

The Question of Identity and the Cloak in *Emare*

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Abstract: This paper examines the Middle English, Breton lay *Emare*. In this literary discussion I posit that the magnificent cloak given to *Emare*, which becomes the main image of the poem, blinds the other characters to *Emare*'s true identity as a woman autonomous from said cloak. The cloak itself is given lengthy description but is never given authoritative meaning by the poet. The ambiguity of this image has been the focus of several author's monographs (See Archibald, Arthur and Hopkins). The poet creates and destroys 'sets' of characters ensuring, in the end, that *Emare* is able to avoid incestuous advances and find her appropriate place with people who are not blinded by the passion that the cloak incites in them. The poem itself falls into the genre of Woman Falsely Accused and Cast Adrift, which were popular in the medieval period (See Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*), and addresses the issue of female identity in a male world.

One of the most enigmatic symbols of medieval literature is the fabulous gemmed cloak worn by the heroine *Emare* in the poem that bears her name. The valuable artefact is never given an authoritative explanation nor is it ever taken from the defenceless woman who wears it. The lengthy description of the cloak (lines 109-168) and the focus placed on the image each time *Emare* is described, demand that, as an audience, we give greater attention to this symbol and its ambiguous presence in the tale.

Emare's story falls into the recognized motif of the Woman Falsely Accused and Cast Adrift Tale, also sometimes called Incestuous Father Tales (Archibald, 162). In this tale, *Emare*'s father the Emperor becomes enamoured with his daughter after the death of his wife and the reception of the beautiful, jewelled cloak from a vassal (ll. 52-188). *Emare* refuses his advances and, consequently, is cast adrift on the ocean without food or water (ll. 250-336). She arrives in "Galys" (l.338) and finds a more appropriate partner in the King of that land under the alias of "Egare". However, as is common to these tales, the King's mother does not receive *Emare* well and plots to destroy her (ll.433-456). Thus, when *Emare* bears a son, the old Queen intercepts the message and sends a new one to the King saying that *Emare* has borne a monster (ll.505-540). The King's reply is also intercepted and the new message insists that *Emare* be cast adrift again with her child (ll.584-597). Her rudderless boat floats back to Italy where she is taken in by a merchant until, by chance, both her husband and father come to Rome to seek penance for what they have done to her and she is able to effect a reunion with both of them through her son Segramour (ll. 640-1035). What makes this version of the tale particularly interesting is the role played by the cloak, for it does not feature quite the same way or, in some cases, at all in other versions of this tale.

In this essay I argue that the beautiful cloak blinds the other characters to *Emare*'s true identity. When the cloak is put on *Emare* she ceases to be *Emare* the Woman and becomes the Bearer of the Cloak, and thus subject to the various reactions of others to the cloak. Ross G. Arthur has argued that good characters react to the cloak in an appropriate way because it brings out the virtues already inherent in *Emare*'s character, but the bad characters react to the symbol of the cloak in ways that are 'useless' and 'sinful' (Arthur, 90). This may be too generous, for everyone who sees *Emare* notices the cloak first and foremost and even the poet

ceases to name his heroine, instead calling her variations of "that comely unthur kelle" (l. 303) throughout the poem. All who behold *Emare* in the cloak agree that she appears to be of Otherworldly beauty and desire to keep her and neutralize the power of the cloak, either in an appropriate or inappropriate way. Whereas the Emperor's desire incited by the robe for his daughter is sinful, the desire that the King feels for this unknown, robed maiden is both natural and appropriate because she is not his kin. The King's mother's reaction to the cloak is the most extremely negative, for she sees its beauty as an Otherworldly threat manifested through *Emare*. Even minor characters such as Sir Kadore and Jurdan the merchant, who rescue *Emare* in Italy, make no attempts to return her to her proper place, but keep her within their own homes as though she is some form of precious commodity.

We are introduced to *Emare* and her family just after the opening prayer of the poem. The Emperor, Sir Artyus, is said by the poet to be "the best manne/ In the worlde that lyvede thanne" (ll. 37-8) and his wife, Dame Erayne, "was full of love and goodness;/So curtays lady was none." (ll. 35-6). *Emare* is born from these privileged loins and the poet tells us that she completes the set by being "the fayrest creature borne/That yn the lond was thoo." (ll. 50-1). The poet obviously wants his readers to recognize that *Emare* and her parents make a "set" of the best, most beautiful and gracious people in the land.¹ This is important because just as the poet completes the set with the birth of *Emare*, he destroys what he has created by having the Empress die and the child *Emare* sent away to learn manners from a noble woman (ll.52-60). In the brief description of *Emare* that follows, the poet uses adjectives and phrases to describe *Emare* that deliberately remind us that she is the product of both her mother and father. At lines 64 and 65 the poet uses exactly the same phrase used to describe her father to illustrate *Emare*'s exceptional courtesy, and the comparison to a "lylye-flowre" (l. 66) while in the following line reminds the audience of her mother's "Whyte as whales bone" (l. 33) complexion. The poet wants to create a strong family image

