“For hys largesse and hys bounte”: the Construction of Masculinity in Sir Launfal

Caitlin Marissa Beecher Smith, Trent University

This paper discusses the external forces, especially powerful women, who drastically influence the knight’s construction of a masculine identity in the Breton Lay “Sir Launfal”.

From a close look into the popular literature of the Middle Ages, one may conclude that the male protagonist’s construction of his masculine identity is based upon many outside forces. The hero may seem like less of a man when, for instance, the lord withdraws his support or neglects the hero, when the hero has fallen sick with love for a courtly lady, or when the social codes of chivalry constrain the hero’s movements or actions. Sir Launfal is a prime example of a knight whose position in the world is entirely determined by outside forces. The poet emphasizes the fact that Launfal’s success as a knight is because of his generous nature. But Launfal’s generosity is determined by his own wealth, which, the poet makes clear, is controlled by the ineffectual Arthur, the scheming Gwennere, and the beautiful Dame Tryamour. The poet balances Gwennere’s vindictive destruction of Launfal’s status and reputation with Dame Tryamour’s unfailing love and generosity towards Launfal. Arthur, as in several other poems of the period, appears weak and ineffective as a ruler, and thus Launfal’s fate lies in the hands of the two oppositional, but equally powerful, women. Before Launfal meets Dame Tryamour he is completely vulnerable to Gwennere’s evil. She is able to reduce him to an extremely low status and it is only Dame Tryamour who can rebuild the reputation he has lost.
Sir Launfal is introduced at line 25 as “a bacheler” who has been with Arthur “well many a yer” (Sir Launfal, 26). The poet sets Launfal up as a generous man, telling the audience that “He gaf gyftys largelyche/ Gold and sylver and clothes ryche-” (ll. 28-9). He was even made “Kynges stuward” (ll. 32) because of “hys largesse and hys bounte” (ll. 31). The poet goes so far as to tell the audience that “So large ther nas noon y-founde,/ Be dayes ne be nyght” (ll. 35-6). Within ten lines the poet has made it clear that Sir Launfal is a great asset to the court and a good man as well. While Launfal may have some personal wealth, the poet emphasizes the cyclical nature of medieval generosity in that Launfal is able to be so generous to others because the King has been generous to him. It is important to note that Launfal’s success at court is due to his good money management and generosity, and not his prowess in battle. As will become clearer later, once Launfal loses the financial support of King Arthur’s court, his identity as a knight and a man of worth is thrown into question.

Gwennere’s introduction follows Launfal’s, and it is immediately clear that her influence on Arthur’s court will be a negative one. Launfal is not fooled by her beauty and her insincere courtesy, and at lines 44-45 the poet tells the audience that “Sir Launfal lykede her noght-- / Ne other knyghtes that wer hende”. The knights, especially Launfal, know or suspect that she “hadde lemmannys under her lord/ So fele ther nas noon ende” (ll. 47-8). But at lines 49-50 Arthur is wedded to Gwennere, regardless of the opinion his knights hold of her. “Her curtasye to kythe” (ll. 69) Gwennere gives gifts of “Gold selver and precious stonys-” to all the lords and knights present at the wedding feast. However, at line 71 the poet tells the audience that “Syr Launfal sche yaf nothing:/ That grevede hym many a sythe.” Launfal is so offended by this public slighting that he feels obligated to take his leave from Arthur’s court at lines 74-75. Gwennere has shown her disapproval of Launfal and, in doing so, has damaged his public image within a world where reputation is everything.

Arthur, while he does not question his new wife’s treatment of his

---

I have used only one source for this essay, “Sir Launfal”. As such, I have cited subsequent lines with (ll. #). A full bibliographic entry can be found at the end of the essay.
Steward, accepts Launfal’s excuse that his father has died (ll. 77) and, ever the gracious king, offers Launfal “greet spendyng/ And my suster-sones two” (ll. 81-2). Arthur, of course, expects that Launfal will return to court after the “beryynge” (ll. 78), and so his generosity can be seen as part of the cycle in which Arthur knows his kindness will be repaid; and not as a conciliatory move on Arthur’s part to make up for Gwennere’s actions. Launfal’s lie to Arthur is forced by Gwennere’s public humiliation of him; a lie, which breaks the chivalric code, is the only way he can leave court without suffering any more disgrace. But Launfal is confronted with a rude surprise when he arrives at “Karlyoun” (ll. 88). The Mayor, once a friend or servant of Launfal’s, denies Launfal and Arthur’s nephews lodging upon hearing that Launfal is no longer under Arthur’s patronage or a knight of the Round Table (ll. 112-14). The Mayor’s excuse that seven knights already take up lodging there is false, and Launfal is well aware of this. His wry remarks to his fellows prompt the Mayor to offer them, at last, “a chamber by my orchardsyde” (ll. 124).

