

## A MODEL OF SHEELA NA GIG IN *LYBEAUS DESCONUS* AND *THE SQUIRE OF LOW DEGREE*?

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“Et aperti sunt oculi  
amborum cumque  
cognovissent esse se  
nudos” (Gen 3: 7)

### *Abstract*

*A Sheela Na Gig is a carving of a woman with exposed and/or exaggerated genitalia, usually found on religious buildings in the Middle Ages and considered to be sacred. This article seeks to examine the complexity of the naked female body in the Middle ages embodying a sheela na gig model. The naked female body is usually regarded as a sinful object as most of the medieval clerical antifeministic writings deal with in relation to the Fall of Eve. However, some anonymous Middle English romances – particularly the fifteenth century Lybeaus Desconus and The Squire of Low Degree seem to resist the medieval representations of the naked female body as sinful. This article argues about naked female body which does not seem to be a subject matter of evil in the Middle English Lybeaus Desconus and The Squire of Low Degree.*

**Key Words:** *Medieval woman, Middle English romance, Lybeaus Desconus, The Squire of Low Degree, Female Nudity and romance*

### *Öz*

### *Lybeaus Desconus And The Squire Of Low Degree'deki Sheela Na Gig Modeli*

*Sheela na gig ortaçağda kutsal mimari yapılarının üzerine kabartmalı olarak resmi yapılan çıplak kadın figürüdür ve resminin yapımının nedeni kutsal sayıldığındandır. Bu makalenin amacı anonim ortaçağ İngiliz romansları olan ve 15. yüzyılda yazılı kültüre aktarılan Lybeaus Desconus ve The Squire of Low Degree'deki tasvir edilen çıplak kadın modelinin sheela na gig modelindeki gibi karmaşık anlamlar içerdiğini göstermektir. Bu makale, özellikle Havva'nın cennetten kovulmasına bağlı olarak Ortaçağda kadın düşmanlığı ile ilgili yazılan*

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*metinlere rağmen, aynı dönemde yazılan ve bu makalede başlık olarak kullanılan romansların bu duruma nasıl ters düştüğünü irdelemektedir.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Ortaçağ, romans, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, Kadın İmajı

Eve is usually considered to be the first naked woman who is responsible for the original fall of the human race into sin. In the Middle Ages, Eve becomes the model for understanding all women as persons whose nature makes them likely to tempt sexually others to sin. This is the reason why most of the medieval narratives suggest that “the sexual desire is itself a punishment for original sin and that all sexual intercourse, tainted by uncontrollable desire is at least venially sinful” (Schaus, 2006: 247).

The role assigned to Eve in the Fall may well be applied to medieval liturgy. Christian writers of the Middle Ages state that such virtuous deceased woman is rare as wives usually commit adultery: “mulierem fortem quis inveniet procul et de ultimis finibus pretium eius” (the words of Proverbs, 31:10). Apart from liturgy, secular medieval romances reflect women as sinful objects. Chretien de Troyes warns men about woman who are sinful objects and take part in adultery in the Old-French *Cligés*: Por ce einsi com an prison / Est gardee an Costantinoble / Ja n’iert tant haute ne tant noble / L’empererriz, quex qu’ele soit (Micha, Champion: 1970, ll. 6652-55). Likewise, in the Middle English *Bevis of Hampton*, Bevis’ mother represents the signs of sin because she takes part in adultery, murdering of her husband and attempting to kill her child (ll.337-54). The fourteenth-century Middle English *Chevalere Assigne* exemplifies a wife who is accused of adultery because the twins she conceives is combined with that of inordinate longing for children: “Thow hast by-gylethe my sone it shalle þe werke sorowe” (l. 78)

Medievalists such as Fellows suggest that medieval narratives combine two themes in the western world: Eve’s nudity and misogyny in the Middle Ages. Particularly, Jennifer Fellows has noted that “the combination of adultery, murder of husband and of the mother of the hero attempting to kill her child may be thought of as the signs of misogyny that were frequently used in clerical antifeminist writings, in which the notion of female promiscuity was fuelled by the role assigned to Eve in the Fall” (Fellows, 1993: 53). While medieval woman’s sexuality and nudity are usually regarded as threat to patriarchal values in the medieval texts, few naked female representations do not seem to inspire any misogyny. In other words, *Lybeaus Desconus* and *The Squire of Low Degree* are the Middle English

romances and they represent the naked female body and they do not seem to inspire misogyny.<sup>1</sup> The way that the naked body represented in these romances seems to be ambiguous and different from the naked female representations found in the clerical antifeminist writings and this will be analysed in detail further below.

