

Sword in the Middle: The Iconography of Courtly Love in the Arthurian Romance

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Since Gaston Paris gave it a controversial but surprisingly enduring name in 1883, courtly love, or *amour courtois*, has come a long way.¹ It was once hailed as the revolutionary sentiment that “erected impassable barriers between us [the Western ‘us,’ in fact] and the classical past or the Oriental present” (Lewis 4). In the course of the twentieth century, the barbarous Orient had been enlightened by this great Western invention, while new barriers had been gradually erected between the now globalized us and the courtly-patriarchal nexus. The evolution of Feminism and gender studies in the last quarter of the century brought about a major reorientation of scholarship on courtly love.² The collusion of courtly ideology and medieval misogyny has been mapped in detail. The lady has stepped down

¹ For a chronological survey of modern scholarship on courtly love from 1800 to 1975, see Boase 18-61.

² For a critical review of Feminist scholarship up to 2000, see Burns, “Courtly Love.” I am much indebted to her thorough, well-balanced survey.

from the pedestal and vanished, in whose absence the male lover has emerged as the sole subject of desire and beneficiary of patriarchal sexual economy. With its ideological armor stripped down to the bone, we now see more transparently how courtly love registers male fantasy, traffic in women, or even masochistic narcissism beneath the surface of *Frauendienst*, or lady-worship.³ Recently, there has been a series of revisionist efforts to rediscover female subjectivity or resistance in male-authored courtly texts.⁴ As far as the Arthurian romance—the courtly narrative *par excellence*—is concerned, however, one big question still remains unanswered, all progresses and paradigmatic shifts notwithstanding. Why does the power of love seem to diminish so drastically in later romance texts—more specifically, those written around or after the middle decades of the thirteenth century? Or why is Lancelot's complete devotion to Guinevere in *Le chevalier de la charrette* and the *Prose Lancelot* so easily compromised in later versions of medieval Arthuriana, including the Post-Vulgate Cycle, the *Prose Tristan*, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*?

It is not a viable scenario that women's social standing began to decline radically in French society, or anywhere else in Western Europe, at some point in the thirteenth century. Even if there were some localized incidents, they could not add up to any historically significant generalization. From the perspective of women's history, crucial social changes occurred predominantly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, not in the thirteenth.⁵

³ E.g. see Bloch; Gravdal 42-71; Hult; Kay; Krueger. For courtly love as narcissism, see Lacan; Žižek.

⁴ E.g. see Burns, *Bodytalk*; Krueger.

⁵ In eleventh- and twelfth-century northern France, the cognatic or bilateral concept of lineage had been gradually replaced by the agnatic lineage or patrilineage, which, many scholars agree, left the single most damaging effect on elite women's social status (Herlihy 82-98; McNamara and Wemple 114). The transition from bride gift to dowry was a byproduct of this transformation in kinship structure, too (Stuard 137-42). The Gregorian Reform of the late eleventh century, which enforced clerical celibacy, may have been another negative influence on women (Stuard

More reasonable than simple historicizing is thus Joan Ferrante's observation that "the decline in the positive symbolism of women in the thirteenth century is but one facet of a pervasive intellectual constraint" distinctive to the period (11). Or this seemingly anti-feminist turnaround may be attributed to "the gradual deconstruction of the genre's thematic core—a phenomenon characteristic not only of overgrown romance cycles but of any overgrown literary genre," which I have associated elsewhere with the weakening of the crusading ideal in later romance narratives ("From *La chanson de Roland*" 102). Neither of these, however, provides a convincing explanation for the increasingly male-centered, thus in some sense more realistic, attitudes towards woman and love in the late medieval Arthurian romance.

