

Fragile Identities: An Exploration of Chrétien de Troyes' "Lancelot" and "Yvain"

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I. Introduction

As a writer within the Arthurian canon, Chrétien de Troyes brought a new level of subjectivity and interiority to the heroes of his tales. However, this does not automatically transform his knights into characters of strong, substantial identity. Instead, the very interiority which Chrétien makes evident in the tales of “Lancelot, or the Knight of the Cart” and “Yvain, or the Knight of the Lion” is constantly constructed, torn down, and reconstructed as characters and readers make their way through the stories. Resting on a multi-dimensional foundation of names and signifiers, the knights build out pieces of their subjectivity through standstills in the plot, moments where they reflect on the forces which motivate them and the figures to whom they owe love and loyalty. Love and the beloved take the most prominent position in the identities of both knights, but by no means assure safety or stability. Indeed, identity can very easily be confused or lost entirely. Ultimately, these stories are part of a whole which stresses a constant shifting of identity; they are unified through fragility and fractures.

II. Names and Titles

The titular knights in Chrétien’s stories of Lancelot and Yvain traverse a shifting landscape of perception which frame their thinking and conception of their own interiority. This fluidity of names and signifiers can be surmised by the reader even from the titles of each story. These titles, “Lancelot, or the Knight of the Cart” and “Yvain, or the Knight with the Lion”, immediately indicate the “instability of the identities these names seem to assure” (Kinoshita 112). Thus, the reader enters Chrétien’s works already expecting to explore an unsteady environment of identification. The titles offer no clear conclusion; in fact, each title’s failure to

distinguish a clear preference for one signifier or the other assures the reader of pluralities and exploration *instead of* conclusion.

Despite his presence in the story's title, Lancelot is conspicuously absent in the beginning scenes of his narrative. The story begins with a feast scene at King Arthur's court, and Queen Guinevere's subsequent capture by Meleagant. Though Lancelot is not present in these scenes, his absence is distinctly felt. Throughout the beginning scenes, Arthur and his court act rashly and seemingly without sense; there is very little of the knightly ideal to be found here. Arthur passively accepts Meleagant's attacks on his reputation, and Sir Kay takes on a task far beyond his knightly abilities. In these scenes, Chrétien lays out "a cognitive ground zero, a terrain upon which...new psychological ideas can be experimented with" (Greene 53). The story's initial scenes provide the groundwork for Lancelot as a character distinct from the apparent senselessness of Arthur's court. He will be a thinking knight, one whose mind attempts to construct and comprehend. Therefore, when an "unknown knight" comes upon Arthur's group in the woods, he acts quickly and decisively in accordance with a clear (but as yet unknown) goal (de Troyes 211). Thus, Chrétien introduces Lancelot not by a name, but by the court's and the readers' perception of his initial actions.

Similarly, Lancelot's existence is initially hinted at by Guinevere before his physical entrance into the story. As she mounts her palfrey to be led away by Sir Kay, Guinevere whispers under her breath: "Ah! My beloved, if you knew, I don't believe you'd ever let Kay lead me even a single step away" (de Troyes 210). The queen's words are not overheard by anyone, with the exception of a Count Guinable, who disappears from the story in the space of the same sentence in which he entered it. However, through this character device, Chrétien ensures that Guinevere's personal identification is not merely heard, but *overheard* by readers,

who are now privy to a personal identity kept secret from the rest of the court and the public sphere at large. They expect the arrival of the “unknown knight”, recognize his importance to Guinevere when he at last arrives, and may infer that the urgency with which he acts relates to the rescue of his “beloved”.

Lancelot encounters the cart fairly early in his adventure, at which point the cart becomes an immediately salient point of reference for Lancelot’s public and private identity until his given name is revealed. By choosing to ride in a vehicle synonymous with shame and disgrace (as Chrétien makes well known to the readers in an extended digression on the use of carts as transport for criminals), Lancelot acquires a signifier with multiple meanings. To be seen riding in a cart, especially when one is in such a privileged position as a knight, would invite contempt from all who witnessed it. However, as Lancelot currently lacks a horse (the traditional means of transportation for the questing knight), the cart also represents the quickest way to continue his rescue of the queen. Additionally, Lancelot’s endurance of public shame for private devotion constitutes a kind of offering to his beloved. His love for Guinevere so overwhelms him that he ultimately chooses to compromise his public character in order to avoid sullyng his reputation as her lover. The dimensions of the cart’s meaning are both inextricable from each other, and inextricable from the character of Lancelot himself.

