



The Depiction of Lancelot in Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight of the Cart* and Malory's 'Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere' in *Le Morte Darthur*

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One of the most enduring factors of the Arthurian tradition is of Lancelot's joint depiction as the best of worldly knights and the catalyst for the collapse of Arthur's court. Lancelot's excellence as a knight is widely undisputed, the general critical opinion can be summed up by Edward I. Condren, 'in Lancelot...is a number of traditional motifs recast in the Arthurian mould of a hero who ultimately achieves his quest and in doing so conclusively establishes his honour, his pre-eminence as a warrior, and his excellence as knight-servant of Queen Guinevere'.¹ However, such a formula is problematic, for in both Chrétien de Troyes's *The Knight of the Cart* and Sir Thomas Malory's 'Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere' in his *Morte Darthur* there is constantly implied the incompatibility of Lancelot's role as a warrior and his role as 'knight-servant' and lover to Guinevere. It will be argued that both writers deal with this conflicting character differently, yet both use the recurring motif of Lancelot being disarmed, whether literally or metaphorically, physically or emotionally. It is suggested that Chrétien introduces the notion of Lancelot's attributes as courtly lover as detrimental to other aspects of his knighthood, whereas Malory arguably attempts to subvert this concept by emphasising Lancelot's strengths in moments of failure caused by his actions as a lover. Despite Chrétien and Malory's differing times, attitudes and goals, it will be proposed that both texts depict Lancelot as a knight whose adherence to one code of chivalry prevents success in another, but that it is this very fallibility that makes him such an enduring character.

Chrétien was among the first to establish the Arthurian tradition of Lancelot as a lover, and *The Knight of the Cart* is undeniably a good example of that tradition – Lancelot's quest is founded on his love for Guinevere and his succeeding in it proves his dedication to her and exonerates that love. Yet this story of *fin amors* contrasts sharply with Chrétien's other romances, which celebrate marital fidelity. Therefore, it will be argued that *Knight of the Cart* is largely ironic, comically undercutting its courtly love motifs in order to bring the tale into line with Chrétien's other romances. Throughout *Knight of the Cart* Chrétien utilises many thematic devices consistent with the Arthurian tradition he helped to shape of Lancelot as the perfect lover-knight, yet these devices are united with another tradition of Chrétien's invention, that of Lancelot as a flawed knight. Chrétien depicts Lancelot's dedication to courtly

¹ Edward I. Condren, 'The Paradox of Chrétien's Lancelot', *MLN*, Vol. 85, No. 4, (May, 1970), pp. 434-453, p. 434 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2907990>

love in moments when he is disarmed - in physical or moral weakness or defeat - resulting in the insinuation that it is Lancelot's role as lover that makes him so ineffectual in other areas of knighthood.

The suggestion of fallibility within Lancelot's character is immediately introduced the first time he enters the narrative of *Knight of the Cart*, when he is faced with the decision whether to accept a ride in a cart, a vehicle that carries shameful connotations for being reserved for criminals. Initially, this episode seems to be a significant indication of the strength of Lancelot's love for Guinevere because of his selfless act in taking the cart to come to her rescue, and as such serves as a verification of the Arthurian tradition of courtly love as promoted by Malory much later. However, this notion is soon negated, for unlike Malory Chretien is not so eager to absolve Lancelot of fault and offers no mitigation of the shame placed upon a knight who rides in a cart, 'A knight who has ridden in a cart is shamed throughout the land' (538-9).² The excessiveness of this judgement however, suggests an air of making gentle fun of the serious Arthurian traditions of shame and chivalry established by those such as Wace in his *Brut*. As Fanni Bogdanow suggests, 'Lancelot is not acting in the rational manner in which a knight should; but he is not just a knight; he is a knight who is a *fin amant*, and Chretien's intention, it seems, is to parody the excesses to which *fin amor* can lead a knight'.³

