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# Through anxious laughter queerly : women enjoying the grizzle in *The Avowing of Arthur*

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Bavaro, Sunny L.

Through Anxious  
Laughter Queerly:  
Women Enjoying  
the Grizzle in The  
Avowing of Arthur

May 2003

Through Anxious Laughter Queerly: Women Enjoying the Grizzle in *The Avowing of*

*Arthur*

by

Sunny L. Bavaro

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Research Committee

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Master of Arts

in

English

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for the Master of Arts

4/24/03  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Department

For Alex Doty  
Who, in solidarity, showed me how to change the space around me by  
Springing our queer monsters into action

and

For Patty Ingham  
Who, through loving respect and many spinning conversations, taught me to  
Fiercely turn *their anxieties*  
Toward  
*Our empowering cackles* of linguistic pleasure

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## Abstract

In this article, I engage in a sustained mapping of female pleasure and desire in the medieval Arthurian romance *The Avowing of Arthur*. My discussion is in conversation with, dependent on, and also reads against arguments that analyze masculinity, particularly in Arthurian romance, and male queerness more generally. I will suggest that such analyses at times replicate the very erasure of women they otherwise analyze. What can we make of the eruptions of female desire found in Arthurian romances? There is another reading available, a reading that delights in thinking seriously about female pleasures and desires.

My queer touch allows us to see how the displacement of excess pleasure onto the gendered other can also give access to a model of self-authorized and self-directed female pleasure. Touched by queer politics, *The Avowing* provides a space for female-identified readers to revel in pleasure found in the performance of the deliciously gruesome logic of bodies in combat.

“... I am in a queer zone.”

-- Alexander Doty, from the introduction to his book *Flaming Classics*

"Start enjoying what we've been fighting for...."

-- from their cd compilation *QueerSoup*, the mission of the founders of *QueerStock*, an annual activist's and artist's festival

### **Spanking Queer Theory**

I have always gotten a secret pleasure out of the Castle Anthrax, enjoyment that has been difficult for me to locate. This scene in the classic film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* begins when Sir Galahad (Michael Palin) stumbles upon a castle shining a beacon in the shape of the holy grail. After yelling that they open the door in the name of King Arthur, he enters the castle and finds “eight score young women, all between [the ages of] 16 and 19 ½” who devise various scenarios aimed at fulfilling their own sexual desires, Galahad time and time again tries to escape their advances, obsessing over the discovery of the grail he believes is hidden inside.

For instance, after Galahad demands that, “in the name of God,” they him where the grail is, the women of Castle Anthrax try to convince him that he needs to be inspected by the castle doctors, who promptly try to “play doctor” with him by removing his pants. When he finally gets away from them, saying, “torment me no longer,” and covering his genitals with his shield before resuming the search through the castle for the grail, he is told that the woman who met him at the door, Zoot, was playing a trick by lighting the grail-shaped beacon.



Finally, she instructs that the punishment for lighting the beacon is to “tie [Zoot] to the bed and spank her.” In fact, the women say, he should give them all a good spanking as punishment for their sister’s transgression. And “after the spanking, [then] the oral sex.” Given that the scene has gone to great lengths to show it is the women, and not Galahad, who are interested in sexual pleasure, who exactly will be receiving the oral sex? It depends on whose pleasure you prioritize.

But the film doesn’t know what to do with the eruption of female desire structured around receiving pleasure so, at the very moment he is about to give in to such sexual pleasures, the film focuses on the status of Galahad’s desires. He is “rescued” by Lancelot, who tells him he is “in great peril” from the “vial temptress[es]” and literally drags him out of the castle. Just before the film cuts to the next scene, Galahad says to Lancelot, “I bet you’re gay.” “No I’m not,” responds the brave knight.

With this “rescue,” the film exposes courtly love, and by extension all of heterosexuality, as determined by a set of compulsory and binding narratives. Yet it is the exposure of chivalry as compulsory that seems to make way for a bold expression of female desire. All the while the viewer realizes that the woman requesting oral sex is actually Zoot who, although she claims to be Zoot’s twin sister, is creating a double narrative which will increase her chances of sexual pleasure. It is the queer touch of combining the two -- the exposure of chivalry and heterosexuality as a compulsory narrative and the eruption of self-authorized female desire -- that is the source of my titillation.

This narrative about the necessity of a knight's allegiance to the desires of the sovereign, a bind that disallows self-directed pleasure or indulgence in one's own desires for receiving oral sex, appears to be, in the first instance, a satirical twist on the more common courtly romance. Here, a knight rescues another knight and, thus, is a parody of the anxieties about the homoeroticism of chivalric life: if Lancelot is interested in directing his pleasure toward completing his knightly vow and not toward getting head, he's, of course, not gay, he is, just a brave knight. To add to the potentially unsatisfying readings, the scene may be a spectacle reminiscent of Freud's sexist formulations of women as fundamentally masochistic in their relationships with men (they don't want to be taken out of harms way, rather, they want to be beaten for sexual pleasure).

