J. S.

Dr. Obermeier

English 306

6 May 2006

Lancelot—As Great as He is Destructive:

A Romp Through Chrétien de Troyes and Malory

The greatest knights in the legends of King Arthur are viewed with renown, respect, and worship for their gallant and chivalric acts: Lancelot, Tristan, and Galahad to name a few. Galahad's purity and perfection, however, set him apart from other knights because he reaches beyond the terrestrial sphere of knightly accessibility into the divine realm. Outside of the divine realm a dark truth hides amidst the tales of wonder and awe that the names of sublunary knights conjure. Hidden within the "chivalric virtues" esteemed to knights are nestled slight but significant variations to major traits such as "loyalty" and "prowess" (Painter 29-30). In the code of a *great* knight, loyalty becomes devotion and prowess bolsters itself upon the subversion of social norms—illegitimacy, laws of love, subservience to a woman, and betterment from ignoble unrequited love. Altering the virtues of chivalry in this manner, ironically, turns the great knight into the most destructive. Devotion and prowess in this regard are destructive because they become reactants with courtly love. Examining Lancelot, specifically, because he is the greatest "earthly sinful man" (Malory 350), a reader reading between the lines of *The Knight in the Cart* and *Le Morte Darthur* stumbles upon the hidden truth. It is because Lancelot, through devotion's guidance, radically adheres to courtly love—that subversion of social norms—that Lancelot rises to legendary status and by the same means plunges Camelot and its knights into destruction and oblivion. **[This paper received a rarely given 98/A for its sophistication of argument,**

analytical and mellifluous usage of language, effective interweaving of primary and secondary sources, as well as correctness of grammar and form.]

Lancelot's trek into fame and doom can be traced back to one point and attributed, initially, to one virtue. In *The Knight in the Cart*, readers are introduced to a frantic and desperate Lancelot who rides a horse to death before being faced with a decision that follows him to the pinnacle of his greatness then all the way to the trough of his banishment. That decision is whether to conform to the orthodox conceits (i.e., not getting in a cart that identifies one as a "criminal," "traitor," or "murderer") or revolt and become a maverick (i.e., get in the cart) (Chrétien 127). Lancelot's decision as to which path he takes hinges upon the delineation between loyalty, the standard knight's virtue, and its variant, devotion, which takes loyalty a step further. The two differ in that devotion mandates ardor and passion in action while loyalty revolves more around reason and "general trustworthiness" (Painter 30). Reason loses out to passion and Lancelot, hesitating "two steps" in actual contemplation of all that has just been stated, hops into the cart and causes the Wheel of Fortune to begin the spin that will lead to both greatness and catastrophe (Chrétien 127).

Lancelot demonstrates his devotion many times to Guinevere throughout his journey to find her. One of his greater actions comes when he is within sight of the castle that holds Guinevere, for between Lancelot and his damsel, whom he has but seen from afar, is the Sword Bridge, a bridge that has "never been crossed by man" (Chrétien 131). Undaunted by the dangerous construct of the bridge and the two leopards at the other side, Lancelot takes wound after wound as he creeps his way across to find that the felines are no longer present. His devotion has led him to a place no knight has thus far gotten and eventually leads him to another place no knight has gotten—into Guinevere's bed.

Within Guinevere's bed lies the web of courtly love that offers esteem. Courtly love maintains that love does not exist in marriage; marriage is an instrument for peace and business. This notion reverses the social concept that marriage's purpose is love. As a result of love's absence, a person within the marriage will seek outside of the marriage to sate this desire in an illegitimate manner. Lancelot eagerly desires to fill this void in Guinevere's life. The whole first half of *The Knight in the Cart* revolves solely around Lancelot seeking to find Guinevere in order to look upon her and love her. Once more, Sir Lancelot's willingness to go against social norms is demonstrated. If Guinevere were a spider, she could ask for no greater fly than a fly willing to adhere to the strands of courtly love. This web works for Lancelot because he absolves himself from having to marry Guinevere and "couch with her, and leave arms and tournament" while still receiving sex (Malory 108). More importantly, it works for Lancelot because his great prowess issues from his engagement in these norm breaking behaviors.

Prowess matters because it is *the* "fundamental chivalric virtue" (Painter 29). Prowess is fundamental because it is a knight's ability on the tournament field and in quests that truly brings him fame and worship. A knight endowed with this trait possesses superior strength or courage, especially in battle. As previously stated, the prowess of a *great* knight varies slightly from that of a standard knight. The variation between great and normal comes from where the prowess originates. For Lancelot-like greatness, that is the greatest earthly greatness, a knight must do the opposite of what others would have him do, such as engage in illegitimate behavior.