Lancelot's incompatibility of lover and warrior is further demonstrated in Lancelot's first distinguishing characteristic in *Knight of the Cart*, that he has managed to have overridden his horse, which promptly dies of exhaustion, '[Gawain] saw a knight approaching slowly on a horse that was sore and tired, breathing hard and lathered in sweat' (236-7). It can be assumed that in his haste to reach Guinevere, Lancelot has neglected his horse, a vital part of knightly equipment, and consequently disarmed himself, resulting in his inability to actually fulfil his task. A borrowed second horse is also found dead shortly after, apparently after some unsuccessful unseen combat (304-13) - another disarmament which similarly suggests Lancelot's less than perfect fighting prowess as a result of his preoccupation with his love. Horses have long been used as symbols of passion and desire, such as Plato's famous simile, 'The obedient steed, constrained now as always by modesty, refrains from leaping upon the beloved. But his fellow, heeding no more the driver's goad or whip, leaps and dashes on, sorely troubling his companion and his driver, and forcing them to approach the loved one and remind him of the delights of love's commerce'.⁴ Here therefore, as so often in Malory, is an image of Lancelot disarmed of the means needed to fulfil his quest, yet Chrétien's reversed symbolism of Lancelot being unhorsed suggests the negation of passion and desire, that his manhood is compromised – all characteristics Malory promotes in his Lancelot. Therefore, although Chrétien's Lancelot appears an ideal knight – courteous, strong, and dedicated to his lady, he is in actuality rather ineffectual. Lancelot arrives too late to save Guinevere, he loses two horses right from under him, he achieves nothing in his first battle and this ineffectiveness culminates in accepting a ride in a cart reserved for criminals.

Such imagery results in a paradoxically contradictory depiction of Lancelot. As Condren states, 'the quality of his love and the purposeful actions which it inspires

² Chrétien de Troyes, *The Knight of the Cart* trans. William W. Kibler (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 213 All subsequent quotations from *Knight of the Cart* are from this edition, with line numbers in parenthesis.

³ Fanni Bogdanow, 'The Love Theme in Chrétien de Troyes's "Chevalier de la Charrette"' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (January, 1972), pp. 50-61, p. 56 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3722385>

⁴ Plato, 'Phaedrus', 254 in *The Collected Dialogues*, trans. R. Hackforth eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Bollingen Series LXXI, 1961), p. 500

suggest that all Lancelot's strength and honour as a man have been directed toward his lady⁵ yet more than this, Lancelot's ineffectuality, shown by the failed actions resulting from such intentions, suggests he has little masculine strength to give. Lancelot has, in a sense, become emasculated, and Chrétien depicts his love as the cause for his emasculation, rather than an excuse and negation of it, as Malory depicts. This is aptly demonstrated when Lancelot almost commits suicide after seeing Guinevere held captive, 'when he could no longer see her, he wanted to throw himself from the window and shatter his body on the ground below' (538-9). In the Arthurian tradition, knights are protectors of life, but this scene shows Lancelot's own life in danger, and Lancelot himself the one who threatens it. Therefore, Lancelot's love emotionally and morally disarms him, causing a nearly fatal and a completely unknighly act that would result in his inability - in the most extreme of ways - to rescue Guinevere, yet the excessive exaggeration of the dangers of Lancelot's love nonetheless appears more comedic in its satire than truly critical.

One of the most comic depictions of Lancelot's martial failure as a result of his love effectively demonstrates how, despite his humiliation of Lancelot, Chretien nevertheless gives him merit, as Fanni Bogdanow notes, 'The great paradox around which Chretien builds his *Charrette* is that *nuls om ses amor re no vau* - no man can merit esteem without love - and yet love forces Lancelot at times, against reason, to submit to the greatest humiliations'.⁶ When Lancelot is so preoccupied with thoughts of Guinevere he ignores three times the warnings of a knight-guardian of a stream, he is subsequently knocked into the water. Although undoubtedly a strong indication of his worth as a lover, it is paralleled with Lancelot's ineffectiveness in other knightly roles, 'the knight's lance fell into the stream and his shield flew from round his neck. The cold water awakened him with a shock' (833-4). Once again, Lancelot is disarmed and rendered incapable of fulfilling any martial duties of knighthood as a direct result of his thoughts as a knightly lover. Thus, the ensuing fight is significant for the difficulty Lancelot encounters and his physical weakness, 'he was exceedingly distressed and angry to be so weak today that his blows were feeble and his day wasted' (852-3). The inference is clear, Lancelot's excellence in his knightly role as lover renders him poor, even ridiculous, in his knightly role as a fighter, yet these faults and ideals are never truly criticised, as shown by Lancelot's victory against the knight, illustrating that whatever shame Lancelot's love may bring, it always eventually brings him success.