One could also say that this is a moment where the knight desires to please the lady, destroying the necessity for his desires to satisfy another be directed to the sovereign. Maybe the danger that needs to be contained in the scene is that he *wants* to abandon the search for the grail and focus on giving her head ? But all of these readings, although perfectly legitimate, focus their analysis on the status of male-centered pleasure. And when I watch this scene, I get the distinct feeling that this pleasure is about me, that it is also about the pleasures of queer female-identified social subjects. For me, the question of how a knight can properly give her pleasure, if he could ever rip himself away from the sovereign long enough, is displaced by Zoot's insistence that she doesn't care what road is taken to get there, but the result must be "... the [receiving of] oral sex." In general, rather than emphasizing female pleasure in the particular viewing moment, these

conventional readings demand that female desire is directed toward a heterosexual future with knights as love objects.<sup>1</sup>

There is something profoundly patriarchal and heterocentric about these two readings. The reading that the Castle Anthrax is only about latent homosexuality in knighthood, while valid, focuses attention on the (un)pleasures of the knights vis-a-vis compulsory heterosexuality alongside the compulsory condition of subjection to a male sovereign's pleasures. The centralizing males and masculinity within queer studies is a phenomenon that Sheila Jefferys has extensively detailed in her recent fabulous work *Unpacking Queer Politics*<sup>2</sup>. The phenomenon of emphasizing male subject positions in, more specifically, medieval sexuality studies is also evident in E. Jane Burns article, "Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man?" Taking the Old French tradition as her point of study, Burns contends that because it is the performative aspect of armor and social status, not essential anatomy, that constitutes gender identity the courtly love context, knights are often seen to engage in gender mobility without much trouble, an advantage they have over their female counterparts (113). She argues:

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<sup>1</sup> I have noticed a similar phenomenon in regards to the pleasure I experience in viewing bloody and grizzly battle scenes in films. I am thinking specifically of *Braveheart* here. In fact, it wasn't until I had a conversation with a few queer female-identified peers that I realized that this pleasure is a fairly common among women who watch this battle film and others, such as *Gladiator*, that utilizes medieval contexts, tropes and codes. These pleasures, too, have been explained away for us. Again, it is our fantasy of the romantic rescue made possible through the battle that is supposed to account for our pleasure, or it is that we desire union with sexy bodies that are splayed out in sweaty glory on the screen. I am deliberately trying to read against the way this Laura Mulvey-transvestite viewer position prioritizes heterosexual male desire because, well, it is (male) heterocentric, even in its queerness.

<sup>2</sup> Although the term 'queer' was adopted with the intension of inclusively, Jefferys shows there is a "bias of queer politics toward the celebration of a specifically gay male sexual freedom agenda," and, in fact, "queer politics was created in contradistinction to lesbian feminism. The dreadfulness of lesbian feminism was its founding myth" (Jefferys 32-35). As in the proceeding footnote, sexism reigns in the queerest of places.

The fact that ladies can, although with difficulty, break through the limiting restrictions of their beautiful skin and that knights can, much more readily, shift into the hybrid status of lady/knight attests to a more fluid relationship between armor and skin than the traditional structures of courtly coupling would suggest (Burns 122).

Burns emphasizes the subversive potential of the male gender categories, the radical possibilities for gender indeterminacy available to us through the male social subject.

While she may be right that “it is the lady’s skin that confers social status upon her; and her status is that of an objectified body to be traded by armed knights,” I wish to take the lady’s position more seriously, and not only for the contrast it provides vis-à-vis male social relations (Burns 120). What might we say about *female-identified* desire, pleasure and sexuality in Arthurian Romance? What pleasures are available?

The implication – both within the primary texts and the texts that seek to analyze them – that the only queer desire worth talking about is male desire, and the additional assumption that all female desire must be directed toward a member of the opposite sex, strikes me as particularly dismissive in its erasure of both female-identified same sex desire and female-identified auto-eroticism. These readings use female desire either to talk about relations between men, or female interactions with men. As a result of this conventional emphasis of these readings, female pleasure can neither be displayed on the screen nor experienced by a female viewer. Even if such readings do centralize female social subject for a moment, it is only to assert her status as female victim or as the seat of displaced anxieties about male queerness. In neither case is female desire itself the subject of analysis.