Soon Launfal’s property and wealth are all spent (ll. 130-32) and we might presume that he has spent a fair portion of it on others in an attempt to regain some of his stature in society. But without the regular income that being a member of Arthur’s court provides, Launfal cannot sustain his two fellow knights (ll. 139). Sirs Huwe and Jon take their leave of Launfal (ll. 137) and return to Arthur’s court in their ragged clothes (ll. 155). When Gwennere inquires after Launfal, the knights offer another lie to save Launfal’s reputation, saying that he “faryth as well as any man-” (ll.161). Gwennere’s vindictive nature is emphasized by the poet at lines 177-180 when he tells us:

“The Quene hyt rew well sore,  
For sche wold with all her might  
That he hadde be, bothe day and nyght,  
In paynys mor and more.”

These lines have dramatic importance because, although Gwennere’s rage is volatile, she can only wish harm upon Launfal. Accordingly, the poet makes it clear after these lines that Launfal’s situation worsens before it improves. He
is not invited to the Mayor’s banquet, for he is of little consequence now; he
cannot even go to the church for solace “for defawte of clothynge” (ll. 202). His
poverty is so extreme that he must beg the Mayor’s daughter for the loan of
a saddle and a bridle so that he might ride in the park and avoid the scrutiny
of the townsfolk (ll. 205-10). Here again we can see Launfal’s dependence
on women; without the Mayor’s daughter’s kindness Launfal loses even
the ability to ride his charger, another symbol of knightly masculinity. The
poet obviously wants to make the point that Launfal cannot be a true knight
without the love and support of powerful women.

By the time Launfal reaches the park he has been truly humbled. He rides
with “lytyll pryde” (ll. 213) and has suffered the public humiliation of falling
from his horse into the mud (ll. 214). The image of Launfal in tattered, mud-
soaked clothing, resting beneath a tree in “symplyte” (ll. 226) is juxtaposed
with the otherworldly beauty and wealth of the maidens who “come out of
holtes hore” (ll. 230). The poet describes the maidens in terms that signify
royalty. He tells the audience that their “kerteles wer of inde-sandel”, purple
being the traditional colour of kings and emperors. Not only that, but we are
told that their cloaks are made of fine “felwet” (ll. 235) and trimmed with
rare and expensive furs (ll. 237). To complete this royal image, the poet tells
us that each maiden is crowned with a “jolyf coronall/ Wyth syxty gemmys
and mo” (ll. 239-40). Even their kerchiefs are embroidered with gold thread;
clearly these women serve a powerful lord who has “largesse” to spare.

But the audience soon finds out that it is not a wealthy lord the maidens
serve, but rather a wealthy lady. Dame Tryamour has sent her maidens to
fetch Launfal to her, and Launfal, always the courteous knight, concedes to
follow the maidens back to their lady (ll. 255-59). The brilliance and show
of wealth of Dame Tryamour’s court far outweighs Arthur’s (ll. 275). This is
important to note because financial wealth will not be the only area in which
Dame Tryamour’s court outshines Arthur’s. Dame Tryamour loves Launfal for
all the same reasons that Gwennere hates him; he is honest, decent, generous,
courteous, true and gentle, all the things an ideal knight ought to be. Dame
Tryamour balances Gwennere’s destruction of Launfal’s identity as a knight
when she says “Ryche I wyll make the” (ll. 318). She gives him a magic “alner” (ll. 319) from which he can take from an inexhaustible source one “mark of gold” (ll. 323) as often as he needs to. With this almost unimaginable wealth Launfal will certainly be able to regain “hys largesse and hys bounte”, and thereby, his identity as a knight. The other gifts that Dame Tryamour bestows on Launfal, the charger, servant, banner and armour, are obviously indicators from the poet that Launfal is reclaiming the symbols of knighthood. It is important to note here again that it is Launfal’s financial insecurity that Dame Tryamour chooses to remedy first, and not his prowess in battle. The poet is once again emphasizing the fact that Launfal is not the ideal knight unless he can contribute to the cycle of generosity that courtly culture demands. Even more important is the fact that this saving grace has come from a powerful woman; the poet has successfully balanced Gwenner’s destruction of Launfal with Dame Tryamour’s reconstruction of his chivalric identity.