Such ridicule may suggest that Chrétien is demeaning Lancelot's devotion to courtly love through his often unreasoned actions resulting from it, suggesting his failure in 'the basic discipline made up of *mesure* and *raison* which Chretien seems to consider inherent to courtly love in a chivalrous society',⁷ as Armel Diverres suggests. Yet even when Lancelot seems most humiliated by his love, his strong adherence to the ideals of courtly love are never in doubt. For instance, when Lancelot promises to sleep with a woman in exchange for her hospitality, it is the determination to honour this agreement even against his will that leads Lancelot to defend the lady. After comically spending some thirty lines of poetry in debating whether to act on his reason or his love, Lancelot's obedience to the codes of courtly love prove the stronger influence and he chivalrously attacks the men assaulting his

⁵ Edward I. Condren, 'The Paradox of Chrétien's Lancelot', p. 445

⁶ Fanni Bogdanow, 'The Love Theme in Chrétien de Troyes's "Chevalier de la Charrette"' p. 53

⁷ Armel Diverres, 'Some Thoughts on the Sens of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 6 (1970), pp. 24-36, p. 35

hostess. Nevertheless, this scene also demonstrates how this same adherence to courtly codes disarms Lancelot, provoking that unknighly lack of reason that prevents the realisation of the unbalanced nature of the agreement and the danger it brings. Similarly, this same ambiguity continues when Lancelot finds a sarcophagus that only one man can lift, and who is destined to liberate the land. It comes as a surprise to Lancelot to find he is this man, for his preoccupation with rescuing Guinevere prevented any knightly thoughts of saving the others captured with her, yet his worth established by this prophesy still stands. The ultimate symbol of Lancelot's conflicting roles is the revelation that the tomb is his own, emphatically portraying how the use of Lancelot's ultimate abilities are responsible for his ultimate weakness.

Throughout *Knight of the Cart*, a single theme governs the depiction of Lancelot – that of a knight whose excellence in one code of chivalry prevents him from excelling in another, resulting in a perfect courtly lover but an impotent warrior. In this manner, Chrétien almost singlehandedly establishes the Arthurian tradition of depicting the paradox of Lancelot, whose merit in the ways of courtly love is an instrumental factor of his faults in other areas of knighthood. This leads to the larger tradition of Lancelot whose worth as a knight – his adulterous love for Guinevere – is simultaneously the cause of the fall of that society of knighthood he epitomises. This starkly contrasts Malory, who, as it will be demonstrated, centuries later attempts to transform this tradition in using Lancelot's love to disguise and deflect his faults. However, although he does not present Lancelot with the same degree of positivity Malory does, Chrétien by no means condemns Lancelot. His comedic tone is more of gentle parody than harsh mockery and Chrétien depicts the relationship between love and the abandonment of reason that Lancelot so often suffers from as a result as an inevitable and inextricable partnership, as he states in his own lyric poetry, 'Very dearly has Love sold me her dominion and her lordship, for at the entry I expended mesure and abandoned reason' (33-35).⁸

The Arthurian tradition of defining Lancelot's greatness in terms of constructions of masculinity and chivalric identity established by Chrétien in the twelfth century was still of great significance to Malory in the fifteenth. Jeffrey Cohen writes of the *Morte Darthur*, 'Heroism is a gendered realm that mandates, quite literally, the assumption of "the armour of an alienating identity"-helm, hauberk, gauntlets, greaves'⁹ and for Malory, as for Chrétien, this use of armour provides an illusion of completeness and perfection that is thus projected onto the knight. Indeed, Malory's *Morte* is well known for its steadfastly positive portrayal of Lancelot as the 'best knyght of the worlde'¹⁰ (863.27) through the adherence to such facets of the Arthurian tradition, as Elizabeth Scala suggests, 'Lancelot's reputation as the best of Arthur's knights depends on his prowess in arms'.¹¹ However, Lancelot's failures in the narrative suggest a substantial challenge to this heroic reputation for, as in *Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot is often depicted being disarmed, 'Heroism organises the masculine "body in pieces" into a cultural coherence represented as invulnerable ...[yet it remains] always in danger of decapitation, dismemberment, and

⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, trans I. M. Cluzel and L. Pressouyre, *The Origins of Lyric Poetry and the First Troubadours* (Paris, 1962), pp. 49-52

⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'The Armour of an Alienating Identity', *Arthuriana* Vol. 6, No. 4 (1996), pp. 1-24, p. 2

¹⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004) All Quotations of *Le Morte Darthur* are from this edition, with line numbers in parenthesis.

¹¹ Elizabeth Scala, 'Disarming Lancelot' *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 380-403, p. 385 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174740>

fragmentation'¹² as Cohen notes. To combat this, it will be argued, Malory subverts Chrétien's tradition of the detrimental effects of Lancelot's adherence to codes of courtly love to conversely reaffirm the worth of his hero. It will be demonstrated that it is the moments when Lancelot is disarmed, and shown in weakness or at fault apparently as a consequence of his romantic preoccupations, that his greatness is most powerfully emphasised in the *Morte Darthur*. Lancelot's arms and armour, as the principal means of identification in chivalric society, are paradoxically used in the creation of his identity at the very moments they are removed in times of physical and moral failings. These scenes serve to delineate Lancelot's heroic identity as well as disarming the reader, dissuading them of any harsh judgements they may pass on Lancelot.