The story’s public and private threads of identity finally unite in a climactic battle scene between Lancelot and his enemy, Meleagant. During this battle, Lancelot is finally named, although, critically, he is named not by himself but by Queen Guinevere. Though the two “halves” of Lancelot’s identity now combine, his status as a lover continues to take precedence over his knightly attributes. As the Knight of the Cart, he is “the willing slave of love, [who] obeys the law of his existence to the point of scorning social respect” (Frappier 160). As

Lancelot, he is the shadowy figure to whom Guinevere dedicated her plea just before being captured; he is her “beloved” who has come to rectify his mistake in letting Sir Kay lead her into danger. More importantly, he is unable to take ownership of his own name until Guinevere bestows it upon him from her position in King Bademagu’s castle window. In doing so, she *allows* him to “acquire the signifier which produces his identity” from her (Gaunt 95). It is implied, then, that she retains ownership over the name and that his status as an ideal lover stems directly from her, and the actions he takes in service of her.

The forms of Yvain’s identity similarly scatter between the public and private understanding. Susan Crane categorizes Yvain’s identification with the Lion as a disguise, what she refers to as an act of “chivalric incognito” in order to “focus attention on the judgment of present actions without regard for lineage, past achievements, or past failures” (Crane 129). Having broken a promise to his lady, Yvain’s given name is now “synonymous with his betrayal” of her love (Kinoshita 136); his connection with the noble lion thus offers him an identity linked to much more admirable characteristics. Under the name “the Knight with the Lion”, he is able to rebuild his status as a worthy knight and lover without reference to any “past failures”. However, in the world of courtly romance, romance is naturally inextricable from the court. “The Knight of the Lion” makes himself known by circulating news of his feats across the lands of Logres and Landuc. The public audience then accordingly views him as the strong and noble knight he has set out to become. Nonetheless, his motivations for the accomplishment of daring deeds are purely private. Though it is invisible to the public eye, his quest for public renown is really a kind of externalized penance for his betrayal of a private love.

III. Moments of Interiority: Thinking Through Reason and Love

Chrétien exposes the intricacies of identity construction within periodic moments of interiority throughout each story. In these episodes, Chrétien suspends the action of the narrative in order to “[open] up the mind of the hero, revealing the conflicting agitation of Reason and Love”, as well as the overwhelming presence of the beloved, in it (Greene 61). Although these moments do not necessarily translate to self-awareness or action, they nevertheless establish Chrétien’s heroes as capable of subjectivity. However, this is not a subjectivity grounded in wholly individual “perceptions, emotions, feelings, passions, judgements, and thoughts...[but in] the universal man, abstracted from his adventures and eccentricities” (Greene 63). The spaces of interiority which Chrétien creates in pockets between the narrative action therefore serve to transform Lancelot and Yvain into “everymen” who encapsulate a broader state of subjectivity in Chrétien’s Arthurian world.

Lancelot’s encounter with the cart forms the first moment of suspension in his journey and exemplifies the structure of such narrative pauses. Chrétien skillfully separates “adventure time” and narrative, chronological time in order to open a space in which “a process of thinking about events, both presently occurring and past adventures, is at work” (Stahuljak 78). As Zrinka Stahuljak defines it, “adventure time” consists of the specific temporal and spatial configurations of narrative which produce meaning in the Chrétien romances (Stahuljak 77). As Lancelot confronts the cart, Chrétien immediately confuses streams of time; in chronological time, Lancelot “hesitated but two steps before climbing in[to the cart]” (de Troyes 211). In “adventure time”, Chrétien jumps into the future of Lancelot’s quest to reveal the implications of Lancelot’s hesitation, writing that he would “regret this moment of hesitation and be accursed and shamed for it” (de Troyes 211-212). As Chrétien then expands on the minutia of Lancelot’s hesitation,

time splits even further. By chronological time, Lancelot has already passed through his moments of hesitation and has gotten into the cart; in “adventure time”, he is still hesitating.

This expansion opens room for Chrétien to stage a debate between Reason and Love within the head of his hero. While “Love, who held sway within his heart, urged and commanded him to climb into the cart at once”, “Reason...counselled him not to do anything for which he might incur disgrace or reproach” (de Troyes 212). The decision-making process that Chrétien allows readers to witness, then, is not a function of an individual human mind. Instead, it is externalized into a staged dispute between two universal states of being. The intrasubjective is thus transformed into a kind of intersubjective exchange; “the individual, on this account, encompasses society” (Kay, *Chansons de geste* 127). The forces of Reason and Love, though they work here within one man, cannot be limited to one subjectivity. They become distanced from the unique individual, remaining overarching entities which ultimately extend beyond the knight himself.

