

HOW TO LOSE A QUEEN IN THREE COMIC POEMS: A DISCUSSION OF  
ARTHUR'S KINGSHIP AND HIS LOSS OF GUINEVERE

by

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the smart people who love me and have my back.

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## Abstract

King Arthur's legacy as a great man and ruler is widespread across various medieval texts, yet despite his apparent greatness he constantly finds himself dealing with the loss of control over his queen, either physically, sexually, or both, while he also strives to maintain his reputation as a good, strong, and noble king. These losses occur in various manners over various texts, but the losses I focus on in this thesis come from three late medieval comic poems: *The Boy and the Mantle*, *Sir Corneus*, and the *Lai du Cor*. My thesis explores what these ideas of loss and control mean within each of these poems and argues that Arthur's loss of control over his queen results in the fortification of male fellowship at his court.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

King Arthur and his queen are key figures in Arthurian mythology. Despite his queen being a target for abduction, or alternatively, her penchant for straying from her husband and compromising their marriage, the two of them appear frequently alongside each other in medieval works. While Arthur's status as king, and a great one at that, is widespread across various texts, approaches toward the characterization of his queen are less consistent, yet King Arthur constantly finds himself dealing with the loss of control over his queen, either physically, sexually, or both, while he also strives to maintain his reputation as a good, strong, and noble king. These losses occur in various manners over various texts, but the losses I will focus on in this thesis come from three late medieval comic poems: *The Boy and the Mantle*, *Sir Corneus*, and the *Lai du Cor*.

Over the course of these three comic poems, Arthur's loss of control of his queen leads to his status as a cuckold and results in the fortification of male fellowship. Arthur's loss of his queen is not merely a physical or sexual loss; it is rather a loss of control over her and her actions. The queen's sexual indiscretions, or her entertainment of other men's affections, serves as a basis for comedy by subverting expectations of the position of control men take on in marital relationships. Her affairs also demonstrate Arthur's inability to maintain control over her, both as his wife and as his queen. These indiscretions result in an intensified camaraderie amongst the knights at court, but come at the cost of isolation for individual women. Even when forgiveness occurs, men who have lost control of their wives and become cuckolds tend to seek out support from their fellow knights rather than their women. This loss of control, which is part of what makes these poems comic, will be referenced throughout this paper as Arthur's loss of his queen.

I will briefly demonstrate the pervasiveness of Arthur's greatness throughout medieval literature as King of Great Britain to highlight how Arthur's kingly persona exists alongside Arthur, the man, who finds himself constantly losing his wife to her desire for other men, or abductors. Arthur's reputation as a great king exists in several genres, beginning with medieval histories. Herein, the term *great* applies to a broad interpretation of the word and can imply Arthur being powerful, strong, fair, or kind depending upon the text; Arthur's greatness manifests itself differently in different genres. Sometimes it is his brute strength and military prowess that make him great, while other times it is his strategic and agile mind that affords him his greatness. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon all wrote major texts that still exist today and situate Arthur as an indelible part of kingship history. He is a great king according to the historical tradition that surrounds the texts I address in my thesis.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin chronicle, *Historia Regum Britanniae* written c. 1130-1136 (Pearsall 7), was certainly not the first to allude to an idea of Arthur, but it is the chronicle upon which several other prominent notions of King Arthur are based. Within Geoffrey of Monmouth's chronicle, Arthur becomes king of the Britons following his father's death: "[Arthur]... was a youth of outstanding virtue and largesse. His innate goodness made him exhibit such grace that he was beloved by almost all the people" (Geoffrey of Monmouth 163). The way that Geoffrey of Monmouth sets up Arthur as virtuous as a youth lays groundwork for the notion that Arthur is one of the greatest kings that Britain has ever seen. His "goodness" (Geoffrey of Monmouth 163) and his "great courage" (Geoffrey of Monmouth 163) are two of the traits that Geoffrey of Monmouth brings attention to, especially at the beginning of Arthur's reign. The focus on these traits implies that is Arthur a king capable of being not only a great warrior, but also a great

leader. After Arthur's initial conquering streak throughout Europe, the chronicle refers to him "[inviting] all the bravest men from the far-flung reaches of his domains to join his household" (Geoffrey of Monmouth 171). This provides Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur the opportunity to make use of his other talents; aside from the art of war, he is able to exert his aptitude for cultivating a loyal group of friends and followers.

The creation of Arthur's court and its refinement reflects the importance of male friendship and loyalty within the Arthurian court, which is a trend that persists in the Arthurian narrative. The idea of romance, for instance, the relationship between Arthur and Guinevere, does not overshadow the bonds of male friendship. The connections between Arthur and his knights are foregrounded in Geoffrey of Monmouth as well as other historical texts that situate Arthur's greatness within medieval histories, for instance, the *Roman de Brut* written in French by Wace circa 1155 (Pearsall 13) and Layamon's poem *Brut* (1190) written in Middle English, inspired by both Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth (Pearsall 15). Geoffrey of Monmouth's work was the direct inspiration for both Wace and Layamon; however, each new text tweaked the story of Arthur to add something new to the developing Arthurian canon.

Beyond these three historical texts there is an extremely rich chronicle tradition in England that takes its narrative or plot cues from Geoffrey of Monmouth's stories. For instance, Wace's *Brut* finds itself adapted from verse into multiple prose versions, resulting in "at least forty-nine Anglo-Norman manuscripts, almost 180 English manuscripts... and about twenty Latin manuscripts" (Matheson 8). There are stories of Arthur's greatness and the bravery of his knights told within prose tales such as the *Culhwch ac Olwen*, a Welsh story that "may date from the late eleventh or early twelfth century" (Lloyd-Morgan 4) about Culhwch, who seeks out Arthur and his court to help



him accomplish a courtship. The support of the Arthurian court is necessary to help Culhwch woo his lady (Lloyd-Morgan 5). In this tale, Arthur acts as more of statesman and less of a warrior, but that does not make him any less great. Other representations of Arthur's greatness as a king and heroism as a warrior include, but are not limited to, his appearances in twelfth-century pieces like Marie de France's Anglo-Norman lai *Lanval*, fourteenth-century works such as Welsh tales from the *Mabinogion* (Davies ix), the Middle English Romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Battles 12), and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (Benson and Foster 4), and fifteenth-century pieces like the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Benson and Foster 4) and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (Shepherd xix). These varied representations of Arthur's greatness demonstrate its pervasiveness as a motif in Arthurian literature in Great Britain.

Arthur's greatness features in stories written in the various languages of medieval Britain: Gaelic, Latin, French, and English. The Latin histories were written for a literate audience, implying that most of the audience for them was clerical. The French texts were written for an aristocratic audience since the aristocracy of England was French-speaking from the eleventh century until well into the fifteenth century. The Gaelic works were accessible to a wider audience within Wales, particularly when they were performed orally. The English pieces came relatively late, with Layamon's *Brut* as an exception. The emergence of English works increased in the late fourteenth century as English became a more viable language for literature and readers began to include monolingual English speakers. Characters, motifs, and plots crossed freely from one language and one audience to another and persisted over time.

One flaw in the greatness of Arthur, explored within texts of all languages and for all audiences, is his loss of control over his queen. The first mention of Guinevere in

Geoffrey of Monmouth is merely a short reference to her marriage to Arthur: “Finally, having restored the entire kingdom to its former state of pristine dignity, Arthur married a woman by the name of Guinevere [known in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s original text as Guanhumara] who sprang from a noble Roman family” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 170). The next time the queen appears in the chronicle is when Britain is threatened by the Romans and Arthur leaves after having “yielded Britain to the custodianship of his nephew Mordred and Queen Guinevere” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 182). Her final mentions in Geoffrey of Monmouth are when Arthur discovers that Mordred and Guinevere have married, and eventually, she flees to a convent to live out the rest of her days. Like many other texts in the widespread and influential chronicle tradition originating with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s work, Wace’s *Brut* and Layamon’s *Brut* both deploy the subplot of Mordred pursuing and marrying Guinevere, despite her marriage to Arthur.

