

# SOCIETAL SPHERES: RECONSTRUCTING GENDER THROUGH ROMANCE

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my daughter, Autumn: may the world, for you, not be limited by societal expectations but broadened by a depth of understanding of the way those expectations have bound women before you. We stand on the shoulders of those who have broken free before us, and there is still much to do with this knowledge for those who will stand on our shoulders; May the view from my shoulders be clearer for you — and yours the next.

## ABSTRACT

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For centuries, people have been captivated by tales of questing knights, fair ladies, and magical encounters. As someone who grew up immersed in the fantasy genre, transitioning from the Brian Jacques *Redwall* series as a child to George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* as an adult, I always wondered how such escapism into distant fantasy worlds could be so relatable to my life. When investigating the history of the source material, I found that chivalric romances have been crafted to suit various audiences and purposes, providing sociopolitical commentary throughout the literary eras. In this thesis, I investigate the impact of the chivalric romance on medieval, Victorian, and contemporary culture by exploring Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century romances *Erec and Enide* and *Lancelot*, Heldris de Comualle's thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence*, Matthew Arnold's nineteenth-century *Tristram and Iseult*, and George R.R. Martin's twenty-first-century *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Using a feminist theoretical framework, I highlight how these authors interwove social commentary with gender expectations. What I found the most fascinating is that despite being separated by centuries, these authors (and their listening and reading audiences) grappled with similar philosophical questions on gender and the societal roles that still resonate today. The treatment of such topics in romance is one reason why the chivalric romance has endured from the twelfth into the twenty-first century.

KEY WORDS: *Romanz*; *Matière*; *Conjointure*; *Interlacement*; Chivalry; Femininity; Masculinity; Gender fluidity; Medieval; Medievalism; Neo-medievalism

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To Dr. Kimberly Bell: when I admitted in your *Gaming the Medieval Text* course that I did not yet know my literary era of expertise but that I loved *Game of Thrones*, your answer set the tone for my graduate program. Your eyes lit up, and you said, “Oh, you should definitely write about that for your term paper! There is a lot that you can explore about game theory in *Game of Thrones*.” From the very start, you encouraged me to explore *why* it is that I love what I love, and watching your own passion for your content, too, was infectious. Through my research in your course, our independent study, and Thesis I and II, you have facilitated a greater understanding of myself and what it is about the Medieval Fantasy genre that resonates with me. Thanks to you, my experience in the graduate program has been exceptionally meaningful.

To Dr. Kandi Tayebi and Dr. Rob Adams: I greatly appreciate the time you have both dedicated to mentor me through this thesis. Dr. Tayebi, you are the reason I decided to write a thesis, and the writing group you facilitated played a tremendous role in my motivation to complete the thesis. Dr. Adams, you encouraged me to step outside of my literary comfort zone by incorporating Victorian medievalism and, in doing so, made my thesis stronger and expanded my knowledge.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction: Gendering Romance

A critical part of the evolution of humanity has been the preservation of human thought through writing, wherein a time machine of human experience allows for glimpses into a) what historical societies were like and b) attitudes of those who lived in these societies. Over time, writing branched into many genres used to convey various meanings and purposes. One such genre of writing, romance (*romanz*), has been adapted over the course of centuries, from the Hellenistic romances of ca. 100 BC-200 AD to the present-day romance novel. For the Greeks, romance was “a reflection of a changing society,” emerging in the third, “post-civic” period (Reardon 116). The purpose of Greek romance was to transform epic ideologies into a more accessible form, a “latter-day epic for Everyman . . . the open form *par excellence* for the open society” (Perry 45). Many centuries later, French writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries developed the genre of romance so that their “audience[s could] . . . elicit meaning” that was to “be readily perceptible”; as Douglas Kelly contends, if “well-written,” a romance would “combine diverse elements so as to convey a significant meaning to its audiences” (xxvi). This tradition continued to be adapted throughout the centuries, from the Victorian into the postmodern age. For readers of twenty-first century romances, now known as neo-medieval fantasies, these modern romances, like some medieval romances, “mask parody, satire, and self-referentiality: journeys that seem literal become internal, subjective, and symbolic . . . so that fantasy and reality blur, and the darkness of the divided self is revealed” (Saunders 7). Close investigation of medieval and modern romances reveals that societies, though separated by centuries, have continually used this

genre to present philosophical problems to their audiences in accessible ways under the guise of entertainment. A prime example of such commentary is how writers of romance from the medieval to the modern have used the genre to examine societal expectations of gender. This thesis aims to a) define the genre of romance (insofar as is possible), using the works of Chrétien de Troyes (c. 1150s - 1190s) as the finest (and in many ways, foundational) examples of romance; b) provide evidence that later medieval and Victorian poets used romance to comment on gender issues as evidenced by the thirteenth-century Old French romance, *Le Roman de Silence*, and Matthew Arnold's nineteenth-century Victorian romance, *Tristram and Iseult*; c) argue that George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, while set in a medieval-like fictional world, is a modern romance which still wrestles with similar questions of gender. In exploring romance throughout the centuries, I will investigate how Chrétien, Heldris de Cornuälle, Arnold, and Martin carefully interweave threads of commentary on human nature and the effects of assigning gender roles and "norms" to their characters to emphasize the enduring cultural relevance of romance as a surviving genre. Throughout this thesis, I will analyze constructs of gender as they appear in *Erec and Enide*, *Lancelot*, *Le Roman de Silence*, *Tristram and Iseult*, and *A Song of Ice and Fire* from a feminist perspective. Specifically, the feminist framework I will be deploying throughout this thesis takes the anthropological and sociological viewpoint that gender is socially constructed — that it is a product of social conditioning and, thereby, constrains both women and men to certain societal roles and spaces.

