

1997

## The Spiritually Redemptive Powers of Women's Sexual Love in The Knight of the Cart

Alison Stine

*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stine, Alison (1997) "The Spiritually Redemptive Powers of Women's Sexual Love in The Knight of the Cart," *Articulāte*: Vol. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

## THE SPIRITUALLY REDEPTIVE POWERS OF WOMEN'S SEXUAL LOVE IN *THE KNIGHT OF THE CART*

ALISON STINE '00

Chretien's *The Knight of the Cart*, commissioned by Marie de Champagne, enforces his patron lady's ideals of courtly love in addition to weaving a quixotic ideology of romantic love as related to spiritual devotion. Yet rather than present these two unlike loves as polar opposites, Chretien makes a startling correlation between romantic, sexual love and a higher, religious devotion. Most interesting, Chretien's vehicle for channeling spiritual love through the sexual is not Sir Lancelot, but the women Lancelot encounters. Women form the tangible link to divine love in *The Knight of the Cart*, and only through the sexual adoration of women can pure, spiritual devotion be obtained by the men who seek it.

In *The Knight of the Cart*, Chretien mars the distinction between spiritual and sexual devotion to the point of near confusion. The parallels between love and religion blur, overlap, engulfing each other with their nearness. Sexual love becomes the religion as Cecil Maurice Bowra describes in his book *Medieval Love-Song*:

love secures both purity and strength . . . the purity of aim which seeks an authentic ideal of generosity and devotion, and the strength of which gives to otherwise remote and elusive ends [uncertainty of an afterlife], a recognizable place in a world of flesh and blood. (31)

Sensual love grounds a person on earth, and gives him an attainable, measurable heaven to hold onto in postponement, or perhaps in substitute, of the real thing. Chretien litters his sex scenes with religious imagery and secular vocabulary. Upon leaving his beloved queen, Lancelot bowed low before the bedchamber, as if he were before a altar, (265) worshipping sex. Here, religion becomes the orgasm, and sex becomes the cleansing communion.

Chretien presents sex as a sacrament, a religious purification rather than a corruption. Men perform this purification with women, and the women redeem them. The female sex has long been viewed

as a paragon of virtue: moral, complete, pure, preserving the roughish male by the sheer influence of her inherent virginal morality. In this sense, women set the religious examples for men. According to Bowra,

She [the woman] stands outside the round of his common activities almost as a presiding deity . . . Her being becomes the center of his own, and through it and for it he endeavors to be all that he ought to be in her eyes. (7-8)

The divine woman becomes the religious cheerleader for the man. "Though he asserts his unworthiness, he also asserts that, with his lady's guidance, it will be corrected and his finest qualities set to work" (Bowra, 23).

An example of women guiding the religious purification of men is found on page 215 of Chretien. Tramping along on their queen-fetching odyssey, Lancelot and Gawain briefly encounter a girl who shows them the right direction to take at a fork in the road. Though a minor incident in the story, this event bears a strong similarity to personal spiritual discovery, the act of 'finding' religion. Chretien furthers this notion of spiritual odyssey through the knights' dialogue with the woman, reminiscent of pilgrims seeking guidance for a holy trek:

Then the knights asked further: "Dear lady, where is this land? Where can we find the way that leads there?"

"You will be told," she replied, "but you must know that you will encounter difficulties and treacherous passes, for it is no easy matter to enter there." (215)

How do Lancelot and Gawain find the way? A woman points out the right path and cautions them about the road. The legendary land the knights seek represents more than an enemy's kingdom. It stands for a religious location—a hell, or more likely, a heaven.

The only ways of reaching this pseudo-heaven are by crossing two barriers: the Underwater Bridge—a water metaphor for death and birth since both involve the coming out of or entering into the beginning, i.e. heaven or the other world—or the Sword Bridge, a metaphor for religious purity or passage to heaven through sexual love: redemption through proxy. What better, what easier way to possess religious purity than through the sexual love of one who already has obtained it?