Arthur’s loss of his queen is not restricted to texts that deal with the history of Great Britain. In the Welsh Arthurian tradition, one of the Triads texts “shown to predate Geoffrey of Monmouth” (Lloyd-Morgan 5) makes reference to an adulterous Guinevere. The *Life of Gildas* written in Latin by Caradog of Llancarfan in the 1120s or 1130s details how Guinevere “had been violated and carried off by the aforesaid iniquitous [Melwas]” (Sims-Williams 60). It is likely that this version of Guinevere’s abduction is based upon a Welsh tale. There is no complete record of this story that survives in Welsh, but there are pieces of the *Dialogue of Melwas and Gwenhwyfar* that exist as part of sixteenth-and-seventeenth-century manuscripts (Sims-Williams 58). Those texts make reference to a plot matching that of the tale found in Caradog’s writings. However, that is not the only abduction of Guinevere within the Arthurian canon. In Malory’s text, she is taken away

by Meleagant (Batt & Field 65). Aside from situations where she is abducted, there are also instances where a man either forces, or attempts to force, Guinevere to marry him. In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Mordred marries and impregnates the queen, but Malory's version of Guinevere valiantly avoids Mordred's attempts to marry and impregnate her.

However, abduction and forcible marriage are not what the three comic poems I am discussing address; instead, they address the king's loss of his queen while she is still present, beside him at court. Arthur briefly loses Guinevere in this manner to Lancelot in the late fourteenth-century English romance (Benson and Foster 1) the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* as he also does in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. Eventually, Lancelot returns the queen to Arthur. This points to the overwhelming loyalty that a knight feels to his king. Arthur's queen, it appears, does not consistently share the same sense of loyalty to her husband that his knights appear to feel. Marie de France's lai *Lanval*, written in Anglo-Norman French sometime in the late twelfth century or early thirteenth century, demonstrates the queen's willingness to compromise her marriage to Arthur by trying to instigate affairs. In *Lanval*, Guinevere propositions a knight who rejects her advances because he is already engaged in a secret courtship (Bruckner and Burgess 190).

This motif of Arthur losing control of Guinevere occurs in a variety of genres, written in different time periods, and languages and that makes it difficult to interpret what his loss of her means on a broad scale. However, the work of historian Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, will be helpful in understanding likely reactions from the medieval period to the three poems considered in this study. Karras's work looks specifically at the state of honour and what it means to be an honourable man in the various social groups that made up medieval society. For a reference point, Arthur and his knights belonged to the Second Estate, the

nobility, within medieval society. While every version of Arthur is slightly different, and his greatness manifests itself in different ways, his circle of loyal knights is a constant in these works even when his queen is not featured. Arthur's knights, as represented in different forms of medieval literature, adhered to ideas of chivalry and camaraderie that fluctuated over the centuries. In the twelfth century, the position of knight "came to have a concrete social or economic meaning" (Karras 23). The figure of a knight maintained social importance throughout the Middle Ages, but around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries knighthood evolved into a position of "social status" (Karras 24) rather than one of a warrior. Due to this transition from warrior to man of the court, a knight in the later Middle Ages found his "[masculinity] defined in large part by his relation to women" (Karras 25). However, this requirement to appeal to a woman did not mean that the knight in question was particularly interested in said woman; love had very little to do with some of the courtship actions taken by knights.

Instead of focusing on actual love, it was the appeal of seeming to be in a relationship or having won the affections of a woman that interested knights: "Success in love was an important part of knighthood. This did not mean that the knight's goal was to impress women. Rather, he used... his attractiveness to women, to impress other men" (Karras 25). This demonstration of attractiveness and its motivations feeds into the idea of a knight needing control over his relationships, particularly with women. Women serve as a validation for a man's skills, awarding their 'love' like a "prize awarded for a man's achievement" (Karras 54) rather than for any actual feelings of love. Arthur is not immune from these knightly ideas of love and attraction. His queen, and any of her attributes – her kindness, her beauty, her wit – are a demonstration of his ability to capture and maintain the attentions and affections of a great lady, except Arthur keeps

losing his queen. His losses of her are not confined to the narratives mentioned above, although they certainly occur within those texts. Whether Arthur's queen is taken by force or simply concedes willingly to break her promise of fidelity to him, she does so consistently within Arthurian literature.

The preceding survey of Arthurian literature demonstrates that infidelity is a deeply ingrained motif within the Arthurian canon and while the indiscretions of Arthur's queen figure in many texts the king's cuckold status is usually kept as an unacknowledged yet open secret at court. Usually it is the secret of the narrative, but in the comic poems that I consider it is openly acknowledged, sometimes blatantly so. The idea of being a cuckold is also not usually held against Arthur. It is that public exposure of the queen's indiscretions and Arthur's status as a cuckold that makes the three poems I focus on, the *Lai du Cor*, *The Boy and the Mantle*, and *Sir Corneus*, comic. Each poem highlights Arthur's exposure as having lost control of his queen, not through abduction, but through either the queen's sexual indiscretions or Arthur's newly awakened belief in her indiscretions. As we will see, the focal point in these three poems, as well as in the other texts mentioned, tends toward Arthur and his reactions to his loss of his queen. Even when Guinevere is blatantly abducted there is more attention focused on how Arthur responds to the event than the queen's own reaction; she has little to divulge about Arthur's loss of her. The loss experienced in these poems is more of a loss of stability for Arthur and his status as king than it is a loss for Guinevere of her marriage. Arthur's camaraderie with his knights is founded in part upon his ability to impress them with his control of his queen: "The achievement of manhood depended on mastering... love (successful commodification of women)" (Karras 25). Arthur's kingship hinges on him

being able to turn his loss of his queen into foundational fodder for his relationship with his men.

## Chapter 2: The Poems

### 2.1 - The *Lai du Cor*

The *Lai du Cor* comes from the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman French tradition and it focusses upon the idea of fidelity and/or chastity testing as conducted by magical objects that expose Arthur as having lost control of his queen. Not only is this the earliest of the three poems I discuss, but it is also the poem that introduces concepts that the later two fifteenth-century works address more plainly. The *Lai du Cor* flirts with the ideas surrounding cuckoldry and adultery, but it does not blatantly call Arthur a cuckold. While the king definitely fails the magical horn test, the term *cuckold* is only used in passing to discuss the purpose of the test. Terms, especially the term *cous* (cuckold), are an important aspect of this poem that help establish a precedent for later comic poems about the revelations of Arthur's status as a cuckold. While revelations regarding Arthur's cuckold status in all three poems are public, the *Lai du Cor*'s insertion of this topic is more of an implication, a heavy-handed one at that, but not a blatant declaration of Arthur's status.

The *Lai du Cor* starts by establishing Arthur's reputation as a great king and how he presides over a great court to set up the comic bit that appears later on when Arthur fails the fidelity test. The poem begins with a scribal prologue that commends the King of England and Britain as "bon rei" (good king) (v. 2) establishing Arthur's reputation. Arthur has organized a great feast to celebrate the day of Pentecost and part of the lavishness of the celebration includes twenty thousand knights and twenty thousand women, married and unmarried alike. While those numbers are grand they were planned specifically so that every person in attendance could have a partner to dine alongside; there is no implication of forcing matches at this feast. This feast is not an opportunity to

seek out a spouse, but the celebration of Pentecost. It is made plain that any man who attends without a spouse will dine with “[S]a touse, / Sa serour, ou s’aime” (his lover, / his sister, or his friend) (vv. 18-19). Arthur brings together all of his barons to attend this feast alongside him because he wanted all of his vassals at his castle, Karlioun (vv. 29-30). Arthur makes this feast an extremely public event. By hosting such a lavish feast, Arthur is able to impress others with what he has, and this pertains to more than just the physical and geographical holdings he lays claim to. Arthur brings thousands of people together to celebrate, and as they celebrate, his guests have a chance to marvel and wonder at the people Arthur surrounds himself with, which includes his queen and his knights.

