Real Men Don’t Cry, But Should They?: Analysis of Gender in Medieval Literature

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In times of character evaluation—whether it is of the self or others—it is not uncommon to judge or be judged by the manner in which one’s actions or ideals correlate to their gender. This correlation is called masculinity or femininity, depending on whether the victim is male or female. In the words of gender theorist Teresa De Lauretis, “Gender is not sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual” (716). Masculinity and femininity only exist to confine an individual to a predetermined standard of social acceptance. For example, Western masculinity is defined by physical prowess, while femininity expects domestic expertise. Therefore, when a man chooses to become a stay-at-home father or a woman becomes a bodybuilder, they challenge their genders and are socially shunned.

Unfortunately, this gender judgment is nothing new. In many Arthurian tales, the expectations of nobles, knights, and ladies are deeply rooted in gender roles. One such expectation is how men and women grieve. This paper, therein, has three goals. First, it aims to prove the existence of gender-based social norms through the works of literary theorists. Then, using the Arthurian tales *Yvain, or The Knight with the Lion*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Lanval*, the paper will reveal how these gender expectations persist into contemporary works, and their toxic effects on social expectations. Finally, upon highlighting the issues above, the paper will advocate gender-neutralization, and how this process will eliminate the profound issues raised by gender norms today. Thus, through the joint efforts of the aforementioned Arthurian tales and contemporary theorists, it becomes evident that gender-based expectations need to be neutralized for contemporary and future literature.
To begin, the notion of gender bias must be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, for without it the following arguments are deemed questionable at best. Once again, Teresa De Lauretis offers crucial insight. She states:

The cultural conceptions of male and female as two complementary yet mutually exclusive categories into which all human beings are placed constitutes within each culture a gender system, a symbolic system or system of meanings, that correlate sex to cultural contents according to social values and hierarchies (De Lauretis 716).

The importance of this claim lies in its beliefs in the origin of gender. The division between sex and gender is incredibly paramount, for being male neither makes someone masculine, nor female feminine. Male and female are biological states, irrevocable with the exception of modern medicine. Gender is a cultural state, with the guiding parameters being solely dependent upon the ideals of each culture or counter-culture. An example of gender’s flexibility is the ability to engage in drag. In the words of theorist Judith Butler, “Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation” (722). To those unfamiliar, drag is the donning and performing of the opposite gender’s clothing and actions. When a man or woman engages in drag, he/she abandons the gender role he/she is originally appropriated and acquires a new one. This understanding alone proves a stark contrast between sex and gender, and reinforces the idea that gender is changeable at will. In other words, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Butler 722). People seek to imitate the standards of their culture without the realization that the standards themselves are imaginary.
With an understanding of the human origins of gender, it is possible to further postulate the standards of these genders, and the consequences for deviating from them, are equally human in nature. Unless done so for the sake of comedic or theatrical effect, the use of drag in many contemporary cultures is seen as a gross deviation from gender norms. This deviance “brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” by the culture (Butler 725). So, while the concept of gender and the rules that govern it are imaginary, the consequences for straying from those rules are very real. It is this understanding that will carry the subsequent arguments through the remainder of this paper.

Before looking into the present affairs of gender, there must be an understanding its past. To scholarly chagrin, direct discussions on gender roles were few and far between for medieval writers, making direct pulls like Butler and De Lauretis an incredible challenge. However, an understanding of previous gender norms can still be built upon the tropes authors used in their works. In other words, the manners in which various medieval authors had their characters act and react can be used to form working arguments on their gender expectations. Because such a wide-spanning application could write volumes, this paper will focus primarily on the medieval expectations of grief as seen through various works.

The search begins with Chretien’s *Yvain, or The Knight with the Lion*. The entirety of the tale recalls the ventures of Sir Yvain and his quests of revenge and love. Towards the beginning of the story, when Yvain first meets lady Laudine, she is morning over the death of her husband, Esclados the Red. In her grief:

She was, at that moment, on the verge of suicide. She cried out at the top of her voice, then fell into a swoon. When she had been set back on her feet, she began,
like a madwoman, to tear at herself and pull her hair, clawing her hands and ripping her clothing and fainting at every step (Chretien 14).

While these lines make Laudine’s suffering very apparent, it would be remiss to assume they define feminine grieving. To this end, the story *Sir Orfeo* comes to the forefront. Though the author of the tale is anonymous, the native language and imagery used place it years and cultures apart from *Yvain*. It is then intriguing to see the queen’s grief described as such:

But when she woke, ah me, the change!
Strange were her words, her actions strange;
She wrung her hands, and tore her face
Till that the blood ran down apace;
Her goodly rubes she soon had torn,
As if of sense she were forlorn (*Sir Orfeo*).

With these two points of reference, a feminine gender trend begins to appear: grief becomes typified by weeping, fainting, mutilation of self and clothing, and/or suicide. This grieving is portrayed as being shallow and entirely physical, in and of itself congruent with the medieval sentiment that women were focused on the physical rather than mental.

