The Freedom of Womanhood: Oriana's Eroticism in *Amadis of Gaul*

Mercedes García Palma
Department of English and North American Literature,
University of Seville
C/ Palos de la Frontera, S/N
C.P: 41004, Sevilla, Spain
Email: mer.gpalma@gmail.com

Abstract:

Amadis of Gaul is a medieval romance written in the early 14th century and edited by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo for its publication two centuries later. Montalvo, apart from emending the first three books, was the author of the fourth one. This neo-Arthurian[1] work, as Tierney described it (1999, 1221) very much like many other works of its genre, fed itself upon romantic, classical Roman and Greek stories whose central axis stood on the journey of the hero for spiritual quest[2] (Savary 1984, 108). It also became an important source of inspiration for the well-known masterpiece *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, whose countless references to the hero of Gaul officially confirmed Amadis as the quintessence of chivalry novels in the history of literature.

The focus of this analysis is going to be drawn to some extracts taken from *Amadis of Gaul*, more specifically, the desperate letter that princess Oriana writes to Amadis, along with special mention to some other extracts in which certain aspects of their relationship will be dissected in this essay. The main purpose of this research is to reveal the underlying meaning to the traditionally conceived role of women in this type of literary genre.

Keywords: chivalry, gender, male, female, power, transfer, erotic.

The aim of this project involves primarily the character of Oriana, the remarkable princess whose heart Amadis strives to keep throughout his journey. Amadis has been conceived in a secret relationship between Perión, king of Gaul, and Elisena, daughter of Garínter, king of Great Britain. He marries Oriana, with whom he has three children. After battling monsters and other enemies, he manages to help queen Briolanja to regain her throne. Because of this, Oriana's jealousy of Briolanja makes her prohibit Amadis to come to see her and Amadis flees to Peña Pobre, where he names himself Beltenebros and lives like a hermit until he is forbidden by Oriana. They marry and Amadis retreats from chivalry to devote to governmental issues. Once king Lisuarte abdicates, Amadis takes over the reign of Great Britain and defends Constantinople.

According to Bullough (qtd in Mandel 1999, 66-68), traditionally, women in medieval romances were conceived of as being subjugated to a male figure or conditioned by a patriarchal structure, where they were deprived of a voice and overshadowed by the ever-present male power:

> what we usually see in the medieval romance is a male-gendered view of a woman's contribution to a

> medieval male world of adventure and action. [...] The noble man was chiefly absorbed in war and the chase, [...] women had no particular place, and often [a man] was not particularly interested in them as individuals.

In spite of this, however, Oriana herself has a major influence on Amadis' actions to the extent of overturning, in the absence of this influence, his expectations of success in his epic deeds:

> Then was he overcome with such pleasure, that he had no power to answer, and Oriana, who now saw the whole power that she had over him, went to the queen and learnt the cause of her sadness, and, returning to the Child of the Sea, told him, that it was for the queen her sister, who now was so distressed. He answered. "If it pleased you that I were a knight, with your leave I would go and aid the queen her sister." "With my leave! and what without it? would you not then go?" "No", said he; "for without the favour of her whose it is, my heart could not sustain itself in danger." (Book 1, 1: 31)

The authority executed by Oriana is also portrayed in the ceremony of identity assignment to the hero when, for instance, he receives a letter from Oriana in which she reveals his origins[3] (Book 1, 15: 113). Actually, "the key to the hero's name is in Oriana's hands, and it is for her that his name has been revealed" (Russinovich de Solé 1974, 139) *(my translation).* This is evidenced when, after having been deprived of Oriana's love, Amadis changes his name into Beltenebros, a proof that only his lady can grant him his real identity. "The transfer of power from such strong female characters to the male hero [...] contribut[es] to the resolution of the hero's quest for self-realization." (Tierney, 1221)

Along this course of action, the idea of identity can be expanded a bit further: the extent to which the perception of Oriana can be flawed, considering the arquetypically female role in the medieval romance, reaches the existence of a gender role reversal: the knight, contrary to what has always been established for this character, can indeed reveal a womanly side in his suffering from a weakness attack upon reading the distressful letter from his lady:

> his grief he could not conceal when he had read those strong and bitter words, for neither his courage nor reason could support him then, for he seemed struck with death. When Durin saw him so disordered, he cursed himself and his ill fortune, and death, that had not overtaken him on the way. Amadis, for he could not stand, sate down upon the grass, and took the letter which had fallen from his hands, and, when he saw the superscription, again his grief became so violent that Durin would have called his brethren, but feared to do so, observing what secresy Amadis had chosen. Presently Amadis exclaimed, 'Lord, wherefore does it please thee that I should perish, not having deserved it!' and then again, 'Ah, truth, an ill guerdon dost thou give him who never failed thee!' Then he took the letter again, saying: 'You are the cause of my unhappy end; come here that it may be sooner!' and he placed it in his bosom. (Book 2, 3: 265)

Amadis is clearly blinded by the excessive, almost zealous love he feels for Oriana, "hoping and expecting death, – all for the anger of a woman!" (Book 2, 6: 285). Having been left powerless by his maiden's painful, groundless accusations and rage of jealousy, Amadis is unable to regain his position

as an invincible figure who can be, however, easily defeated by something as feeble as love (Morros 2004, 43). It is precisely his dependence on Oriana's constant moral support and guidance[4] (Russinovich de Solé 1974, 24-26) that establishes a link between Amadis and the power bestowed by her woman, and, hence, this female power represents the ultimate force that can be found within a man's *anima*, as if breathed into his soul by her:

> In the Middle Ages, long before the physiologists demonstrate that by reason of our glandular structure there are both male and female elements in all of us, it was said that every man carries a woman within himself. It is this female element in each male that I have called the *anima*. (Jung, qtd in Russinovich de Solé 139)

Shifting the focus of analysis now to Oriana's letter to Amadis, it is noteworthy that her reliability on the weight of her words successfully aids her in achieving her goal: catching Amadis' attention: "The letter exists as a document of authority because women have control of language, [it] illustrates how a written text can have a performative force" (Fletcher 2003, 30). And it is likewise revealing that this letter becomes the perfect framework for her to unconsciously[5] (Jung 2009, 166) grasp *the other* that, according to Lacan "resembles the self, which the child discovers when it looks in the mirror and becomes aware of itself as a separate being. It [...] ground[s] the hope for an anticipated mastery; this [...] will become the basis of the ego" (Lacan, qtd in Ashcroft et al 1998, 170). In this sense, the letter is the mirror where Oriana discovers the reflection of her *other* self, identified by her difference from the man's identity. It is in her recognition that female inferiority can be abused (by the presumed infidelity on Amadis' part) that she desperately looks for self-assertion uttering a speech as a means to construct her own identity and subjectivity as opposed to a dominant male figure: "The position of the *I* within language, the subject, [...] produces [itself] by a system of differentiations between the *I* and that which is not the *I*, [...] the subject being in a continual process of development" (Lacan, qtd in Ashcroft et al 1998, 223). Thus, the process of construction and assertion of the self through language is the only reliable resource for Oriana to vindicate herself. In examining Oriana's construction of her-*self* through the use of the language she employs, it can be noted that the use of formulae such as "most disloyal and cruellest knight in the world," (Book 1, 19: 120); "I withdraw all that exceeding and misplaced love which I bore towards you" (Book 2, 1: 262) or "as the wrong is manifest, never appear before me!" (Book 2, 1: 262) could be considered as oaths in the assumption that they represent "a woman's control of language, demonstrate that women honor their pledges [...] using oaths to obtain power over men" (Fletcher 2003, 30). Comparatively similar in structure with the Greek tragedies[6] (Fletcher 35), the fulfilment of these oaths constitutes the tragedy itself, which in the case of Amadis, represents his own tragic spiritual death. This validates the powerful nature of women's language in controlling men and in challenging the old belief that women could only attain moral excellence as long as they remained voiceless, for otherwise male hegemony would be potentially threatened (Fletcher 36). Ironically, Oriana seems to be fulfilling more than just the punishment of her knight by means of this letter. It is not by chance that she begins the letter thus: "My frantic grief, accompanied by so great a reason, causes my weak hand"; "I

have no other revenge in my power" (Book 2, 1: 262). By rendering herself weak and distressed, she deliberately conceals her real purpose as a manipulative strategy to remain in a victimized position, given that she already finds revenge in cunningly turning to the mastery of her own language, and not in dismissing her feelings towards Amadis.

The dissection of Oriana's psyque additionally lends itself to a Freudian study of Oriana's narcissism: in regarding Amadis as unthankful for, presumably, rejecting her love, she manifests the extent to which she becomes the prey of her own jealousy, and, ultimately, of her egotistic love. Her strategy for conveying an apparent self-hatred only serves to emphasize the opposite: her self-loving nature demands that she prevail over everything else within the knight's scale of values. For this reason, blaming oneself for loving the other (more than oneself) translates as her frustrated expectations of becoming Amadis' love-object, and hence, as her repentance for transferring and placing her own narcissism onto the man. According to Freud (qtd in Kofman 1980, 40):

> To love the other, to overvalue the object is for the woman to love in accord with [...] a displacement of her purely feminine narcissism, just as man himself can only love another through a transference of his own narcissism. Narcissism then is indeed the ground of all love.