Chivalric romance (*romanz*), as a genre, emerged in twelfth-century France from the desire of a number of poets to contribute to the tradition of Latin epics by re-



imagining them. This “art of reshaping through rewriting” became, as Mathilda Bruckner explains, “an act of linguistic and cultural transposition . . . [aimed] to give lay audiences access to the matter of Antiquity” (13). The goal was not to produce original story material as understood today but to re-envision characters and tales from these early materials and translate them from Latin, thus exposing new listeners and readers to such stories through the process of *translatio studii*, the transferal and translation of classical Greek and Roman knowledge to another culture, including France (Krueger 5). The source materials for the twelfth-century romances are known as protoromances. One such protoromance, Wace’s *Roman de Brut* (ca. 1150s), was influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s largely fictional *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1138), which chronicles the history of Britain, from its eponymous founder to the days following the reign of King Arthur.<sup>1</sup> Romance authors such as Chrétien de Troyes, who was largely responsible for developing and codifying romance as a genre in France, drew from Arthurian sources, such as Geoffrey’s *Historia* and Wace’s *Brut*, to “self-consciously blend . . . ancient and contemporary stories into new shapes, creat[ing] characters who appealed to the sentimental, moral, and political concerns of [his] audience” (Krueger 3). Through romance, authors were able to entertain while also safely addressing societal issues, such as gender roles, in need of further examination. Thus, romances served (and serves today) “as a forum for the construction and contestation of social identities and values” (Krueger 5). According to Roberta Krueger, it is this “twentieth-century recasting of medieval romance themes in fiction and film” which has allowed the “idealizing spirit of romance [to] endure” (5-6). In other words, romance as a genre has survived throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Kelly identifies three types of protoromances, including, “vernacular chronicles and hagiography, antique romances based on Latin sources, and narrative lays” (2).

centuries to the twenty-first century, largely in the neo-medieval fantasy genre, which forges connections between the modern and the medieval to comment on our own society in ways surprisingly similar to certain romances in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Because this study examines romance from the medieval, Victorian, and current time periods, it is important to make a distinction between how each period treats romance. Scholars make such distinctions by categorizing romance under the rubrics medieval, medievalism, or neomedievalism. The term ‘medieval’ refers to the Middle Ages, ca. 500 – 1500, and includes “all culture, literature, and modes of thinking that characterized that era” (Carroll Introduction). Medievalism emerged during the Victorian era (ca. 1837-1901) and “refers to the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration” (Pugh 2). Neomedievalism is characterized by “its inauthenticity,” a simulation of “what we think of as medieval” that results in “a fantasy — often nostalgic — a façade” that takes us into a fantastical realm or “cyberspace” (Ashton 3). This last category includes Fantasy literature. As Shiloh Carroll explains, “[m]ost fantasy literature is neomedieval, having a vision of the Middle Ages based on the word of medieval scholars such as Tolkien or the medievalist work of Victorian artist such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood or Romantic artists such as Sir Walter Scott” (Introduction). In short, neomedievalism looks through a broader lens, in which both medieval and medievalism are layered, thereby creating a distance from reality (Pugh 3). For the purpose of this research, we begin by examining how gender was debated in medieval romance. From there, we move to why medievalism emerged in the Victorian era and how it was used to treat their own gender concerns. Lastly, we consider the

movement to neomedievalism in the contemporary world and how it is used to explore modern questions of gender fluidity.

Literature that falls under the categories of medievalism and neomedievalism can cause modern readers to misunderstand and generalize about the medieval realities for men and women. For example, although ten centuries are often lumped together under the general term “Middle Ages” to characterize Western Europe during ca. 500-1500 AD, “there is no such thing as a single ‘Middle Ages’ — rather [there was a] *multiple* ‘Middle Ages’ with widely assorted lives, activities, achievements, and legacies . . . [which] were different from one another, just as they are different from us,” resulting in a “rich and complexly woven tapestry of an era” (Morrison 5-6). This study primarily focuses on French chivalric romance, which was created for the court. It is French courts that are represented in French romances, which feature all the characters who make up the court, including kings and queens, princes and princesses, and their relatives (seneschals, clerks, servants, etc). Each French court represented “a legal, financial and social center” in which a lord was the hub, resulting in “an intensely political” melting pot of individuals from various backgrounds (Gaunt 47). Such a petri dish of human activity lends to the complexity of romance since “interests and fantasies of a group of people who were heterogeneous despite their being bound together by . . . the courts of the French” aristocracy are represented (Gaunt 48). It is this focus on such a culture of court life that deemed romances as “courtly” (Gaunt 48).

Just as there were “multiple” Middle Ages, there were also multiple experiences for French women of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that depended on a number of factors from social standing to geographical location to personal circumstances.