The present paper, I hope, will serve as an iconographic introduction to my larger, more bookish project, in which I am planning to trace how chivalric masculinity was constructed, consolidated, and reconfigured in the Arthurian romances from Chrétien de Troyes to Malory. I shall attempt to answer the question I have raised above partially and tentatively by showcasing the recurrent Arthurian iconography of two lovers embracing each other in a highly symbolic fashion. My point will be that what is changed is not so much the lady as the knight, that it is not female agency but the special formula of male servitude that has actually vanished. Courtly love at its best, I shall argue, is governed by the strictly coordinated metaphysics of eroticism that at once mobilizes and forecloses the sexuality of both partners for the sake of feudal ideology.

My first example comes from one of the earliest surviving versions of

135-37). There were some signs of progress as well. By the mid-twelfth century, for instance, the "consent *per verba de presenti*" of both partners had been recognized as the sole legal condition for valid and binding marriage, which "undermined the authority of the parents, fathers in particular," allowing the bride and groom more room for autonomy—theoretically at least, if not practically (Herlihy 81).

the Tristan romance. The two lovers are hiding out in the forest of Morrois, away from the Cornish court and King Mark's murderous rage. It is "a summer day at harvest time" ("un jor d'esté, / En icel tens que l'en aoste"; *Romance of Tristan* 87; *Roman de Tristan* 1774-75). As usual, they lie side by side in the bower "made of green branches" ("fu de vers rains faite") to take a nap (88; 1801). Oddly, however, they arrange their bodies in an utterly unnatural position this time, as if they had some psychic premonition:

First Yseut lay down; then Tristan drew his sword, put it between their bodies and lay down himself. Yseut was wearing her tunic . . . and Tristan kept his trousers on. . . . Hear how they were lying: she had put one arm under Tristan's neck and the other, I think, over him; her arms were clasped tightly around him. Tristan in his turn had his arms around her, for their affection was not feigned. Their mouths were close together, yet there was a space between them and their bodies were not touching. (88)

Yseut fu premire couchie;
 Tristran se couche et trait s'espee,
 Entre les deux chars l'a posee.
 Sa chemise out Yseut vestue

 E Tristran ses braies ravoit.

 Oez com il se sont couchiez:
 Desoz le col Tristran a mis
 Son braz, et l'autre, ce m'est vis,
 Li out par dedesus geté;
 Estroitement l'ot acolé,
 Et il la rot de ses braz çainte.
 Lor amistié ne fu pas fainte.
 Les bouches furent pres asises,
 Et neporquant si ot devises
 Que n'asenbloient pas ensemble. (1804-25)

While their arms and upper bodies are intertwined, and their lips “close together,” there is “a space between them” created by the strategic position of the sword, so their lower bodies are “not touching” despite the obvious physical proximity between them. This is exactly how they are discovered by King Mark, who soon arrives on the scene, following the forester’s lead. The king raises his sword to kill them both, but he overcomes his suspicion and takes pity on them in the end, persuaded by their strange posture and the presence of “the naked sword between them” (“la nue espee / Qui entre eus deus les deseerot”; 92; 1998-99). Before he leaves, he covers Iseut’s eyes with his fur gloves to shield her from “the ray of sunlight” (“le rai”; 93; 2041), takes off the wedding ring from her now “woefully thin” (mervelles . . . gresliz) finger (88; 1814), and, most significantly, withdraws “the sword from between them” (“L’epée qui entre eus deus est”), placing “his own in its place” (“la soue i”; 93; 2049, 2050). This puzzling iconography of two eroticized yet artificially separated bodies and the naked phallic symbol of the second male in-between, appears only in Bérout’s version of the medieval Tristan legend (c. 1155-87).⁶ Although it is not Bérout’s text, but Thomas of Britain’s, that is known as the courtly version, this image serves as a perfect visual representation of how courtly love operates in the medieval Arthurian romance.