Furthermore, in the quote "I am deceived and deserted" (Book 2, 1: 262) there is a reinforcement of the idea that her deluded expectations of being the only object of desire for Amadis contribute to the creation of her narcissistic self. Thus, as one's own narcissism can be transposed to the beloved one -making them the object of desire-, discrediting the assumption that the medieval female character does not regard her knight as a sex-object, rather than love-object, will be the point of discussion in the next section.

Insofar as can be ascertained, this research has demonstrated how Amadis and Oriana have adopted personality traits that are not arquetypal within the canonically established. In an attempt to take this study a bit further, again, the canonical and religious expectations for a woman in the Middle Ages were far from harbouring obscene and lusty thoughts. However, what is contended contention here underscores a process of humanization of Oriana, considering her sexuality as a potential aspect that conforms her female identity. As Mandel (1999, 63) puts it:

> Scholars of medieval romance have been comfortable in our assumptions about sexual labelling [...] the assumptions that historically have been made about the sexual identity of men and women in medieval romance can be misleading [considering] the special interests that have shaped [their] form and content [...] and that they were aimed at an aristocratic audience.

The notion of sexual identity especially alludes to the sexual role assigned to virile, masculine, strong, brimming with testosterone knights[7] (Mandel 66) and to weak, pure, dainty, feminine, chaste damsels revealing thus the double standard of a medieval society that "relegated women to the sphere of the lustful because of their reputedly inherent physical and moral weaknesses" (Hahn 2008, 486).

Much as medieval society acknowledged sex as a natural act, the contradictory nature of this recognition lies in the fact that "women are forced to mask their true desires behind the cloak of social respectability or the male model that has been projected onto them" (486). Hence, women's main purpose is to preserve and extol the moral standards fostered by a noble readership. In order to discredit this assumption, ambiguity can be ascribed to some of Oriana's words; sexual innuendos can be found in medieval texts being "the nature of the situation which admits to a secondary, sexual meaning. If [this meaning] were primary, then it would be a matter of bawdy, not innuendo" (Christoph 2008, 281-2). This means that, even though we need to be very careful in ascribing a more or less sexual meaning to these utterances, considering the historical context, this should not prevent us from contemplating the eroticism both in Oriana (as a humanized female abstracted from the text) and in the text itself, considering the sexual abstinence that must be kept in a couple before marriage. Hence, the categorization of her speech as chaste is proven wrong in favour of a more virile representation of carnal desire, confirming the myth in the ascription of sexual labelling: "my continual sighs and passions" (Book 2, 2: 263); moreover, the recurrence of phrases such as "(raging) anger" often ascribed to Oriana, as well as the imagery of fire "burning [her] on all sides" (Book 1, 11: 69) and "the fire, wherein you saw your lady enveloped, is the great pain of love which she suffers for you" (Book 1, 24: 144) all depict a manifest sexual repression imposed by the rules of a patriarchal society in which the noble damsel had to be loyal only to his father, the king, and wait for marriage in order to consummate and unleash her "sighs and passions". Similarly, allusions to Oriana's death seem to suggest her (again repressed) longing for the culmination of the sexual act: "Oriana's heart died away within her, and she fell [...] she recovering her senses, exclaimed, 'ah friends, let me die and be at rest [...] yet greater shall be our lovers when in the other world we are united!'" (Book 1, 21: 129) And again, in her letter to Amadis: "and so put an end to my life" (Book 2, 2: 263); certainly, in some medieval texts, "to die" was a metaphor for "sex" or "orgasm". As Llewellyn argues: "we find that sex is inextricably linked with death in medieval and early modern literature." (qtd in Hahn 162). Furthermore, moral virtues such as sexual abstinence and fidelity do not translate as a rejection of sexuality. In fact, the bodily consummation of their love before marriage does take place (Russinovich de Solé 162) as in the case of Lancelot and Guinevere, undermining thus the concealment of sexual motivations in this literary genre:

> The hero and heroine figures [...] represent the spiritualizing force of love, which in this case is not engendered by the erotic negation but by the physical and spiritual consummation – they assert the possibility of earthly bliss, and, with this, the beauty of the world. (167) *(my translation)*

The conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis of the medieval female character is that, contrary to all assumptions, it is possible to underpin female self-governance based on woman's acknowledgement of the magnitude of her own authority over men. In so doing, Oriana's manipulative techniques contribute to the destruction of the clichéd notion of selfless love and, simultaneously, to the exaltation of her ego. Running parallel to Ophelia, who chooses death as an act of freedom and so put an end to female anxiety in a male-ruled world, Oriana's own subversion comes through in her recognition

that her freedom cannot be granted by a man since he is the only source of all her distress and misery.