Therefore, with regard to women's ability to maintain agency — whether they could be autonomous individuals who wielded power in their own right varied. Women's experiences were, of course, individual and thus nuanced; moreover, “the subtleties of women's rights are impossible to generalize about since they vary over time and geographic location,” both then and now (Morrison 6). In the Middle Ages, just as today, men's opinions varied about women, their expected role in society and the family, and even the level of education that was deemed appropriate. It is certainly true that there were those, like St. Jerome, who advocated for men to control women's sexuality, including married women, warning that the result of a husband loving his wife too much is insanity (*Against Jovinianus*, Book I). There were also those, such as Thomas von Zerklare, who considered women the weaker of the sexes and believed that they should only be instructed in “courtesy and decency” since they are not meant to be rulers and, therefore, have no need for more than “common sense” (qtd in Aurell 194). Some, such as Philip of Novara, went so far as to claim women should not be instructed in literacy at all unless they take the habit, as he believed women, like Eve, cause the fall of man when they are joined with knowledge (Aurell 194). Others, however, such as Vincent de Beauvais and Pierre Dubois, took a middle ground, supporting women's literacy for practical societal purposes, such as ensuring they would be able to read and teach their children about the Bible or even to understand rudimentary medicine should they need to “tend those wounded in the Crusade;” at the same time, neither one advocated for women's literacy for their own purposes (Aurell 193). Since this study opens by examining how women's roles were questioned in the medieval writings of Chrétien de Troyes, it is important to remain mindful of the varied contexts and multiplicity of

realities for medieval women (and, moreover, medieval men's opinions of women's societal spaces).

Regardless of such attitudes, in some parts of French society, women were able to exert public influence and power. There are historical documents, including *The Lands of Loire*, which prove some "women achieved dominance at court . . . [and] often could wield power, achieving royal influence," serving as queen regent and ruling in their own right (Morrison 8). Records from *The Lands of the Loire*, for example, provide a glimpse into a twelfth-century society in which women wielded considerable power and were recognized as lords "by both secular society and the clergy" (Livingstone 183). Certain aristocratic titles were even feminized to account for such women rulers, such as "domina . . . vicedomina and legedocta" (Livingstone 175). As men were often off at war, it was the "wives and mothers [who] were the likely — if not preferred — candidates" to take charge of "the castle, fiefs, vassals, children, and other dependents" (Livingstone 171). As mothers, women wielded considerable influence over their sons, often the future leaders and movers of society, and "from childhood to adulthood, sons' lives were intertwined with the lives of their mothers. . . [who were] not pale creatures relegated to the towers of castles" (Livingstone 48). Marriages, most of the time arranged, tended to be partnerships that were long lasting, and these charters provide primary documentation that husbands often "respected [their wives], trusted them, and valued their assistance in overseeing and protecting family holdings . . . [thus] a picture of companionate marriage emerges" rather than that of "oppressed and oppressor" (Livingstone 162, 165). When married, women "were endowed with considerable property" which they maintained "throughout their lives" as well as being able to inherit additional property (Livingstone

100, 142). Christine de Pisan (ca. 1364-1430), “the first professional woman writer,” exemplifies many of these possibilities for women. As a young girl, she lived in the court of Charles V of France, where she was instructed in literacy at the behest of her father (Bashpinar 24). At the age of fifteen, she married Etienne du Castelle, with whom she had an ideal and loving partnership for ten years until he died, leaving her as the sole support for her mother and three children with “only one powerful instrument to depend on for support: her pen” (Cosman 2). While alive, Castelle, like Christine’s father, supported her talents and interest in writing, encouraging her to develop her profession. Upon his death, Christine opted out of pursuing a second husband and instead chose to remain single and run her household alone, serving as the sole support for her mother and children (Bashpinar 24). As evidenced by Christine and the women of Loire, overall, the spectrum of women’s experience did allow for women to climb the ranks in certain parts of society, but even in those areas where women became influential, they still did so from a realm defined by their gender — such as that of a widow, for example, or taking the reins of leadership while the husband was away fighting a war.

When we review how ideas of gender have been treated through the ages, it becomes clear that writers have continually questioned why it is that women are constrained to certain societal realms in the first place. Heldris and Martin create characters like the woman knight, Silence, in *Le Roman de Silence*, and her modern equivalent, Brienne of Tarth, in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, to fashion similar arguments that one’s sex does not prevent her from stepping into the armor of a knight and fighting just as well as a knight. Nor does it prevent those men, like Martin’s Samwell Tarly, from opting out of socially accepted and expected roles of masculinity and refusing to don

their armor. Arnold presents us with a cautionary character in *Tristram and Iseult*, where he uses Iseult of Brittany as a warning of a life less lived. Not only has literature “been used to tease out information about lives from the past,” but it continues to inform our realities in the present, and, even today, “a magical romance may not reflect ‘reality’ directly, yet through it we can learn about how a culture imagined itself . . . [providing] a sideways glimpse of history” (Morrison 9). From the late twelfth-century romances of Chrétien de Troyes to the thirteenth-century *Le Roman de Silence* to the nineteenth-century *Tristram and Iseult* and, finally, to the twenty-first century *A Song of Ice and Fire*, we see that when we employ “old structure to new purposes,” we provide “society a mirror in which its ‘ghostly’ or ‘monstrous’ aspect[s]” become apparent (Saunders 5). Through romance, audiences explore “enchanted worlds of pasts and futures at once familiar and unknown, worlds of dream and symbol, which provide ways into the deepest fears and pleasures of the human psyche” (Saunders 5). Such employment of the “adventure story, which rewrites the motifs of quest, battle, and otherworld through different and ambiguous treatments of race, gender, and place, to raise uneasy political and psychological questions” is still relevant in the twenty-first century (Saunders 7). When placing medieval and modern side by side, we unearth important commonalities and grapple with similar philosophical questions regarding gender for which we still do not have concrete answers.