After the arrival of all of Arthur’s guests there is a disturbance that occurs when a handsome boy makes an appearance at the court: “Kar a vous un dauncel / Mount avenaunte e bel, / Sour un cheval coraunt” (A young gentleman came to them / Pleasing and handsome, / On a fast horse) (vv. 35-37). And in his hand he carries “[U]n cor / A quatre bendes d’or” (A horn / with four bands of gold) (vv. 39-40). This horn is a beautiful artifact made from ivory and encrusted with gems (vv. 40-53), which makes it precious in and of itself without even factoring in its magical properties. This particular horn is the creation of “une fee” (a fairy) (v. 55) situating it as a magical device. Aside from its beautiful exterior the horn is also equipped with one hundred small bells that if rung “Sounent taunt doucement / Que harpe ne vïele / Ne deduit de pucele / Ne serreine de mer / N’est tele a escouter” (Will sound so sweet / No harp nor a viol / Nor voice of a young woman / Nor siren of the sea / Will charm the ear as much) (vv. 62-66). Upon his arrival in front of the entire court, the boy takes the horn from where it was slung over his shoulder, raises it with one hand and makes the palace vibrate with its sound: “Il le leva



en haut— /... Desour le corn feri; / Le paleis retenti, / Les eschieles sonerent” (He holds the horn up high /... On the horn he strikes / The palace resounds, / The bells sound) (vv. 77-81). The sounds that emit from the horn are so beautiful that the knights “En lesent le manjer” (They stop eating) (v. 84), the servants find themselves incapable of completing their services, and “Cil ki taille le pain / Il retaille sa main” (He who cuts the bread / He cuts his hand) (vv. 99-100). The sounds made by the horn enchant the entire court into sudden stillness.

The horn is a special artifact that, if Arthur were acquire it, would better demonstrate his power and wealth. As court finds itself hypnotized, they stop talking, and even Arthur finds himself dazed by the magic of the horn. The boy approaches King Arthur and ten kings appear around him, silenced at the sound of the horn: “Il conust les .x. rois / As plus riches cunrois; / Entour le roi Artu / Fu[rent] pour le corn mu” (He identifies the ten kings / The most richly attired / Around King Arthur / Made mute by the horn) (vv. 113-115). He addresses Arthur with blessings: “Cil Deus ki meint en haut, / Reis Arzurs, il vous saut, / E tout voustre barné / Que ci voi assemblé” (God who is on high / King Arthur, may he keep you / And all your vassals / Who are assembled here) (vv. 121-124). Arthur responds in kind, and then the boy goes on to explain his presence and the origin of the horn in his possession. The boy tells Arthur that the horn is being given to him by the King of Moraine and that the artifact is a treasure from the man’s personal collection. However, the horn comes with a condition: that Arthur will listen to the horn but will not feel indebted to the King of Moraine or blame him for what the horn tells him: “Que gré ne l’en sachez / Ne mal ne l’en voillez” (That you will not drag about gratitude to him for it / Nor will you wish bad things upon him for it) (vv. 135-136). Arthur accepts the gift and then requests that the boy join them at the feast, therefore

making the numbers at the celebration uneven. He also promises the boy rewards: “Quant jeo mangé avrai / Chevaler vous ferrai / E cent livres d’or fin / Vous durai le matin”

(Once I have eaten / I will make you a knight / And one hundred pounds of gold / I will give you in the morning) (vv. 151-154). The boy laughs, politely refuses the offer to join them at the feast, but states that he will return for Arthur’s promised reward. Arthur’s acceptance of the horn and the offer for the young messenger to join his court accentuate both Arthur’s desire to keep precious things close and his ability to demonstrate his might to others. A knighting ceremony would be a sufficiently public event to showcase Arthur’s splendour, and the horn makes a wonderful addition to his current wealth.

It is notable that upon accepting the gift Arthur is not beholden to the king who sent it, which makes it entirely Arthur’s responsibility, so everything that the horn can do occurs under the king’s unintentional endorsement. Arthur inspects the horn and then requests that his chaplain decipher the inscription on it; he tells the king “Vous dirai tel merveille / Qu’è ounke en Engleterre / N’è en nule autre tere / Ne fust si graunde oïe, / Mes n’est lius k’or le die” (I will tell you something so marvelous / That never in England / Or in another land / Has so great a one been heard of / But this is not time and place to speak) (vv. 196-200). The rest of the inscription emphasizes that while the revelation is important it is not meant to be public yet, but Arthur decides to announce this revelation in front of all of his guests. His decision highlights Arthur’s choice to make the horn and its inscription public despite cautioning from both his chaplain and the horn itself. Jeff Rider states that Arthur’s demand for the secret of the horn to be declared publicly causes the horn to “no longer be measured in weight, pleasure, or convenience, but in honor, shame and mockery” (176). Arthur is the one who shifts the horn’s usage from one of relative decoration and amusement to one that can and does bring shame to his court. The

king chooses to ignore the warnings of the horn and of his chaplain in order satisfy his desire for public revelry.

The purpose of the horn becomes plain when Arthur has the inscription read and it is revealed that the horn acts seemingly as a fidelity-testing device. Rider actively argues against labelling the horn in this poem as a “chastity-testing device” (176) because he states that “The horn reveals something about the *relationship* between husband and wife” (176). As for what the poem states, the horn affects men, and will not allow those who are jealous or cuckold to drink from it. Much like the later two poems, *Sir Corneus* and *The Boy and the Mantle*, the horn will cause cuckolds to spill their drinks upon themselves. Where this horn differs from other iterations of the drinking horn story is that the horn from the *Lai du Cor* deals with more than cuckoldry; it also targets jealous men “Que ja houn n’i bevra, / Taunt soit sages ne fous, / S’il est cous ne gelous” (No man can drink from it / Be he wise or foolish / If he is cuckold or jealous) (vv. 232-234). Additionally, a man can also only drink from it if his wife has never wished for a better or different man, even if the thought is fleeting “Ne ki nule femme heit / Qui heit fol pensé feit / Vers autre kë a lui” (Who has a wife / Who has ever had a passing or foolish thought / About another man) (vv. 235-237). This discussion concerning the thoughts of a man’s wife indicates that the horn lends itself to the task of identifying more than adultery. The horn serves to expose indiscretions, both sexual and mental, that compromise the integrity of a marriage.

The use of the term *fol* (v. 236) in the description of the types of thoughts women could have that would cause their husbands to fail the horn test can be widely interpreted. The word *fol* could mean foolish or wanton.<sup>i</sup> The implication of a foolish or randomly passing thought is that it is not intentional, or at the very least, it has no real energy for

action behind it. On the other hand, a wanton thought can be interpreted as a precursor to adulterous activities. The wanton thought renders a man cuckold, because he loses control of his wife sexually, while the foolish thought simply represents a kind of mental incontinence in the wife's mind. She cannot prevent herself from entertaining thoughts of other men, no matter how quick or foolish they are, because her mind is loose and open, without respectful or virtuous constraints.