## Whose Pleasure Pleases Who?: Female Bodies, Male Masochism

There is another reading available, a reading that delights in thinking seriously about female pleasures and desires. I want to engage instead in a sustained mapping of the female pleasure and desire in the medieval Arthurian Romance *The Avowing of Arthur*. My discussion is in conversation with, dependent on, and also reads against arguments that analyze masculinity, particularly in Arthurian romance, and male queerness more generally. I will suggest that such analyses at times replicate the very erasure of women they otherwise analyze. What can we make of the eruptions of female desire found in Arthurian romances?

Although it may be true, as Burns asserts, that it is knights who can participate more readily in gender fluidity, I want to focus on the stakes involved in displacing “knightly pose[s]” onto a female social subject. In particular, *The Avowing of Arthur* not only maps the anxieties about the victimization of knighthood through gendered displacement, but suggests that knights don’t have access to the masochistic pleasures which percolate within such scenes of masochism. It is the courtly lady status *as lady* that enables her indulgence in the self-directed pleasures of knighthood that are strictly off limits to the experience of knights.

Patricia Clare Ingham provides convincing evidence that “*The Avowing* points to the gendered negotiations implicit in knightly relations and elaborates the intricacies of a union among military fellows and the king they vow to serve” (27). She reads the displacement of the “victimization required by knightly rivalries” onto the courtly lady as a means to externalize and, thus, safely maintain this victimization sovereign power. As

Ingham points out, through such gender displacement masculine victimization "... can be made to disappear" (34). In other words, the poet offers a specifically *gendered* disavowal and externalization of anxieties over male victimization.

My reading seeks to have a conversation with, and is largely indebted to, Ingham's assessment of *The Avowing*. As a starting point, I would like to focus on the epigram that sets opens Ingham's chapter the Arthur tale in her provocative book *Sovereign Fantasies*. She quotes well-known queer film theorist Teresa de Lauretis – "The representation of violence is inseparable from the notion of gender" – obviously in reference to the discussion the gendering of anxiety necessary for knightly warring that unfolds. What is not the focus of Ingham's chapter, however, is how her writing has been touched by the queer through the use of the words of a queer critic. What I would like to do is take up this queer lead offered by Ingham, to centralize the queerness, to touch back as a queer reader. I want to suggest that although the lady acts as a stand-in for knighthood's anxieties, she also comes to be the realization of the masochistic pleasures dis-allowed by allegiance to the sovereign. My queer touch allows us to see how the displacement of excess pleasure onto the gendered other can also give access to a model of self-authorized and self-directed female pleasure.

My reading of *The Avowing* will thus help to centralize and access the self-directed female pleasures of the gender fluidity Burns describes. The text's courtly love discourse of 'doing it' specifically *for the woman* creates her as a woman even as she represents the knight's anxieties. What this *gendering* of the fantasy of displacement – the

very displacement that hopes to contain anxieties about the self-pleasures of submission to the king (masochism) – enables is a scene of self-directed female pleasure.

*The Avowing of Arthur* is a text that is palatably concerned with knights proving their allegiance to the sovereign. It begins by with Gawain, Kay, Baldwin, and Arthur vowing to complete a knightly deed before the next morning. For my purposes, Arthur vow's to kill a boar that has been roaming the Inglewood Forrest, and Kay's vow, "quos wernes me the way/ hym to dethe dighte," are the most important (ll. 135-6).

In the first section of the text, Arthur has killed the boar, and Kay -- with the help of Gawain, the importance of which will become clear -- has rescued a "birde bryghte" from a rogue knight. As the second section of *The Avowing* begins, the Gawain, Kay, Menealfe, and Arthur "heit hamward, gode spede;/both the birde and the brede/to Carlele thay bringe" (ll. 490-2). Obviously in the second of these lines a parallel is drawn between "the birde and the brede" both of which are objects of pleasure for the court. As Ingham's reading suggests, these two components provide for the smooth functioning chivalric culture; masculine aggression in service of the sovereign is enabled through the gendered displacement of the anxieties of victimization. Much like Burns' courtly lady, she is a "lady/knight," an externalization of the feminization caused by submission to the pleasures of a sovereign. And much like the boar, she is contained, her power defused.

They continue to ride "hamward" and Kay, spurred on by Arthur's question, "quere wan ye this wighte?" Kay begins to recount the story of the woman's rescue. As he explains that Gawain won the woman through defeating Menealfe, something curious happens. The weeping woman interrupts, adding to Kay's narrative, "He toke him there

to presunnere' –/ then *loghe* that damesell dere/and lovet wyth a *mylde* chere/God and Sir Gawain” (ll. 490, 496, 509-512).