¹ What is meant here by "set" is that the poet is deliberately making groups of people or things, generally three, bringing together 'one of a kind' people or things. Thus the first set includes *Emare* with her two parents forming the best people in Rome, but when the Empress dies she is replaced with the cloak. *Emare*/ the cloak must end up in an appropriate set, that is with the King and not the Emperor.

in the minds of his audience so that when the ensuing incest scene plays out it will resonate on a deep personal level as being wrong or sinful. When the poet tells us "All her loved that her sye,/ Wyth menske and mychyl honour" (ll.68-9) it is to highlight the impropriety of the incestuous advances that the audience is already expecting based on the genre.

When the poet returns to the Emperor we are told that Sir Artyus is making the most of his time now that he is a single man. The poet tells us that he "ledde hys lyf yn weddewede,/ And myche loved playnge." (ll. 77-8). The poet is deliberately using the word "playnge" here because he will use it again and again later on in the poem. Its meaning can be tricky; some take it to mean feasting and games, but others such as Ross G. Arthur suggest a more sexual connotation in this line (Arthur, 89). The latter view is more appropriate for this discussion, for it feeds into the theme of awakening sexual appetites that, at this point in the poem, surrounds the Emperor. Just after this hint at royal promiscuity, the poet introduces the cloak.

The cloak is described in terms that encourage the audience to use the most extravagant parts of their imaginations. The poet tells us that the Emperor could not see "For glysteryng of the ryche ston" (l. 100). It would seem that this blinding is more detrimental on a psychological level for, as we shall see, the cloak's magnificence fans the flames of the Emperor's growing sexual appetites. The poet also takes this opportunity to introduce the idea of the cloak as being Otherworldly. At line 104 the Emperor exclaims in haste "Sertes, thys ys a fayry,/ Or ellys a vanyte!" (ll. 104-5). And certainly the robe does work an illusion on those who see it; its magnificence has the power to blind those who see it to the identity of the person who wears it. The King of Sicily replies that "So ryche a jwell ys ther non/ In all Crystyante." (ll. 107-8) and thus the poet returns to his perfect set: The Emperor, Emare and, now, the cloak. At the same time he seems to confirm that, while it is not explicitly magical, this is not an ordinary, everyday cloak.

At line 109 the poet embarks upon a lengthy description of the cloak and its extravagant decoration. The poet here goes into greater detail about the various stones and panels depicting four erotic scenes of passionate lovers. We are told that the cloth was made by the Emir's daughter as a wedding gift for her beloved, the Sultan's son (ll.158-162). The poet makes very clear the point that this cloak was meant for the Sultan's son to wear to the richest of occasions; the jewels, extravagant embroidery and long history of exchange suggest that the material wealth attached to the cloak is not lost on the other characters, yet interestingly no one attempts to steal it from Emare once it is on her.

Not only is the robe an obvious symbol of wealth and privilege, it is also highly eroticised by the four panels depicting four sets of doomed lovers. The first panel shows "Ydoyne and Amadas" (l. 122) who were doomed to be separated by social rank and desperate trials (Laskaya & Salisbury, *Notes*). The next features "Tristram and Isowde" (l. 134) whose love was adulterous and, thus, also doomed to fail (Laskaya & Salisbury, *Notes*). The third panel depicts "Florys and Dam Blawncheflour" who can be seen to represent innocence and adolescent love because of their age, but who also must go through trials to prove their love (Laskaya & Salisbury, *Notes*). The last panel shows the Emir's daughter with her beloved and, while this love was legitimate, it was doomed nonetheless because the cloth was taken by force before it was given to the intended (ll.173-4). These erotic images, combined with the physical magnificence of the robe, create the "vanyte" that blinds the Emperor, and subsequent characters, to Emare's

true identity. It is understandable that the cloth would incite erotic passions, but the Emperor's passions are misdirected after the death of his wife and transferred to his young daughter. The poet is creating a new set here, but it is one that is unnatural, for the kind of love the Emperor wants from his daughter is not the kind a father should want. Nevertheless, when the King of Sicily and Emperor have had enough "play" (l. 183), the King returns home and the Emperor immediately sends for his daughter, suggesting that the King's visit only distracted the Emperor from his now fully awakened sexual appetites.