A wife needs to be wholly faithful and virtuous in order to allow her husband to pass the test. There is discussion after the revelation of the inscription as to whether any man could pass this test: "Mes ne quit chevaler / De ci k'a Mounpeeller / Qui femme heit espousee / Ja en beive derree, / Is seyt veir ke cil dist / Qui ces lettres escri[s]t" (Is there a knight / From here to Mounpeller / Who has married a wife / Who could drink any / If what he says is true / Who wrote these letters) (vv. 257-262). This discussion leads to an uncomfortable feeling amongst the women at court, including Arthur's unnamed queen, and she keeps her head down in fear of what might happen: "Meime la reine / En tint la teste encline" (Even the queen / Hangs her head) (vv. 267-268). However, the blame could fall upon either the male or the female in a relationship with this horn, because it can detect jealous men as well as women with wandering thoughts. Rider emphasizes this point, reminding us that any revelations that occur courtesy of the horn are up to the interpretation of the court: "[The horn] does not reveal anything about either the husband or the wife alone" (176). Some of the women at court whisper about how "Ore ui verrez / Les gelous esprovez" (Now we will see / The jealous ones proven) (vv. 277-278), implying that perhaps there is something that the women can gain from having their husbands undergo this test too. However, as the narrative progresses it becomes obvious that the women do not gain much at all from the horn's ability to test jealous men,

because there is no manner of identifying the exact reason why a man might fail the test. At the sound of those whispers Arthur becomes frustrated: “Arzurs fu mout irrez” (Arthur became irritated) (v. 281). He demands to drink from the horn, likely in hopes of reassuring himself that he will not be shown as cuckold or as someone whose wife has taken interest in another man. He attempts to make an example of himself, which he does, but not in the manner he anticipated. When he goes to drink “sour lui le versa” (Upon him [the horn] upends itself) (v. 294) and he finds himself publicly declared as a jealous man, a cuckold, and/or a victim of his wife’s foolish thoughts. At this moment of revelation Arthur is consumed with rage and attempts to stab his queen. However, his attempt is prevented by several of his knights: “El quer souz la peitrine / Vout ferir la reïne” (To the heart within the breast / He goes to stab the queen) (vv. 299-300).

Arthur’s loss of control of Guinevere and her actions impacts his public persona and causes him blatant humiliation. Even if his queen was not the one responsible for the horn spilling, since it could logically be Arthur’s fault, the poem focusses on Arthur’s reaction. Rider makes it clear that the source of shame he identifies in the poem “is not a loss of virtue but a loss of reputation manifesting itself as words, as censure, mockery, whispers” (182). While at first the queen does not react to Arthur’s humiliation, she eventually does have a chance to speak out about her feelings on this revelation within her marriage to Arthur. This is different from what we will see in *The Boy and the Mantle* where Guinevere’s first choice of action is to run from her humiliation to hide in her chambers. Iuwein, one of the knights who prevented Arthur from harming his queen, tells his king that “Houk n’oÿ parler houm / Jour de sa mesprisoun” (Never before [has he] heard men speak / Any day of the queen committing indiscretions) (vv. 321-322) and that he should have some faith restored due to the lack of whisperings about the queen around

the court. Iuwein asks Arthur to listen and trust the members of his court and what they know, implying that the trust between the men of the court and the king is strong enough to help the king overcome his concerns about his queen's potential indiscretions. Arthur listens to Iuwein. It is only Iuwein who is able to penetrate the king's rage-induced tunnel vision, bent on violence, and save the queen.

The queen takes on an active role in proving her fidelity in this poem. She outlines to Iuwein how she will willingly allow herself to be set upon a pyre and if any part of her or her clothing burns she should be taken as guilty and then shall let her body be dragged apart by horses (323-330). She shares this dramatic idea of a trial by fire, set by Arthur, to demonstrate the depth of her love. She explains to Iuwein that she loves Arthur beyond all else and how she never purposefully compromised her fidelity to him: "Quë ounke houme n'aimai / Ne jammés n'amerai / For soulement soun cors" (No other man I love / No others will I ever love / My heart is solely his) (vv. 331-333). She tells everyone that the drink spilled, not because of a fault on Arthur's part, but because she gave a brave young man a ring in an attempt to keep the youth, a good man, behind to increase the court's value (vv. 337-356). In her explanation of the situation with the young knight she notes how she offered the knight a ring and her love but only with the intention of keeping him at court. This act, in and of itself, is well within the scope of her duties as queen since she is meant to provide Arthur, and by extension, his court, stability, balance, and support. This explanation, coupled with Guinevere's offer to test herself atop a pyre, points to the idea that she may not be the party at fault in this particular situation and that it might be Arthur's jealousy that caused the horn to spill (Rider 178).

The queen declares that she never truly loved or wished for another no matter his wealth or power; she also delivers an ultimatum to her husband: "Jammés ne serrai le[e] /

Si ne seye venge[e]” (I will not find happiness again / If I do not have vengeance) (vv. 371-372). The queen essentially requests vengeance upon the King of Moraine, a demand that appeals to Arthur’s sense of total power and his potential need to prove himself to not only to his wife, but to his court. The public nature of Arthur’s humiliation and the queen’s ultimatum puts Arthur in a situation that demands he act or lose face in front of those that look to him for leadership. However, Arthur’s pledge to not harm his fellow king upon the reception of the horn was also public, which forces him to tell his queen that he cannot betray his word. Arthur’s honour here precedes any desire of his to please his queen; his word to another king stands firm. His personal power and greatness as a king and his attachment to his own honour are thrown into conflict here by his queen and her desires. His honour takes precedence, because “Learning to be a knight involved learning to keep one’s word” (Karras 61), and Arthur will not break his bond of fellowship with another man, even for his queen. Arthur’s choice here keeps in a pattern for this story type, and Arthurian literature at large, by placing his bonds with his knights above his bond to his queen.

In response to his refusal to act, the queen changes tactics and redirects the conversation back to the revelation and the horn, bringing their marital issues to the forefront of the court again. She praises Arthur in this aftermath: “Le meillour ay... / Qui hounk saunz Deu fust rois: / Qu’irroie dounk queraunt / Plus bel ne plus vaillaunt?” (I have the best... / Who ever, with the exception of God, was king / So why would I go looking for / Another more handsome or more valiant?) (vv. 401-404). While she tries to appeal to Arthur’s ego in an attempt to distract the rest of the court from the revelation he reacts angrily to her statement that no honourable knight would take the test, because it would dishonour him and his wife: “Ja a fraunc chevaler / Ne deüst oum bailer / Icest

corn a tenir / Pur sa mulier” (For the sake of his wife / No one should ever / Hand over the horn / To a noble knight to try) (vv. 407-410).

Instead of siding with his queen and presenting a united front to the court, Arthur chooses to demand that every man at court try to drink from the horn, and inadvertently, seeks companionship from his fellow men. Arthur refuses to be the only man shamed. Also, by demanding the rest of the court try to drink from the horn Arthur is implicitly acknowledging that his queen was, in his opinion, unfaithful: “Trestout l’essaierount” (Everyone will try it) (v. 412). While she refutes his assessment, Arthur’s embarrassment overwhelms him and pushes him to look to the rest of his fellows for camaraderie and support. As the men of the court start testing themselves, man after man finds the horn upended upon himself. Rider acknowledges that the mass failure to complete the horn test by the men at court “mitigates Arthur’s failure somewhat” (178) and allows the king to find peace in his situation. Arthur’s anger vanishes when he finds himself surrounded by his fellows sharing the same humiliation: “Einz comença a rire” (He starts to laugh) (v. 460). Arthur’s laughter is reminiscent of his reaction to failing the test in *Sir Corneus* where, as we will see, he wholeheartedly embraces his cuckold status. Arthur willingly and openly forgives his queen. That Arthur and his queen are definitely not the only couple at court who fail the test demonstrates how their failure is not unusual, although as Rider points out it is still notable “because they are the first to undergo the horn test and are the best representatives of the court, the most courtly couple, the standard” (178). Arthur forgives his queen after having lost her to the humiliation brought on by the horn and its test: “Dame, moun mautalent / Vous pardoiing bonement” (Lady, from my anger / I willingly pardon you) (vv. 479-480). By reconnecting with his queen, Arthur gives credence to the idea that the horn test and the subsequent failures of the men of his court



regarding the test actually does less harm than previously anticipated. There is a sense that “shame to all... has thus become the very sign of the court’s unity and coherence” (Rider 186) and that Arthur and his queen’s reconciliation is merely another aspect of that unity. However, this reunion of Arthur and his queen was only made possible by the majority of Arthur’s court also failing the test, thus providing the king with a sense of community via mutual shame.

The remainder of the court tests the horn and eventually, after exposing others as cuckolds it arrives in front of a knight named Garadue. He is the only man for whom the horn does not spill: “Le corn mist a sa bouche— / Ben vous ay dist k’il touche!” (He put the horn to his lip / And I tell you it touched his lips) (vv. 543-544). While Guinevere and Arthur are supposed to be “the standard” (Rider 178) against which all marriages at court should compare themselves, Garadue and his lady supersede that “standard” (Rider 178) by passing the test. Arthur, in awe of Garadue’s demonstration, rewards the man with the horn. By rewarding Garadue, Arthur acknowledges that the man and his wife have a relationship that he and his queen cannot match. Interestingly, Arthur does not choose to isolate Garadue and his lady for their success, since their triumph exposes the rest of the court to the reality that a marriage where both parties are faithful is possible. Garadue’s triumph is not seen “as a threat to the new community which has been founded on failing the horn test” (Rider 187). Finally, after this demonstration the court returns to their feast and celebration, and after it is all over “En lour teres revount / La dount il venu sount; / Les femmes premenerent / Cil ki plus les amerent” (They returned to their lands / From which they had come / With those who loved them the most) (vv. 581-582).

The epilogue of the poem points to Garadue as the fictional author of the lai, which explains why Garadue would be the one to outshine even the great King Arthur with his

ability to drink from the horn. The ending of *Sir Corneus* echoes the situating of Garadue as the author of this lai, because the character of Sir Corneus is also put forward as the author of the comic poem that shares his name. Inserting the author into the poem appears to serve the comic aspect to some extent, as these characters are seemingly part of Arthur's court and intent upon creating a means of amusement. This self-insertion is particularly notable in the case of Garadue, because this character is also the same as the character of Craddocke, who appears in *The Boy and the Mantle*. Craddocke, like Garadue, passes the chastity and fidelity tests put to him and also receives a reward for the trust and fidelity of his marriage. Garadue and Craddocke<sup>ii</sup> are simply different versions of the same person in various texts. One example of the acknowledgment that Garadue is also Craddocke occurs when Matilda Bruckner and Glyn Burgess address narrative Arthurian lays: "Finally, a knight named Garadue (Caradoc) passes the test" (206). They place the name Caradoc in brackets to indicate that Garadue and Caradoc are the same character. Since the *Lai du Cor* features Garadue and one of the earliest versions of the horn test, it is likely the influence for other horn-testing stories that appear afterwards including *The Boy and the Mantle* and *Sir Corneus*.

There is a stark contrast between how the *Lai du Cor* refers to Arthur and his status as a cuckold in an understated manner and how the other two poems address him blatantly as a cuckold. The *Lai du Cor*'s use of the word *cous* (cuckold) occurs only twice (vv. 234, 280) and both times it refers to the general idea of cuckoldry. There are no direct references to Arthur being a *cuckold*, because the idea of being cuckold was shameful and hence, usually hidden. Unlike the other two fifteenth-century poems, however, the *Lai du Cor*'s narrative shies away from actively calling the king a *cuckold*. In reference to the ideas of chivalry and knighthood that existed in the twelfth century,

there was more of a focus on the “ethical meaning” (Karras 23) of chivalry than the “court display” (Karras 24) of chivalry that followed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There is a measure of restraint that exists within the *Lai du Cor* that restricts the poem from leaning too hard into the idea of shaming Arthur for his status, while *The Boy and the Mantle* and *Sir Corneus* are much freer with the use of the term *cuckold*. At this point, it is important to understand how shameful the term *cuckold* is, and how, while Arthur is a cuckold in most, if not all, stories pertaining to his kingship and adventures, he is not often blatantly referred to as one. The general use of the term *cuckold* is different from actively levelling the full weight of cuckold status upon a character, in this case Arthur. This poem keeps away from the blatant declaration that Arthur and his fellows are *cuckolds* yet it still introduces the derogatory term *cous* to show how even kingly husbands are seen to be not in full control of their wives.

## **2.2 *The Boy and the Mantle***

The fifteenth-century Middle English poem *The Boy and the Mantle* describes the public humiliation of several women at King Arthur’s court, most notably, Queen Guinevere. She is the first woman to try on the mantle brought to the court by a child who proclaims that “[The mantle] shall never become that wiffe / That hath once done amisse” (vv. 29-30). The trope of the mantle as a fidelity or chastity testing device exists in various versions across the spectrum of Arthurian literature (2-3 Cross). It appears in the Welsh Triads, which list “the Thirteen Treasures of the Island of Britain” (Roberts 86), which includes a “*mantell Tegau Eurfron*, the mantle which fitted only a faithful wife” (Roberts 86). Tegau Eurfron is a famous character in Welsh literature for being the most faithful of wives to her husband, Caradoc, also known as Craddocke. By identifying these tests in relation to chastity or fidelity one can “accurately characterize what is at stake”

(Besamusca 290) in these texts, although there are more nuanced cases where the tests reveal more than simple adultery, such as the instance with the drinking horn in the *Lai du Cor*, which revealed the quality of integrity or lack thereof in the marriages of the men and women at Arthur's court.

Guinevere's act of trying on the mantle is done within full view of the court, and most importantly, her husband, King Arthur. When she puts the mantle on it exposes her lack of faithfulness to Arthur: "Ill itt did her beseeme" (v. 44). The manner in which the mantle shrinks or shreds when a woman dons it is meant to "[disclose] the nature of the victim's transgression" (Besamusca 292). She acknowledges the shame that her actions, implied by the shredded mantle upon her body (v. 40), have brought upon her by leaving the view of the court and hiding in her rooms where she curses the maker of the mantle (vv. 49-56). Guinevere acknowledges her shame in this poem, but she does not accept responsibility for her actions. She is merely frustrated with the exposure of her faithlessness and how the entire court has witnessed her humiliation.

While Guinevere sulks, angry at the mantle and its maker, there is little reaction from Arthur, with the exception of his exclamation when she first dons the mantle: "'By my troth,' quoth King Arthur, / 'I think thou be not true'" (vv. 47-48). No indication is given of Arthur's tone or his state of mind concerning this revelation. However, the King's humiliation is alleviated to some extent as his fellow knights call their ladies forward to find them wanting in faithfulness as well. After Guinevere's dramatic exit, Kay's lady is made to take the mantle and she is also humiliated, although more so than the Queen. While the mantle appeared "as sheeres had itt shread" (40) on Guinevere, Kay's lady finds herself "...bare / All above the toute<sup>iii</sup>" (vv. 71-72). When she appears naked from the waist up, in front of the court, the knights humiliate her with jeering that

sends her following the Queen's example and fleeing from the room (vv. 73-80). She also does not react to her exposure other than to flee the scene as soon as possible. There is a camaraderie to the public shaming of the unfaithful women in the poem that serves to point towards both the discomfort of the women being exposed and the unease of the men discovering their wives' secrets. This particular unease applies to the men who fear being exposed next, since aside from Arthur's initial reaction to Guinevere's exposure to the court there are no individual reactions from the knights whose wives are shamed. It is interesting to highlight the marriages at court between knights and their ladies in this poem because as Karras indicates, "Knights described as married are relatively few in the Arthurian corpus" (56). Looking back this proves true, at least in the *Lai du Cor* where many regular characters from the Arthurian canon do not appear with the exception of Arthur, his queen, and Iuwein. However, since Iuwein's testing is not shown in that poem perhaps he is unmarried. We will see that it is the knights who are established with lands and titles that undergo these tests because they are also the knights who are capable of providing for a spouse and thus, married. The younger knights tend toward bachelorhood and not marriage simply because they are not established enough yet for that step. Through the jeering and laughing the knights find reassurance in each other, knowing that even without their unfaithful wives they can still find value or acceptance amongst their peers. This community forged through laughter and fear of shame is exactly what happens in the *Lai du Cor* and to a greater extent in *Sir Corneus*, where the cuckolds actively dance and rejoice together. While the knights have the support and reassurance from their fellows, Kay's lady and Guinevere have no such recourse. Their humiliations are individual and public, and result in self-imposed, personal isolation immediately after they occur.