Why laughter? For one thing, it shows that Ingham is only half right to describe the woman with the word “weeping.” She weeps, later to laugh at the mention of her own weeping. To begin with, this eruption of laughter is one born from anxieties about victimization. Kay’s use of pronouns, rather than proper names, in his description of the battle and rescue is quite confusing; it is unclear who took who prisoner, unclear who is in control. In fact, it might be said that the speaker is interested in bringing to light this very unintelligibility, such that what is emphasized is not individual knights, but knightly identity-as-defined-by-bondage. Thus, the laugh of the woman is in reference to the matrix of power that is knighthood, the confusing pronouns indicating a moment of anxiety about the lack of ability to keep the “birde brighte” and “the brede,” or the feminization of victimization and the aggression enabled by it, separate. At issue, then, is the meaning of the meta-narrative about chivalric community.

Second, the use of the word ‘mylde’ to describe the laughing/weeping woman’s interruption is particularly telling, and creates the framework for thinking about what is at stake in her laughter. According to the Medieval English Dictionary, one of the many connotations of the word is, “not easily provoked, and giving no offence to others; not rough or fierce in manners” (MED). If we read between the lines of this particular definition, it appears that the laughing/weeping woman is in a cheerful state marked by passivity and submission to a dominant system of manners, here, the courtly romance. However, one of the other reads of the word ‘mylde’ concerns a stance of empowerment.



From the MED: “of persons, their disposition and behavior .... chiefly of a superior, e.g. a king” (MED). The semantic range of the word ‘mylde’ enables the laughing woman to also occupy a position of authority and power, similar to the sovereignty of a king. The woman’s love of Gawain and God evoke both gentile demureness and commanding agency. In addition, this distillation is decidedly gendered; the former definition is a traditionally feminized position, and the latter a masculinized position this text saves for Arthur, Baldwin and other men. In this moment, masculine aggression and power mingle with feminized victimization.

Furthermore, it is significant that the laughing/weeping woman interrupts Kay’s retelling of the story before her rescue is even mentioned. Since she represents anxieties about victimization, it makes perfect sense that her disruption occurs while Gawain tells Arthur that Kay was taken prisoner, indicating that it is the bondage structure of knighthood which is the route of the pleasure/anxiety. As such, she encodes a host of different pleasures, and we could read her subsequent laughter as indicative of her relief at being released from her job as stand-in. She may indeed represent victimization; she may also represent a knightly fantasy of the possibilities of being released from bondage to the sovereign. Having been the subject through which knights can separate their victimization by the sovereign from their duty to him, she might welcome the kind of disappearance from the text that Ingham points to. Reading from her perspective, invisibility in the midst of this community might not be such a bad thing. She laughs anxiously, knowing happily that her last purpose is to disappear.

I was absolutely fascinated with this moment of laughter when I first read *The Avowying*. It seemed so poignant to me. Especially after reading Ingham's assessment, I felt that the laughing woman had been taken advantage of not only within the narrative of text (she is threatened with rape, a threat that seems to, patriarchally, work to set off the chain of events that secure Menealfe's position as knight in Arthur's court), but also ideologically in that she was valuable only in so far as she greased the gears of the Round Table machine. And I couldn't really get away from thinking about her laughter. I began to focus on her knowledge – her's was a knowing laugh. And it was a knowledge that must remain secret. Otherwise, why would Arthur so violently say immediately after her laughter, “thenne sayd the King opon highte,/all squwithe to the knyghte/quat is thi rawunsun, opon *ryghte*?/the soth thou me sayn,” (ll. 512-15)? On one hand, Arthur's reaction seems to mark her erasure: the laughing woman appears to be invisible to Arthur. He ignores her laughter, and, unconcerned with her status, he “squwithe<sup>3</sup>” inquires as to what the ransom is. But, if the end of the story is that she is a necessary part of the clean operation of the system of knighthood, why the sense of urgency here to reassert the very law she is part of upholding?

The laughing woman's exposure of knightly enjoyment in subordination threatens Arthur's sense of the smooth and untroubled performance of knighthood. Slavoj Žižek<sup>4</sup>, gives us a context within which to look at the phrase “enjoyment:” “[it] is a translation of *jouissance*, that is, the passional register of unconscious desire, the interior limit of the

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<sup>3</sup> glossed by Hahn as ‘quickly.’

<sup>4</sup> I am much indebted to L. O. Aranye Fradenburg's article ““So That We May Speak of Them’: Enjoying the Middle Ages.” for my reading of Žižek's theories about enjoyment

subject's identity as such, that which is 'in you more than yourself'" ("So That We May Speak of Them ...," or WMS, footnote #1). On the one hand, her laugh indicates the unconscious desire of the knights to enjoy this victimization. Yet, borrowing from Žižek, the laughing woman engages in a "theft of enjoyment" that the knights receive in their submission to the king.

