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Women and Their Sexuality in *Ami et Amile*: An Occasion to Deconstruct?

Summary of the Action

Ami and Amile are born the same day and resemble each other so closely that no one can tell them apart. Valiant warriors and sworn friends, they serve Charlemagne. Hardré, a traitor, offers his niece Lubias in marriage, first to Amile, then to Ami. The latter weds Lubias and dwells with her in Blaye.

The emperor's daughter Belissant falls in love with Amile. She comes to his room at night and, pretending to be a chambermaid, tricks him into *commixtio sexuun*. The couple is denounced by Hardré. A judicial duel is arranged between accuser and accused. Amile sets out to take counsel of Ami, who offers to change places and fight in Amile's stead. Ami wins. Meanwhile, also taking his friend's place, Amile sleeps with a drawn sword between himself and Lubias. Eventually the couples are sorted out, and Amile and Belissant are happily married.

Ami is stricken with leprosy. Persecuted by his wife, the leper leaves home, begging his way over much of Europe. After years of wandering, he is reunited with Amile. When an angel announces that Ami can be cured by having his body smeared with the blood of children, Amile insists on beheading his own sons for the cause. By miracle, Ami is healed and the two boys are restored to life.

Ami returns to Blaye, establishes his own son, and eventually forgives Lubias. He and Amile undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They die on the return voyage near Mortara in Lombardy.¹

¹ *And et Amile, chanson de geste*, ed. Peter F. Dembowski, *Classiques Français du Moyen Age* 97 (Paris: Champion, 1969).

Etat présent

In *The Epic Quest* I praised the trouvère's treatment of the female characters, Belissant and Lubias. I said that he depicts with skill the evolution of Belissant's love for Amile, followed by the brilliant, strikingly evocative seduction scene. Concerning Lubias, I was impressed by her force of character and her capacity to maneuver the people of Blaye against the leper. I saw in Lubias a figure of evil, of course, yet at the same time a woman who has a legitimate claim to make, resentful of the friendship that keeps Ami from her, jealous of Amile and enraged at Ami. Eventually she transfers her hostile animus from Amile, whom she cannot harm, to Ami, whom she can and, in the end, does.

I saw the "woman question" forming a part of a nexus of secular concerns and secular values—heroism, feudal loyalty, feudal power, love, and family—that Ami and Amile learn to renounce in favor of the absolute. The friends' abnegation proves to be total, for they abandon all and set off on the final pilgrimage that will lead them to death in Christ.²

A number of articles, since 1966, treat that same woman question, directly or tangentially: studies by Vesce, Zink, Rosenberg, and Kay.³ All four underscore the antifeminist,

² William Calin, *The Epic Quest: Studies in Four Old French "Chansons de Geste"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), chapter 2.

³ Thomas C. Vesce, "Reflections on the Epic Quality of *Ami et Amile: chanson de geste*," *Medieval Studies* 35 (1973): 129-45; Michel Zink, "Lubias et Belissant dans la chanson d'*Ami et Amile*" *Littératures* 17 (Automne 1987): 11-24; Samuel N. Rosenberg, "Lire *Ami et Amile*: le regard sur les personnages féminins," in *"Ami et Amile": Une chanson de geste de l'amitié*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Paris: Champion, 1987), 67-78; Sarah Kay, "Seduction and Suppression in *Ami et Amile*," *French Studies* 44 (1990): 129-42. See also Alice Planche, "Ami et Amile ou le Même et l'Autre," in *Beiträge zum Romanischen Mittelalter*, ed. Kurt Baldinger (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977), 237-69.

misogynistic element in the trouvère's handling of both Belissant and Lubias.⁴

Sarah Kay's essay is especially challenging. Grounding a rigorous close reading of the text in the most sophisticated feminist theory, Kay argues that both women characters are punished and, in the end, excluded from the "epic world," a world and world vision that depend on their exclusion. In contrast to Zink, who naïvely accounts for misogyny as the archaic residue of an earlier, *chanson de toile* mentality, Kay situates *Ami et Amile* in the contemporary epic tradition and finds in it two models of misogyny—the feudal and the clerical—that "inform" the *chanson de geste* as a genre. Kay also perceives the *Ami et Amile* narrative in terms of generic shift, that is reworking of the *Roman de Tristan* structure. Similarly, I envisaged *Ami et Amile* as a late *chanson* that reacts against contemporary courtly orthodoxy.