The child who brought the mantle finds his work rewarded when an old knight offers him “Twenty marks to his meede” (v. 84) in exchange for the mantle. The old knight’s wife takes the mantle from her husband who guesses that “[The] mantle might / Doe his wiffe some need” (vv. 87-88). Upon donning it, the woman appears mostly bare except for “But a tassel and a threed” (v. 92), which exposes her almost completely to those assembled at court. The reaction to this revelation is also one of increased humiliation for the woman as the knights “Bade evill might shee speed” (v. 94). There is an implication during this particular instance of the test that readers of the poem should expect the wife to fail because her youth and beauty imply opportunity for infidelity. However, this expectation is not echoed by her husband who simply seems to find his thoughts occupied by the idea that should his wife pass the test she would be in possession of a lovely, and most importantly, bargain-priced, mantle: “[The] mantle might / Doe his wiffe some need” (vv. 87-88). Unfortunately, the mantle leaves the woman’s body almost wholly exposed to the population of the court, and while the other women before her also experienced some degree of humiliation, her almost complete nakedness is an intense indignity. While her almost complete nakedness makes her feel properly shamed for her infidelity the indignity provides the men at court with fodder for their amusement and entertainment. There is a sense that the almost, but not total, nakedness the woman endures is more humiliating than her appearing completely naked. With complete nudity there would be the potential for some form of dignity, but the tassel serves to highlight her indiscretions in a way that makes them even more blatant. Since she is hardly clothed, all attention is drawn toward the areas where she is sporting clothing, meaning the single tassel and thread. Like the women embarrassed before her

the young woman also chooses to run to her room and hide from the judgment and jeering that follows her exposure.

The public nature of these humiliations serves to push the women into isolation and potentially, reflection upon their actions, but that is not mentioned. These women are not the focal point of the poem, despite the narrative placing their humiliation front and center at the beginning. The reactions of the male characters are what direct the poem. While the women disappear after their public shaming the men of the court stay in the public sphere to watch the unfolding of what one might consider personal or private issues between a wife and a husband. The three men whose wives are tested keep themselves in the public venue of the court and despite the shaming of their wives, maintain their position in the public sphere. The mantle itself is a visual, and therefore public, display of infidelity. For instance, the cloth shifts in colour when Guinevere tries it on: “One while was itt goule, / Another while was itt greene; / Another while was itt watchet” (vv. 41-43). These colours draw attention to the wearer, ensuring that members of the court are not ignoring the public displays of humiliation taking place. As the women leave the sight of the men of the court they depart individually and end up alone, but the rest of the court stays. The three men whose wives are exposed and humiliated maintain a united front during their moment of shame and bond by staying with the other men and implicitly placing the blame of infidelity squarely upon their wives, not the men with whom their wives were unfaithful.

The intensity of the shame placed upon the women at the beginning of the poem increases as each woman takes on the mantle and demonstrates the intensity of isolation brought upon her by the mantle test. This increase in shame implies that Guinevere is actually the least humiliated of the three women. While in this poem Guinevere’s failure

of the test is not complete, there are versions where she “fails, sometimes completely, sometimes only slightly (perhaps depending on the bias of the poet)” (Rogers 220).

Notably, Guinevere is also the only one out of the four ladies tested, and the three who are shamed, who is named. Her name serves to isolate and spotlight her; she is not just the queen here, but Guinevere, wife of Arthur. She is not simply an unnamed queen in this poem; she is Guinevere and she is being called out by name in an attempt to attach some form of responsibility for her actions. Her status as queen places her in a slightly different position, status wise, from that of Kay’s lady and the young wife of the old knight. As Arthur’s queen, Guinevere’s actions do not only impact her own reputation, but also Arthur’s reputation as a king and ruler. Any distance she obtains through being named does not distance her enough to avoid impacting King Arthur. She actively compromises Arthur as a husband and as a king when she tries on the mantle. Her punishment from the mantle itself, which appeared “As sheeres had itt shread” (v. 40) embarrasses her, but that embarrassment does not compare to the utter humiliation that Kay’s lady or the young bride deal with after trying on the mantle. Kay’s lady and the young wife of the old knight do not speak, leaving Guinevere to react as an individual, alone. The situation wherein Guinevere is embarrassed is followed by the queen cursing the creator of the mantle. She states, “I had rather be in a wood / Under a greene tree / Then in King Arthurs court / Shamed for to bee” (vv. 57-60) after she tries on the mantle and it reveals her indiscretions. Perhaps Guinevere is allowed to react to her embarrassment because of her status as queen, since neither of the other two women have reactions to their humiliations except for fleeing the public sphere of the court. Also, as her embarrassment is lesser, in comparison to that of the other women, her reaction is potentially more justified or allowable because she is not made to bare herself to the court, either literally or



figuratively. She still has some dignity and some of the mantle to cling to while the other women have little to nothing to cover themselves in the face of the revelations.

In light of the revelations of infidelity occurring at court, another knight steps up to break the pattern and pass the test, leaving him separate from his fellows but secure in his marriage. Craddocke and his lady come forth, and he asks her to don the mantle. At first, the mantle appears to begin the process of humiliating her, and by association

Craddocke: “Upp att her great toe / Itt began to crinkle and crowt” (vv. 113-114).

Craddocke’s lady does not panic upon being presented with the test of the mantle, nor does she distance herself from its reaction to her. She handles the situation with grace and certainty about her virtue. She cautions the mantle, speaking to it and asking it not to shame her for her actions as she relates a story that once, before she and Craddocke were married, they had kissed. Upon stating her confession “The mantle stoode about her / Right as shee wold, / Seemelye of colour, / Glittering like gold” (vv. 125-128).

Craddocke’s lady faces no public mocking from the court as she stands as a representation of something none of the other ladies could be, the example of a faithful wife and a woman chaste before marriage. This plot point exists in other versions of the mantle story where “only Carados<sup>iv</sup> succeeds: among the women trying on the mantle, only his wife passes the test” (Rogers 220) and she stands as “the virtuous one... the heroine of the moment” (Rogers 220). Much like Kay’s lady and the old knight’s wife, Craddocke’s lady is unnamed in this version of the poem, but here her being unnamed allows her to connect her fidelity to her husband and bring him honour. She sets herself apart and isolates herself in a different way from the other women who endured the test before her. Women in these testing stories are consistently singled out, whether by praise for their virtue or shame for their indiscretions. Craddocke’s lady does not push herself

into isolation in her chambers, because she is not shamed by the mantle. Her husband has not lost her, whereas the three other men, including Arthur, have been publicly exposed for losing control of their wives. This is also when the use of the mantle ends, since Craddocke's lady has proven herself more virtuous and faithful than the king's queen, Kay's lady, and the old knight's wife. She presents herself as an exemplar for women at the court by passing the test and then relegates herself to the background while two more fidelity and chastity tests take place.