In the Middle Ages, female identity was usually associated with female sexuality, therefore female nudity and virginity. Female sexuality was considered a potentially dangerous element because of its physicality. When a woman was depicted naked, her nakedness was associated with her sexual impurity. To take nudity and virginity first: one must bear in mind that there were medieval discourses of nudity and virginity. Virginity was represented as a sacred vocation that was placed highest in the triad virginity-widowhood-marriage and there is also another way of understanding virginity and nudity as a phase in the life course of women intending to marry which produced the triad maid-wife-widow (Beattie, York: 2001). This way of categorising female sexuality was a commonplace of Christian thought and this influenced the medieval narratives. For instance, Chaucer's Parson's Tale refers to the highest degree of maidenhood: 'thilke precious fruyt that the book clepeth the hundred fruyt' (ll. 867-8). After the Fall of Adam and Eve, women identity is sexualised, therefore women are named as sinners and thought as the followers of Eve. Augustine sets the stage for Christian idealization of virginity by associating the Fall of Man with sexuality, sin and death, and with sexual sin often linked to the Original Sin, therefore a result of the Fall (Zycha, Vienna: 1990). It stands to reason that virginity would constitute the praiseworthy ideal of Christian perfection. Similarly, Tertullian (A.D.160-220), the theologian who first denounced woman as the Devil's gateway. Accusing women of original sin, as well as all manner of lesser evils, Tertullian addresses them directly:

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<sup>1</sup> *Lybeaus Desconus* survives in six manuscripts: London, Lincoln's Inn Library, MS 150 dating from the late fourteenth century; Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS XIII. B.29 dated to 1457; London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 306 dating from the second half of the fifteenth century; London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula compiled between 1446-1460; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 dating from the late fifteenth century; London British Library, MS Additional 27879 (Percy Folio) dated to 1650. The edition from MS Ashmole 61 will be used in this article: George Shuffelton (ed.), *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008. *Squire of Low Degree* survives in one manuscript: London, British Library MS Additional 27879. The edition of *Squire* from this manuscript will be used: Erik Kooper (ed.), *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005.

In doloribus et anxietatibus paris, mulier, et ad uirum tuum conuersio tua et ille dominatur tui: et Eam te esse nescis? Viuit sententia Dei super sexum istum in hoc saeculo: uiuat et reatus necesse est. Tu es diaboli ianua; tu es arboris illius resignatrix; tu es diuinae legis prima desertrix; tu es quae eum suasisti, quem diabolus aggredi non ualuit; tu imaginem Dei, hominem, tam facile elisisti; propter tuum meritum, id est mortem, etiam filius Dei mori habuit: et adornari tibi in mente est super pelliceas tuas tunicas?

While Eve was naked and virgin, her nakedness was usually thought as not a symbol of innocence, but of evil. This article seeks to examine whether or not naked female body is a subject matter of evil in the Middle English *Lybeaus Desconus* and *The Squire of Low Degree*, and this article argues that representation of naked female body may be regarded as the symbol of innocence and ambiguity as depicted in the model of Sheela na gig.

Female nudity occurs in some medieval romances as depicted in the Sheela na gig model on the church walls that contradict the general assumptions of the representations of naked and sinful women. *Lybeaus Desconus* and *The Squire of Low Degree*, formerly (and more appropriately) known as *Undo Youre Dore* may be given examples of medieval romances which represent the female nudity more ambiguous and different than these above-mentioned general assumptions about medieval women. In *Lybeaus*, the naked lady of Synadowne who emerges from the monstrous exterior of a worm, is ambiguous in her erotic effect.