## CHAPTER II

### Chrétien de Troyes and the Conventions of Chivalric Romance

King Arthur and his gallant Knights of the Round Table, the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the quest for the Holy Grail — tales imbedded in the fabric of our modern culture from the Middle Ages, and yet the name Chrétien de Troyes, codifier of the Arthurian romance, only floats in the circles of academia and remains virtually unknown to popular culture. As the author who is credited with creating what we recognize as the original French chivalric romance, Chrétien established the conventions and motifs that would be imitated by writers throughout the centuries in his five known Arthurian romances: *Erec and Enide*; *Cligès*; *Lancelot, ou Le Chevalier à la charrette*; *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au lion*; and *Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal* (Kelly 135). As mentioned in the introduction, Chrétien wrote the medieval literature that would inspire future medievalisms, or re-interpretations of the medieval, that would eventually lead to the even more distant neo-medievalisms. The terms medieval, medievalism, and neomedievalism are particularly important to this thesis as they “designat[e] the level of separation between the historical medieval and the text in question” (Carroll introduction). In this chapter, the texts in question are, in fact, the historical reference material and are, thus, medieval. Beginning with the truly medieval, I aim to lay the groundwork for the rest of this thesis by describing the conventions of medieval chivalric romance and illustrating how they were first used by Chrétien, focusing in particular on *Erec and Enide* and *Lancelot*, two romances that embody the characteristics of the genre while also exemplifying societal commentary surrounding marriage, gender, and the roles of men and women. Although in some ways Chrétien de Troyes contributes to the topos



of courtly love that reinforces the societal space of women, criticism of such roles can be found in his romances, as is the case of both *Erec and Enide* and *Lancelot*. These romances are not entirely unproblematic, and such confusion “forces us to move from such a single-focused reading to a more complex level of analysis, where we can follow the interplay between specific positive and negative interpretations” (Bruckner 56). When examining Chrétien’s works from a feminist perspective, such complexities surrounding gender are evident and do not necessarily reveal a pro- or anti-feminist view, which, as Mathilda Bruckner argues, “prevent[s] us from taking sides either with the positive reading against the negative, or vice versa” (Bruckner 69). By employing such muddling duality, Chretien “refus[es] to settle into a neatly unambiguous conclusion . . . [and gives] competing values expression without allowing them to cancel each other out” (Bruckner 73). In doing so, he “recasts the question of woman” in a particularly medieval way by encouraging audiences to debate about the various portrayals of women within his texts (Krueger 232). In short, representations of gender in Chretien’s romances, such as *Erec and Enide* and *Lancelot*, were troubling, and were intended to be troubling, as they still are troubling today.

Although Chrétien is foundational to the development of the Arthuriana, he did not invent King Arthur’s court but rather inserted himself within a tradition of telling such tales through *translatio studii*. Originating in Celtic folklore and Nennius’ ca. ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, the tales of Arthur were nonetheless popularized by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1138), a largely fictional chronicle presented as “a serious academic history in Latin prose, claiming the authority of an antique source” (Barron 66). In his account, Geoffrey relates the alleged history of the

Britons, culminating in the reign of Arthur (now King Arthur), who not only defeats the invading Germanic tribes but also conquers half of Europe (with a plan to take on Rome itself) (Barron 66). Although subsequent writers such as Robert Wace<sup>2</sup> and Layamon were inspired by Geoffrey's history, it is Chrétien who is responsible for creating the genre of Arthurian romance (Farina 1). In a literary relay race, Chrétien transformed Geoffrey's *Historia* by incorporating the "designs of romance" in a revolutionary way (Bruckner 25). Chrétien created a mold that other authors followed as did those authors after them. Thus, through this cycle, the obsession with the Arthuriana has bled into our modern world. Despite the popularity of Arthur and his court, modern readers are unaware that "the genuine beginning of the Arthurian romance was firmly rooted in . . . [Chrétien's] poetic genius" (Farina 3). Indeed, without his five romances, the Arthuriana would not exist in our collective consciousness, and King Arthur would not have become a recognizable name (Farina 4). It was Chrétien who popularized the "two biggest [Arthurian] motifs — specifically, the Holy Grail and Lancelot's liaison with Guinevere," and, consequently, he "first injected the spirit of courtly love" into the tradition (Farina 211). Chrétien de Troyes' romances thus "launched a vogue for Arthurian fiction" that inspired others to take up and reimagine those stories as well (Krueger 2).