A fascinating variation of this iconography is found in the *Prose Lancelot* (c. 1225), which forms the long central branch of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, “the most widely read and the most influential group of Arthurian prose romances” written in the Middle Ages (Frappier 295). It is not long after Lancelot and Queen Guinevere have their first kiss. King Arthur and the queen are holding a court at Quimper-Corentin, while Lancelot is pining

⁶ There is no corresponding scene in the surviving fragments of Thomas of Britain’s *Tristan* (c. 1170-75). In Gottfried von Strassburg’s Medieval High German version (c. 1200-10), the lovers do not show any sign of intimacy, deliberately lying down “a good way apart from each other, just as two men might lie, not like a man and a woman” (270); King Mark does not replace Tristan’s sword with his own, either.

away in the remote Welsh borderland of Sorelois, where he is detained by his overly devoted friend Galehot. One day, a damsel comes to the court, bearing “a shield slung upside down around her neck” (“*.I. escu a son col ce desos deseure*”; *Lancelot-Grail* 2: 167; *Lancelot* 8: 204). She is a messenger from the Lady of the Lake, Lancelot’s foster mother, who has sent the shield as a gift for the queen. The shield is “completely split, from the base right up to the top” (“*tous fendus des le pié jusqu’en la pene*”); “only the cross-piece of the boss . . . kept the two parts from falling apart” (“*amont ne ne tienent les .II. parties a nule rien que eles ne chent fors au bras de la borcle*”; 2: 168; 8: 206). The figures of a knight and a lady are painted thereon:

And on one of the parts of the shield there was a knight, as richly armed as the artist’s skill could make him, except for his head; on the other half was the most beautiful lady ever portrayed. At the top they were so close that he had his arms around her neck, and they would have been kissing, had it not been for the split in the shield, and below they were as far from one another as they could be. (2: 168)

Et l’une des parties de l’escu avoit .I. chevalier si richement armé com chil le sot miex faire qui le fist, fors la teste; et en l’autre moitié estoit portraite une si bele dame com on la pot plus bele portraire, si estoient par en haut si pres a pres que li uns tenoit ses bras au col a l’autre et s’entrebaisoient, se ne fust la fendeure de l’escu, mais par desous estoient si loing li uns de l’autre com plus pooient. (8: 206)

There is a striking, almost unsettling, resemblance between this image and the position of Tristan and Iseut’s sleeping bodies, except that the sword in the middle is now replaced by the lengthwise crack dividing the field of representation into two equal halves. Again, the knight and the lady have their arms around each other’s neck, and they are all but kissing, while their lower bodies are “as far from one another as they could be.” According to the damsel, the split shield indicates that “so far there have

been only kisses and embraces" ("plus n'i a encor que de baisier et d'acoler") between the knight and the lady—that is, between Lancelot and Guinevere (2: 168; 8: 207). When their love is finally consummated in a later episode, the shield becomes "completely whole, without a crack" ("tout entier sans fendure"; 2: 228; 8: 444). Whether or not the lower bodies of the painted figures remain separated thereafter is left unexplained. They may well have to do so, however: the way the two lovers' bodies are positioned does not simply account for the progress of their physical relationship; as we shall see, the aesthetics of courtly love itself cannot dispense with this widening space in the middle, which is conceptual and ideological as well as visual and physical.

The most vivid, and probably the best known, version of the same iconography is the miniature illustration of Lancelot and Guinevere's first kiss in an early fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Prose Lancelot* (Pierpont Morgan Library ms. m.805, fol. 67r).⁷ Although the manuscript itself seems to have been produced around 1310-15—nearly a century after the composition of the Lancelot-Grail Cycle—the miniature captures the spirit of the original text better than any other visual description available. The war between King Arthur and Galehot, lord of the Lointaines Iles, is now over. In a gallant gesture to win Lancelot's friendship, Galehot has sacrificed his imperial ambition, surrendering to the king on the brink of final victory. During his subsequent stay with the king's household, he learns about Lancelot's love for Guinevere and volunteers to arrange a tryst for them; one evening, they meet in his presence on the meadows near the king's pavilion. Then follows a long interrogation of love, at the end of which the queen grants Lancelot her love, taking him "by the chin" ("par le menton") and kissing him "long enough in front of Galehot"⁸ ("devant Galahot assés longuement"; *Lancelot-Grail* 2: 146; *Lancelot* 8: 116). It is this

⁷ For my discussion of this miniature, see "Asð wang romaens" 334-35.