However, involvement in an illegitimate act such as adultery requires one to justify his or her actions by changing the laws that govern action. Courtly love has Lancelot do just that. The upended orthodox conceit that Lancelot's mighty prowess inherits its powers from is Lancelot's placement of Guinevere above God and King: love as law. Galahad represents the sought after

social norm with God's law at the forefront, and for that reason, he is the only knight to surpass Lancelot, yet his name is not near as known as Lancelot's. Due to his subverting social norms, Lancelot must clutch to courtly love and have love guide his every action as law lest he be held accountable before God and king. Lancelot admits that "all [his] great deeds of arms… [are] for the queen's sake… never did [he] battle all only for God's sake" (Malory 332). And when his love is "a love that, though still adulterous, inspires prowess that benefits the entire community," it makes it easier for Lancelot to be a citizen of love's laws (Grimbert xxxvii). As we see, with his love for Guinevere as the mitigating factor for his actions, Lancelot performs many grand feats of amazing prowess.

One such feat appears in *The Knight in the Cart* when Lancelot battles Maleagant. Lancelot is sorely pressed, and the crowd notices Lancelot's attacks weakening and fear of his defeat creeps near. Then, Lancelot hears his name called and turns to see Guinevere watching from the tower. Lancelot's "Love" inspired prowess sparks upon sight of her empowering a "strength and courage" seen in *great* knights (Chrétien 163). Here, we see that to Lancelot there is no mightier power than love. He does not think of God or King Arthur to gain strength and overcome Maleagant. No, the reader sees *love* as the power that instills the greatness that brings Lancelot to the top, and it brings him to the top with enough force that he pummels his adversary until the king fears for Maleagant's demise and asks Guinevere to intervene. The simple words, "I wish Lancelot to restrain himself" halted Lancelot immediately; whereupon, he began to take blow after blow from Maleagant without a movement to attack (164). At this point, Lancelot is held at bay from destroying Maleagant by a strand of courtly love that is fine spun with the thread of devotion: subservience to the woman.

Subservience to the woman completely flips the common, orthodox medieval conceit that the woman submits to the man, but courtly love demands such an uprooting, and the maverick Lancelot is all too willing to comply. Lancelot's submissiveness and prowess are exemplified during the Tournament at Noauz. Upon his arrival on the field, Lancelot "proves the match of twenty of the best [knights]" and performs with such prowess that the crowds' eyes cannot be taken off him (Chrétien 183). But of course he's doing so well, Guinevere is watching. She decides, however, that she does not wish for Lancelot to continue doing so well. It is upon hearing that the queen "bids him 'to do his worst'" that Lancelot finds himself once more adhering to the notions of courtly love to the point of pain (183). Lancelot immediately rides as swiftly as possible at a near knight and misses his stroke while receiving such a buffet that he does not fight for the rest of the day.

Here, courtly love shows itself as a tyrant that pummels its lovers mercilessly, for Lancelot is once more commanded to do his worst. Lancelot is eager to comply for the "love and favor of the queen" are at stake (Chrétien 186). The great knight Lancelot is bound to his defeat by the strands of submission and the law of love. However, compliance to courtly love pays off when Lancelot hears the command "to 'do the best' [he] can" (186). We see in events following this command the reason why Lancelot adheres to courtly love. It brings him greatness. Lancelot rides onto the field with all the men that mocked him for his failure and defeats first the king of Ireland; whereupon, he turns and charges a "magnificent knight" and knocks him "a hundred feet or more from his steed" (187). The day ends with the knights saying Lancelot's worth is equal to "a thousand of the likes of those on this field" and that he "surpassed all the knights in the world" (187). Praise and worship of such magnitude makes it clear why Lancelot is such a maverick. His submission continually brings him greatness, for "Lancelot's perfection as knight

is made possible only because of his total and unquestioning devotion" (Walter xix). All he has to do is sacrifice his body every now and again.

Lancelot's sacrifice of his body is demonstrated in another manner when he turns down submissive woman after submissive woman: Dame Elaine (who tricked him into bed with an illusion of Guinevere and later with a lie) (Malory 283), Elaine la Blanche (who died from her love for Lancelot) (416), the girl (who held Lancelot to the promise of sleeping in her bed) (Chrétien 137), as well as many other girls and damsels. Not one of the females listed nears to Guinevere. Guinevere and courtly love dominate Lancelot's life.

Lancelot's submits to the power of courtly love when he defends Guinevere against an accusation of poisoning Sir Patrise at a dinner she held for the knights (Malory 406). Sir Patrise and Sir Lancelot fight for near an "hour" before Patrise suffers a blow and falls (412). However, as Patrise stands, he stabs Lancelot in the thigh and enrages Lancelot. Lancelot then buffets Patrise such a blow that he crashes to the ground. Guinevere's honor is saved with a few marks of praise and worship given to Lancelot. The twist to the scene is that Lancelot was banished by Guinevere before rushing to her aid to protect her honor. In fact, Lancelot was more than banished; he had been told by Guinevere that she would "never love thee [Lancelot] more" (404). Still Lancelot rides in to save her honor. Such greatness comes from being trapped within the web of courtly love.