As the female guide of Lancelot and Gawain illustrates, women steer the religious progression of men, bettering men's moral standards by serving as examples as well as mentors in their spiritual development. They pass judgement on moral attributes and errors, using their love—or the withdrawal of love—as punishment, a reward, or penance. "She expects so much of him, and he himself rates his obligations so highly, that any small divagation from the strictest standards may make him despise himself and feel that she also despises him" (Bowra, 25). Women's love is the incentive for men's good behavior, vaulting women to a position of power over men, and setting up the relationship of man and woman much like the devotional relationship of church and pilgrim. In his book, *The Secular Lyric in Middle English*, Arthur Moore characterizes this equivocal, nearly servant and master relationship as having the elements of "characteristic humility of the lover and idealization of the lady" (69). Women fulfill the role of the confessor, the absolver of sins, the sainted judge of moral right and wrong, the power of ultimatum invested in a mere bat of their eyelashes or a flick of their long flaxen tresses. In Chretien, the lady is so idealized, so glorified, she becomes the ultimate sexual and moral ideal. On page 262, Guinevere and Lancelot play out a melodramatic scene of transgression and atonement where the mere language suggests an intensely sexual relationship—a relationship not between two lovers, but between a priest and sinner. Using dramatic secular words to express his anguish, Lancelot pleads: "My lady, if you will tell me what sin it was that caused me such distress, I am fully prepared to atone for it at once" may God preserve you from such sin for God's sake, accept my penance at once, and if you ever could pardon me, for God's sake tell me so" (262).

After such an emotional, divine outpouring, the queen answers with a reserved, surprisingly cool confidence: "Dear friend, may you be completely forgiven . . . I absolve you completely" (Chretien, 262). The reader half expects Guinevere to spot holy water on Lance's head and proclaim Bless you, my child—so absolutely as-

sured is she in her own religious purity, in her power to absolve him of sin. Guinevere is just as "guilty" as Lancelot. She has committed the same sin as Lancelot, with Lancelot, yet she erases her own guilt and elects herself to the position of Lancelot's priest as well as his savior, transferring her holy virtues to this corrupt man through her love for him.

This idea of the sexual transfer of religious purity stems from Chretien's notion in *The Knight of the Cart* that women are vessels, channels through which God transmits secular virtues like a satellite dish. Likewise, they should be worshipped as such and given the same reverence that a pilgrim would lavish on the bones of a saint; "Lancelot bowed low and adored her, for in no holy relic did he place such faith" (Chretien, 264). Lancelot experiences a near orgasmic sanctification by worshipping a token from the queen's body, a lock of hair from her comb:

Never will the eye of man see anything receive such reverence for he began to adore the hair, touching it a hundred thousand times to his eye, his mouth, his forehead, and his cheeks. He expressed his joy in every way imaginable and felt himself most happy and rewarded. He placed the hair on his breast near his heart, between his shirt and his skin (Chretien, 225).

This explicit idolization seems sexual as well as religious in tone. Lancelot "touches it [the hair] to his eye, his mouth, his forehead, and his cheeks" (Chretien, 225) like a priest making the sign of the cross on his own face. The lock of hair stands for the cross, and fulfills the same function as a cross in Christianity: it redeems by reminding one of absolute perfection. For Lancelot, this absolute perfection is embodied by Guinevere, the Christ-like figure the standard to which he should devote himself.

While this flattering devotion elevates women, it also demeans them, reducing them to secondary objects of adoration. Lancelot worships Guinevere's hair, an inanimate, dead piece of her, and not her living attributes such as wit or kindness. Through this objectifying, women are lessened to virtuous gifts, trophies allocated to men for good behavior, God's jackpot prizes in the celestial super lotto. The knight who tries to steal a woman under Lancelot's protection boasts,

God has granted me the one thing I have always most desired. He could not have rewarded me more if he had made me a crowned king, nor would I have been as grateful, nor have gained so much, for what I have been

Alison Stine is a first-year English (writing) major. She is the first place winner of the Annie MacNeill Poetry Prize, and the third place co-winner of the Danner Lee Mabood Award for Fiction. Her stage plays have been seen at the Cleveland Playhouse, the International Thespian Festival, and La Habra Theatre in L.A.

granted is fair and good. (228)

Woman are so desirable as battle prizes so "fair and good," in Chretien's words because they are the embodiment of spirituality. They have an inherent connection with religion through the mere virtue of their gender. As the modern playwright Tony Kushner writes in his play *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches*: "Women are for birth, for beginning" (56). Because of their potential for childbirth, women have an inceptive link to creation and to spirituality that men can never share. Women are in themselves creators, mortal mini-gods. Guinevere makes a similar assertion in another Lancelot tale, *Lancelot of the Lake*: "And if I were God," she said, "I should have made Lancelot just as he is" (Corley, 29).

Women possess a closeness to God; in a sense, women are the next step down on the creation ladder, God's administrative assistants. Women's religious closeness is fostered by their natural connection with nurturing and life giving. Ray Bradbury writes in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*:

Oh, what strange wonderful clocks women are. They nest in Time. They make the flesh that holds fast and binds eternity. They live inside the gift, know power, accept, and need not mention it. Why speak of Time when you are Time, and shape the universal moments, as they pass, into warmth and action (42-43).