In this article, I propose a reading of the *chanson* parallel to Kay's. I insist that my considerations are meant to be taken in conjunction with hers, not in opposition. *Ami et Amile*, deceptively simple, deceptively hagiographic, proves to be a rich, complex, sophisticated work of art, complex in its epicness and its hagiographicity. This very complexity can accommodate, indeed demands, multiple readings—which, in the long run, will be seen perhaps to converge.

In Defense of Belissant

I am not convinced that Belissant is punished for having been a "subject" and for having defied patriarchal, feudal order by seducing Amile; or, for that matter, that Amile is punished for having let himself be seduced. It is true, in a scene packed with Freudian symbolism, that could have been written seven decades after the publication of the *Traumdeutung* instead of seven centuries before, after Amile makes love once with Belissant and she reveals her identity, the youth immediately suffers from pangs of shame and

⁴ Rosenberg, however, distinguishes between Charlemagne's daughter, who learns and grows in the course of the narrative, and Hardré's niece, who does not.

guilt, and, no less immediately, while they are still in bed, Hardré denounces them from the next room.

However (in my opinion this is crucial), the displaced symbolic superego who denounces the libidinal id is not the supreme father-figure Charlemagne: it is Hardré. The role of father-surrogate and upholder of moral values is displaced from the king to the traitor. Because the nexus of conflict is constructed so that Amile is opposed by Hardré and not by Charlemagne, the audience is left free to sympathize with, indeed is coerced into sympathizing with, the children of desire: Amile and Belissant. This is the case because the couple, regardless of feudal and Christian precept, do embody the secret desires and aspirations of society. The joining of Amile and Belissant is recounted in all its sensuous detail, with all the positive overtones of passion, beauty, and desire, corresponding to comparable scenes in other chansons:

A mienuit toute seule se lieve,
Onques n'i quist garce ne chamberiere.
Un chier mantel osterin sor li giete,
Puis se leva, si estaint la lumière.
Or fu la chambre toute noire et teniecle,
Au lit le conte s'i est tost approchie
Et sozleva les piauls de martre chieres
Et elle s'est léz le conte couchie,
Moult souavet s'est deléz lui glacie.
Li cuens s'es veille, toute mue la chiere
Et dist li cuens: "Qui iéz tu, envoisie,
Qui a tele hore iéz deléz moi couchie?
Se tu iéz fame, espeuse nosoïe,
Ou fille Charle, qui France a en baillie,
Je te conjur de Deu le fil Marie,
Ma douce amie, retourne t'an arriere.
Et se tu iéz beasse ou chamberiere
De bas paraige, moult t'iez bien avancie:
Remain huimais o moi a bele chiere,
Demain avras cent sols en t'aumosniere."
De ce qu'elle oit fu elle forment lie.
Envers le conte est plus préz approchie
Et ne dist mot, ainz est bien acoisie.
Li cuens la sent graislete et deloïe,
Ainz ne se mut que s'amor moult desirre.

Les mamelettes deléz le piz li sieent,
 Par un petit ne sont dures com pierres,
 Si enchaît li ber une foïe, (664-91)

The scene concretizes a masculine wish-fulfillment fantasy, not the fantasy envisaged by Zink (to sleep with the pretty maidservant, for one night only), but, rather, the all-but-institutionalized wish-fulfillment fantasy of the twelfth-century *juvenis* lacking land and a wife: a lovely, virginal girl of the highest status offers herself to him; he not only enjoys her in bed, more to the point he weds her and becomes lord of the domain given to him by her father.

The couple endure a brief period of anxiety: once it is ended, they marry and settle down. Their *ménage* is presumably what Belissant desired from the beginning and what Amile would have desired had he not been impeded by masculine scruples. Not only are the boy and girl not punished; they are rewarded to the fullest degree that the secular world can.

The reward does not last forever. In the end both comrades—Ami and Amile—leave their wives to set off together onto pilgrimage and death. This means, however, only that both men renounce the good of secular life, including love, marriage, and family, for the sake of a higher, better good. And that epic action does arrive at closure, one convention of closure being crusade, pilgrimage, and martyrdom. I do not see the trouvère making a claim that his closure wreaks vengeance on Belissant, any more than Guy of Warwick's conversion and death, to instance one analogue, bring about condemnation of his beloved Felice.

