texts to what we consider as modern works. The events of works like the Arthurian legends may stem from historical fact but, through time and retelling enhancements, have grown to include superhuman characters and supernatural events. The social and cultural as well as the spiritual and secular power dynamics of the time influenced the authors. Their audience also played an important role in the events and characters portrayed within the story. Works like those of Marie de France focused more on character development than those of her medieval predecessors who wrote list-like accounts. This creative development of the characters within the story adds another level of depth to the narrative and allows the creator to explore subject matter that may otherwise be thought of as taboo if not put within the context of a story. In order to gain insight into the creative process that groundbreakers like Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes went through when they composed works that defied the norm, I have created a poem called *Amr* that is based in early Arthurian legend using pseudo-Old English meter, yet the story timeline falls somewhere after the events that happen in Marie de France's *Lanval*. The purpose of using the pseudo-Old English meter was to simulate an earlier, now lost, Arthurian epic similar to that of *Beowulf*. The alliterative verse would also appeal to a modern audience better than a rhyming couplet which, to a modern eye, may appear too pretentious and monotonous. The

typical modern reader's distaste for such poetry would detract and distract from the meaning that I hope that they get from the poem. I have also treated the poem "*Amr*" as if someone else had written it and analyzed it based upon the psychological, cultural, and social aspects particular to the theme and context within which it was written. In doing so, I have had the opportunity to explore and expand on ideals, social conflicts, cultural attitudes, and facets of character development that were first pioneered by Marie.

The dynamic of the Arthurian legends tends to change over time and includes everything from almost superhuman heroic epics to modern fairy tales and satires. According to *The Arthurian Handbook*, "medieval romancers... updated" the stories which were handed down through oral traditions and "cared little for originality... [and] authenticity" (Lacy 4-5). Those stories were at one point or another recorded in writing. Many of the stories were compiled, collated, edited, and transcribed in Latin by an eighth-century cleric named Nennius into a work called the *Historia Brittonum* or the *History of the Britons* (Lacy 18). In the *Historia*, Arthur is portrayed as having "[slain] nine hundred men single-handed" (Lacy 21). In the Appendix of the *Historia* is a "list of 'Marvels of Britain'" where strange events were recorded, "two of [which] concern Arthur" (Lacy 21). One was a re-appearing dog's print, and the other one was the "tomb near a spring" where "Amr, son of Arthur" rests (Lacy 22). The "Welsh tales" about this tomb say that "Arthur himself slew him there and buried him. No light is shed on this otherwise unknown tragedy" (Lacy 22). What is interesting about this tomb is that "every time you measure it, it is a different length—anything from six feet to fifteen—and, [Nennius] assures us, 'I have tried it myself'" (Lacy 22). Since there is such a seemingly tragic story that may never be told again, I decided to take the small amount that we know about Arthur's son, Amr, and fill in the blanks just as an author of Marie's time might have done.

One writing technique that made her successful was that Marie took time to develop and explain some of the more fragile human

emotions within her poems. She also took advantage of the opportunity to update the existing stories and to weave within her poem, "Lanval," a type of "character-study." As S. Foster Damon explains, "Marie did not merely write down in rime the stories that she had heard. She selected the material, combined and compressed it, bringing it up to date, refining it, and making it sensible, and all this with a sense of short-story structure that is modern rather than medieval" (Damon 974). Damon describes Marie's work as being a "different *genre*" than other literature at the time (976). Damon also says that "Marie's lays are... written in the obscure 'philosophical' manner," which was very unique and sets her work apart from the majority of her counterparts because it included a "symbolic" aspect that brought deeper meaning to the poem (976). In my creation of "Amr," I have carried over this "philosophical manner" of "character-study" which is "symbolic" in nature.