⁸ The translation is modified here to match the original phrase grammatically.

celebrated scene, later to be immortalized by Dante in Canto 5 of *Inferno*, that the miniature reproduces with marvelous details. In the left half of the picture, Lancelot and Guinevere are sitting on a bench and about to kiss each other, their torsos strained into an extremely awkward posture. The awkwardness is caused partly by Galehot's presiding/intervening position, and partly by the two lovers' wondrously inflexible legs, which, despite their confronting upper bodies, are aligned not only with each other's, but also with Galehot's. As in two previous images, the near union of the lovers' upper bodies are, here too, apparently eroticized. Their lips are "winning near the goal," to borrow Keats's words, and their faces, converging into the apex of the isosceles triangle formed by their reclining bodies. Guinevere holds Lancelot's cheeks with both arms, while Lancelot has his right hand placed on her left forearm (and his left elbow, on Galehot's knee). But their lower bodies are yet again safeguarded by the establishment of a neutral zone in the middle, which is now occupied neither by a phallic sword nor by violently split empty space, but by an actual masculine body. This image is in sharp contrast with what happens in the right half of the picture, where Guinevere's two ladies-in-waiting and Galehot's seneschal are sitting under the trees and engaged in a conversation, each turning her/his entire front body quite comfortably towards the direction of the other sex. This parallel image emphatically sets off the unnaturalness and performativity of the famed kiss scene.

In the iconography of high medieval eroticism I have highlighted so far, the lovers' bodies are always arranged into the shape of an isosceles triangle, which neatly diagrams three key elements of "authentic" courtly love. First, while the two lovers' heads are joining at the apex of the triangle, their lower bodies are sliding away from each other along the baseline. This unique composition reminds us that courtly relationship is promoted only on the level of pure reason and high ideal, and that it is clinically sedated and safely de-eroticized as it goes down to the level of

sexuality. Of course, this does not mean that courtly love in the Arthurian romance is a purely platonic affair as it is in Dante's *Vita nuova* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Lancelot and Guinevere do kiss and have sex. Their sexuality, however, is meticulously conditioned by so many convoluted rules, rituals, and obstacles, both mental and physical, that their chance for enjoying each other exclusively for themselves approximates to zero as the narrative progresses further and further.

Second, the lovers' bodies form the two opposite sides of the isosceles triangle, so they are supposed to be of the same length and inclined at the same angle. Such configuration demands that both the male and the female actors of this erotic game be equally contingent on and vulnerable to the trigonometry of ideological mandates. That is to say, courtly love in its purest form exploits and victimizes participants of both sexes, not just woman. So it is not femininity alone that is subject to rigorous construction in the best French Arthurian romances; the courtly masculinity of the ferocious-yet-submissive, carnal-yet-ascetic lover boy is also an ideological construct.

Third and last, the problematic middle space, out of which the lovers are evacuated, is not empty after all; there is almost always somebody or something looming perpendicular to the base line, whether it is the sword (phallus) of the husband, an enigmatic split, or the second man who happens to be the first man's friend and the woman's rival.⁹ The polymorphism of this intervening phallic object is metonymic by nature; as I have suggested elsewhere, the woman's husband and the man's friend serve the same ideological function as avatars of the sovereign will, the true center of the courtly world ("Asð wang romaens" 343). Strategically, the symbolic sword in the middle, or any of its metonyms, prevents the lower bodies of the lovers from making a direct contact with each other. In doing

⁹ For my discussion of Lancelot and Galehot's homoerotic relationship, see "Between Guinevere and Galehot."

so, however, it occupies the privileged position from which it can approach and manipulate both of them. The Pierpont Morgan miniature makes it abundantly clear that it is none but Galehot who is the true leading actor and presider of the kissing scene.