A worme ther ganne oute pas  
 With a womanes face:  
 “Yonge Y am and nothings olde.”  
 Hir body and hir wyngis  
 Shone in all thynchis  
 As amel gaye and gilte.  
 Her tayle was mekyll unnethe,  
 Hir peynis gryme and grete,  
 As ye may listen and lere.  
 Syr Lybeous swelt for swete  
 There he sate in his sete,  
 As alle had ben in frye;  
 So sore he was agaste  
 Hym thought his herte tobraste  
 As she neyhid hym nere.  
 And ere that Lybeous wiste,  
 The worme with mouth him kyste

And clypped aboute the swyre.  
 And aftry this kyssyng  
 Off the worme tayle and wyng  
 Swyftly fell hir froo:  
 So fayre, of all thinke,  
 Woman, withoute lesyng,  
 Sawe he never ere thoo;  
 But she was moder naked. (ll. 2067-92)

The text betrays a level of disappointment on behalf of her questing knight; his ‘woo’ is a narrative that inspires a level of textual scrutiny seldom deemed necessary in Middle English romance. Similarly, in *Undo Your Dore*, the princess of Hungre’s clothing mysteriously vanishes during the erotic wordplay she and her suitor partake in through her chamber door:

Undo thy dore, my frely floure,  
 For ye are myne and I am your  
 That lady with those wordes awoke,  
 A mantell of golde to her she toke  
 She sayde: “go away, thou wicked wyght, (ll. 545- 49)

...

Also naked as she was borne  
 She stod her chambre dore before. (ll. 673-74)

When the door is eventually unlocked and she confronts the corpse of the steward lying on the other side, her mantle is nowhere to be found. *Undo Your Dore* refers explicitly to *Lybeaus* as a cornerstone of the chivalric canon; the princess includes a synopsis of the earlier romance to illustrate what is expected of a knight:

Go forth and ask eme at my kynne,  
 And loke what graunt you may wynne  
 Yf that ye gette graunte in faye  
 Myselfe therto shall not say nay,  
 And yf ye may not do so  
 Otherwyse ye shall come to  
 Ye are bothe hardy, stronge, and wight,  
 Go forth and be a venterous knight. (ll. 583-90)

However, the most brazen textual echo and homage to *Lybeaus* occurs in the very episode integral to this discussion; when the princess stands ‘as naked as she were borne’ in her doorway (l. 673), she does so just as the Lady of Synadowne does in line 2137 (“As naked as she was bore”) of *Lybeaus Desconus*. This article suggests that the binding together of these texts through reference to the exposed female body encourages the re-evaluation of such incidences in romance that seems different than the

general assumptions of the female nudity. In order to achieve this, it is essential to unpick the complexities of the incidents themselves, both in development and structural placement and also in terms of gender construction and the visualising of the nude. This should enable a consideration of the overall function and effect of these episodes within each romance as a whole. Accordingly, this study considers the instant at which the princess may disrobe and the repercussions this has upon the sequence as a whole. The recurring demands from her visitor to 'undo her door' startle the princess of Hungre from sleep and she subsequently wraps her naked body in a rich golden garment as she rises: 'that lady with those wordes awoke / a mantell of golde to her she toke' (l. 547). Confusion and concealment of her body operate in tandem here; the identity of the Squire is ascertained painstakingly slowly, and primarily through his assertion that he desires to take his 'leave' of the princess: "to take my leave of you, lady." (l. 570). It may be argued that this term is loaded with connotative possibilities, a metaphor that, much like the original title of the romance, reinforces the erotic undercurrent. Interestingly, this phrase recurs just before the reader glimpses her naked at the threshold of the chamber (ll. 669-75).