The psychology of the "symbolic" representations in a poem like "Lanval" is an important topic to consider when creating the complicated and multi-dimensional interiority of the characters. During that time, the culture was a predominantly Christian patriarchal society. The conflict of gender roles within a patriarchal society has a direct effect upon what is considered culturally acceptable for men and women. According to Patricia Clare Ingham, the idea of chivalry with regards to military allegiance to the king within Arthurian legends was personified and "gendered feminine" within many of the texts (Ingham 25). The feminine gender was something that needed looking after and protection by the strong masculine gender because the feminine qualities were considered weak and flawed. In "Lanval," a Faerie Queen chooses Lanval as her lover. Lanval says to the Faerie Queen, "if this should be | your wish" (Norton 119-120) which puts the emphasis on what the female wants instead of on following the cultural norm. She ultimately takes him away from his world to her realm. This dynamic whereby the female has control over a man reverses the roles of characteristically female

and male in their society. Marie played with the gender roles and reversed their polarity within her poem to see where this conflict between social norms and love takes the characters.

The definitions of sexuality as it pertains to gender have changed over time, and sexual identity as an ideological counterpart to gender has evolved with greater understanding and clearer definitions. An article by Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio explains that "the very term 'sexuality' is a modern construct which originated in the nineteenth century" and defines "sexuality" ... to refer to the erotic, that is, to a state of physical attraction to either sex" (Freedman et al. 483). Freedman and D'Emilio further state that "in the past, there was no language of 'sexuality' per se" (Freedman et al. 483). The article discusses how the "theoretical constructs" of social interactions between different sexes are not "unchanging" or "immune to the shifts that characterize other aspects of society" but are "subject to the forces of culture" and more directly "how men and women interpret their behavior and desires, and [the] meaning that different societies affix to sexual behavior, are enormously diverse" (Freedman et al. 484). With this in mind, gender roles in a patriarchal society are often skewed toward power differentials within the relationship of the parties involved. Gender should not be confused with having continuity in sexual preference in the opposite sex, but should instead be viewed within the context of the culture at the time and the perception of masculinity and femininity of the individual.

The following poem "Amr" attempts to take Marie's idea of reversing gender roles one step further. The idea of recognizable gender based upon the physical sex of the individual is morphed into a gendered perception of the individual that might not relate to that individual's sex. The way that society treats the person is an indication of whether or not the people view them as being masculine or feminine. The blurring of these lines creates a conflict that hybridizes or blends the cultural concepts of being male and female in a society that has strict patriarchal views.

Amr

Arthur's son Amr, who ages tell,
 Lived and loved, no lone soul can deny,
 Focused on the future, and founded in reality.
 One steady of heart, solid in mind,
 Trouthe held fast, and trust had earned.
 Many maidens fancied, "Marry and be happy"
 But Amr liked none. Amour he never felt.
 Concerns of state duties, or charge-troops he put first.
 Military strength was key. Martial success he gained.
 10 Returning from far lands, relating foreign intel.
 Resting in a recline couch, random thoughts float by.
 Alone Amr slumbered. Ajar was his window.
 A slight stir rises him. "SHIT!" he cried out,
 Blinded and baffled, his balance was unsteady.
 His gait-step was guarded, grounded by firm hands.
 Long locks caress him, silk lines on his chest.
 Delicate hands part this sea, displaying a figure of dreams.
 Unable to speak, Amr utters nothing.
 "Are you well?" asked the man. A word and a faint.

