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

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Chretien’s *The Knight of the Cart*, commissioned by Marie de Champagne, enforces his patron lady’s ideals of courtly 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 devotion 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, overapping 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 litter 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 be comes the orgasmic sanctification by worshipping a token from the queen’s body, a lock of hair from her comb:

> 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 places, for it is no easy matter to enter there.”

> 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.

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, Chretien:

> 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. (78)

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. Through 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:

> “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.”

> 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).

This idea of the sexual transferal 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 celestial 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:

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

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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, woman 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 woman 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 erotic 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 galluping off into the woods after Guinevere, her love assures 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:


