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[English 400 Level Course]

Two Wrongs Make a Right: an Analysis of Necessary Rape in Sir Degaré

Rape has been one of society's major moral hazards since the times of Middle English: society sees the loss of a woman's innocence (her "maidenhead" referred to in many Middle English writings) as a terrible event, one which only human monsters are capable of. It is surprising, then, that in the opening 180 lines of Sir Degaré, there is not only a case of father/daughter incest, but also an event of violent rape, perpetuated not by a social outcast, but from a handsome knight. The discord between the physical attractiveness of the man and his breaking of the chivalric code of honor makes readers question why: why does the story of the knight and Princess have a happy ending when the beginning is so filled with tension and distress? But perhaps more importantly, why is this rape allowed? We find that this rape, unlike the common version of it, is for the greater good, and is thus allowable under the chivalric code that governs the knight's actions. Though it undoubtedly breaks the social mores of the day, the rape of the Princess by the knight in the woods holds the expression "two wrongs make a right" to be true: the rape of the lady taints the father-daughter relationship (through the possible allegations of her father being the father of her child) enough that it must be severed, ultimately allowing the Princess freedom from the King.

We can see that the plot of normality is unhinged by line 24 of the poem, when the incest relationship between the Princess and her father, is suggested: "this maiden he loved als his lif, / Of hire was ded the Quene his wif:" (23-24). The subject of the rhymed couplet switches

between the first and second lines, linking the wife and daughter as potential lovers to the King. The later warning of the King to his daughter to "never aqueint with man" lays a possessive claim that seems unusual for a normal father-daughter relationship (170). Even if there is no true incest between the two characters, the fact that it is suggested creates a "situational incest" which threatens the relationship whether or not the allegations are true. The taboo of familial incest is the condition on which the father and daughter are acting and making choices. In other words, the mere inobservance of the proper social mores taints the relationship between the father and daughter as incest, regardless of whether or not physical sexual intimacy has actually happened. With this tarnished relationship, and reputation, the question as to why the daughter wanders alone in the woods while the rest of the travelling group rests under the chestnut (chastity) tree arises.

At first reading, one may suggest that the Princess does not rest under the chestnut tree because she does not belong there: by partaking in an incest relationship with her father, she has lost her ability to be chaste to any man other than the King, which is not socially allowable. Given that her only option for chaste love is denied by society, she does not have a rightful place to be under the chestnut tree. With no place to go, the Princess chooses to pick flowers in the woods, yet becomes disoriented and concerned when she loses her way. In strangely ambiguous lines, the reader learns that she is fearful for certain upcoming events:

> Nou ich wot ich am forloren!
> Wile bestes me willeth togrinde
> Or ani man me sschulle finde!
>
> (86-88)

The TEAMS text of the Middle English Breton Lays suggests that the "Or" in line 88 translates to "before," leading to the Princess worrying that a beast will eat her before a man is able to come and save her. In this reading, she wants a man to find her, even though it does put her in a precarious position: she is, after all, a confused woman alone in the woods, and anything can happen to her.

But what if we consider the "Or" to be just an "or"? In this reading, the Princess is just as scared of a man as she is of a beast. This fear of man is understandable, seeing that in the next line (line 89), one appears. We are introduced to the knight with a blazon: he is a

> gentil, yong, and jolif man;
> A robe of scarlet he hadde upon;
> His visage was feir, his bodi ech weies;
> Of countenaunce right curteis;
> Well farende legges, fot, and honde:
> (91-95)

The scarlet robe, particularly, suggests a noble lineage, yet the knight remains unnamed throughout the poem, leaving us to question his nobility and aristocratic standing. Much like unnamed (or unnamed-at-the-moment) characters of other Middle English stories, we are inclined to judge the knight's personality by his physical attributes: the fact that "his visage was fair, his bodi ech weies" leads to the conclusion that he is "of countenance right courteis" (93-94). This judgment becomes noteworthy in the next scene, when the knight forcibly rapes the Princess, leaving her with child and a glove and sword that is to be given to the son she will give birth to – this breach in accepted social norms is even more pronounced by the initial favorable characterization. The knight does keep with the tradition of beginning with a profession of his love for the Princess by stating