Where Craddocke's lady represents the epitome of virtue at court, Guinevere represents compromised virtue. While Craddocke's lady tries on the mantle, Guinevere returns to the venue where the court gathers and she takes this opportunity to try to humiliate Craddocke's lady. Guinevere attempts to convince Arthur that Craddocke's lady has manipulated the magic of the mantle and is only pretending to be virtuous. There is no camaraderie or solidarity amongst the women of the court, unlike the men who band together to jeer at the guilty wives as a collective. Instead of staying hidden in her chambers or simply staying silent, Guinevere outright accuses Craddocke's lady of multiple counts of adultery: "I have seene tane out of her bed / Of men fiveteene" (vv. 137-138). The Queen goes on to accuse Craddocke's lady of adultery with a variety of men including "Preists, clarkes, and wedded men" (v. 139). Guinevere's attempts to shame the lady imply that the Queen hopes to eclipse her own humiliation by creating an even more public and shameful incident for Craddocke's lady.

By attempting to humiliate Craddocke's lady, Guinevere's words threaten Craddocke himself, although that does not appear to be the queen's intention, since a man's reputation is tied to that of his wife. Interestingly, it is not Craddocke who steps in to protect his wife from the Queen's vicious lies, but the young boy who brought the

mantle to court. The boy does not even bother to address Guinevere. Instead, he turns straight to Arthur and counsels him to “chasten” (v. 145) Guinevere for her audaciousness. This points to how the exposure and humiliation of the women is not necessarily about them at all, but about their husbands and how said men have lost control of their wives. The boy also points out that Arthur’s status as a cuckold is now known to Arthur’s court at large: “King, in thine owne hall / Thou art a cuchold” (vv. 149-150). This is a public declaration that places the King in the awkward situation of needing to actually confront his new status and the state of his marriage. The term *cuckold* is actively and publicly used to address Arthur here, which is at odds with the *Lai du Cor*’s manner of addressing the term in passing rather than as an actual label for the king. While Arthur is sexually betrayed or fails to protect Guinevere in many stories and poems, the use of the derisive label *cuckold* as it is boldly applied to Arthur in such a public forum is pointed and unusual. The boy does not shy away from reminding Arthur of his status as a cuckold, and the king does not seek further confirmation of his status.

The next fidelity or chastity test the boy presents to the court involves a wild boar’s head that a cuckold’s knife cannot carve (vv. 159-162). Craddocke takes up the challenge of this test and “britled the bores head” (v. 173). Aside from Arthur, who does not participate, the rest of the men at court panic at the prospect of the test: “Some rubbed their knives / Uppon a whetstone; / Some threw them under the table / And said they had none” (vv. 163-166). Craddocke also passes the test of the drinking horn that the boy presents. As no cuckold can drink from the horn only Craddocke passes the test. At the end of these three tests, Craddocke is rewarded with the horn and the boar’s head, while his lady receives the mantle separating them from the rest of the court based upon their virtue and fidelity. Craddocke and Craddocke’s lady reap rewards for their fidelity:

“Craddocke wan the horne / And the bores head; / His ladye wan the mantle / Unto her meede” (vv. 189-192). These rewards, given out after the three tests are complete, mark Craddocke as a man more capable of keeping his wife happy and faithful than even the great king of Britain. While there is no apparent animosity between Craddocke and Arthur, as evidenced by the reward, there is definitely a shift of honour that sways to favour Craddocke rather than Arthur.

Until the mention of Craddocke’s lady being rewarded with the mantle the women are strikingly absent from the last two tests that the boy brings to the court. There is no opportunity for split attention during these tests since the women are not focused upon in this portion of the poem; they cannot be humiliated or celebrated. The focus is on the men of the court who are the ones positioned as those that suffer more from the shame their ladies bring down upon them. While the women exist as catalysts for the initial shaming of themselves and by proxy, their husbands, they are no longer required during the final tests. The humiliation of the three men, with the exception of Craddocke and by extension, his lady, is the focal point of this poem, while the women and their faults exist to provide the men a means to discover their status as cuckolds.

### **2.3 *Sir Corneus***

*Sir Corneus* is another fifteenth-century Middle English poem that features Arthur’s discovery of his cuckold status, but his reaction within the text to being named as a cuckold is unusual in its levity. The poem begins with a stanza that invites the listener or the reader to engage with the entertaining tale or “bowrd” (v. 4) it contains. The narrative of the poem then begins to unfold with the establishment of Arthur’s status as a man “of grete honour, / Of castelles and of many a toure, / And full wyde yknow” (vv. 7-9). The actual plot of *Sir Corneus* sees Arthur devote much of his time to

identifying and shaming cuckolds; he operates without knowledge of his own status as a cuckold. One could read this obsession with outing cuckolds as an intense reaction to Arthur's personal fear of becoming or already being a cuckold, whether he is aware of it or not.

There is a distinct irony in King Arthur testing for cuckolds and shaming them while he himself is one. The manner by which Arthur seeks out the cuckolds at court is through chastity or fidelity-testing featuring the drinking horn test. This test is conducted similarly to *The Boy and the Mantle*. However, the set-up for the horn and its existence within Arthur's court is different from that of *The Boy and the Mantle* where the horn is brought to the court by the boy and is only recorded as being used on that particular occasion. In *Sir Corneus* the horn appears as a prized possession of Arthur's: "Kyng Arthour had a bugyll-horn / That evermour stod hym befor / Werso that ever he yede" (vv. 22-24). The poem implies that Arthur is perfectly aware of what the horn does: "Yff any cokwold drynke of it, / Spyll he schuld withouten lette" (vv. 31-32). It is also clear that he has the horn brought to him whenever he is at his table: "For myche crafte he couth therby" (v. 28). He uses the horn to embarrass his courtiers and force them to confront their cuckoldry. In contrast to the brief mention of cuckoldry at the beginning of the poem it is plain that at this point in the narrative, being a cuckold is something that Arthur finds shameful and entertaining as long as he is not found out to be one. The poet outlines how discovering one's status as a cuckold does not make the cuckolds happy: "Gret dispyte thei had therby, / Because it dyde them vilony / And made them offtymes sade" (vv. 34-36).

At this point, Arthur is not aware of his status as a cuckold, so he does not plainly acknowledge being one; he sees his drinking horn as a means to create entertainment. It

appears that his entertainment takes priority in this situation over the honour of the rest of the men at his court. As king, he is entitled to request whatever kind of entertainment he desires, but his intentions in asking for the entertainment of the cuckolds are not wholly focused on humiliating them. While the cuckolds of his court feel ashamed of their status Arthur encourages them to find joy in their new state.

This encouragement might be meant to shame the cuckolds more, or he might actually care about them and simply shows his affection in a less than compassionate fashion. Every cuckold identified finds himself brought before Arthur who then has “Ordeynd throw hys awne assent /... The tabull dormonte, withoute lette, / Therat the cokwoldes wer ssette, / To have solas and pley” (vv. 50, 52-54). He sets up the cuckolds at their own table, which both highlights them and their newly discovered status to the court and demonstrates Arthur’s feelings towards cuckolds and cuckoldry. Arthur seemingly wants to keep the cuckolds in his line of sight to perhaps remind himself of what he fears, or to remind his fellow courtiers how any man, regardless of status, can be brought low by a woman. While the reasoning for keeping the cuckolds close by is not given, the speculation that Arthur uses them to remind him of his worst fear makes sense given the final outcome of the poem. When Arthur eventually discovers and embraces his cuckold status he has his fellow cuckolds join him to serve as a reminder that he is not alone in his cuckoldry. Their fellowship keeps Arthur from feeling the fear he appears to be motivated by at the beginning of the poem.