The identity of Chrétien de Troyes is a historical mystery. It is even speculated that Chrétien was not actually the poet's name, but a "moniker for 'I am a Christian from Troy'" and that he intended to remain historically elusive (Farina 205). Most scholars, however, agree that Chrétien was a clerk in the church and, as his narrator proclaims in

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<sup>2</sup> Wace and Chrétien were contemporaries, but scholars are unsure of whether or not there is a connection between Wace's *Brut* and Chrétien's works. There is speculation that Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* in some ways responds to *Brut* (Pickens 219).

the prologues to his romances, that Eleanor of Aquitaine, her daughter, Marie de Champagne, and Phillipe, Count of Flanders, were some of his patrons. We do know that he served in Marie's court from 1160 to 1172 and composed his romances between 1170 to 1190, leaving the unfinished *Percival*, where we first encounter the story of the Holy Grail as it is connected to Arthuriana. None of Chrétien's original manuscripts survive, but two thirteenth-century manuscripts, both of which are anthologies, "present all five of the romances now attributed with certainty to Chrétien: the Guiot manuscript . . . and Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, fonds francais 1450" (Huot 66). Although "no author portrait survives for Chrétien," it is actually an image of Marie de Champagne who appears "at the head of the *Chevalier de la Charette* in the Guiot manuscript" (Huot 69). During his time spent at Marie's court, Chrétien introduced his (and future) audiences to "the most enduring love stories of the Arthurian canon: the tales of Lancelot [and Guinevere which] are largely responsible for introducing the theme of *fin'amor*," resulting in courtly love becoming a hallmark of the Arthuriana and, moreover, the romance genre (Rouse 18). Courtly love elevates the importance of women in the romances and contributes to it being deployed to critically evaluate questions of gender as it explores (and informed) the expectations of relationships and courtships for both men and women.

The term *romanz* is a slippery one, and it was adapted by people from different cultures in different historical moments to suit their own purposes. At the same time, there are certain common characteristics a great number of romances share, particularly the chivalric romances.<sup>3</sup> Such motifs, or *matiere*, involve a knight whose chivalry is

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<sup>3</sup> Modern scholars debate whether or not romance should be labeled a genre in its own right; some, instead, prefer the term *mode*, but nonetheless all agree there are specific motifs that connect chivalric romances.

tested while engaged in a marvelous quest. The marvelous aspects of romances result in the fictionality that makes romance enticing as escapism, allowing “readers to step out of the actual world and experience the intriguing pleasure of possibility,” a world of imagination (Knapp and Knapp 3). As James and Peggy Knapp contend, “romance elicits wonder through its marvelous adventures, it is at the same time deeply philosophical, as it asks us to imagine other worlds . . . to enter into fictions that evade conceptual closure by containing some mysterious surplus” (3). This marvelous quest leads to (or from) an aristocratic and courtly lady who, at one point or another, is often in need of rescue (and who is often, though not always, imprisoned in a tower) (Saunders 2). Stock characters, including damsels in distress, women who actively propel the action, opposing knights, and helpful or antagonistic dwarves are also the staple of romance. It is the main character, however, who represents the chivalric societal ideal (Bruckner 19). The driving force for the protagonist is “idealized love as the inspiration of knightly prowess” (Barron 74). Such a focus on love entwined with chivalrous pursuits “allow[s] for incisive social reflection . . . [and] exploration of gender” as expectations are placed on both hero and heroine and, at times, these expectations are subverted (Saunders 2). As W. R. J. Barron contends, the result of deploying such motifs leaves the audience of romance “constantly comforted by convention: the ceremonial arming of the departing hero, the perfection of his chivalry. . . his wilderness quest opposed by a catalogue of conventional opponents, natural and supernatural, ending in a wayside castle” (Barron 78). However, he adds, it is in the times where we are “discomfited by contradictions: the futility of armor against an undefended blow, the profusion of virtues, physical, moral, chivalric,” where Chrétien

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Even those, such as Norththrop Frye, who take issue with referring to romance as genre, concede that romance maintains “archetypes, large patterns, conventions, and repetition of motifs” (qtd in Saunders 3).

invites us to question aspects of society in need of examination (Barron 79). Such contradictions contribute to the nuance of romance, transforming it from an interesting and entertaining story into an enduring genre ripe for sociological examination.

It is not these motifs alone, however, that define chivalric romance, but rather the techniques of *adaptation*, *conjointure*, and *interlacement*. Romances are not composed as entirely new story material, but rather stories that are adapted by the romancer through the process of *translatio studii*. In the Middle Ages, as Douglas Kelly explains, “the modern notion of original creation was foreign” as people believed that “only God could create” and that “the artist was a humble imitator . . . when he or she invented or ‘re-created’ a given matter,” or *matiere* (106). It was expected that writers would reimagine earlier source material when composing (Kelly 106). Chrétien structured his vision of the tales using *conjointure*, a technique wherein a writer carefully interweaves episodic adventures as an organizational tool, which is necessary to the plot as a whole (Berthelot 56). More simply put, “the combination of two or more entitites is a *conjointure*,” and when Chrétien introduced *conjointure* in *Erec and Enide* (which we will come back to later), we see how he “lift[ed] parts from the tale or from a number of different versions of a tale, and recomb[ined] them into a new version” (Kelly 156). It is this “artful interweaving or *conjointure*,” Kelly convincingly argues, that “defines vernacular roman as romance. . . and, implicitly, the art of romance invention” as introduced by Chrétien (13). Such a structure also contributes to the *interlacement* of multiple stories, another defining feature that characterizes romance, which, like the strand of a braid, “affords . . . an anchoring point which justifies and legitimizes the unfurling of the work: as long as the strands of the braid remain unbraided, the text can — better still, must — continue”

(Berthelot 52). Through utilizing both *conjointure* and *interlacement* to re-imagine and adapt previous *matiere*, Chrétien's romances both ensured continuation of the source material while simultaneously creating a new network of stories that would be reimagined through the centuries (Krueger 2). Largely due to the popularity of Chrétien's work, "romance became a literary genre — though a very fluid, varied one" (Saunders 2). Chrétien's work would be imitated, as he "produced outstanding embodiments of secular social values . . . [that would] give his *romans courtois* archetypal status" (Barron 65). Such representation of social values resulted in the genre becoming an effective way to comment on aspects of society such as gender.

