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Sally Poor

Representations of Male and Female Beauty in *Parzival*

Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* is at once a tale of chivalry, redemption, and spiritual enlightenment. Throughout his retelling of the narrative initially composed by Chretien de Troyes, Wolfram weaves a dazzling thread of glamour and romance, with a special emphasis placed not only on courtly elegance and knightly valor but also on physical beauty. This last subject is particularly prominent, with lengthy passages dedicated to the physical appearances of even minor characters. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the theme of beauty in *Parzival* is the way it is used to distinguish between the roles of men and women in the medieval epic. Praises of womanly beauty—such as those pertaining to Jeschute and Condwiramurs —are generally used to express either sexuality or purity, while depictions of masculine beauty—such as those concerning the knight Karnahkarnanz, Parzival, and Ither—represent courage and strength of character.

In this examination of male and female beauty, one of the most apropos passages for discussion comes at the beginning of Book 3, in which Parzival first encounters the knights of the chivalric world (starting at the top of page 73 in the Hatto). Our first impression of the knights leaves no question of their strength and power. The knight Karnahkarnanz is described as seeming “like some god” to the young boy, and his trappings convey status and wealth: Wolfram tells us of his tabard, his “well-adjusted stirrups,” and the bells that are attached. Even these extraneous adornments—the bells—are mentioned in context of his prowess as a knight: “his right arm too jingled with bells wherever he thrust or swung it,” giving “music to his sword-play” (73).

The manliness of Karnahkarnanz’s appearance is further emphasized by the way Wolfram links his chivalric behavior with his good looks: “ ‘Have you seen two knights, my boy?’ Karnahkarnanz asked him, the very coronal of manly beauty. ‘They are backsliders from chivalry, ravisher devoid of honour who have carried off a girl by force’ ” (73). Here, the phrase “the very coronal of manly beauty” is subordinate to the independent clause in which Karnahkarnanz inquires after the two rogue knights, implying that there is an association between his physical appearance and his noble character. This relationship is not just a function of translation, as it exists in Wolfram’s original text, as well: “Aller manne schoene ein bluomen kranz, / den vrâgte Karnahkarnanz / ‘junchêrre, sâht ir für iuch varn / zwên ritter die sich niht bewarn / kunnen an ritterlîcher zunft?” (Martin 43).

In contrast to the link between male beauty and nobility is the link between female beauty and sexuality as illustrated by Wolfram’s description of Lady Jeschute, wife of Duke Orilus de Lalander. When Parzival first happens across Jeschute sleeping in her tent, Wolfram describes her as wearing “Love’s blazon – a mouth of translucent red, torment to the hearts of amorous knights” (76). In this way, Lady Jeschute is defined by her relationship to men. Wolfram’s description seems to place her in an position of power, but it really defines her as an object of sexual desire, meaning that her influence exists only within the confines that men construe around her role as a woman in society. The sensual description of Lady Jeschute’s “parted lips” wearing “the flames of Love’s hot fire” (76) further reinforces her sexual objectification. Similarly, Wolfram’s next exclamation—“Thus lay the loveliest challenge to adventure imaginable!”—seems to be in reference to the temptation that Jeschute presents, which is antithetical to the idea of a knight’s honor and self-discipline. Although this could be construed as a negative appraisal of womanhood—i.e., the threat that a woman’s sexuality poses in distracting men from their more serious affairs—other aspects of Wolfram’s description present a picture of purity and innocence that obviate blame from the fairer sex: “no art” was lacking in her figure, “since God Himself had fashioned her sweet body,” he writes, continuing, “The adorable woman was slender of arm and white of hand” (76). He speaks in terms so affectionate that it is fairly clear Jeschute presents no true danger. As always, the men are in power.