Now, there are some scholars who believe that the Emperor's desire for Emare is fuelled by her "own extraordinary natural beauty" (Hopkins, 74) but it is important to note that it is only after the Emperor has seen the robe that he "aftur hys dowghtur hadde longyng" (ll. 188). The Emperor's passions have been running high since line 78 and the audience knows that eroticism of the robe will certainly have an effect on the father/daughter relationship the poet has created. Equally important to note the fact that the poet ceases to name Emare after this point; she appears to lose her identity until she reaches the land of Galys where she calls herself "Egare" (l.360). The poet does this deliberately to intensify the idea that Emare the Woman will be lost when the cloak is put on her.

The grown-up Emare is reintroduced in terms that both remind us of her royal lineage and impress upon us the inherent goodness of her nature; we are told that her complexion is still pure and fair like her mother's was, and that she "Was godely unthur gare." (l. 188). Emare has grown into the picture of genteel, innocent perfection and, were this a different genre of tale, the audience might expect some knight to fall in love with her and go through the usual trials to win her love in return. But this is not that sort of tale, and the poet quickly changes gears to introduce the incest theme when he tells us of the reunion between father and daughter. At line 212 the poet says "He klypped her and kissed her swete", which seems natural after a long separation, but the reunion is made uncomfortable by the following lines where the poet tells us that "To the palsy they yede in fere,/ In romans as we rede" (ll. 215-6). The term 'romans', or romance, suggests the love being expressed here is romantic or sexual, not paternal. The Emperor is still "blinded" by the illusion of the robe; he cannot see that it is his own flesh and blood that he is courting because, as the poet has shown us, his sexual passions are awakened and quickly becoming out of control. In the following stanza the poet describes the Emperor in terms that could be employed to describe an enamoured knight of courtly romance. When the Emperor writes to and obtains permission from the Pope to wed his daughter (ll.233-40), the audience is prepared to be disgusted by his advances but also understands that the Emperor can barely contain himself in the face of his awakened passions. Papal permission obtained, the Emperor has the beautiful, gemmed cloth made into a cloak for Emare, thus forever linking the object that he truly desires (the robe) to the object that his desire is more easily transferred to (his daughter).

The illusion of the robe is now transferred onto Emare and thus "She semed non erthely wommon" (ll.245) and this idea is re-enforced by the fact that the poet continually refers to Emare as a variation of "that wordy unthur wede" (ll. 250). By marrying the robed maiden, the Emperor can both neutralize the power of the cloak and rebuild the perfect set that was broken when his wife died, but this set is unnatural and cannot be allowed to persist. Thus, for the first time in the poem, we get to hear Emare's voice,

which rings out in stark refusal of the union her father has suggested. She says, "Nay syr, God of heven hyt forbade" (l.251) thus lending God's authority to her position and highlighting the impropriety of the Pope's assent to the marriage. The illusion does not work on Emare and she is able to rebuke her father for his inappropriate advances. She uses strong language that reminds us that she is a woman of rank and of faith², and her use of the word "play" in line 254 confirms our suspicions about its sexual connotations in previous lines.

Not expecting to be refused, the Emperor flies into a blind rage and swears "That deed shulde she be" (l. 268), though he is loath to kill her himself. Rather, the Emperor commissions a rudderless boat to be built so that when she is cast adrift it will be God's commandment that will decide her fate—ironically the same commandment she hoped would save her from this sinful union. (ll. 251-2). What is interesting is that it is only after "Of her they lost the syght" (l. 279) that the Emperor is able to *see* what he has done. Once the catalyst of his awakening passions (the cloak) is gone from his immediate surroundings he can finally see what he has done to his own daughter and repent accordingly. (ll. 280-300). Though many search for the young maiden, she is indeed lost for the time being.

Emare floats on the ocean "A good seven nyghth and more" (l. 326) until she reaches the land of "Galys" (ll. 338). Her boat is discovered by the King's steward, "Syr Kadore" (l. 349) who, upon looking into the boat, finds "a glysteryng thing theryn" (ll. 350) which turns out to be Emare. It is important to note that the poet introduces Emare in terms of the cloak first rather than allow her an identity autonomous from the cloak; in fact, she is no longer even Emare but rather "Egare" (l. 360). This is, again, reinforced a few lines later when the poet calls her by "That worthy unthur wede" (l. 366). Sir Kadore does not ask any more than her name and, to the audience, it seems odd that he should not ask her any more questions about who she is and how she has come to be there, but this again is the cloak working its "vanyte". Sir Kadore is not seized with passion, but he does feel "gret pyte" (l.361) for the wretched girl and brings her into his home without really knowing who she is or why she is there. This is potentially unwise and even dangerous, as the Old Queen will point out, because no one really knows Emare's true identity, although the cloak she bears demands acknowledgement. The audience, of course, understands Emare's true nature and the poet gives us glimpses of it when he tells us of the appropriate recognition and love she receives for her courtesy and good deeds. As with the earlier incest scene, this appropriate love highlights the impropriety of the Old Queen's reaction to the cloak when she meets Emare.