### ***Erec and Enide***

Chrétien's first romance, *Erec and Enide*, reflects all of the aforementioned hallmarks of *romanz* that he, of course, established. In the tale, a knight named Erec is first sent to defend Queen Guinevere's honor when she is struck by a not-so-chivalrous knight. On his adventure to find the knight, he meets Enide, a lady of unsurpassing beauty, who is the daughter of a poor vavasor. He vows to marry Enide, then wins her hand in a hawk tournament against the knight he set off to find, who becomes Erec's prisoner after Erec defeats him in the tournament. From there, Erec takes Enide back to Camelot with him, where they are married and fall into an insatiable lust that creates gossip among the court that he is shirking his knightly responsibilities. When Enide laments to Erec that she has caused him to lose his honor and respect, he becomes very angry and subsequently takes her with him on a quest to reclaim it, with the stipulation that she cannot speak to him unless he speaks to her first. On their quest, Enide repeatedly breaks the rule and speaks out to Erec when aware of impending danger, and

we watch as her self-confidence grows during the course of adventures. This culminates in the *La Joie de la Cort* episode, in which Erec and Enide's relationship is juxtaposed with that of Enide's (unnamed) cousin and her *ami*, Maboagrain, whose relationship reflects a power imbalance in favor of the woman. Erec and Enide, whose *conjointure* is *bele* by this point in the narrative, contrast in this scene with Enide's cousin whose overbearing tendencies have created *disjointure* with her *ami* (Burns 190).

The motifs of romance are evident throughout the story, beginning with Erec, who represents the ideal, chivalric knight. Throughout the course of his adventures, some of which are marvelous (as is the case when he encounters and defeats giants), his chivalry is tested as he is met with opposition in separate episodes which carry the narrative forward. Erec encounters the specific tropes depicted in chivalric romances: opposing knights, ladies in need of a champion, dwarves, and giants. Both his original quest, the impetus of which is to restore Guinevere's honor, and his subsequent adventures with Enide, directly correlate to a courtly lady in need of rescue or restoration. Moreover, it is in this early romance where Chrétien explicitly introduces and displays romance's defining feature, *conjointure*, while adapting *matiere* from Geoffrey's *Historia*. In *Erec and Enide*, Chrétien's narrator describes his story as "Une mout *bele conjointure*," ("beautifully joined and crafted well" or to "elicit a most pleasing pattern") (line 15, pg 1). With Chrétien's romances, it is not only the way he combined and arranged the source material "which is *bele*," but also his aim to improve upon "the quality of the source *matiere*, like the sower's seed in good ground" (Kelly 20). This *conjointure* is one thing that separates Chrétien's romances from his predecessors. In the Prologue, Chrétien "contrasts [his] tale with other versions of the same tale," claiming that the previous

versions were “depecié (fragmented)” or “corrompu (incomplete)” but that his *conjointure* of such tales is *bele* because he conjoins and completes the material to create “a new, complete whole” (Kelly 157; line 21). His romance becomes *bele conjointure* because it “corrects material faults” through “articulate jointing,” while simultaneously “express[ng] the truth of the *matiere* — a notion consistent with medieval conceptions of the beautiful” (Kelly 27-28). *Conjointure* sets Chrétien’s romances apart, creating a mold which others would later follow. The multiple narrative strands adds complexity to the narrative. As Bartłomiej Błaszkievicz explains,

When the interweaving of many individual strands of the narrative occurs within a given work a potentially very complex and intricate web of reciprocal relationships between particular events, characters or motifs may be created (like in the case of the French Vulgate Cycle’s Arthurian romances). In such a case the principle of bipartite division may bifurcate throughout the work as binary oppositions give rise to multifarious forms of analogy which will multiply between various narrative lines as each one develops in order to contribute, by means of the standard medieval technique of *amplificatio*, to the overall grandeur of the work’s theme. (18)

Essentially, each strand weaves a larger, more complex tapestry, as opposed to a story which is linear. At the same time, juxtaposition of the individual strands allows for contrast and commentary. With *Erec and Enide*, for example, the *conjointure* allows for a dual perspective, that of Enide and of Erec, which makes it particularly ripe for commentary on gender. Through Enide’s perspective, audiences are exposed to a



woman's interiority and how she adjusts to her new role as a wife while also finding her own voice.