- 20 The Faerie Prince lifts Amr, folding him into oiled arms.
Taking Amr to bed, tending his comfort,
Laying Amr on his ample chest, the Prince assessed his ward.
The Prince marveled on the magnificence, and manly features of Amr.
Rugged and robust, unlike the region he was from.
Strange and serene he lay, then slowly he awakens.
A flavor floats in Amr's nose, fragrant and sweet,
Stimulates sensual areas. Amr surveys his pillow.
Realizing his benefactor, he recoils out of bed.
"Who are you?" Amr demands. "What are you?"
- 30 The muscular stranger, moving out of the bed,
"I am Lanval's son" he said. "Lucian is my name.
Prince Amr I presume? I am Prince of another world. "
Amr gazes and grips his blade. Gold armor sparkled,
Lucian stood shining. The smoothness of voice faded,
Amr's heartbeat pounded hard. Barely hearing what's said,
Tracing the outline with his eyes, not telling from whence it came
Amour gripped his heart, Amr looked pained.
Never before has he felt this, nothing even close.
The Faerie Prince's form, filling the armor tight,
Amr's life-juice pounded, longing gripped his soul.
He's hiding pleasure, heightened and excited,
Swallowing this spectacle, his sensibility returned.
Attempting to keep abstruse his thoughts, he analyzes this treat,
"Speak stranger," Amr demanded. Lucian supplies warning,
"War is coming with a cover, we must combine forces."
He details the plans, Amr decides to side.
The Prince makes request, "Please, for safety,
Do not speak of me to the king. Say only little.
Relay this important intel. Invest in weapons.
- 50 Invaders are your danger, insight is your cure."
"Why do you tell me this?" asked Amr. Wonder gripping his soul,
Color flushes his face, clear feelings are seen.
"I fear that the facts of this, may fracture this bond," said Lucian.
Amr steps closer. "Speak brother," he assures.
Delicate hand caresses Amr's face. Doubt melts away.
Amr definitely doesn't reject this. Deeply he looks into Lucian.
Lucian speaks, "I have looked in vain, for love in this world.
There wasn't man nor beast, mother nor daughter,
That stimulated or swept my heart. Then suddenly I glimpsed you.
- 60 You were in battle. Your courage unmatched.
Four years I have loved you. Finally my heart is known."
Lucian's sword shined, and silver danced around them.
Lips touch light, longing breaks.
Passion rises this picture, perceived only by two.
Coitarche combines visions, and the clock-time drips hours,
But, Alas! Avarice ends, so adjusts the lovers.
Lucian must return, Lanval requires his strength.
"Farewell for now, friend beloved,
You are valiant and victorious, but the voracious foe is unmatched.
- 70 Together our trouthe is strong, triumph will be ours.
Convince your comrades, and we confirm victory."
Back the beloved returned, bewildered Amr was left.
Amr convenes in court, he conveys the news.
Questions of this quixotic tale, queried the court.
But portions story didn't tell, this interest piqued caused talk.
King Arthur's advisors told, but altered meaning,
His son's words of truth, and warped his intention.
Perverted context, this paramour encounter,

- For shadow show danced, shared-views from candlelight.
80 Later that night, Lucian returns to Amr.
They set off toward the Faerie-land, traversing the kingdom.
For many moons they stay, and military strategy planned.
Known not to them nor knight-faerie, the knife-blades attack,
Many warriors were killed, and watchmen arrowed,
Army-scouts overpowered them, Amr couldn't be found.
Arthur's fears fermented, and false-hearted son condemned.
Betrayal was bearing fruit, and boasting many casualties.
"Amr's ascension," the King exclaimed, "Attained not today!"
He set out to find the fiend, his fidelity abandoned,
90 "Not a son of mine," said the King, "Never from my loins."
Amr rides atop a steed, Arthur stops short,
A substantial beast, a stallion of power,
Carries Amr high, as if conveying a king.
Arthur's blood boils at this, a bargain of treason.
"Infidel! You insult me!" cries the King. "This instant you shall die!"
Unaware and unarmed, Amr unmounted with news to share.
The king's sword swung, piercing strong mail.
"Father! Why?" cried Amr, "Forever I've loved you!"
"Father I am not, and fool I am never!"
100 The assemblage turned to leave, the accused lay bleeding,
The withdrawal stopped short, wonderment gripped them.
A white-clad knight shown, and warriors in massive numbers.
They marveled at magnificence, and moreover idolized their power.
Lucian saw his love, legs weak with panic,
Terror and tears streamed, he took to him,
"My love-friend Amr," he cried, "low-pierced to die!"
Laments from the Faerie-crowd grew, and loudly filled the air.
"Trysts and treason!" exclaimed the King, "Tactics are suppressed!"
Sorrow-filled Lucian spoke, "Sir King this man is innocent."
110 Guilty of only love, no game-plan deceit.
Strategy protects your rule, subterfuge never conceived.
Loyal his intent, and legit his reason,
Bonding our forces, and bolstering our stratagem.
Against the ferocious faction, the foe we mutual-shared,
Amr struggled to sanction us, and succeeded in a union-force."
The king discerned his deception, and descended to his son's side.
Lucian bemoaned his beloved, and beside him the King.
The sacred spring became, and still remains today,
The burial-mound Licat Amr, as if bonded the worlds,
120 Half-built in our kings-land, and half-laid in outer-world.
Honor-bond formed, was hard-fast set.
Lucian vowed allegiance. The victory must be won,
Oath made obliged, then ordered troops campaign.
The fearless warriors fought, and found their peace.
The vow to vanquish was complete, and valorous men returned heroes.
Tales are told, and trace the hills,
That locating Licat Amr mound, one loses direction.
The proportion and position changes, perspective depends.
Plain-told legend, portal made secret,
130 A doorway to dimensions, where dreams of Faerie-love manifest.