While he does judge his men for their situations, Arthur places the cuckolds in a location that allows him to easily and simply indicate that he shares something supposedly shameful with these men when the revelation of his cuckoldry occurs. Eventually, he chooses to see his situation as a way to bond with his fellows in place of

just humiliating them. While the separate table and the “Garlandes of wylos” (v. 59), which symbolize “forsaken love” (Furrow 125) were put upon the cuckolds’ heads sound like an instance of public shaming, there is an undercurrent of brotherhood that persists within this poem, particularly later on between Arthur and the other cuckolds revealed by the drinking horn test. This is where the strength of the fellowship amongst the men at court is tested to determine whether they will stand by each other as they are exposed as cuckolds. While Arthur initially keeps himself from his fellow cuckolds due to his ignorance, upon learning of his true nature he indulges in the brotherhood. The intensity of Arthur’s loyalty to his fellow cuckolds and the other cuckolds to Arthur stems from the bonds of knighthood. It is those bonds of knighthood that Karras states, “exploit a sense of belonging and companionship that knights shared” (61). In a similar fashion to how the three outed men stayed in the public venue of the court in *The Boy and the Mantle*, the cuckolds are not removed from the main court area. It is not indicated where the women who rendered the men cuckold are seated, but it is made clear that the men have a community together. They are not isolated through physical removal, and they are given the chance to share the burden of their embarrassment with their fellow cuckolds. They are seated together and dress alike; they are a unit. No matter how unwelcome their cuckoldry is to them it also bonds them together. Arthur encourages the cuckolds to “be glad” (v. 65) and “For his sake make gode chere” (v. 66). Arthur is not only asking for the cuckolds to find it within themselves to be cheerful, but also placing the onus of their cheerfulness upon himself to some extent. He takes it upon himself to order his fellows to find cheer for the sake of him. This may sound inconsequential, but by inserting his own wishes into his request Arthur brings with it his request his power and might as king. One cannot overlook the second stanza of the poem that highlights Arthur’s greatness,

implying that Arthur's request for the cuckolds to be happy is accompanied by his full might as a great man and well-known king. It also carries the weight of Arthur's own public status as a cuckold when his status is revealed.

Additionally, Arthur also requests that his cuckolds will "Be never the wrother with your wyves" (v. 68). There is an odd relationship between women and men in this poem. Arthur counsels his cuckolded men not to take their anger out on their wives for their change in social status. He also reminds the cuckolds that from women, despite their obvious faults and indiscretions, "com duke and kyng" (v. 70) and "Of them com owre manhed" (v. 72). There is less overt shaming directed at the females alluded to within the poem, unlike the anger and jeering that followed the exposure of the unfaithful women in *The Boy and the Mantle*. When Arthur uses the horn he discovers his cuckold status: "Bot sone he spyllyd on hys brest" (v. 178). After this revelation, the cuckolds present in the hall claim him as "ther awne brother" (v. 182). After the revelation, there is a brief mention of Arthur's queen, who is unnamed, as she is "schamyd" (v. 187) and who desires to flee the public forum of the court: "Sche changyd hyr colour lesse and mour, / And wold have ben away" (188-189). Like Guinevere from *The Boy and the Mantle*, this queen seeks to isolate herself from the humiliation of being exposed as unfaithful in the public venue of the court. But while the queen desires to leave the public sphere, Arthur stays and keeps himself in plain view of everyone.

By claiming Arthur as their brother, the cuckolds appeal to the king's sense of brotherhood, loyalty, and honour and allow him the space to properly accept his status. Again, this method of claiming a knight as a brother follows Karras's definition of loyalty that applies "not only to one's lord but also to one's kin, notably brothers, and friends" (Karras 61). The cuckolds appear to feel cheer and relief at the realization that the man



who shamed them would now share in their disgrace: “And glad thei wer of that” (v. 183). In light of his revelation, Arthur promises his fellow cuckolds that he will no longer taunt them and that he will acknowledge his status as a cuckold: “For I ame one, and aske no leve” (v. 194). He embraces his new status and even goes one step further by offering to take his place in the dance with the other cuckolds: “Lordynges all, now may ye know / That I may dance in the cokwold row / And take you by the handes” (vv. 196-198). This offer is only the first of Arthur’s actions that see him fully embrace his fellow cuckolds. He also has the cuckolds wash and then seats them “by hys awne syde, / Up at the high dese” (vv. 209-210) while he puts a garland of willow, a symbol of compromised or betrayed love, upon his head (Furrow 125). Arthur takes his status and embraces it; he neither hides from the drinking horn test nor fights his revelation.

Despite his taunting of the cuckolds in the past, Arthur takes everything in stride and meets his fellows on the same level. Also, surprisingly, he acknowledges the man that entertained his wife in a manner that rendered him a cuckold: “That man aught me gode loffe” (v. 218). This line also potentially implies that the man was a person who had sworn loyalty to Arthur as king. This would mean a betrayal of the crown, as men who swear fealty to Arthur should hold the good of the kingdom and the reputation of their king beyond their own desires. Arthur needs to trust his men beyond everyone else, even his queen. Despite the implication that entertaining the queen was a favour this adulterous indiscretion still counts as a betrayal of trust. Arthur’s loss of his queen is not so much about the devastation of their marriage in this instance as it is the betrayal of one man by another, because loyalty is “not only to one’s lord, but also to one’s kin, notably, brothers, and friends” (Karras 61). There is a compromised relationship here between Arthur and the unnamed man who ‘entertained’ his wife rather than between the queen and the king.

The queen hardly figures in this poem, because the narrative focusses on Arthur and his feelings towards his cuckolds. The poem does conclude in the final stanza with a short message that Arthur “Lived and dyghed with honour” (v. 251). Thus, his status as a cuckold did not define his ability to maintain his honour, the respect of his fellow knights, or his greatness as king.

### Chapter 3: Conclusion

These three comic poems all approach the same subject, the revelation that Arthur has lost control of his wife, with varying degrees of male solidarity. *Sir Corneus* makes light of the situation, presenting a brotherhood of cuckolds who band together in the face of shame and cuckoldry. *The Boy and the Mantle* sees the men of the court bonded by their cuckold statuses, except for Craddocke who emerges as a paragon of virtue. The *Lai du Cor* presents a scenario where Arthur is only stopped from murdering his queen because one of his fellow knights pulls him back, and then he aggressively pushes others to discover whether they are his brother in jealousy or cuckoldry. The constant, but understated, emphasis placed upon the communities of men that form in each poem in light of the virtue or fidelity testing supports my argument that by losing control of his queen Arthur's bonds with his knights are further solidified in light of losing control of his queen.

Arthur cannot trust his wife. Even in the *Lai du Cor* where he explicitly forgives her his act of forgiveness implies his belief in her guilt despite her denials. It is Arthur's knights, his fellow men, that support him through his feelings of anger, shame, and acceptance. Exposing the facade of Arthur's marriage to his queen, as well as that of the marriages of numerous other men at court, causes the affected men to cling to each other. They were brothers before their marriages, and they will maintain that brotherhood through anything. By contrast, the women flee from the community of the court. The women deal with their anger and shame on their own, or in the case of the *Lai du Cor*, the queen defends herself on her own to the court of men. There is no camaraderie amongst the women of these poems. Their indiscretions were done in secret and so, they suffer. The extent of their humiliation is hidden and it is not pursued either; none of the men are

said to follow their wives when they flee. They are out of reach of their husbands and their control. They are not stable or virtuous; the shamed women of these poems are threatened, ignored, jeered, and forced into isolation due to their actions. The stories of the shamed women are unwritten, because the important part is that, at the end of the day, Arthur and his court still stand strong. In the face of his queen's betrayal, Arthur finds solace and support in the only place he was sure to find it: amongst his brothers in arms. No woman can compete with the intensity of the male fellowship at play in these three comic poems.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup>Anglo-Norman Dictionary. See Fol<sup>1</sup>, a. **2** foolish, stupid; ignorant; foolish, unwise; foolish, wrong; foolish, misguided; frivolous, silly, empty and **5** lewd, wanton.

<sup>ii</sup> Also spelt as Caradoc.

<sup>iii</sup> Rump.

<sup>iv</sup> Another version of the name Craddocke.

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