Dame Tryamour has very simple rules for Launfal to follow in return for the commercial and emotional gifts she has given him. At lines 361-65 Dame Tryamour tells Launfal:

“But of o thing, syr knight, I warne the,
That thou make no bost of me—
For no kennes mede!
And yf thou doost—I warny the before!—
All my love thou hast forlore.”

Launfal will lose everything again, just as quickly as he regained it, if he does not follow the rules she has set; he is the ideal knight but only as long as he has her support. Thus, when he returns to Karlyoun, it is in the same impoverished state that he left in. This is all part of Dame Tryamour’s plan, for this way she can make a huge public spectacle of delivering Launfal’s new wealth to him, which she does at lines 376-400. Her intention is to let all those who think that Launfal is “but a wrecche” (ll. 394) know that he is now a man of worth and consequence; she is well aware that it is Launfal’s reputation and public image that determine his identity as a knight. Launfal wastes no time in rebuilding
his reputation for “largesse”. He repays all that he “hadde borwyd before” (ll. 418), holds feasts for the poor, clothes the needy and assists those who are imprisoned for debt (ll. 421-32). Again, the poet is building the pattern of dealing with Launfal’s financial “largesse” and generosity before dealing with his prowess as a warrior. This pattern suggests that Launfal’s identity as a knight is truly determined by how he manages his wealth.

But of course, Launfal must also prove himself in battle, and thus the poet describes Launfal’s victory over the lords of Karlyoun with the help of Gyfre, Blaunchard, and the impenetrable armour gifted to Launfal by Dame Tryamour (ll. 433-88). Launfal triumphs over seemingly impossible odds, and one gets the impression that without Dame Tryamour’s generosity and forethought Launfal would have been cut to ribbons. Launfal’s victory is coupled with another show of wealth and generosity, for he “Held a feste, ryche and ryall,/ That leste fourtenyght” (ll. 494-5). And, of course, like a true courtly lover, Launfal spends all his spare time with Dame Tryamour (ll. 499-504). The poet almost immediately sets up another challenger for Launfal: Syr Valentyne (ll. 505-7). The poet heightens the dramatic tension by making Syr Valentyne a terrifying, fifteen-foot tall giant (ll. 512). Valentyne does not mince words, but directly attacks Launfal’s “manhod” (ll. 528). Although these exact words never make it to Launfal’s ears, the audience knows that the poet is setting Valentyne up as an oppositional figure to Launfal. Both appear to have an element of the supernatural on their side, and Valentyne’s discourteous challenge is balanced by Launfal’s gracious acceptance because “he was a gentyl knyght” (ll. 541). Dame Tryamour’s assurance that he will slay Valentyne on the field (ll. 551-2) reminds the audience exactly who Launfal has to thank, not only for his victories in battle, but for his “noblenesse” (ll. 401) as well. Launfal wins a close battle with the help of Gyfre and returns to “Bretayn” (ll. 611).

Finally word reaches King Arthur of Launfal’s success and “noblesse” (ll. 615). Arthur then sends word to Launfal that he should come back to Cardevyle to resume the job he never should have had to give up (ll. 622). Arthur is asking Launfal to manage all his guests, not because Launfal has
proven himself a great warrior, but “For cowthe of largesse” (ll. 624). The poet’s use of the words “ryche”, “ryall” and “honeste” (ll. 632) to describe Arthur’s feast reminds the audience of Launfal’s celebratory feasts and suggests that Launfal has a better understanding of “largesse” than Arthur does. In coming back to Cardevyle, however, Launfal has once again entered Gwennere’s sphere of influence and has opened himself up for attack. Gwennere knows that Launfal is “large” and that to seduce him will put him in her power. At line 676 Gwennere tells Launfal that she has “lovyd wyth all my myght/ More than thys seven yere!” and that she will die without his love in return (ll. 680). This places Launfal in a difficult situation; to acquiesce to her offer would make him a traitor to both Arthur and Dame Tryamour, but he faces an attack on his manhood if he defies her. Like Syr Valentyne, Gwennere attacks Launfal’s virility (ll. 689), and in the face of such an onslaught, Launfal boasts that his lover’s “lothlokste mayde” would make a fairer queen than Gwennere (ll. 697-8). This rash statement, however true, breaks Launfal’s agreement with Dame Tryamour and, accordingly, he loses all that she gave to him (ll. 733-43).