Therefore, instead of Kay's notion of a Garden of Eden pattern of a woman's challenge to patriarchal, paternal law, the fall, and the punishment (God the Father-Charlemagne punishing Adam-Amile and Eve-Belissant), ending in the restoration of patriarchal order, I propose a different structure: one of archetypal comedy, derived from Plautus and Terence not Genesis, with boys and girls together, as children, arrayed against fathers. Amile and Belissant together defy the law of the fathers (Hardré replacing Charlemagne) and triumph. Young love wins out and the old order is transformed, with the full approbation of the implied audience.

In Defense of Lubias

We are told, everybody is somebody's cup of tea. Lubias, however, is a curious brew: hot and bitter. The nastiest, the most formidable villain in the chanson, she persecutes Ami, become a leper, after having for years labored to separate him from Amile. She is evil incarnate, because she is Hardré's niece and a member of the family of traitors, according to the old philology; because she is a woman, according to one of the new criticisms. Yes, of course... yet, as was true for Belissant, the case of Lubias is more complex and more ambivalent than it at first appears.

Consider, as Kay did, the most important scene in which she appears: the substitution of Amile for Ami back at home, while Ami substitutes for Amile at court. From the companions' perspective, all works according to plan, and all is justified. Ami instructs his *sosie* what to do and how to act in his place. He twice warns Amile to decline Lubias's offer of her *services*, because of the *bonne foi* and *loiauté* that the companions owe each other:

"Et Lubias soz le pin trouveréz,
Li siens services voz sera présentez.
Fiuls de baron, voz le refuseréz. (1065-67)

Sire compains, en ma chambre entrerez,
Et Lubias si fera autretel.
Si siens services voz iert abandonnéz,
Sire compains, et voz le refuséz.
Biaus chiers compains, bonne foi me portéz
Et voz ramembre de la grant loiauté,
Que li uns l'autre se doit bien foi porter." (1086-92)

He also advises Amile that if the woman utters *orgoil or faussetéz*, he should not hesitate to bash her: "Hauciéz le paume et el chief l'an feréz" (1069).

Amile follows Ami's advice to the letter. When Lubias, in a rage, accuses her husband Ami of having had sexual relations with Belissant, a vicious slander, Amile as husband-surrogate does bash her, precisely as the real husband counseled him:

"Sire, dist elle, moult m'avéz enpor vil.

Or revenez de la cort de Paris
 La fille Charle baisier et conjoir,
 Dont li miens cors est tenus enpor vil.
 Dex doinst, li Peres qui onques ne menti,
 Males nouvelles m'en laist encor oïr,
 A mal putaige soit li siens cors reprins."
 Li cuens l'antent, a poi n'enraige vis,
 Hauce la paume, enz el nés la feri.
 Com ses compains li ot conté et dit.
 Passa avant, as poins la voit saisir,
 Samblant faisoit que la volsist laidir,
 Quant si home li toillent. (1125-37)

That night, after everything else had been done "Si com est a coustume" (1155), man and wife go to bed. Lubias, who forgives and forgets quickly, "Deléz le conte s'a couchié nu a nu./Qu'elle le cuide acoler corn son dru" (1162-63). However, Amile had the forethought of retaining his sword on his person; he places it in the bed to separate him from Lubias, thus maintaining *bonne foi* and *loiauté*. Finally, Amile appeases Lubias's second fit of rage by inventing a story of illness and convalescence requiring abstinence. Then Lubias, who began the day by slandering Ami, ends it by slandering his companion Amile with an equally false accusation that the latter had tried to seduce her.

All works according to plan. All is justified. From the vantage-point of Ami and Amile, of course, which would appear to be also the vantage-point of the implied audience, molded and manipulated by the implied author. Ami and Amile can do no wrong. Yet, because this is a mimetic fiction, told in the third person from a universal *Auktorialsituation* with largely external localization, we can ask the questions: How does Lubias react? What are her feelings? Why does she do what she does?

In general terms, I said in *The Epic Quest* that Lubias dislikes Amile for défendable reasons: he declined the offer of her hand in marriage and passed her on to Ami; later, of course, she believes it is he who slew her uncle. She comes to dislike her husband Ami because he will not listen to her, because he prefers Amile to her, placing a higher price on friendship than on marriage. In Kay's words: "the subordinate role of wife to husband... is further subordinated to the companionship between the two men..."

the male companion whose relationship is so clearly perceived by Lubias as a rival to that between herself and her husband" (pp. 136-37).