Lancelot taking action to save Guinevere shows just how deep in the web he is. He puts aside his pride, an all too common trait in knights, and saves her even after she has cast him out and called him a "miscreant knight" (Malory 404). His unrequited love with Guinevere makes him a better person. The common view is that people are bettered through achievement. Lancelot goes against that. The submissive women previously listed fell short for their willingness to yield

themselves to Lancelot. He says, not textually, “I am better for pursuing the unattainable!” If Guinevere was attainable, Lancelot would not be out performing such great feats. He says it himself when he says that marriage would take him off the battlefield and force him to sit around (108). Lancelot never mentions marriage again until the very end of *Le Morte Darthur* when he reaches the end of his knighthood and hangs up his sword to join the ranks of the church (520). He never mentions it because it was this unrequited part of courtly love that brought Lancelot to such esteem as to be called one of the “best knights of the world” (Caxton 60). Ironically, the channel that grants Lancelot his place in legend is the same channel that destroys Camelot and the Round Table.

Lancelot’s illustriousness through his devotion to courtly love all begins when, in *The Knight in the Cart*, he subverts a social norm—shame—and hops onto the cart which causes the Wheel of Fortune to begin spinning. Well, that one decision spins a full circle, as we see, when Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred come before Sir Gawain, Sir Gaheris, and Sir Gareth with the intent of exposing Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere because it “shames” the king (Malory 468). Gawain will not help expose Lancelot because Lancelot saved Gawain from King Carados, and Gareth won’t either because Lancelot knighted him. The two knights reasoning rests in their unwillingness to shame themselves by partaking in such “evil” (469). Here, Lancelot and Guinevere’s bedded revolt against the orthodox survives and exists only by knights turning blind eyes because of their adherence to the norm and the prowess and august deeds that Lancelot performs because of this affair with Guinevere, as was just shown. Mordred and Agravain, however, join Lancelot in his reversal of social norms and go against the fear of shame by opting to betray a knight that has saved both of their lives. Ironically, the norm they are going against is the same norm that they use to justify their actions and the same uprooted concept that begins

Lancelot on this path of fame and destruction. Agravain and Mordred succeed in their attempt to expose Lancelot; whereupon, he runs to Dolorous Guard and takes half of the Round Table with him.

Just to add to the irony of the downfall, Gareth and Gaheris, after deciding to not betray Lancelot with Mordred and Agravain, are accidentally slain by Lancelot when he rescues Queen Guinevere from being burnt for her adulterous actions (Malory 482). The two goodly knights die because of Lancelot's courtly love affair. The deaths of Gaheris and Gareth are also the point at which Camelot officially begins its spiral downward towards oblivion. It is this event that leads Gawain, more irony, and King Arthur to Lancelot's land with the mindset to kill him (487). Gawain and King Arthur's departure for Camelot to kill Lancelot for killing Gareth, who died because of Lancelot's courtly love, allows Mordred the opportunity to overthrow the land and, eventually, kill King Arthur as Mordred himself dies. Thus, Camelot is destroyed, and Guinevere admits to Lancelot, the "flower of knighthood," that "through thee [Lancelot] and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed" (281, 520).

The debate, then, is whether it is greater to adhere to the common, orthodox conceits of a person's time or to subvert the norms in order to achieve illustriousness. In examining Lancelot's decision to break the norm, we are exposed to magnificent feats and stories that have survived centuries. Within those stories, however, the dark truth that he destroys Camelot and the knights of the Round Table is exposed. He bought the title "best knight of the world" at the price of Camelot and its knight (Caxton 60). On the other hand, if we look at the fate of a knight that adhered to the norms of their time, Gareth per say, we see that he dies because of Lancelot's maverick attitude and has achieved very little recognition among the modern masses outside of scholars and Arthurian students. Therefore, if a person desires to be great and achieve the status

of legend, he or she must subvert norms. On the other hand, if a person desires not to be known and fade as ink upon the paper that his or her story *might* be written upon, he or she should pursue and live life in accordance with the laws of normalcy.

Works Cited

Chrétien de Troyes. *The Knight of the Cart*. *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*. Ed. James J. Wilhelm. New York: Garland Pub., 1994. 123-99.

Grimbert, Joan Tasker, ed. Introduction. *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 37.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte Dathur*. Ed. Helen Cooper. Winchester Manuscript. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

---. *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table, Volume 1*. Eds. William Caxton, A. W. Pollard, and Sir Edward Strachey. Caxton's edition. New York: Macmillan, 1903.

Painter, Sidney. *French Chivalry: Chivalric Ideas and Practices in Mediaeval France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1940.

Walters, Lori, ed. Introduction. *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*. New York: Garland, 1996. 19.