Žižek's discussion of the "theft of enjoyment" can even further map what the laughing woman's enjoyment means to knightly identity: "we always impute to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment: s/he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment ... what we conceal by imputing to the Other the theft of enjoyment is the traumatic fact that *we never possessed what was allegedly stolen from us ....*" (WMS, footnote #5). If the woman functions to represent the interior anxieties about the victimizations essential to knighthood such that she enables them to stay in their place as a sub-text, Arthur seems to be concerned that, through her abject laughter, she has brought to the surface the (im)possibilities of pleasure in knightly subordination, a desire that must go unrecognized in the exterior, and a pleasure that must go unexperienced. Whereas the woman represents the exteriorizing of knightly anxieties about the need for knights to desire victimization and submission, she also indicates that there are potential pleasures in this submission that knights can never really have or *experience as pleasure*. It is because, as Cixous and many other feminist scholars have suggested, female-identified subject can more readily access *jouissance* that the laughing woman can experience the pleasures of knightly masochism.

The text encourages us to read the laughing woman's presence as a way of disarming the anxieties of knightly victimization, but the emergence of laughter undercuts the text's hopes of containment. As Fradenburg indicates, "the true value of sacrifice [to the law] 'lies in its very meaninglessness,' and its enjoyment is the enjoyment renunciation itself, that is the enjoyment of the law's designation of desire; the renunciation of jouissance so as to produce the plus-de-jour, the surplus enjoyment that will be embodied in the objet-a, that fascinating but arbitrary object that fills out the void (of sense) in the other" ("Sacrificial Desire ...," or SD, para. 27). Thus, although the text may want to create this desire as meaningless such that it retains value for efficient knightly identity, the laughing woman "takes-on submission" such that it gives it meaning, re-citing through her laughter the submission, not as what must appear to be "obedience and sacrifice for their own sake" but, rather, sacrifice for the sake of pleasure and enjoyment. According to Fradenburg's rendering, it is the form of the law that we desire, "and our renunciation in relation to this law produces the plus-de-jour, the left over enjoyment that sustains our obedience (and can also become the basis of our refusal)" ("Sacrificial Desire" 28).

I wish to focus on the refusal-power associated with the specifically "*mylde loghe*," to focus on the fact that a female social subject has this power through knowledge. In addition to being a joyful response from someone being recounting the story of her rescue, and even on top of it being the perfect melancholic reaction from a weeping woman, she also represents anxieties about what is at stake in that very rescue. As a laughing woman, she appears strangely disruptive, self-referential. She seems to

even cackle at the great lengths knights go through to distance themselves from their anxieties. This means the text evokes pleasure. A touch of the queer pleasure even. How might we re-consider “the instability of powerful masculinity within a military scene” through reading her laughter as indicative of the pleasures of subordination? Might her laughter also allude to the queer masochistic pleasures of knighthood?

## Queering the Soro and Care of Masochism

Does her laughter indicate that s/he gained pleasure out of being “presunnere,” explaining why she would have only composed feelings toward being rescued by Gawain? Put in terms of masochistic pleasure, rather than laughing in relief that she has been rescued as a result of one particular knight’s capture of another, what emerges is knighthood as a masochistic discourse; her laughter is an indication that there is something pleasurable for knights about bondage, a pleasure marked by the agency of submission.

Seeing the laughing woman as representative of knightly masochism enables us to make queer sense out of her first appearance in the text. As we leave Arthur to sleep off the fruits of his success in vowing, the text turns to Kay, who has come upon “a knyghte” who leads “a birde brighte,” the laughing woman. At this point, the knight remains unnamed, although we find out later in the story that it is Menealfe. After we are told that she is “wepputte wunder sore,” she speaks of her own condition:

Ho sayd, “Sayn Mare myghte me soede  
and save me my madunhede  
and *giffe the knyghte for his dede*  
*bothe soro and care!*”

Thus ho talkes him tille  
Quille ho hade sayd all hur wille;  
and Kay held him full stille,  
and in the holte hoves. (my italics, ll. 281 - 288)

Which knight, exactly, is the laughing woman talking about here? Again, a close look at the etymology is crucial here. Although apparently an obscure form, the MED indicates that “soro” is a form of the word “sorwe,” which glosses as both “sorrow” and

“sore” (MED 232). On one hand, she could be saying that she wishes the captive knight “soro” for kidnaping her and asking Kay to do the “dede” -- of course the courtly lady would wish harm to the knight who is holding her captive. Also, this reading would work well to keep her separate from the knights: knight’s fight for the sake of women, not because they are submissive to the king. But because the laughing women represents anxieties about submission, the use of the words “soro and care,” indicate the double bind of knighthood rather than marking a clear separation of masculine and feminine; it is “dede” that includes being both cared for and put in the way of danger by allegiance to the sovereign.