Whereas the debate between Love and Reason during the cart scene takes place entirely in Lancelot’s mind, his spoken debate between Cowardice and honor in the doorway of the feigned-rape scene holds clear implications for knightly action. Within moments of its beginning, Lancelot’s speech immediately veers into confusion. He announces that he has “set off in pursuit of nothing less than the queen, Guinevere. I must not have a hare’s heart when I am in quest of her...I am disgraced if I don’t go in to her” (de Troyes 221). In just a few sentences, Lancelot conflates the queen and the damsel by failing to distinguish between his use of “her”. This confusion is only worsened by Lancelot’s next few words, as he states that he is “so shamed and filled with despair that I feel I should die for having delayed here so long” (de Troyes 221). The confusion of language which appeared earlier in his speech begins now to have consequences for

his action; he does not appear to understand his own instructions and continually fails to put them into physical movement. He denounces Cowardice and inaction, but fails to act for the minutes it takes him to sort through this speech. Additionally, his ability to fight appears to be conditional. At the end of his speech, he asks himself “if the way to her were free and those fiends were to let me cross to her unchallenged, what honour would there be in it?” (de Troyes 221). Any action on his part seems to be dependent upon the movements and decisions of his partners in this scene. In her analysis of the production of knowledge in Chrétien’s works, Zrinka Stahuljak concludes that “knowledge is not arrived at through introspection, but intersubjectively” (Stahuljak 104). This interpretation is neatly demonstrated in this scene, as Lancelot’s monologue goes unanswered by the others in the room. Thus, he can gain no knowledge from the circular confusion of his own thoughts, and his action stalls for a much longer period of time than is appropriate for a noble knight facing such a morally reprehensible situation.

IV. Love Transforms Identity

Time is held in suspension yet again when Lancelot, falling into deep meditation on his lover Guinevere, appears to lose the knightly dimension of his identity to the overwhelming force of Love. Chrétien describes him as “a man with no strength or defence against love” (de Troyes 216). Here, love is again positioned as a force external to Lancelot. It does not seem to originate within him, but to assault his mind and sense from without. His thoughts are so completely overtaken by love that he forgets all trappings of knighthood: “He forgot who he was; he was uncertain whether or not he truly existed; he was unable to recall his own name; he did not know if he were armed or not, nor where he was going nor whence he came” (de Troyes 216). Each of these forgotten elements appear carefully chosen to exemplify a complete absence

of knighthood. Chrétien follows by stating that “He remembered nothing at all save one creature, for whom he forgot all others” (de Troyes 216). In this, Lancelot forgets that he has an identity separate from that of Guinevere’s lover. Any action and thought which is unattached to her thus disappears, and the reader is given to understand that if left to his own devices, Lancelot may never have resurfaced from the sea of his thoughts. Indeed, Lancelot fails to rouse from his meditations by his own will; instead, he is forced to awaken when the physical realities of knighthood finally catch up to him.

Chrétien also does not place Lancelot in a specific spatial location until after this list of forgotten pieces of identity. Thus, when Lancelot is unable to recall “where he was going nor whence he came”, his present as well as his past and future locations become unidentifiable both to him and the reader (de Troyes 216). Here, one must recall that Lancelot, as an unknown knight, happened upon Sir Gawain and King Arthur in the forest and would not reveal from “whence he came” even then. As Guinevere is held in an unnamed land (one to which Lancelot has only scant directions, and which he must rely on the aid of others to find), Lancelot’s future location is also obscured from both reader and knight. Lost in his meditation, Lancelot is lost in space and can no longer be placed in the physical setting of the story. He appears not even to have a physical body; Chrétien notes that “he was so intent upon her alone that he did not hear, see, or pay attention to anything” (de Troyes 216). His meditations on the subject of his lover have apparently so overwhelmed him, he essentially ceases to exist as a corporeal being. He has become a pure manifestation of his love for Guinevere, and thus is unable to inhabit space and time as a physical body or as a knight.

Lancelot is again lost in meditation on Guinevere when he sees the queen’s comb, and her hair attached to it. Upon learning that the comb belongs to her, he “did not have strength

enough to keep from falling forward and was obliged to catch himself upon the saddle-bow” (de Troyes 225). Such a strong, bodily reminder of his lover weakens the physical indications of his knight-like behavior and his performance of that identity. Throughout this meditation, Chrétien uses a constant stream of extremes to describe Lancelot’s ecstasy upon such a discovery. He “[touches] it a hundred thousand times to his eye, his mouth, his forehead and his cheeks...[and expresses] his joy in every way imaginable” (de Troyes 225). Such descriptions are typical linguistic conventions of courtly romance, and through them Lancelot inhabits completely the dimension of the courtly lover. Forced off his steed (an identifier of his knighthood) by the power of Guinevere’s hair, he slips neatly and wholly into a conventionally romantic state of being. Chrétien continues on to say that “He would not have traded [the hair] for a cart loaded with emeralds or carbuncles...he felt no need for any other aid” (de Troyes 225). Chrétien’s use of the words “cart” and “aid” here are especially salient, as at this point in his quest Lancelot is still very much associated with the criminal cart, and the aid he accepted by entering it. Through this meditation, Chrétien highlights the prominence of Lancelot’s status as a lover; he also emphasizes the cart’s association with Lancelot’s love for Guinevere over and above its significance as a symbol of public disgrace.