In extrapolating Oriana's and Ophelia's personal circumstances for a general, conclusive study, it is worth noting that women in medieval and Renaissance times were seen as political and social constructs, whose personalities were conferred by a tyrannical hierarchy which prevailed an ongoing family lineage and high social ranks, and that being so, the subversive nature of women in literature may sometimes make them slaves to their own undertakings. But whereas Oriana finds her freedom and identity in writing the letter, Ophelia has to meet her own death for the same purpose; however, in both cases, they seem to succeed in bringing forward and deterring assumptions of the delusory nature of their female roles:

> you get a protagonist who pits herself against the status quo and either smashes herself against it, or momentarily brings down the structure. [...] Individual action is always doomed to failure, and collective action is probably the only way to right the wrongs of this society. (Bogdanov 1988, 94)

It can be contended that death and suicide attempt as vindictive practices carried out by female character –*Hamlet*'s Ophelia is to be mentioned here– are a strong case for their consideration as the ultimate means to embrace self-assurance. Contrary to Ophelia's fulfilment of her own death, Oriana's words weigh on Amadis with accusations of metaphorically murdering her. By appealing to her symbolic death –that of her female ego on getting (sexually) rejected by Amadis– Oriana finally embraces self-governance as the only way to escape her oppressive love for a man.

Endnotes:

1. A description of the origins of this concept is given here.
2. More on spiritual quests in all its forms during the Middle Ages is tackled in this book.
3. In this chapter, the fact that Oriana's letter contains the truth about Amadis' origins constitutes one of the moments of rising action.
4. In this article, the close relationship between Oriana and Amadis is further discussed, and how he acquires his identity and moral integrity by means of her countless interventions as a mediator in various conflicts.
5. (The unconscious). The unconscious comprises all subliminal psychical contents of the forgotten and the neglected; it is constantly in action and creates combinations of materials that enable one to determine the future. *(my translation)*
6. The Corinthian women do not approve of Medea's infanticide but can say nothing to stop her. Upon hearing her appalling plan, they protest, "I forbid you to do this" (813), but their attempt at performative speech misfires. "It will not be otherwise" (814), responds Medea, who has a singular power to create action with words.
7. "[Medieval] culture was designed by men to privilege testosterone."

References:

Archive. Full text of "Amadis of Gaul". Available at: *https://archive.org/stream/amadisgaul03lobegoog/amadisgaul03lobegoog_djvu.txt* (accessed July 2nd 2019)

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Key concepts in post-colonial studies*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Bogdanov, Michael. "Sexual Politics." *The Shakespeare Myth*. (Ed.) Graham Holderness. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988. 90-97.

Christoph, Siegfried. 'The limits of reading innuendo in medieval literature.' *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern times.* (Ed.) Albrecht Classen. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. 281-283.

Fletcher, Judith. "Women and Oaths in Euripides." *Theatre Journal* 55. 1 (2003): 29-44.

Hahn, Stacey L. "Feminine sexuality in the Lancelot-Grail cycle." *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern times.* (Ed.) Albrecht Classen. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008. 485-487.

Jung, Carl Gustave. *Lo inconsciente.* Buenos Aires: Losada, 1938.

Kofman, Sarah. "The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard." *Diacritics* 10. 3 (1980): 36-45.

Mandel, Jerome. "Polymorphous sexualities in Chretien de Troyes and Sir Thomas Malory." In *The Body and the Soul in Medieval Literature*. (Eds.) Piero Boitani and Anna Torti. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer Ltd, 1999. 63-68.

Morros, Bienvenido. "Amadís y don Quijote." *Criticón* 91 (2004): 41-65.

Russinovich de Solé, Yolanda. "El elemento mítico-simbólico en el Amadis de Gaula: Interpretación de su significado". *Thesaurus* 39. 4 (1974): 130-168.

Tierney, Helen. *Women's Studies Encyclopedia: Q-Z*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1999.