Couldn’t she also be referencing the knight who rescues her? If we centralize her laugh such that she also represents knightly masochism, the fact that Kay waits until the recreant knight is far away from where the lady is speaking from, so far away that he must gallop on his horse to over take him, indicates that he is more interested in fighting the knight than he is in rescuing the laughing women. So much for doing it for the damsel, eh? And the lack of the use proper names for the knights is at issue in this paragraph, too; the reliance of the word “him” in the quoted passage works to further displace the conventional reading that knights are motivated to fight by keeping sacred the welfare of maidens.

Although I agree when Ingham suggests that the text tries to make “the split between Menealfe, Gawain, and Kay proves useful to Arthur; it ensures that these three knights will unite in their oath of loyalty to their sovereign and not to each other,” given the slippery pronouns, this seems to be a moment where that attempt is futile (*Sovereign*

*Fantasies* 173). Thus, the statement of the co-existence of “soro and care,” both sorrow/bodily soreness and care, is a statement of the terms of the masochistic pleasures of combating each other that are latent in conventional knighthood. Additionally, the double use of until in reference to the expression of her will (“tille” in line 285 and “quille” in line 286) marks out her doubleness. She both stands in for the anxieties of the submission through feminization as indicated by the line which references her “madunhede,” and expresses the masochistic desires for pleasure in pain that are to be had by serving the king by engaging in combat.

In fact, the text draws a direct parallel between the situation of the laughing woman and Menealfe, a parallel that, because it draws attention to the convention, queerly displaces it. Just as in line 286, the we are told laughing lady speaks her “wille” which we know as also being the desires of knights, at 298 the recreant knight says, “I am redy atte thi wille.” As such, the two are able to fight because anxieties about submission and the unaccessible pleasures involved in it have been externalized through the laughing woman. But it also aligns Menealfe with the laughing woman. What this discourse of displacement creates is a moment full of queer viewing pleasure. In her article, “Chaucer’s Queer Touches/ A Queer Touches Chaucer,” Caroline Dinshaw provides a helpful definition of queerness. “Queerness,” she contends, “works by contiguity and displacement, knocking signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange; it works in a way to provoke perceptual shift and subsequent corporeal response in those touched” (Dinshaw 76). From the perspective of the woman’s laughter, this is a scene certainly touched by queer laughter.



Recalling that, much like the spacial displacement that Dinshaw suggests occurs when the queer pardoner barges in on the Wife of Bath, Kay must “prekut oute prestely” and “aurehiet,” or overtake, the recreant knight, this seems to be a clear moment where bodies are ungrounded in addition to pointing toward the desires of (hetero)knights. In fact, this displacement brings to bare the homoerotic implications of masochistic knights. With the touch of the queer, not only does self-directed pleasure emerge, but the same-sex context of that desire erupts, too.

Also, at the moment that the recreant knight expresses his “wille,” there is a hyperbolic repetition about doing the duel properly, a propriety that involves the exposure of the Menealfe’s proper name, as it were. Although this seems to be the text trying to recontain the externalized anxiety that has been allowed return through linguistic parallel and pronoun slippage, he has already been touched by the queer. As a result, a beautiful thing happens. As an attempt at defusing the queer power of her gendering, Menealfe refers to the laughing woman as the gender neutral “wighte” in telling the story of how he came to be her capture. However, much like the powerful eruption that happens through the previous repetition of doing it for the gendered term “birde bryghte,” the rules of knighthood are denaturalized and displaced through the queer insistence on those very rules, and what emerges is a scene of masochism.

And recall that the laughing woman is off to the side, seeming to fade into the background at the very moment her welfare is ostensibly taking center stage. On one hand, conventionally this is an example of the exact erasure that Ingham speaks of; as she is pushed into the background, so are the knight’s anxieties. However, since I, too, have

been touched by the power of her queer laughter to displace, I cannot forget that she also represents excess masochistic pleasure. What, then, can we make of the fact that she is watching the performance? Can we, as readers and critics, access this pleasure of watching masochistic battle scenes between knights?

As Ingham notes, the text repeatedly reminds us that the sparring is done for the sake of the laughing woman. But, as previously mentioned, perhaps what this repetition of the gender-normative chivalric discourse enables is a re-citation of what it means to be 'doing it for the woman.' Judith Butler asserts gender discourse(s) are performative, they are "act[s] of discourse with the power to create what it names such that the discourse seeks to police what counts as viable bodies, or "bodies that matter" (Butler 122).