What does the lady intend when she attempts to 'take her leve' unclothed? It may be stipulated that the 'taking leve' used by both parties, is operating here as an erotic euphemism; it is a signifier for a literal sexual act or an erotic fantasy. The princess' demands for him to 'go forth' as she lets her mantel fall, seem far from sincere: "Go forth, and aske me at my kynne" (l. 583), "Go forth and be a venterous knight" (l. 590), "Go forth, and be nothyng afrayde" (l. 596). It may be proposed that the playful vocal interchange through the chamber door as a substitute for the physical intercourse is wiewed before marriage. Of course the 'rub' of this episode and ultimately what makes it so vital to the narrative energy, is that the text contains and restrains the desires of both the lady and the Squire. A detailed examination of this will follow, but at present it is sufficient to say that although the lady may be visioned as a powerful and directional presence within *Undo Youre Dore*, her attempts to reposition the boundaries of the narrative convention are ultimately quashed. Fewster advocates this idea and deems the repeated appeals to 'undo', ironic; 'for she never can' (1987: 146). Sepulchred in her chamber and unable to break free, she becomes more than a little like the corpse that she reveres.

If *Undo Youre Dore* presents nudity, than the Lady of Synadowne in *Lybeaus Desconus* is similarly aligned with sexual ambiguity. The range of explanations for why her questing knight should be 'woo' as her reptilian attributes fall away, revealing her 'naked as she were bore' (l. 2137), will be explored in due course. At present the following question should be posed:

what exactly happens to the Lady of Synadowne during her imprisonment? It is not too fanciful to question whether she has been subjected to sexual exploitation, for the text in fact insinuates such occurrences. The fear that her captors may have ‘dodne her synne’ is inherently bound up with her vulnerability as a female ‘ayre’ but the shadow of rape or at the very least, that of sexual threat, infuses Lambert’s account: Than is my lady ayre (l.1786), Luste they done hir synne (l.1790). If the metamorphosis from worm to woman restores her to her original state, why is she naked at all? Her screams are heard with an ominous frequency and though ‘Mabones will’ is directly related to the surrender of ‘hir right’ as trustee of a kingdom, the sadistic means by which this is demanded, and the natural stylistic stress on this line, suggest a deeper level of harm:

Oftyn we hire hir crye:  
 To sene hir withe none eye,  
 Ther-to haue we no might.  
 They do hir tormentrye  
 And all the velenye  
 And dreche hir day and nyght.  
 This Mabon and Yrayne  
 Haue sworne her othe certayne  
 To dethe they will hir dight,  
 But she graunte hem tyll  
 To do Mabones will  
 And yeven him her right. (ll.1773-84)

This observation provides the backdrop for the encounter itself in which the Lady of Synadowne is truly the active player in an odd reversal of gender roles. In the form of a worm, she approaches a quivering and frozen Lybeaus uttering the strange pronouncement ‘yonge y am nothinge olde’ (l. 2069), as if she imagines this is the key through which Lybeaus’ revulsion can be reversed. It is interesting that of all the information she could have relayed, she chooses to market herself as youthful. She self-assuredly manages to counter all the female roles henceforth explored in the text. As James Weldon puts it, “in her naked, disenchanted state, she counters illicit love with her legitimate marriage and substitutes female consent for parental choice” (2007: 73). The moment of Lybeaus’ ‘woo’ thus heralds an empowering of the feminine; as the lady of Synadowne casts off which has concealed her, her identity blossoms. Much like the princess of Hungre in *Undo Youre Dore*, she spiritedly controls her situation to the extent of her capabilities, which in the light of her questionable nakedness is all the more socially transgressive. This is clearly a text and over-arching story concerned with the limits of female power.

Regardless of this, the economy of desire is legitimised and driven by the masculine protagonists. The pursuit of the erotic goal is in many ways, the very essence of romance. However, both Lybeaus and the Squire are presented somewhat disenchanted with the framework offered to them by romance. As a man without an identifier other than the 'Squire', the reader might well enquire; what is it that defines the Squire? Indeed the lady herself struggles to make such distinctions, a factor that provides much of the humour in the 'undo your dore' episode. The answer to that question is however, somewhat darker. The actions and intent of the Squire are problematic. He interrupts events as 'he was set and served at meate' (l. 497) and slinks off into the darkness, not only disrupting the courtly rituals surrounding food consumption but also metaphorically suggesting that another appetite needs to be appeased. He enters through the 'posterne gate' (l. 505), grasping a phallic 'drawen swerd' (l. 507) and most importantly, lies to the lady about being 'besette with many a knife' (l. 540) if it is assumed that this text utilises linear chronology, which the reader has every reason to believe it does. Here is a 'squire of low degree' in valour, attempting to achieve sexual union with his lady before it is legitimised through knightly deeds. A similar motif operates to a lesser extent within Sir Degrevant, but here, knightly deeds punctuate an ongoing erotic engagement and Degrevant has to enter enemy territory with a certain admirable guile in order to come within reasonable distance of the object of his lust:

That frely to folde,  
Wyth love she wondus the knyght,  
In hert trewly he hyeght,  
That he shall love that swer wyght,  
Acheve how hit wold (ll.476-80)

The Squire strives for a complete 'short-circuit' in the paths of both narrative desire and of his own fulfilment. What the Squire strives for, Lybeaus gets, at least to some extent. Yet there is something in the Lady of Synadowne's nudity itself that distresses him, for the description of her unveiling is complementary towards her beauty until her nakedness becomes overtly obvious:

So fayre, af all thinke,  
Woman with-oute lesynge,  
Saw he neuer ere thoo,  
But she was moder-naked,  
As God had hir maked:  
Therfor was Lybeaus woo. (ll.2089-93)

Weldon suggests that Lybeaus is embarrassed for the lady and that this is the crux of his unease (2007: 78). This sentiment is only viable in one



manuscript version of *Lybeaus*. In British Museum, Ms Cotton Caligula A II, there is a textual variant that highlights an intense emotion in the Lady of Synadowne; ‘sche stod be-fore him naked / and all her body quaked (ll. 2014-15)’ could feasibly betray fear and shame, but this is somewhat thwarted in the light of her impending proposal. The version in Lambeth Palace MS 306, from which the above text is cited, projects a more ambivalent standpoint in which it becomes increasingly unsatisfactory to use shame as a justification for Lybeaus’ grief. If parallel instances of his distress as a character within the text is searched, an analogous incident during his fight with Maboun the necromancer may be found. The loss of his sword and his recognition of fallibility in battle against such a powerful opponent causes a momentary crisis of masculinity: “For he had lorne his swerde” (l. 1991). The deprivation of his gendered and socially resonant appurtenances has a curious effect upon him. For a brief time, he is rendered metaphorically castrated and defunct:

Tho was Lybeaus asshamed,  
And in his harte sore agramed,  
For he had lorne his swerde,  
And his stede was lamed  
And he schulde be defamed

To Arthur kinge his lorde. (Lambeth Text, ll. 1509-11)

If feelings of inability and failure provoke this response in the fight prior to the appearance of the worm, this has fascinating repercussions for the way in which his ‘woo’ might be viewed in regards to the naked Lady of Synadowne. Is the text in fact insinuating that the knight does not want the lady on the erotic level expected of him? The moral jeopardy of desiring a woman who has been aligned with a serpentine form has not yet been touched upon, and this is of vital contextual importance to the episode. Nothrop Frye prudently warns people to be wary of imposing modern value-judgements of gender performativity on subjects that are historically removed (1976: 51). Declining the advances of a female who is deemed accessible is no longer the fashionable way in which masculinity is asserted, yet to apply this criticism thoughtlessly to the medieval knight, is to disregard the spiritual threat with which libidinous females were commonly associated (Frye, 1976: 51). The micro-cycles of *Lybeaus Desconus* contain a notable number of episodes in which Lybeaus battles giants and other males aggressive in imparting their hyper-masculinity. *Lybeaus* is a romance in which as Hopkins as emphasised, the socially sanctioned desire for the female body is inextricably bound with the particulars of ‘wede and fassyon’ (2007: 54). The beauty contest, in which the desirability of Ellyne and ‘Geffroun’s lemman’ is assessed, is swiftly concluded without any detailed examination, for it is immediately obvious that ‘be-twene hem was

partye' (l. 841, l. 926) and this gulf is one of material beauty.<sup>2</sup> In this economy a naked body, born like Saint Margaret from the dragon's womb, is uncanny; it is at once the zenith of sustained excess and a spectacle of all worldly trappings stripped away.