Blending of the gender identities among the characters in "Amr" creates a hybridizing of two socially acceptable definitions of what it means to be male and female in a patriarchal society. Males are typically thought of as being strong protectors who demonstrate great physical prowess. Females are usually

considered physically weak beings who need the protection of a man in order to survive. The challenges to the overtly Christian patriarchal societal norms are highlighted by the ambiguity of the hybridized males and the subsequent neutering of the father figure. This tension is further complicated by the allusions to

Christian lore throughout the poem. "Amr" represents an author's attempt to blur the socially constructed norms that define sexual orientation that is confined by strict religious views and thus introduces an alternate definition that transcends what is culturally acceptable into an expansion of perspective for the reader regarding gender roles and sexuality.

The characters can be seen as allegorical representations whose actions mimic aspects of the Christian bible stories. Lucian offers salvation to Amr who in turn accepts when he is told about an eminent battle between good and evil forces. The lines "Lucian supplies warning, | 'War is coming with a cover, we must combine forces'" and "the voracious foe is unmatched" are evidence that Lucian offers protection against a "mutual-shared" enemy (44-45, 69, 114). This offer of salvation is an example of the prominent Christian ideology that salvation comes from a patriarchal God to those who are in his favor. King Arthur, then, betrays his son after being deceived, and he denies him three times before he dies by saying, "Not a son of mine," "Never from my loins," and "Father I am not," which is directly reflective of the story of the Passion of the Christ¹ (90, 99). The king later repents, after he learns the truth: "The king discerned his deception, and descended to his son's side. | Lucian bemoaned his beloved, and beside him the King" (116-117). Lucian forgives the king and honors his promise of salvation because "honor-bond formed, was hard-fast set" (121). This unbreakable bond was sealed in blood, like the sacrificial payment of Christ's blood on the cross. Christian theology characterizes salvation coming from a man whereas the original sin comes from a woman. Lucian is portrayed as the ultimate source of forgiveness and salvation whereas King Arthur is the one needing to be saved. This dynamic is further complicated by the depictions of their gender identities and how they change through the poem.

Gender differences and roles within society were common themes within Arthurian literature. According to an article by Lorraine Stock, gender identity is complicated by questions of the "bending of gender rules [that] erodes the dependability of gender signifiers," such as dress or how a person presents themselves, which "destabilize audience reception" of the individual (Stock 8). Such "signifiers" required "rigorous testing (with no certainty of the outcome) of virtue and valor of a male protagonist" (8). Stock pointed out that the purpose of rescuing a damsel in distress was "to demonstrate the knight's Christian virtue and masculine *virtus*" (8). This "testing" of "masculine virtue" held a high importance culturally to being accepted and proven as filling a male role within society. The male role model was celebrated and elevated over time and, as Maureen Fries points out, "female roles either worsen or lessen" because the influence from "Christian culture" increased and "stereotyping [of] the second sex into Evian/Marian templates" tainted what it was to be female/feminine in a male/masculine driven society (Fries 67).

The gender identity of Amr from the beginning is very masculine. He is a warrior and a great leader who puts the "concerns of state duties, or charge-troops" first (8). Amr was focused on the "military strength" and "martial success" that he could bring to the kingdom (9). Amr was also pure in that he had never fallen in