Chrétien did not only define and deploy *conjointure*, however; he allegorized it. As he introduces the term *bele conjointure* formally in the prologue of *Erec and Enide*, he also metaphorically represents the impact of such a technique through the couple's marriage. As a term, when "we think of *conjointure* in the sense of coupling, joining, bringing together . . . in marriage, we see how the romance author has metaphorically transferred the act of coupling with a woman . . . into the realm of literary creation that is his alone" (Burns 162). Through the joining of Erec's chivalry with Enide's resistance, the quest expands on previous *matière*, which results in an "extraordinary narrative whose aristocratic heroes and heroines mirrored and exemplified prowess, love, [and] moral fortitude" (Kelly 318). Chrétien's first romance invites consideration of the role that women play in the courtly milieu and how women, according to Jane Burns, "can nonetheless make gender trouble within it, not only with their bodies but more significantly with the voices that issue from them" (159). This dual perspective that Enide's resistance to Erec's direction creates joins with Erec's perspective and portrays "how one could tell the chivalric tale differently, thereby exposing what it hides . . . that knights might fall short of the chivalric ideal or that ladies might refuse the commodification and fetishizing that ideal requires" (Burns 179). Enide's active participation in moving the narrative forward by speaking up against Erec's wishes proves that "*conjointure* is not narrative synthesis or stylistic harmony; it is a simultaneously coming together and holding apart . . . the con is not appropriated into

literature or tamed into obedience. It talks” (Burns 182). The beautiful joining of Erec and Enide creates friction, which without Enide’s resistance would not ignite.

Especially in *Erec and Enide*, there is a focus on the conflict between love and chivalrous pursuits that invites the readers’ critical examination of gender. Scholars have not reached a consensus regarding whether this work reflects a type of pro-feminist or anti-feminist view, but all certainly agree that something is being said about the role of men and women in the medieval milieu. The tale is teeming with commentary surrounding gender, starting with the dual protagonists. There are some scholars who view “Chrétien as pro-feminist in the sense that he was able to envision a strong woman character” (Ramey 377). There is certainly evidence that the tale follows the transformation of the heroine from weak and unsure to strong and self-assured throughout the course of events. It is not only Erec’s development that is important to the narrative but equally Enide’s, placing both characters in the role of protagonist. Others, however, condemn Chrétien for misogyny, claiming the message in *Erec and Enide* is that “disaster [results] from women in power over men” and that “in a time when women actually exercised real power,” such as Marie de Champagne, “Chrétien depicts a heroine, Enide, who willingly subjects herself to her husband” throughout the course of the narrative to convey that “the only proper role for women . . . is silent submission” (Ramey 385). After surveying scholarly opinions spanning both pro-feminist and anti-feminist viewpoints, I do not believe Chrétien provides a clear argument necessarily for or against the importance of women’s voices but rather creates room for such discourse. I take issue with the view that Chrétien wrote *Erec and Enide* merely to remind wives of their duty to be subservient to their husbands and learn their “place;” there are moments of extreme

strength exhibited by Enide throughout the course of the tale, and we watch her move from a silent and submissive woman to a woman who understands the power of her voice and is prepared to rule as Queen of Nantes. *Erec and Enide* is the first romance in which we witness Chrétien grapple with complex questions of gender that defy easy explication.

The narrative can be broken down into three distinctive parts throughout which we see Enide's evolution. According to Nitze, these parts are "(1) the winning of Enide, (2) Erec's redemption and the testing of Enide, and (3) the contrast of the pair with Mabonagrain and Enide's nameless cousin . . . [in the] *Joie de la Cort*" episode" (692). Throughout the course of the story, we are provided with Enide's interiority and thus witness her development, how she learns and contends with her new position as a wife in the aristocratic world (Campbell 462). Enide initially plays the role typical of a medieval aristocrat; she is treated as a passive commodity traded between her father, the vavasor, and Erec, who wins the right to claim her in the sparrowhawk contest. In this section, "Enide, like the sparrowhawk, becomes an object to be obtained, a prize for the knight whose prowess can match her beauty" (Campbell 463). She does not take issue with the course of events here, passively allowing herself to be commodified and exchanged. After they are married, Erec experiences a period of "*recreantise* [languor or laziness]" during which he spends all of his time in bed with Enide, resulting in gossip about his prowess (Campbell 464). Enide laments her role in Erec's public perception while he's sleeping, pondering aloud, "certainly the earth should swallow me up since the knight, the best, the boldest, and the bravest of all . . . has utterly abandoned all deeds of chivalry for my sake . . . I have indeed brought shame on him" (32). Enide speaks these thoughts aloud but to herself, afraid to tell Eric what people are saying about him, She then denies

the truth of these words when Erec, who was not actually asleep, questions her about her monologue (Sullivan 323). In this scene, her hesitance to speak outright conveys her lack of confidence. When initially confronted by Erec, she “feigns ignorance” and tries to hide the truth of her feelings (Sullivan 323). Throughout their conversation, Erec modulates his tone, becoming more stern, which convinces Enide to tell the truth (Sullivan 323). Erec moves from calling her “dear sweetheart” to “Lady” to the absence of a pet-name as he scolds, “Now you are telling me lies. I hear you openly lie” (32). Only then does Enide tell Erec the truth of the gossip. Erec’s harsh tone towards Enide continues as we enter into the next section of the romance where Erec takes Enide adventuring with him to both prove his prowess and, furthermore, test her loyalty. He directs Enide to “Gallop along . . . [and] not be so presumptuous as to address” him and not to “speak to [him] unless [he] address[es her] first” (35). It is in this section that we witness the majority of Enide’s development.