In the world of romance, the knight is a fallible entity. Temptations may seduce him and mistakes are permitted to channel their course as Lybeaus' lengthy sojourn with the 'Dame Amoure' illustrate (Stevens, 1973: 80). However even taking this into account, his horror and loathing in the final encounter seem markedly prominent. In the Lambeth version in particular, he perspires to such an extent that he almost appears to melt into the seat he lies petrified in:

Sir Lybeous swelt for swete  
There he sat in his sete,  
As all had ben in fyre;  
So sore he was agaste  
Hym thought his herte to-braste  
As she neyhid hym nere. (*Lybeaus*, ll.2076-2081)

In romance, love, or at the very least, erotic desire, is frequently ignited or propagated though visualising the lady who is often placed at a removed level (Stevens, 1973: 35). A similar motif operates within the Old-French *Florence de Rome*; although King Garcy does not see the princess of Rome, he hears of the beauty of Florence from the merchants and falls in love with her:

Tot me tramble li cors, car forment sui lasses;  
Par moi n'iert mes ma lance ne mes portez.  
Alez moi por Florence et si la m'anemez!  
Je vuel ester de le basiez et acolez,  
Et en sa belle brace soit mes cors repouses. (ll. 109- 113)

Garcy, a harmless, old man wants to embrace ('brace'; 'happe') and cuddle ('acolez'; 'hodur') Florence. Even though he has not seen her before but only has heard of her beauty, he wants to marry her. When his messengers return to Constantinople and describe her beauty again, Garcy's desire to marry Florence becomes inevitable and the word 'brace(r)' refers to his desire for sexual intercourse.

Moreover, this is how Degrevant sees Melidor in *Sir Degrevant*, and indeed, the Squire in *Undo Youre Dore* frequents the garden 'under her

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<sup>2</sup> The popular folkloric tale of Melusine is analogous to Lybeaus here, for it combines the curbing erotic desire and voyeurism with the monstrous female in a particularly significant way; on a certain day of the week in which Melusine reverts to a serpentine form, it is imperative that her husband avert his gaze.

chamber window' (l. 66), in which he laments. It is curious to note that the parts of a woman on which the knight allows his eye to linger are never those carnal zones directly analogous with nudity. In the *Lay of Guingamor*, as the protagonist encounters a faery maiden bathing, it is her 'limbs, long and smooth' which monopolise the narrative description (Weingartner, 1985: l.130). The blazons of beauty found in romances such as *The Erle of Toulous* herald a similar approach; the male gaze lingers on the exposed flesh at the limits of clothing; her facial features and her 'hondys whyte as whallys bone' (Laskaya and Salisbury, 1995: l.355). Narrative description of an absent object is leisurely in these texts; literal bodily presence on the other hand, does not permit the same voyeurism. The female Saint as the heroine of a hagiographical text is usually young, beautiful, rich, noble and virgin is naked and tormented. After miracles, her naked body is concealed and she becomes one of the bride's of Christ. In *Vie Sainte Fey*, St. Faith is illustrated as naked: 'they stripped St Faith, and laid her on this throne. The young virgin was laid out naked on this bed, they who did not worship the church, which is the body of Christ stretched out her tender limbs on this bed'. Moreover, the vulnerable naked body of St. Agnes is miraculously concealed through three successive demonstrations of divine intervention. According to Shari Horner, the preservation here is similar to the way in which the princess' nudity is textually restricted in *Undo Youre Dore*: 'the illicit spectacle of the naked virgin body is immediately subverted by the various coverings which surround and protect it' (1998: 37). Admittedly, the Lady only succeeds in exposing herself to the corpse of the man she believes is her lover, both within the chamber and at its threshold.