Lancelot is undoubtedly a problematic hero in the *Morte Darthur*, and especially in 'The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere', which describes the transition of Lancelot and Guinevere's love affair from the private to the public sphere. In the book Lancelot remains 'the greatest of knights and best of lovers, the model by which all others would be judged',¹³ as Larry D. Benson states, but as in *Knight of the Cart*, his role as lover threatens to compromise his role as a knight, and much must be done to reconcile these roles. One such method is Malory's attempt to remove the physicality from the lover's relationship. For example, despite apparently admitting the couples adultery, 'sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurte honde, but toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawnyng of the day' (1131.28-31), Malory refuses to admit any 'lycoures lustis' in the relationship. The explanation given is that love was more virtuous than modern day definitions, and is therefore not as sinful, 'nowadayes men can nat love sevennyght but they muste have all their desyres...But the olde love was nat so. For men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them' (1119.31-6). This justification appears more of an awkward sleight of hand however, than a reasoned argument for 'vertuose love' (1119.30), placing blame on the reader's misunderstanding rather than Lancelot. Moreover, Malory uses 'linguistic ambiguity' to undercut 'the material reality of the Lancelot-Guinevere relationship'¹⁴ as Robert Sturges claims, using it as a form of euphemism and even denial. This is achieved by refraining from bodily descriptions, replacing the physical with metaphysical and the particular, 'abed' with abstraction, 'were togydirs'. These devices reconfigure the terms in which Lancelot's affair should be understood, re-empowering him in his most obvious moments of weakness.

Despite Malory's attempts to euphemise Lancelot's adultery, indications can be found that do implicitly suggest the allusions of physical contact Malory strives to avoid. Therefore, 'Lancelot and Guinevere' contains Malory's strongest attempts to maintain Lancelot's heroic greatness, markedly at the very moment the *Morte Darthur* is most explicit about his knightly failure in committing adultery. Whilst Malory admits, "sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne" (1045.10-11), he also strives to complicate the reader's subsequent reaction to Lancelot's actions. For instance, Lancelot's return to the queen is framed with, 'shad nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall' (1045.14-16). This declaration of Lancelot's

¹² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'The Armour of an Alienating Identity', p. 2

¹³ Larry D. Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 81

¹⁴ Robert S. Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 196

sinful love of Guinevere, his breaking of the 'promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste' (1045. 11), and the detrimental public effects of it, '[they] had many such prevy draughtis togydir that many in the courte spake of hit' (1045. 19-20) is thus negated. By framing Lancelot's adulterous love in terms of the Grail he might have attained, Malory defines Lancelot's fault by his potential achievement, in contrast to Chrétien who expresses Lancelot's failure to achieve his potential in terms of that same love.

'The Fair Maid of Ascolat' is a significant episode within 'Lancelot and Guinevere' that is similarly designed to restore Lancelot's reputation. Elaine is introduced with these words, 'she keste such a love unto sir Launcelot that she cowde never withdraw hir loove, wherefore she dyed' (1067.33), immediately promoting Elaine's love for Lancelot as a symbol of his worth. Moreover, Chrétien's Arthurian tradition of Lancelot's knighthood being compromised by his role as knight-lover is also arguably maintained, for Lancelot is shown to be literally and metaphorically disarmed after risking his love becoming public when he and Guinevere suspiciously both refuse to attend a joust, neglecting his knightly duties. However, Malory once again attempts to avert this from reflecting negatively on Lancelot by showing him attending the tournament and borrowing blank arms, 'I wolde pray you to lende me a shyld that were nat opynly knowyn, for myne ys well knowyn' (1067.7-9), to disguise his identity and so allow him to participate in the traditional knightly act of jousting.

However, considering the problematic notion of romantic physical contact in the *Morte*, demonstrated in Malory's euphemisms between Lancelot and Guinevere, 'The Fair Maid of Ascolat' is significant for its body imagery suggested by the physical symbols of arms shared by Lancelot and Elaine, which are initiated through Lancelot's following of the codes of courtly love. In this manner, Lancelot's faults as a result of his codes of courtly love – Elaine's death, Guinevere's jealousy and the subsequent fateful public knowledge of their love – resurface despite Malory's attempts to negate them. Lancelot's blank arms carry subtle tones of physicality that arguably reflect negatively on him for being symbolic of Elaine, whose name *Le Blanche* identifies her with a lack of identity, as Martin Shichtman states, 'her life has been a blank, a whiteness to be written on, to be inscribed',¹⁵ just as Lancelot's plain arms erase his own. This attempt to rearm Lancelot and thus recover his merit therefore may be construed as having the opposite effect of symbolically taking Elaine's personal symbol and thus, Elaine herself, an intensely physical symbol that only reiterates Lancelot's romantic associations and its damaging effects.