However, Butler also asserts that we need not be simply pawns to the whims of the laws of gender discourse; there are ways to disturb these gender-norms, actually to subvert or disobey them, a re-citing that as a political contestation. She claims that "the instabilities, the possibilities for *rematerialization*, opened up by this process [of repetition] ... spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law (Butler 2). It is "a repetition of the law into hyperbole," through "a parodic inhabiting of conformity," that "... produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law, ... , creat[ing] more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent" (Butler 3).

At the moment of her laughter, the woman lingers in pleasure, evoking a fluidity that always haunts the margins of normative chivalric culture. In this, the laughing woman re-cites the terms of her victimization and containment into a site of (previously

marginalized) pleasure. In other words, the text attempts to cover over the masochistic pleasures of knighthood, yet the laughing woman opens up a space for indulgence in the (im)possible pleasures of knightly masochism, as represented by the laughing woman. Her laugh is thus both a product of (masculinist) knightly discourse feminine bodily pleasure which re-cites the female body as one filled with enjoyment. Helene Cixous has much to say about the liberatory effects of a discourse of the feminine body. She asserts that women writing from their bodies:

a feminine text [that] cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there is no other way. There is no room for her is she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to shatter the framework of institutions, blow up the law, *break up the 'truth' with her laughter* (my italics, Cixous 1237, 1241).

Cixous description is uncannily like the laughing woman. Although patriarchal discourse creates her body as a stand-in for anxiety, her laugh registers disruptive pleasures in excess of the determined direction of the text. The lady is able to use her body, before our very eyes, to turn a disciplining law into a law of disruptive pleasure. It is no wonder that Arthur attempts to reassert the law that circumscribes the proper position for women (and the feminine) so quickly: his evocation of Guinevere as the mediator of the Law tries to re-situate female bodies as serving the pleasures of the sovereign.

For the chivalric economy to 'work,' knights must desire victimization/death without ever indulging in the enjoyment of such as masochistic position that is in relation to the law of chivalric culture, yet, her laugh registers this excess not as empty and/or formulaic, but rather as a bodily materialization of pleasurable excess within itself. What

began as a way to contain femininity through gender difference actually unleashes the destructive power of female pleasure through re-citation by the female body. She experiences a “loghe” that they can never indulge in. The laughing woman, “writes in white ink” (Cixous 1237).

The laughing woman indicates not only anxieties about the masochistic pleasures in knightly identity but also indicates that she has access to this Other enjoyment in a way that they do not; not only does she steal their enjoyment, but her excessive (in its excess of the law) laughter re-cites this theft giving her – as a fem/ale -- access to the enjoyment that they must desire but that they cannot ever access. Seen from this angle, the laughing woman becomes a model of enjoyment and pleasure available for female-identified readers of *The Avowing*. Exposing masochism as inherent in structures of knighthood through the power of a queer touch to gain pleasure from displacement, laughing woman makes available a scene of female pleasure from enjoyment by female-identified readers. Through the re-citation of gendered discourse, the pleasures of the laughing woman displace Baldwin’s cautionary narrative about the murdering women, making accessible grizzly pleasures for queer female-identified.

So, whereas the text encourages us to believe that the desire to ‘do it for the woman’ is shaping subjects loyal to the law of chivalry, the repetition and thus hyperbolic over-determination of this chivalric code, enables a re-articulation of the victimization as pleasure or enjoyment. For this queer critic, the laughing woman’s position as spectator who watches the performativity of knights in battle, in all of the senses in which Butler uses that term, has provided me with an ally in both the pleasures I receive in watching

films with medieval battles and the delicious delight I experience in reading gory battles between knights. In basking in this framework, Baldwin's story about the murdering women at the end of *The Avowing* is one such scene that, though the queer touch of the laughing woman, becomes a grizzly delight.

## Enjoying (the Grizzle of) the Middle Ages<sup>5</sup>

When we recall the performative nature tale within the tale at the scene of laughter, what can we make of the excess pleasure that is circulates in the text, particularly the bodily pleasures to be had in reading Baldwin's tale within the tale of the murderous women? For this queer critic, the laughing woman's position as spectator who watches the performativity of knights in battle, in all of the senses in which Butler uses that term, has provided me with an ally in both the pleasures I receive in watching films with medieval battles in them and the delight I experience in reading gory battles between knights. Baldwin's story about the murdering women at the end of *The Avowing* is one such scene. Through the queer touch of the laughing woman, becomes a grizzly delight.

I would argue the laughing woman's laugh has deliciously subversive a/effects. Her laugh becomes an immediate threat to the stability of the system that seeks to displace, though gender difference, the anxieties that paralyze knights. It is the exposure of the masochistic pleasure implied in that laughter, pleasures directed not toward the sovereign but circulating within the very moment of narrating the story of bondage, that Arthur also hopes to erase to keep inaccessible.