> "Iich have iloved the mani a yer,
> And now we beth us selve her,
> Thou best mi lemman ar thou go
> (105-7)

But the fact that he immediately follows his announcement with a forcible rape provides a stark contrast to the chivalric love declaration we have seen in previous romances:

> Wether the liketh wel or wo."
> Tho nothing ne could do she
> But wep and cried and wolde fle;
> And he anon gan hire at holde,
> And dide he wille, what he wolde.
> He binam hire here maidenhood,
> (108-113)

While traditional love declarations do involve some sort of physical consummation, rarely is this act forced upon the woman. With the growing popularity of the Alexandrine marriage, both parties would need to consent to the relationship before it would be considered legitimate. In this case, however, the lack of consent and agreement on the part of the Princess is exactly what makes the relationship so precarious: it would be possible for the King to act like many families did in that time and claim that his daughter was raped. The slight hitch with this plan, however, is the fact that not only was the daughter not supposed to be in contact with any man, but the realization that the knight who impregnated his daughter was a fairy: "Be thou afered of non wihghte:/ Iich am comen here a fairi knyghte;" (99-100). Unlike other rapes, there is no name to attach to the rapist; in fact, he may not even exist. The lack of information regarding the knight, other than his generalized physical description, allows for both the Princess and the King to be frightened by the possibility that society will believe the King is the father to the Princess' son. It is precisely this situation that allows the Princess to break free from her father and gain the right

to give consent. But, we must wonder, does this mean the rape is allowed despite the breaking of the chivalric code?

Turning quickly to Yvain, one of Chrétien's romances, we see that the breaking of the chivalric code is allowed if there is an overarching greater good that will come of the actions. While this example is from an Arthurian romance, while Sir Degaré is a "fair unknown romance," the chivalric code that is being discussed is decidedly similar in both cases. In this lay, the title character Yvain is able to decline two marriage offers from various important lords without consequence, despite the fact that the denials sparked anger and were considered to be discourteous. We see that these rude actions were justified because Yvain had a duty to help a lady with an inheritance dispute. Returning to Sir Degaré, we can see that the knight's discourteous rape of the Princess can be justified by noting that it is decidedly this action that allows her to break free from her father's rule. At the time of the meeting of the characters, she was not able to give consent to a relationship, but by forcing her into one, the knight was able to wrong her enough to make the situation right.

In this case, rape is justifiable. But this does not mean that all cases of knightly rape are excused: it is important to note that the knight that rapes the Princess in the story is a fairy. He is, ultimately, outside the realm of human moral codes, though he does appear to be subject to chivalric duties because he holds the title of "knight." This distinction allows the initial impression of the character to be correct and deceitful at the same time: the lady did not know that the knight was a fairy at first glance, thus her judge of character was not naïve. The disparity between the appearance of the knight and his actual person could justify the discrepancy between his outward chivalric personality and his violent rape; he can be classified as a man insofar as he looks like one, yet his actions are not ruled by the human social norms that prohibit rape. In other

words, the only governing code the knight must adhere to is that of the chivalric code, which allows for socially unjustifiable acts (such as rape) as long as there is an overarching good that will be had (in this case, the Princess' gain of consent). Had the knight been a human, we perhaps would not have seen the rape transpire – after all, a human knight must follow both the chivalric code (which would allow the rape) as well as social mores (which would condemn the rape). The disagreement between the two codes is settled by the overruling code: that of human society. This code, however, is decidedly absent in the case of the fairy knight, allowing his only code to govern that he is to rape the Princess to produce the greater good, without facing consequences from human society.

In this case, the way to make a "right" from the initially tarnished plotline of the Princess and the King is to wrong it in such an incurable way as to force the relationship to become normal. Though ties between the daughter and father will never be completely stain-free (since there will always be the history of the situational incest), we can see that the actions of the knight do, in fact, help, rather than hurt, the Princess by creating a situation where her father must give her up, giving her the ability to give consent to other men. With this realization, we may view the rape in Sir Degaré not as completely acceptable under human societal norms, but necessary nonetheless under the only rule the fairy knight must adhere to: the chivalric code.

Works Cited

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