love before. He was never tarnished with the love of a woman because love was something that belonged in the realm of the feminine in a patriarchal society. The concept of purity in abstinence was also an underlying theme in "Lanval" and other Arthurian literature (Damon 978). This purely masculine identity was shifted dramatically once he came into contact with Lucian. Lucian was depicted as a "muscular stranger," but with feminine seductive features like his "long locks" and "ample chest" ("Amr" 30, 16, 22). When Amr first lays eyes on Lucian, he "faint[s]" which is something ordinarily considered feminine (19). Amr is also uncontrollably attracted to Lucian. This loss of control and the blending of gender identities between the two are depicted as being natural. According to an article by Gretchen Mieszkowski that describes sexuality as regards to gender within a pre-Christian society, people were "not expected to be attracted exclusively to the same sex or to the opposite sex" (40). According to Mieszkowski, readers did not "think of identities" sexual or otherwise "as defined by homosexuality and heterosexuality," as many modern readers do based upon the social constructs and terminology today (40). Even though this terminology was not used at that time, the social and cultural views on sexuality had changed from what they were during a more pagan era. Mieszkowski, quoting John Boswell, argues that there was a "major shift in attitude toward homosexuality that occurred between the High Middle Ages and the late Middle Ages," from a tolerance of the act and homosexuality often being portrayed satirically within literature to what it was viewed as after the 12th century, when "Western Europe became virulently homophobic" (24). The foundational ideals of a patriarchal society where male and female are ultimately destined to be together are challenged and complicated by the thought of such a sexual attraction between same sex partners. The influence from the church and state had changed the ideas and perceptions on a social and cultural level to create this shift in attitudes toward sexuality. By highlighting this in "Amr," the rules are flipped and it goes against conventional ideals and actively reverts them to pre-Christian notions of gender and identity. The joining of the masculine and feminine aspects of Amr is physically depicted by the act of making love with Lucian. The two are joined by this sexual awakening and fruition of mutual feelings. By merging these two aspects of his being, Amr transforms into an ambiguous gender identity. This, in turn, creates conflict in the masculine-ruled world of politics. Amr takes the message of invasion to the "court," but when it is discussed with King Arthur, the latter is told a warped version of the truth which makes circumstances look like Amr was trying to take the throne (73). The "perverted context" was also colored by rumors of Amr's lover which would have been punishable by death in England during the latter part of the 12th century (78). Amr's job was to procure military intelligence from far-off lands, but now that he became gender indeterminate, his reputation was easily tarnished. This problematic alteration of motives is tied to being tainted with feminine qualities in a male-driven world. The social culture behind this historically anti-female thought has a connection with the biblical story of Eve and the original sin. Feminine qualities were proof of sin and the capacity for deception. This supposed sinful deception and rumors of a same-sex love encounter ultimately lead to Amr's death.

¹ Referring to the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

After King Arthur slays his son, King Arthur and his troops turn to leave but then stop because they saw an army of Faerie knights. They were in "wonderment" because of the "magnificence" of the warriors (101, 103). This scene is reminiscent of the scene in "Lanval" during the trial when two sets of maidens enter and are described as the "most beautiful and decorous" beings those who were in attendance had ever seen, leaving the men to think "surely one must be [Lanval's] amie" (Norton 153). Lanval denies them and, shortly afterward, the fairy queen enters and the king and court are "astonished" by her beauty and "held it for a miracle" (Norton 154). By her presence and physical beauty, she offers herself as proof of Lanval's boasts and in turn shifts the power from the king to the court which then yields to the fairy queen, thereby bringing the masculine dominated rule under a feminine dominated rule. King Arthur did not make the final decision concerning Lanval's innocence in contrast to charging Lanval with treason from the beginning for defaming King Arthur's queen. The entrance of the fairy queen, who was in a higher dominant position than King Arthur, created a shift in the male-female gender role power dynamic. In "Amr," the king was made impotent compared to the glorious show-of-force of the Faerie Prince. The blended gender became the masculine gender. This rendered King Arthur, who embodied the primary masculine figure, gender deficient. He was essentially neutered by the emasculating effect of his troops seeing the massive Faerie Army. Lucian ultimately had to step in and provide a way of salvation to the king which had a further feminizing effect.

The story of "Amr" takes Marie's idea of reversing gender roles further by drawing these lines as blurred versions of a space somewhere in between. This creates a new androgynous and ambiguous gender identity that conflicts with the socially constructed definition. The evolution of the portrayal of socially constructed definitions of biological sexual assignment versus

psychosocial gender identity is brought to the readers' attention, forcing them to look at the criteria that they use to judge what it means to be male or female. The definition, as a result, becomes harder to fit the rigid typecast set forth by society.

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