The laughing woman has modeled for us a position from which viewing rivalry involves excessive queer pleasure in submission. Read through the touch of queer laughing woman, we see that she has not disappeared but, rather, has saturated the entire

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<sup>5</sup>This is in reference to L. O. Aranye Fradenburg's article "So The We May Speak of Them': Enjoying the Middle Ages," which was one of the texts that sent me thinking about my own enjoyment of Arthurian romances.

scene. The touch of the laughing queer spectator displaces Baldwin's anti-feminist tirade about the sexual servitude of women, bringing to the fore bloody enjoyments.

The infectious laugh allows indulgence in the "explicitly erotic delights" of Baldwin's gruesome tale be something for queer females who are viewing the performance of the rivaling woman. The force of Baldwin's tale as a reassertion on gender/sexuality and chivalric norms has been blunted. His reference to the beauty of the women as "one was bryghtur of ble/ then ther othir toe" is particularly telling (ll. 931-2).<sup>6</sup> The performative iteration of the word "bryghtur" recalls his knightly vow, but it is also now firmly meshed in the queer discursive history of the text. What re-emerges is not only women signifying anxiety, but female having access to the masochistic pleasures of performances of the gruesome realities of rivalry.

The focus on the female body's enjoyment in the scene at the line "ho cutte hitte wyth a knyfe" and the performance of a discourse of submission provides a grizzly twist on the pleasures of masochism released by the laughing women. Thus, in remembering how the displacing power of the laughing woman was released through the performance of a story with the story, the performativity of the Baldwin's stance centralizes the queer history of how to read rivalrous performances from pleasure. This allows a queer female-identified reader to use the laughing woman as a model for getting self-pleasure out of a

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<sup>6</sup>Hahn's gloss of this as "handsome" clearly reads with the argument that this moment is centrally about the (dis)avowal of both the pleasures and, in Ingham's instance, the anxieties, about knightly rivalry. Within a heterocentric paradigm, this is certainly "an amazing (masculinist) fantasy" about women fighting over being the prime sexual object for 500 knights (*Sovereign Fantasies* 178). But as is indicative of Ingham's use of the parenthetical here, she is a critic that has been touched by the queer yet again, and she marginalizes even as she centralizes the heterocentric reading. Again, I take her tantalizing lead and centralize the margin. Thanks to her and the laughing woman, there is another fantasy to be had here.

staged performance of a gruesome battle; it is the very re-citation of performative nature of discourse as highlighted by Baldwin's story within a story that displaces its normativizing thrust of it.

This rendering of the containment power unintelligible mirrors both how the pronoun slippage of the bondage scene and the laughing scene displace and confound attempts to reassert chivalric code. Baldwin's assertions about the "proper place" for women is rendered illogical. Once he lands on the lesson of his telling -- "ne no biurdes brighte of ble" will he be jealous of for the end of time -- the invocation of what is now language that signifies the queer female pleasures in performances of gruesome rivalry displaces his anxious anti-feminist rhetoric. The very queer, palatable disconnect unleashes grizzly pleasures that become the nightmare of the court performing through Baldwin's words.

So when Baldwin uses a most hyperbolic death of the knight in order to teach what is supposed to be a very serious lesson about chivalry, I bask in campy pleasure. Baldwin's fabulous claim that a knight crawled into the barrel to escape a missile, only to have the missile make a direct hit, causing, of all things, "sone the hed fro the hals,/ hit lyputt full evyn," ("immediately have his head pop off of his neck") is an illustration of "a kyndely thing," or a normal thing, takes on new meaning. In a queer romance filled with displacement, pronouns without antecedents, and structural recursivity, what places are proper after all, what actions count as "normal"? I revel in pleasure found in the performance of this deliciously gruesome logic of bodies in combat. Similar to the laughing woman, I cackle at the knights who scramble into campy barrels,



trying to shore up their manhood by disavowing the feminine ‘excesses’ now circulating for my queer enjoyment.

I think one way to enjoy texts of the Middle Ages is to focus on stealing back, or re-thefting, pleasures. Taking serious the pleasures that erupt where we would least expect them by centralize female actions in texts is a way to take back Arthurian romances that may otherwise have little pleasure to offer queer female-identified readers. Even in being well aware of what I risk implying when I suggest that we meditate deeply on women gaining pleasure in masochistic violence, it is my wish that such queer readings about of these texts will open up a space in feminism where we can think about how to pleasure our selves even in the face of debilitating patriarchy. I want to make sure that queer pleasure swells even in amid the most constraining ideological (k)nightmares.

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