Yvain, watching the Lady of Landuc’s grief-stricken madness from a window, is suddenly struck with love for her and sent into a state of complete inaction. Chrétien describes the moment Yvain is struck, writing that “New Love has sweetened him with her sugar and honeycomb, and has made a foray into his lands where she has captured her prey” (de Troyes 311). Love’s entrance into Yvain’s body and mind is framed in the language of questing and hunting, of an interaction between predator and prey. Completely overwhelmed by his “capture”, Yvain loses all sensibility. Chrétien emphasizes this loss by comparing Yvain to a hypothetical,

logical figure. He states, in quite a matter-of-fact way, that “someone else, who preferred his freedom to remaining here, might have been upset, but for him it was all the same whether the gates were closed or opened...He would rather have died than leave (de Troyes 313-314). The force of Love, having entered his mind, roots him to the spot so he cannot move under any circumstance. Much like Lancelot before him, Yvain ceases to identify even with his own physical body under the pressure of Love.

V. Incomprehensibility and the Loss of Identity

Yvain’s story begins not with his journey, but with the retelling of the adventure of his cousin, Calogrenant. The substance of his cousin’s story, though it holds great implications for the plot, also implies a theme of division between the heart and senses (specifically hearing). Calogrenant begins his tale by asking his listeners to “lend me your hearts and ears, for words that are not understood by the heart are lost completely” (de Troyes 297). By framing the beginning tale in this way, Chrétien also situates Yvain’s journey upon this stage. Calogrenant’s initial demand for both the comprehension of the ears and the heart immediately invites the reader to consider whether the characters in “Yvain, or the Knight with the Lion” will be able to understand the things they see and hear.

Suspension of plot-based action in favor of externalized thought and meditations is not merely the property of knights; the Lady of Landuc inhabits odd spaces of expanded self-talk where she fails to comprehend her own conclusions. Mourning the disappearance of her husband’s killer, “the lady was so grief-stricken that she quite lost her mind and cried out as if she were mad” (de Troyes 309). This statement lies in contrast to the rest of the lady’s speech, which is a rather straight-forward assessment of the facts and an assignment of blame based on

them. For the majority of her speech, she appears to be leading to a few simple conclusions: that God will have wronged her should it be His will that Yvain escape, that Yvain's invisibility must indicate that he is either a phantom, devil, or coward and it then follows that he must have used deceit to kill such an excellent knight as her husband (de Troyes 309-310). Chrétien then renders these sensible conclusions meaningless as he sums up the lady's monologue; "Thus the lady argued within herself; thus she struggled alone, thus she confounded herself" (de Troyes 310). The Lady of Landuc does not appear to have heeded Calogrenant's wishes at the beginning of the story; she has not taken her own words to heart.

Yvain's descent into madness is framed in the same way as Calogrenant's division between the ears and the heart, and represents the ultimate failure of comprehension and loss of identity. Chrétien begins his description of Yvain's madness by writing that "his anguish grew constantly, for everything he saw added to his grief and everything he heard troubled him" (de Troyes 330). These words recall Calogrenant's exhortation to both receive and comprehend the raw stimuli one might encounter. In this instance, sensory input enters Yvain's body, but serves only to torture him, instead of bringing him to awareness. Indeed, Yvain ends up so far from the realm of comprehension that he completely loses his mind; "such a great tempest arose in his head that he went mad" (de Troyes 330). Yvain's madness represents an "extreme example of...loss of referentiality and signification" (Stahuljak 85). Having been stripped of his identity as a lover, Yvain now divests himself of all other dimensions of his former status as a knight and a member of Arthurian society. In doing so, he loses the foundations of his ability to comprehend, as well as his ability to construct meaning.

VI. Conclusion

The subjectivities of Lancelot and Yvain are elusive; their identities are composed of a spiderweb of signifiers, personal associations, and obedience to powerful external forces. As the two knights embark on their respective quests, Chrétien's heroes straddle the line between the public and private, as well as the divide between knighthood and love. Throughout the journey, moments of interiority are consistently opposed to necessary action, and often paradoxically inhibit the construction of knowledge. To construct meaning out of such a fragile foundation is perhaps a more daring feat than many of the plot-based achievements of either of these two knights.

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