In particular, concerning the replacement scene, we ought to be aware of the context. After wedding Lubias and fathering a son, Ami quits his wife for seven years in order to rejoin the companion at court. After a brief return, he again leaves her, once more for the sake of the companion. Upon the second return, Lubias descends from the tower and greets him, joy in her heart. However, the man she believes to be her husband does not entrust her his sword, as presumably was *a coustume*. Lubias responds with overpowering rage:

Enz en son cuer forment s'en esjoï,
Encontre vint desoz l'ombre d'un pin.
L'espee Amile vait elle recoillir.
Li ber la voit, d'autre part se guenchi.
Voit le la damme, dou sens cuida issir. (1120-24)

She then makes the accusation cited above.

The sword is a military and a phallic image, the symbol of Ami's military prowess and feudal honor. To entrust it to his lady in their castle would signify that he enters in peace, that this is his house, their home; it would symbolize their intimacy, indeed the feudal and marital contract that makes them a couple. We know why Amile retains the sword; we know why he cannot reveal the truth to Hardré's niece. Yet, because of this failure in communication, willed by the man, the woman believes that she is insulted in her womanhood and in her feudal honor. The insult is even greater since it is perceived as a slap in the face, as her husband's response to the joy she displays upon his homecoming.

Lubias's response to a sexual insult is a sexual accusation. She accuses Ami of scorning her physically ("Dont li miens cors est tenus enpor vil") because he now is Belissant's lover and prefers her. Of course, vis-à-vis Ami, this is slander. On the other hand, vis-à-vis the man standing before her, the accusation is truth itself: Amile did kiss and enjoy Charlemagne's daughter; and the *males nouvelles* and *mal putaige* threatened by Lubias have already been noised about by Hardré. By the very casuistry of medieval law that

allows Ami to defeat Harare in *the judicium Dei*, Amile stands guilty before Lubias. This is surely one reason, among others, why he does not answer, does not speak a word (thereby avoiding perjury). Instead, after having metaphorically slapped the lady's face, he now also does it physically. His physical superiority, his battery, settles

The marriage is not as one-sided, as dark, as most critics imagine it to be. Yes, Lubias rightly perceives that she is alienated, on the outside, vis-à-vis the couple constituted by the comrades. Yes, for this and other reasons, she and her husband are what we would call "spiritually incompatible." Yes, they fail to communicate. Or, rather, they do communicate: their hostility is given vivid, unforgettable expression through Lubias's malicious tongue and Ami's (or Amile's) righteous fist

On the other hand, at court Ami misses his wife and his son; tenderly he weeps over them and is especially eager to see them, sentiments expressed in a touchingly beautiful *locus amoenus*:

Ce fu a Pasques que on dist en avril,
Que li oisel chantent cler et seri.
En un vergier entra li cuens Amis,
Oï la noise des oisiaus et les cris,
Lors li ramembre auques de son pais
Et de sa fame et de son petit fil.
Tenrement plore quant ses compains i vint;
Ou voit le conte, si l'a a raison mis:
"Que avéz voz, sire compains gentiz?
—Sire compains, jel voz avrai ja dit.
Bien a set ans passéz et acomplis
Que je ne vi ma moillier ne mon fil.
Se je l'osaisse ne dire ne jehir,
Veoir l'alaisse volontiers, ce m'est vis,
Le matin par som l'aube." (537-51)

Lubias is very beautiful, "la cortoise, la blonde... Qui plus blanche est que serainne ne fee" (468,473). As we have seen, Ami has no intention of sharing her favors with anyone, including the beloved comrade. As we have also seen, Lubias is eager to greet Ami in turn. The two of them, whatever their differences, are in the habit of paying the *debitum conjugale* and, it would appear, often. There they communicate in another mode. They pay the debt with pleasure, whether or not they have been previously quarreling. And, in a rare early example of the Auerbach *Kreatiürlich*, they habitually chat in bed on domestic or other affairs. They have a son. Also, as far as we can tell, they fulfill the other expectations of a medieval aristocratic marital contract: we can assume that Ami is a

competent warrior and judge, and Lubias a competent estate-manager.