When Sir Kadore throws a feast for the King, Emare is in the hall, dressed in the cloak, serving. Once again we are reminded of the "vanyte" being worked by the cloak, when the poet says:

The lady that was gentyll and small
In kurtull alone served yn hall,
Byfore that nobull kyng.
The cloth upon her shone so bryghth
When she was theryn ydyghth,
She semed non erthly thing. (ll. 391-6)

This passage, again, shows that Emare is not being named by the poet, but rather is defined by the cloak. We can also see the

² She tells her father "Take God you beforen!/ That my fadur shulde wedde me,/ God forbade that I hyt so se." (ll. 261-3).

"vanyte" being worked on the King, for because of the cloak she appears to be Otherworldly and we are told that "So fayr a lady he sygh nevr non:/ Hys herte she hadde yn wolde." (ll. 398-9). The King is so "anamerd" (l. 400) that he cannot continue eating but can only stare at the mysterious robed maiden. The King has slightly more control over his passions than the Emperor did, for he calls together his counsel to discover what he can about Emare *before* announcing his intention to marry her. (ll.409-32). Here Sir Kadore is able to play the paternal role that the Emperor couldn't in that he gives Emare an identity that is appropriate for a king's bride and does not try to keep her for himself. (ll. 421-29). In contrast to the inappropriate love generated in the Emperor, this union, while unusual, is appropriate both in the partners and the way it is facilitated.

When the King summons his mother to meet his chosen bride, the Old Queen bitterly refuses to accept Emare. The poet is careful to mention that "The cloth on her shon so bryght" (l. 439) that in reaction to it the Old Queen exclaims "I sawe never wommon/ Halvendell so gay!" (ll. 443-4). The Old Queen is wholly blinded by the cloak's magnificence; its illusion of Otherworldliness is readily accepted by her and thus takes over her understanding of Emare's identity. The very next words that the Old Queen says are "Sone, thys ys a fende,/ In thys wordy wede!" (ll. 446-7). This union is as abominable to the Old Queen as the incestuous marriage to her father was to Emare, as we are reminded of when the Old Queen says: "Cryst hyt the forbede!" (l. 450). But the cloak has awoken the King's desire for Emare and he proclaims he "wyll have thys may!" (l. 452) with or without his mother's blessing. When the Old Queen leaves and swears she "wolde not be at that dede" (l. 456) we get the impression that her passions have been awoken by the cloak too and that this will not be the last we hear from her on the subject.³

Following this exchange we see the outcome of the King's suitable reaction to the cloak in the result of a loving marriage and fruitful pregnancy. Again, the poet has put together another perfect set: the King, Emare/the Cloak, and the child. However, the set is jeopardized by the Old Queen's hate and when the King is called away to war (ll. 481-92); the Old Queen seizes the opportunity to destroy what she sees as an Otherworldly threat to her kingdom and her son. Emare, of course, is just a woman, and a good one at that, but the "vanyte" of the cloak blinds the Old Queen so that she cannot see the inherent goodness in Emare's character. When the child is born we are told that he is a perfect child bearing "a dowbyll kyngus marke" (l. 504) and that he was "christened wyth grete honour" (l. 505). It is clear to the audience that Emare is not the Otherworldly threat that the Old Queen believes her to be, but the Old Queen cannot be swayed because the "vanyte" of the cloak has blinded her with passion. Thus, when a letter is sent to the King announcing the birth of his son, the Old Queen intercepts the messenger and, through trickery, is able to replace the joyous news with a twisted travesty (ll.510-540). In the new letter, the child is said to have been born "A fowll feltred fende" (l. 540) with three heads.