What is most significant for my argument is that courtly love presupposes the “obliqueness” of the male subject—his inability to stand upright or claim a true subject position. Love ennobles the lover and increases his *worldly* renown, in return of which he has to maintain an apparently *unworldly* lifestyle, appropriating in a curious way the monastic ideals of chastity, poverty, and obedience. He must refine and restrain his sexual desire—and his virility, too—according to the prescriptions of *courtoisie*; he must prefer to be a landless bachelor, or “a poor man and a good knight” (“povres hom et bons chevaliers”), rather than to be “a rich but recreant king” (“riches rois recreanz”; *Lancelot* 6: 170; my translation); and in theory at least, he must be absolutely obedient to his lady, even though that does not make her powerful or independent in any practical sense. The ultimate recipient of his service is thus not the lady, but the courtly system itself, which is under strong (often camouflaged) masculine control. Despite her seemingly exalted status, the lady is inevitably displaced and marginalized in the machinery of courtly love, which is now a well-established fact. In some sense, she is also used “as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men,” as Eve Sedgwick has argued in her groundbreaking study of male homosocial desire (25-26). Sedgwick’s model of the erotic triangle, inspired by Gayle Rubin’s interpretation of Claude Lévi-Strauss, however, is not straightly applicable to courtly aesthetics for several reasons. First, conventional gender asymmetry is more or less counterbalanced in a typical courtly setting by underlying asymmetry in male homosocial relationship. Second, the sword in the middle, or anything with similar symbolic implications, is expected to sever or forestall a bond

rather than to cement one. Moreover, it is men, as well as women, who are exchangeable and replaceable in the classic triangle of courtly love—a point that has hardly drawn serious critical attention so far.¹⁰

The debilitating effect of courtly love on the male lover is clearly shown in a later development of the split shield motif in the *Prose Lancelot*. Lancelot is now captured by the Saxon invaders and goes “genuinely mad” (“erragiés sans ghile”) in their prison (*Lancelot-Grail* 2: 230; *Lancelot* 8: 452). Released still in madness and brought back to Guinevere, he happens to pick up the same shield, which now performs a strange power on him. Once he slings it round his neck, he regains his sanity, but it torments him unbearably. As soon as he takes it off, however, he becomes “as mad as before” (“autresi forsenés comme devant”; 2: 231). As a lover, then, Lancelot has two alternatives at hand: if he ceased to love, he would instantly be a madman; if he kept loving, he could maintain his rational and civilized self, but only with a terrible, excruciating pain. In other words, he is destined to stray eternally in the limbo of subjectivity, incapable either of escaping the system altogether or of taking advantage of it too much.

This extraordinariness of courtly iconography looks all the more extraordinary when it is set against another heraldic representation of Lancelot and Guinevere in a later Arthurian romance. A shield with the painted image of a knight and a lady appears again in the *Prose Tristan* (c. 1250), which is later reproduced in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (1469-70). I shall follow Malory’s version. The stage is again Cornwall during King Mark’s reign. Tristram has been just released from Darras’s prison. Before the day is over, however, this luckless guy is unwittingly stuck in Morgan le Fay’s

¹⁰ A case in point is Esclados le Roux in Chétien’s *Chevalier au lion*, who is replaced by Yvain as the protector of Laudine’s territory. Once in Esclados’s place, Yvain is exposed to the same danger, although a second replacement is not realized in the narrative itself. See Kim, “Asó wang romaens” 328-31.