Although theirs is not a "good marriage" according to book standards of the twelfth or twentieth centuries, it surely does correspond accurately enough to countless historical *ménages*, in all the centuries. It functions well enough, for better and for worse, until Ami is stricken with leprosy, a living death that does separate the spouses. So many modern and medieval marriages also function, *tant bien que mal*, until catastrophe strikes. Now Lubias's nastiness comes to the fore, indeed dominates the action. However, even here, I maintain that the opposition is less male-female than it is clerical-lay, and that the plot, now centering on melodrama, still maintains an element of complexity and ambiguity.

With her womanhood, her sexuality, and her very self spurned for years, we have reason to understand why the lady manifests no charity to her stricken husband. Their union has survived as a feudal, civil contract. Ami, become a *mezel*, no longer has the capacity to fulfill his side of the bargain: he can no longer function as a warrior and a judge, nor can he pay the conjugal debt. Lubias's first reaction is eminently justifiable, according to historical law and precedent: a petition for annulment. This was not uncommon in medieval practice, admittedly a practice indulged in more often by husbands than by wives. The bishop refuses, anticipated by the voice of the narrator-implied author: "Maris et fame ce est toute une chars/Ne faillir ne se doivent" (2117-18). Only then, when the secular feudal world is compelled to yield to the clerical Christian world, does Lubias break the customary bounds of decency and decorum. She all but imprisons her husband in a hut, feeding him on bread and water, in the hope that nature will take its course and, in time, enable her to wed a second man and, with him, *gaber* and *déliter* as she used to do with the first one. Even here, she has more than one precedent in history, including kings of France, to follow. Unlike Ami and Amile, Lubias is no saint. She is not one to offer *le baiser au lépreux*, or to enter a convent. Unlike Belissant, she is not what our students would call "a nice person." Yet she is historically authentic, she is mimetically genuine, she represents her social class, she has a point of view and a voice, and, in portions of the diegesis, she does become a subject.

Implications

In *Ami et Amile* the absolute pervasiveness of both clerical and feudal misogyny ought not to be exaggerated. The clerical and the feudal mind-sets are more nuanced than we sometimes give them credit for. Belissant's seduction and Lubias's side of the story, as I interpret them, constitute what Kay calls "counternarrative." Differing marginally with Kay on this point, I do not think that it "is a long way from the surface" (p. 140). Quite the contrary: the counternarratives of Belissant and Lubias contribute an indispensable element to the basic structure of the chanson: the conflict, opposition, antithesis between the secular and the sacred. The feudal, heroic, secular world is shown to include men and women, to be constituted by both the masculine and the feminine. The medieval public would be aware of the legitimate feudal aspirations mirrored in the Ami-Lubias marriage as well as the romantic fantasy aspirations mirrored in the Amile-Belissant courtship. The medieval public was, I am convinced, no more monolithic or simplistic in its response to a work of art than the public of Racine or the public of the *nouveau roman*.

Does this mean that I believe the trouvère wished his audience to take Lubias's side against the comrades or to blame the comrades for quitting their wives when they set off together on the final pilgrimage? *Of* course not, no more than Tuold wanted his audience to support Ganelon against Charlemagne, or Milton wanted his audience to support Satan against God the Father. Does this mean I believe we ought to deconstruct the text, recognizing that the representational strategies in some sense do subvert the work's explicit ideology? Yes, indeed. Yet, I repeat, we are not dealing with the barely visible trace of absence: the call of the secular, and the call of woman, are openly inscribed in the epic world, as one option for heros and non-heros alike.

We are told what Ami and Amile renounce in order to attain their oneness in God's eyes and their union with him. For the sacrifice to be meaningful in intellectual and artistic terms, that which is to be sacrificed has to be worth something. The trouvère represents what is renounced in all its poetry and in all its complex, concrete, and flawed reality. For that reason we are meant to comprehend and to empathize with Belissant and even, should one so wish, with Lubias.

The greatness of *Ami et Amile* lies in its Christian message and Christian imagery, of course; also in its magnificent human depth: the rapture of young love, the talk of old couples, the concrete, flawed but so human reality of war, marriage, the court, and the law—the reality of men and women in a world that, one day, is to be surpassed but, until that moment, will be lived and scrutinized with all the intensity that art brings to bear when it invents life.*

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