The exaltation of women into divine, eternal creatures also elevates the act of sexually loving them into something more meaningful than mere sex, something poetic, inspirational, and deeply spiritual. Women carry a closeness with nature, "Erotic love is part of nature," (Saville, 176) and nature is a part of God, vindicating erotic love as a means of connecting with God. The only way men can share in the female connection with nature/God is through possession of women's bodies; in other words, sex, procuring a spiritual closeness through a sexual love. By elevating the woman into a naturalistic, pious vessel of virtue, how can the man not acquire at least a portion of her innate holiness through sex? After sleeping with Guinevere, "so deep was the pain of parting that getting up was a true martyrdom, and he [Lancelot] suffered a martyr's agony" (Chretien, 265). Surely the mere act of loving a woman is not worthy of martyrdom, yet through this act of physical love Lance experiences a sense of spiritual love; he catches a glimpse of religious purity by briefly sharing a woman's intrinsic, natural connection with spirituality.

Yet while women's close bond with spirituality elevates men, does it also condemn them? Women are indeed closer to nature. Unlike men, their self-generated powers of creation show that their connection with the spiritual, with the garden of Eden i.e. the initial center of creation has not been broken. However, while Eden served as the source for creation, it was the center for original sin as well. Do women's close associations with the spiritual denote a close relationship with sin, and the opposite of religious purity, evil? After falling in love with Guinevere, Lancelot is inspired to stalwartly carry out her rescue, among other morally worthy acts, but he is also 'inspired' to sin by committing adultery with her. She encourages sin in him along with sanctimony. His once devout religious morals leave him. Lance now subscribes to the religion of Guinevere, and "since Love ruled his action, the disgrace did not matter" (Chretien, 212).

In Jeff Vandermeer's contemporary fantasy novella *Dradin In Love*, the narrator, a once pious missionary lusting after an unnamed woman, cultivates a similar blindness to disgrace and sin: "Now he could see her as a person, not an idea—never moving as he made love to her "If ever he had lost his faith it was then, as he lost himself in the arms of a woman indifferent to him, indifferent to the world" (96). Joe, a character in *Angels in America* and a Mormon, experiences a comparable loss of religious empathy. His perfect piousness is replaced by a dulled, physical dependence on a imperfect romantic relationship:

What scares me is that maybe what I really love about her is the part of her that's farthest from the light, from God's love, maybe I was drawn to that in the first place. And I'm keeping it alive because I need it. (Kushner 53)

Even *The Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* warns its medieval audience about the dangers of succumbing to the physical desire of women: "And those who sinned with the women God allows to die because he would pardon them through the death and anguish they suffer in the defense of his faith" (Porcheddu, 29). While the *Turpin* is obviously not making an argument for the rampant carnal love of women, the author unintentionally advocates physical love as a approach toward attaining spiritual redemption. Sleeping with women is a sin, yet God forgives sin. The subconscious message that emerges here is: Sex will get you to heaven. By partaking in sex with a woman, a man is assured spiritual forgiveness and completeness, despite the spiritual emptiness of the woman: "It did not matter that she was in pieces, that she was not real, for he could

see now that she was his salvation" (Vandermeer, 97). Women salvage men by allowing them to sin, providing an outlet for their corruption, thus an opportunity to be forgiven of that sin and ultimately, spiritually redeemed.

Though spiritual redemption is not the motive that sends Lancelot galloping off into the woods after Guinevere, her love as-

sures him of a spiritual as well as a sexual completeness by connecting him with the inborn intimacy of women and spirituality. In *The Knight of the Cart* women redeem men, and bring them a little closer to divine love through sexual adoration, assuring the essentialness of women in the road to spiritual fulfillment.

#### WORKS CITED:

- Bowra, Cecil Maurice. *Medieval Love-Song*. London: The Athlone Press, 1961.
- Bradbury, Ray. *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. New York: Bantam Books, 1983.
- Chretien de Troyes. *Arthurian Romances*. Trans. William W. Kimber. London: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Corley, Colin. *Lancelot of the Lake*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993.
- Moore, Arthur Keister. *The Secular Lyric in Middle English*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957.
- The Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*. Trans. Fred Porcheddu.
- Saville, Jonathan. *The Medieval Erotic: Alba Structure as Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.
- Singer, Irving. *The Nature of Love, Volume I*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Vandermeer, Jeff. *Dradin In Love*. Tallahassee: Buzzcity Press, 1996.