Now Launfal is once again at the mercy of Gwennere’s influence on Arthur’s court. Upon hearing Launfal’s refusal of her offer, Gwennere goes to Arthur and tells him a version of the encounter in which she is the victim of Launfal’s inappropriate advances (ll. 711-20). Gwennere has already sworn, “so moste sche thryve” (ll. 705), that she will avenge herself of Launfal in so public and damaging a way “That all the lond schuld of hym speke/ Wythinne the dayes fyfe” (ll. 707-8). Without Dame Tryamour’s support Launfal is completely helpless against this attack. It is his word against hers, and since he can no longer contact Dame Tryamour, he lacks credible evidence to back up his claim. Even though, the poet tells us, the knights know that “The Quene bar los of swych a word/ That sche lovede lemmannes wythout her lord” (ll. 790-1) and have known Launfal to be a generous and courteous knight, they still demand to see physical evidence of Launfal’s beloved (ll. 795-801) or “Other the maydenes were/ Bryghtere than the Quene of hewe” (ll. 798-9). It is here that Gwennere swears the fatal oath that if a fairer woman than she should be brought to court that her eyes should be put out (ll. 809-10). Gwennere’s over-
confidence is a symptom of her inner blindness to the codes of courtesy and generosity; she cannot appreciate the things that Launfal stands for.

Of course, Launfal cannot produce Dame Tryamour on the given day and Arthur, corrupted by Gwennere’s blind rage, “dampny him to sclo” (ll. 837). But even the Earl of Cornwall, whom Launfal has defeated in tournament, vouches for Launfal’s graciousness and generosity (ll. 843) and says it would be wrong “For-to dampny that gantylman” (ll. 842). But before the knights can spirit Launfal away from certain death, a different kind of salvation comes to him. Just when it becomes clear that Launfal cannot save himself, ten beautiful maidens come riding up to Arthur’s castle (ll. 848-9), and though they are each more fair than Gwennere, Dame Tryamour is not among them. She is the daughter of the Faerie King, and thus her entrance demands the proper announcement and preparation. Arthur’s court is clearly not fine enough for Dame Tryamour.

Although the appearance of her magnificent maidens is enough to validate Launfal’s claim, the poet spends nearly forty lines describing Dame Tryamour’s physical beauty, her mantle, her horse, falcon and dogs (ll.927-965). Dame Tryamour’s visage is described here in terms that suggest her nobility: for example her purple clothing is trimmed with white ermine fur (ll. 943), her palfrey’s saddle and bridle are made of gold and precious stones, and both her falcon and her greyhounds are symbols of her noble heritage. Dame Tryamour clears Launfal’s name and reveals the truth about the encounter (ll. 994-1002); the truth of her beauty lends validity to her testimony about Launfal’s innocence. Dame Tryamour has entered Gwennere’s sphere of influence and changed Launfal’s fate. Her love of his gracious generosity is able to overcome Gwennere’s blind rage. This is signified by the poet at lines 1006-1008 when Dame Tryamour fulfills Gwennere’s oath that her eyes should be put out if she is proven to be less beautiful than Dame Tryamour. Launfal leaves Arthur’s court with Dame Tryamour (ll. 1015-20), suggesting that Arthur’s court is not truly the ideal and that Launfal’s loyalty to his lady outweighs his loyalty to Arthur. This should not come as a surprise, since it is in Dame Tryamour’s court that Launfal finds the appreciation and support
that allow him to become the ideal knight.

Thus we have seen that in the case of Sir Launfal, it is his reputation for “largesse” and “bounte” that make him a true knight. More importantly, we have seen that this reputation is extremely sensitive to public opinion, and when Launfal loses the support of Arthur’s court he loses his identity as a knight. Launfal’s fate is controlled by two powerful but oppositional women; one who hates the things that Launfal stands for, the other who loves Launfal unconditionally. Without Dame Tryamour’s help, Launfal would have been easily destroyed by Gwennere’s lies. Although Launfal is a warrior, he cannot do battle against slander, for even his true statements require physical evidence. Launfal can only take part in the courtly culture of generosity and “largesse” with the support of either ineffectual Arthur or Dame Tryamour, and thus their support governs whether or not he can be a true knight.

Bibliography