Another adoption of Elaine's symbolism occurs when Lancelot wears her sleeve as a token, and one with particularly bodily connotations. Again, Malory attempts to excuse such physicality by stating its use as disguise to enable Lancelot to demonstrate his knightly fighting prowess, 'because he had never aforne borne no maner of token of no damesell, he bethought hym to bere a token of hers, that none of hys bloode thereby myght know hym' (1168. 9-11). This serves as justification for Lancelot's acceptance of such a physical token of affection in his accordance with codes of courtly love. Furthermore, Lancelot's disarming himself and giving of his arms to Elaine to hide in her bedchamber similarly serves as a symbol of the body, one made clear when Gawain asks to see them. Elaine states the shield 'ys in my chambir, coverde wyth a case, and if ye woll com with me ye shall se hit' (1078.22-23), but such an intimate intrusion is forbade by her father, 'Nat so...but sende ye for

¹⁵ Martin B. Shichtman, 'Elaine and Guinevere: Gender and Historical Consciousness in the Middle Ages,' in *New Images of Medieval Women*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1989), p. 261

that shyldes' (1078. 24-25). The symbols of arms, sleeve and bedchamber thus evoke a subtle physical analogy that complicates Lancelot's hitherto perfect reputation established by his physical distance from Guinevere.

Moreover, the significance of Lancelot's relationship with Elaine, thus structured in the codes of courtly love, to Guinevere most emphatically reveals how, despite Malory's best efforts to reverse it, Lancelot's romantic actions have a detrimental effect on his knighthood and the chivalric society he represents. Upon hearing of Elaine's token, Guinevere insists on Lancelot wearing her own (1103.16-22). This serves to remove any hope of anonymity, identifies Lancelot all too clearly as Guinevere's knight, thus marking one of the first public demonstrations of their relationship and the beginning of the end for Arthur's court. However, once again, at moments when criticism of Lancelot seems inevitable, Malory attempts to redeem him. The reasons for this momentous mistake on Lancelot's part are given by Guinevere herself. The Queen's actions reveal how wearing Elaine's token cannot be divided from the symbolism of her body, for when Gawain reports that 'he had founde sir Launcelottis shyldes in the keypyng of the Fayre Mayden of Ascolat' (1080.3-5), Guinevere reacts with the intensity of a betrayed lover, "Fy on hym!" seyde the quene. "For I harde sir Gawayne say before my lorde Arthure that hit were mervayle to telle the grete love that ys betwene the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat and hym" (1080.11-14). Therefore, Lancelot's acceptance of Guinevere's token is presented as a similar symbolic act of physical love, publically announcing his dedication to her, and the chivalric code he exemplifies. Paradoxically however, this explanation only serves to emphasise the responsibility of Lancelot's display of love that reveals his adultery and subsequently leads to the inevitable failure of that same chivalric code.

Despite the many attempts to disarm the reader's judgments of Lancelot's physical and symbolic acts as a lover and to replace them with a distant and 'vertuous love', Malory arguably cannot wholly mitigate the detrimental effects that love has on Lancelot's other knightly attributes. The more Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship is euphemised, the more those terms of that relationship appear in his more innocent scenarios. Throughout 'Lancelot and Guinevere', Malory provides evidence for Lancelot's greatness in episodes wherein he can disarm the doubts surrounding his hero. However, it is in the *Morte's* refusal to be controlled in this way that evidence can be found for criticising Lancelot at the very moment when he and the reader are disarmed.

It seems that despite disparate times, traditions and narrative aims, in both Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* and Malory's 'Lancelot and Guinevere' Lancelot's positive attributes of epitomising courtly love can never be reconciled with the faults such attributes provoke. It is indeed undoubtedly difficult to balance the love for one woman against a cascade of incidents leading to the destruction of an entire society. The Arthurian tradition established by Chrétien of demonstrating Lancelot's failings in direct consequence of his actions as a courtly lover transcend not only the centuries but also Malory's efforts to subvert them, subtly resurfacing even when he presents Lancelot at his best. Despite this criticism of him however, intentional or not, Lancelot remains in both texts the best of worldly knights. His worldliness is what makes Lancelot fallible, like every human being, and the fact that he can achieve greatness despite his shortcomings is what makes Lancelot such an enduring character.

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