The Old Queen expects that her son will exile Emare or kill her for bearing a monster, an event that would confirm the Old Queen's suspicions about the cloak, were it true. But the King, for all his sorrow upon reading the false letter, does not share his mother's reaction to the cloak and, being far from the cloak, is

³ It should be made clear that the Old Queen's passion is a product of her hatred and fear of Emare/the cloak and not, as in the Emperor's case, a product of sexual desire.

better able to keep his passions in check. Thus, in response, he instructs Sir Kadore to “kepe well that lady yynge/ Tyll she hadde her hele” and to continue to serve her in all things (ll. 569-73). But once again, the Old Queen cunningly decides to take matters into her own hands and intercepts the messenger again (ll. 580-97). The new letter condemns Emare to be cast out again into the ocean. What is interesting is that in the Old Queen’s instructions it is clear that she is consciously trying to get rid of the cloak as much as the woman who bears it. She says in the letter: “And putte her ynto the see,/ In that robe of ryche ble,/The lytyll chylde her wyth” (ll. 589-91) giving the impression that it is more important to her to rid the kingdom of the Otherworldly cloak than the potential heir that Emare has produced. The Old Queen loses all sense of right and compassion in her blind rage and can only focus on the cloak.

When it is time for Emare to board her ship, the poet makes a point of telling his audience that she was dressed “In that robe of ryche ble” (l. 644). The thing that the Old Queen finds so threatening is allowed to leave with Emare, rather than be destroyed, because Emare and the cloak are one, the cloak having usurped her identity as a woman. The Old Queen, unlike the Emperor, does not have a sudden realization of her wrong-doing, nor does she repent for her actions. This is perhaps why her son takes such harsh revenge against her while the Emperor receives comparatively light retribution for his blindness. Upon hearing what has become of his queen the King flies into a blind rage and orders that the Old Queen “shall be brent,/ Wythowten any othur judgement” (ll.796-7) for her traitorous actions. Unlike the Emperor’s, however, the King’s council is more level-headed and votes to exile the Old Queen in a show of mercy to remind us that this is being done to teach her repentance for her blindness (ll. 799-804).

In the meantime, Emare and her child float on the ocean and eventually reach Rome (l.679). Upon reaching the shore, Emare meets a kindly merchant who, reminiscent of Sir Kadore, brings the unknown maiden into his household (ll. 706-8). Like Sir Kadore, Jurdan the merchant notices the stunning cloak and can almost not look at it for all its glittering (ll. 697-99). He too allows for the possibility that she may not be a normal human with a cloak like that, as the poet tells us “yn hys herte he thowghth ryght/ That she was non erthyly wyght” (ll. 701-2). But, nonetheless, he brings her to his home and keeps her there for seven years. It is interesting to note that Emare gives the alias she used in the last setting, suggesting she wants to be found by her King, and that Jurdan makes no attempt to return her to her place.⁴ Jurdan, like the other characters, reacts to the cloak and has a desire to keep it, and thus Emare as well, contained.

But this, also, cannot be the last we hear of Emare, for the poet is concerned with perfect sets. At this point in the tale, the poet has created and broken two perfect sets (Emperor/Empress/Emare and King/Cloak-Emare/Segramour). The story cannot end until the pieces of the broken set are put back together, and so the poet tells us that, after seven long years, the King decides to make a pilgrimage to Rome (ll.821-2). The King conveniently stays with the same merchant that Emare lives with (ll. 839-40). Emare,

more than likely unsure as to why she was cast adrift the second time, decides that she will use her son to effect a reunion with her husband, knowing that if he is true he will naturally recognize his own flesh and blood. We see her plan come to fruition when the King says to Jurdan “Yyf me thys lytyll body!...I love hym specyally” (ll. 897, 900). It is at this point that Emare knows it is safe to reveal herself and identify herself as “Emare”, as he has known her until now as “Egare” (l. 907). When the King and Emare are reunited we are told that she is still wearing the cloak, and thus the poet is able to bring the set back together and allow Emare some identity of her own within the protection offered to her by her marriage to the King. This is why she is also able to effect a reunion with her father without fear of his reaction to the cloak.

The power of the cloak, though ambiguous at times, is undeniably strong. It not only usurps Emare’s identity but it forces a blind reaction from every other character in the poem, to the benefit or detriment of the woman who bears it. The cloak eroticises Emare and makes her the object of desire, jealousy and love. Emare becomes a commodity to be passed from hand to hand, as the physical value and Otherworldly qualities of the cloak demand greater attention than the woman within the illusion. This is the reason behind the Emperor’s unbridled lust, the King’s awestricken love and the Old Queen’s blind rage. In the end, all turns out well for Emare as the poet facilitates her placement in an appropriate set with her husband and son and, within the protection of that set, enables her to confront and seek reunion with her estranged father.

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⁴ My argument here is based on the fact that upon landing in Galys, Emare changes her name to Egare, knowing her own lineage and the Cloak would make easy for her father to find her. When she lands in Italy she does not call herself Emare, but continues to use her alias, even though she is known under that name as the Queen of Galys and could be recognized by the Cloak.