Still, the duality of sexuality and innocence simultaneously embodied in Lady Jeschute is worthy of note. As in other parts of Arthurian legend and British history (the dragons clashing beneath Vortigern’s castle, the War of the Roses, etc.), the tension is captured in the imagery of red (lips, evoking vitality and passion) and white (skin, evoking purity). In this way, women’s beauty is a double-edged sword: when they are viewed as objects of sexual desire, their beauty confers upon them some degree of power; when they are seen as innocent creatures needing protection, it renders them helpless. Either way, however, female beauty tends to be viewed through the rather shallow lens of sexuality.

Male beauty, on the contrary, is presented as a sign of inner strength. After encountering Jeschute, Parzival comes upon the Red Knight, Ither, whose gear was so “red that it infected the eye with its redness!” (84). The word *infected* here is striking, creating the impression that the red is functioning in an aggressive and forceful manner. Wolfram continues, “His charger was a swift sorrel, its criniere red all over, its trappers were of red samite, his shield redder than fire. His surcoat, well and amply cut to his figure, was all red. Lance-head and shaft were both of them red. The warrior’s sword was all red as he had wished it, but well hardened at its edges” (84). The comparison of the color red to fire is not new, but it is still important to note that when referring to Jeschute, it was “Love’s hot fire,” meaning that the red still pertained to sexuality and romance; here, it is simply fire: fierce, bold, and destructive.

This lengthy commentary on Ither’s clothing and weaponry is also interesting because it represents a common theme among the men in *Parzival*; the only description Wolfram provides of Ither’s actual appearance is that “his skin was white, his hair red” (84). This is in stark contrast to depictions of female beauty, from which elaborate descriptions of clothing are conspicuously absent. Although Wolfram briefly mentions a “sable coverlet” in his portrayal of Lady Jeschute, the true focus is on her body and physical appearance.

This can be attributed to the fact that while attire is an important part of Karnahkarnanz and Ither’s physical beauty, since it gives them status and authority, a woman’s attractiveness is not necessarily empowering. Jeschute, for all her womanly charms, is still at the mercy of Duke Orilus, who tears her dress, smashes her saddle, and keeps her out of his bed for a year. He even vows to destroy her beauty, proclaiming, “I will make your red lips fade and teach their colour to your eyes” (79).

The power that clothing can confer upon a man is especially interesting to consider in Parzival’s case. His garments are specifically described as coarse and oafish, since his mother the Lady Herzeloyde has determined that he “shall wear fool’s clothing over his white skin” in the hopes that, “if he is roughly handled, he will surely come back to [her]” (75). As Wolfram writes, “Ah, the pity of it! The Lady took some sackcloth and cut him a doublet and breeches all of a piece down to the middle of his gleaming white legs – regular fool’s clothes” (75). Because Parzival is so hopelessly naïve, he is practically impotent when compared to the great knights who come riding by, and his rough-hewn clothes are indicative of his ignorance.

Lady Jeschute draws attention to this, too, when Orilus accuses her of “making a pair” with Parzival: “God forbid!” she cries, “His buskins and his javelin were too near to be overlooked. You ought to be ashamed to say such a thing!” (78) Though she admired his good looks, saying she had never seen anyone so handsome, respecting him as a man still would have been shameful because of his obvious lack of social status. In fact, throughout the passage, Parzival is described in rather delicate terms; rather than the powerful red of the knight Ither, the color most often associated with him is white (in reference to his pure skin). This is not a symbol of his femininity so much as his lack of authority or understanding of the world (which was, of course, associated with women in the medieval age). As he matures, Parzival’s “white skin” becomes less important, taking the backseat to descriptions of his handsome, noble countenance.

Although women and men in *Parzival* are praised alike for the splendor of their good looks, the meaning of beauty has distinctly different implications for each gender. In the passage describing Parzival’s first introduction to the chivalric world, we observe that womanly beauty is seen through the lens of sexuality, while male beauty is associated with nobility of birth and strength of character. In this way, Wolfram’s colorful illustrations of Parzival’s journey take on another layer of meaning, providing us with greater insight into the glamorous world of chivalry and romance that has captured the imaginations of readers for so many years.

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/s/ Hannah Hirsh