If medieval nudity was something to be safeguarded, then in facing his unclothed maiden face-to-face, Lybeaus seems negatively afflicted by its brazen presence. The ambiguous 'woo' may originate from the troubled allusions of the naked female popularised in contemporary Christian doctrine. If the virgin martyrs are seldom depicted fully naked, it is because nudity aligns itself with another less virtuous category of women. The most obvious of these is Eve, and the development of iconography surrounding the Fall often included the virgin-headed serpent popularised in contemporary bestiaries and biblical commentary. Flores and Caviness suggest that the figure of lust fuses ideas of the libidinous with the serpentine, for she is commonly a nude woman upon whose erogenous zones, snakes and toads feast (Flores, 2000: 168; Caviness, 2001: 120). Particularly, Caviness asserts that the disobedient wife of Lot receives similar treatment; prior to her unfortunate metamorphosis, the artistic penchant is to portray her as a nude woman readily accessible for pornographic scrutiny (2001: 62). Of course, the Lady of Synadowne conversely emerges from a snakish skin and stands devoid of shame in full view of the man she deems her saviour. This is the antithesis of the Man of

Law's 'O serpent under femynnytee', the pervasive metaphor for the duplicitious nature of all descendents of Eve, for in *Lybeaus*, it is the woman herself that is concealed and then unmasked (Benson, 1988: 1.160). The loss of innocence accrued through the Fall thus experiences a reversal to some extent here. In the Lambeth version of the text, Lady Synadowne does not even seem to acknowledge her absence of clothing, almost as if she was reverted to the pre-lapsarian state. In *Lybeaus Desconus*, the prescriptions bound up with both 'religious and social nakedness', as two modes by which the contemporary subject is to understand and approach nudity, clamour to be heard (Miles, 1980: 81).

The libidinal economies at work in these texts are integral to their structure, and this article postulates that these moments of nudity are seams in the text, ruptures which startle the reader out of complacency. If Frye is right in that pornography has a stultifying effect whereas the erotic maintains both interest and energy, then *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Undo Your Dore* adhere to this oppositional paradigm (1976: 24). In the former, the sustained anticipation required for eroticism is eroded by other sexual encounters during the quest and thus, the naked Lady of Synadowne fails as an erotic object for Lybeaus. Through the denial of sexual resolution in *Undo Your Dore*, the Lady remains the impetus for the Squire's quest, despite his measure of reluctance. To have let narrative desire 'short circuit' here, to use the terminology of Peter Brooks, would have been 'premature discharge', a momentum stifled too soon (1992: 109). Instead of undressing in the same space, the princess and her squire are disrobed at a similar time in different spaces; whilst the princess manages to misplace her golden robe, the steward's men remove the Squire's 'good garmente' outside her door (l. 652). The door thus becomes a metaphorical breakwater between the two desiring parties. Guingamor experiences similar barriers to the fulfilment of his desire for the naked faery-maiden. He neither halts his quest for the boar nor resists her allure but instead, attempts to direct the narrative in order that he may recapitulate the erotic experience at more leisure:

As soon as Guingamor saw her  
 He was stirred by her beauty;  
 He reined in his horse:  
 He saw her clothes on a large tree  
 And went there without delay;  
 He put them in the hollow of ana oak tree;  
 When he had taken the boar  
 He would want to come back here  
 And speak to the maiden;  
 He knew well that she would not leave naked. (ll. 434-  
 443)

This intent is similarly thwarted as the maiden duly chastises the knight for his lack of honour. In a curious parallel with this episode, Lybeaus denies the Lady of Synadowne clothing for a considerable measure of narrative time. Indeed, he makes no attempt to dress her before he has had the proposed marriage sanctioned by Arthur. If this were a knight 'woo' at her embarrassment, dressing her would surely be a gesture of high priority. It may be suggested that Lybeaus' denial of her clothing is a conscious decision by which the young knight defers his quest's end, and unclothed, the Lady of Synadowne is a figure in limbo; she may not be integrated back into society without material adornment. The nakedness of Lady of Synadowne and the princess of Hungre are more complicated than the general assumptions of the medieval antifeministic stereotypes. The portrayal of Synadowne and the princess, elaborated through an emphasis on ambiguity and short-circuit of, as well as by their actions and interactions across the works, complicates traditional romance ideas of female gender in the Middle Ages. *Lybeaus Desconus* and *The Squire of Low Degree* undermine the general assumptions of the naked female representations.

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