Masculine grieving, therein, focused on mental and spiritual representations. In the story of *Yvain*, this is first demonstrated by the titular character’s loss of Laudine’s favor. His grief is expressed as such:

All he saw tormented him; all he heard tortured him. He wanted to flee by himself to some wild land where no one would know or seek him, where man or woman would know no more of him than if he had fallen into a bottomless pit.
He hated himself above all, and knew no one to console him in the death he had brought upon himself. He would rather go mad than be unable to take revenge upon himself, robbed, as he was, of joy through his own fault (Chretien 24).

Compared to Laudine’s suffering, Yvain’s is undeniably more nuanced and exploratory. However, rather than tear at himself or his clothing, Yvain is consumed by insanity and the need for isolation. In turning to Sir Orfeo, we see tropes occurring. When Heurodis is abducted by the fae, Orfeo commands, “For since I have lost my wife, the queen, The Fairest lady this earth hath seen, To dwell in the wilderness am I fain” (Sir Orfeo). Thus, medieval masculine grieving was characterized by insanity, self-loathing, amnesia, and/or extreme isolation—usually by fleeing into the wilderness. While never explicitly stated by a narrator or author, the use of these tropes across ages and cultures shows men and women were socially expected to express their grief in drastically different ways.

Next, having defined one medieval gender standard, it is time to see what happened when characters strayed from that norm. In this respect, the story Lanval by Marie de France characterizes a man who opens himself to feminine grieving, and the effects that follow. After losing his faerie love to the actions of the queen, Lanval “curses his tongue, the heart he couldn’t hide—It’s a wonder he doesn’t commit suicide. All his crying and begging and braying, self-hatred, self-abuse, humble praying” (Marie de France 10). Lanval weeps, desires suicide, and harms himself, all clear symptoms of feminine grieving as described previously. When his fellow knights check on Lanval, “They were ready to scold and blame Lanval for being still so sad. They cursed such a love as mad. Every day at his house they’d meet, checking on him, just to find if he’d drunk water, if he’d still eat” (Marie de France 11-12). Lanval’s deviation is treated just as Judith Butler described, with ostracism and punishment. In fact, Lanval appears to
be punished by the narrator herself, for after his imprisonment, he serves only to identify his lover from the procession of fae women who enter Arthur’s court. He is stripped of his masculine role in the story, despite possessing other masculine qualities like chivalry, bravery and prowess. This meta-punishment would then serve to appease the masculine audience, since having such “unmanly” qualities excused would put their gender standards in an uncomfortable state of doubt. When other tales, like *Gilgamesh*, share similar moments of men openly weeping or grieving in feminine ways, they are berated by other men, and even Shakespeare’s *King Lear* noted tears as being womanly.

Having thus proven gender roles were prominent in medieval literature; it is important to examine how they persist into contemporary literature. Because the medieval literature dealt with Arthurian tales, it is only fitting the contemporary deals with the Fantasy genre. In particular, the novel *Eragon* serves as an interesting example, as it is written for a youth audience by a young author. The story itself revolves around a young boy, Eragon, who becomes magically linked to a dragon, Saphira, and takes part in an incredible adventure. The problem becomes, however, when he encounters the elf Arya, she is beaten and unconscious. Worried for her, Saphira tells Eragon, “*Tired or not, hungry or not, you must save her. I will meld my strength with yours, but you are the one who must wield the magic* (Paolini 315). Although not about grieving, we see a clear division of expectations between masculine and feminine characters. While Saphira is stronger, and more capable of saving Arya, the duty is deferred to Eragon. Also, though Arya and Eragon were both imprisoned by the same force, Arya is brutally tortured and requires saving by Eragon. Many fantasy stories use this trope, with femininity being defined by the inability to overcome confrontation, or being incapable of mental or physical prowess. Masculinity, then, demonstrates perseverance in the face of opposition, and
being able to improve mental or physical prowess if initially lacking. Male characters that cannot perform these roles, like Samwise Gamgee in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, become portrayed in more feminine roles—which may in part be a cause of modern audiences to view the relationship between Sam and Frodo as homosexual, as each character then fulfills an opposing gender role.

Therein, through the use of medieval literature like *Yvain, or the Knight with the Lion*, *Lanval*, and *Sir Orfeo*, as well as contemporary literature and gender theories, this paper has proven gender roles need to be neutralized for future audiences. As the studies in the medieval texts showcased, both the feminine and masculine gender roles carry toxic notions on how men and women should handle responses like grief and suffering. Contemporary literature, while subtler in gender expectations, expects men to become the champions of any conflict, even if it is beyond their means, and women are expected to know and surrender to their limits. Without change, future literature will have different faces to the same problems. It becomes apparent that challenging the faces alone does not suffice, gender itself must be confronted.

The solution, for the sake of this paper, will be termed gender-neutralization. The philosophy behind this solution is to cease defining social expectations by one’s biological character. In regards to literature, this would then entail the creation of characters as stand-alone personalities and capabilities, and readers to regard these characters’ actions as undefined by his/her culture. Judith Butler expresses the sentiment clearly by saying, “gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (725). Individuals, and their fictional counterparts, express themselves in ways cultural artifacts like masculine and feminine can never predict, and for each example pulled into either category, a
counterexample makes itself known. In this regard, future authors deserve to express characters as products of their imaginations, not their cultures.
Works Cited