castle, where he is offered freedom in the next morning on condition that he carry a special shield to “the Castell of the Harde Roche, where Kyngge Arthure hath cryed a grete turnamente” (333). On the shield are painted the figures of a king, a queen, and a knight. So the actors involved are roughly the same, but the iconography has an entirely different composition this time: “Than the shyld was brought forthe, and the fylde was gouldes with a kyngge and a quene therein paynted, and a knyght stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge upon the kynges hede and the othir upon the quenys hede” (334). The king and the queen are respectively identified as Arthur and Guinevere by Morgan herself. Then there is this overshadowing knight, who is not only standing above the royal couple, but also literally stepping on their heads with each of his feet. Although Morgan refuses to identify him, his identity is not ambiguous at all: he is Lancelot, of course. According to Malory, “Morgan ordayned that shyld to put Sir Launcelot to a rebuke, to that entente that Kyngge Arthure might undirstonde the love betweene them” (334). This shield, then, is made by Lancelot and Guinevere’s sworn enemy for the purpose of ruining them, so it does not serve exactly the same function as the one sent by the Lady of the Lake. Still, it is true that this new iconography nicely encapsulates Lancelot’s changed position in the triangle of heterosexual relationship. The fine and artificial balance between the two lovers that once defined the iconography of courtly love is now lost for good; instead, the male lover occupies the apex of the triangle—if this is a triangle at all—relegating both the woman and the second man/husband onto the same low baseline. Now Lancelot stands out not only as the world’s best knight, barring his saintly son Galahad, but also as the self-sufficient agent of his own desire and behavior who no longer has to be regulated by the strictest ideology of eroticism.

When courtly love first emerged in narrative literature in the second half of the twelfth century, there was the sword in the middle, or strangely

polymorphous central phallic surveillance, which licensed and policed the sexuality of both female and male subjects in various disguises. Why this original schema ceased to function is a question beyond the scope of this paper. One point of interest, however, is that the life span of courtly ideology proper coincided with the process through which the knights, or *milites*, became de facto members of the feudal aristocracy in medieval France.¹¹ According to Georges Duby, the upper and lower levels of the French aristocracy—"castellans and simple knights"—had merged into a single ruling class "sometime between 1180 and 1220 to 1230" (178). This transformation of the aristocracy was initiated by kings and princes, who employed both knights' service and the ideal of chivalry to vanquish the autonomy of local castellans. Of course, we do have fossilized specimens of pure courtly aesthetics from a later period, such as the Pierpont Morgan miniature. Yet it is quite arguable that after the middle decades of the thirteenth century—or when the equation between knighthood and aristocracy had been firmly established—chivalric masculinity went through a notable transformation in the Arthurian romance, which engendered a breed of knightly heroes apparently less romantic and more blatantly misogynistic than Lancelot and Tristan at their best. By the time the second, long version of the *Prose Tristan* was compiled around 1250, it was no longer necessary for the lovers to place a sword between their demure yet high-strung bodies, or for their surveillant to replace it with his own. The naked sword (or what it stood for) became less dangerous as the Arthurian hero outgrew his initial obsession with the feminine and the erotic, occupying himself more readily with the homosocial pursuit of arms; meanwhile, the two swords became less clearly distinguishable for ideological purpose as the knight had triumphantly marched into the rank of the aristocracy.

¹¹ For my discussion of this possibility, see "Asö wang romaens" 343-48.

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ABSTRACT**Sword in the Middle:
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The iconography of two lovers embracing each other in an unnatural yet symbolic fashion recurs in the medieval French Arthurian romances—especially, those in which the idea of courtly love is preserved in its purest form. There is a striking resemblance between the arrangement of Tristan and Iseut's sleeping bodies in Bérout's *Roman de Tristan* and the picture of a knight and a lady painted on the split shield sent by the Lady of the Lake in the *Prose Lancelot*, which are reproduced, again with an uncanny resemblance, by the famous illustration of Lancelot and Guinevere kissing each other in an early-fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Prose Lancelot*. This iconography marvelously sums up the *modus operandi* of medieval courtly love at its best, which at once mobilizes and forecloses the sexuality of both man and woman for the sake of feudal ideology.

Key Words | Arthurian romance, courtly love, iconography, eroticism, sexuality, masculinity