Throughout their adventure together, Enide’s growth is evident in the confidence projected in her monologues. From the onset, Erec baits others to challenge him by instructing Enide to ride in front of him, for if a knight “encounters a woman who is accompanied by another knight, he may challenge the knight for the right to take the woman” (Campbell 2). Although Erec previously directed Enide not to speak to him unless first spoken to, Enide disobeys this rule on multiple occasions and speaks out first to warn Erec of impending danger. It is in these moments, where we watch Enide’s internal monologue regarding such acts of disobedience mature throughout the course of the narrative. In their first encounter with robbers, Enide professes her conflicted feelings, exclaiming, “God! . . . my lord will be captured or killed . . . This is not a fair

contest . . . Shall I then be so cowardly as not to dare speak to him?" In the second episode where they encounter opposing knights who discuss coveting Enide like they would desire chattel, she questions, "what shall I do? My lord's threats are so severe . . . he will punish me if I speak to him. But if my lord met his death, . . . I would be tortured and killed . . . why am I waiting? Now I am too cautious in my speech . . . God, how shall I talk to him? He will kill me. Very well, let him kill me" (38). Although we see her resolve at the end here, the amount of inner turmoil she experiences during these episodes at the thought of disobeying her husband's orders reflect a lack of confidence in her decision-making process. Although these musings reflect her immaturity in the first two episodes, these "interior monologues in the forest show her to be a thinking, feeling subject, despite the patriarchal acts of definition that attempt to deprive her of that subjectivity" (Campbell 467). In the next episode, when she encounters the Count, we see substantial growth from both her monologues and interactions with the Count. When the Count first tries to convince her to marry him, she tells him she "would rather be still unborn or else die in flaming thorns . . . than be untrue" to Erec (42). When this does not work, and the Count threatens to kill Erec while he sleeps, she then uses her own sexuality to dissuade him, telling him that she would "like to feel [him] in bed . . . [his] naked body beside [her] naked body" (43). It works, and in this moment, she moves from "a sex object" to a woman who actively "subverts . . . attempts to define her as such, and uses" her sexuality as a tool "against him" (Campbell 469). After persuading him not to kill Erec, she again uses her speech to inform Erec of the plot and save them both (Campbell 469). Already, from episode to episode, the growth in Enide's self confidence is evident, as she questions herself less and speaks more.

By the third episode, however, it is Enide's silence that speaks much louder than her previous monologues, as Enide does not hesitate to warn Eric "When the couple are pursued by the count and his men . . . showing that she has gained enough confidence and experience to act without first having to resort to inner debate" (Sullivan 326). She later openly opposes the Count's request to marry her when she believes Erec is dead, showing a marked transition from the beginning of the story in which she passively accepted being an object of exchange, to a woman who "vociferously protests . . . both with her voice and her body" as she would rather commit suicide than re-marry (Campbell 469). She thus shows "that she has acquired the self-confidence to face death or torture rather than accept the second best" (Sullivan 327). She does not, as she did before, just accept her new position as wife; she actively resists with her life.

The final episode, known as the *Joi de la Cort* scene, solidifies Enide's development. Erec and Enide accidentally venture into a garden, where they encounter the knight Mabonagrain. They learn that Mabonagrain is bound to protect the place against outsiders and remain enclosed with his lady, to whom he swore the vow that entrapped him, a vow that can only be broken when he is defeated. Until now, Mabonagrain has remained undefeated, and the widows of the men who fought him are locked away. Erec defeats Mabonagrain and untethers him from the vow, for which he is grateful. It is then that we learn the lady who bound him is actually Enide's cousin, and the trap in which she ensnared Mabonagrain recalls Erec's period of *recreantise* from earlier in the narrative. As explained by Laura Campbell,

the scenario brings to light the same problems of activity and passivity in love, as well as the interface between the public and the private, that plagued the initial

stages of Erec and Enide's marriage. Their passionate private relationship damaged his reputation by confining him to a feminized private sphere, just as Mabonagrain is unable to participate in normal chivalric activity when confined to the garden. He becomes inactive, as Erec was at the beginning, waiting for challengers to come to him, rather than proactively participating in tournaments. (471)

This scene is important because it juxtaposes the now educated Enide with her cousin who, unlike Enide, did not develop throughout her relationship; conversely, Erec and Enide's relationship has progressed into a partnership due to mutual growth throughout their adventures (Sullivan 328). The Enide we are left with at the end of the tale is a self-assured Queen who is well-equipped to rule alongside her husband. Clearly, Erec is not the sole protagonist here; as Penny Sullivan points out, "The idea of progression is not confined to the hero alone: the poem may be read not only in terms of Erec's preparation for love and kingship, but also as an account of the education of the heroine" (Sullivan 321).

In this romance, Chrétien mobilizes the conventions of the genre he himself largely defined to "Interrogat[e] the roles [women] should play within male chivalric practices" (Campbell 462) He does not write a story only of knightly prowess, but equally a tale which represents "Enide's journey from, passive accessory to accidental temptress, and to queen-in-the-making," and in doing so, Chrétien has "produced a more active female subject" (Campbell 470). Thus, we see the troubling nature of assigning societal roles reflected in the *conjointure* of our hero and heroine's journey. In *Erec and Enide*, Chrétien presents a woman's subjective experience and journey towards agency

— a woman who finds her voice. Moreover, in doing so, he invites audiences to question societal roles for both men and women.

***Lancelot, ou Le Chevalier à la charrette***

Chrétien composed *Lancelot* for Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, Marie de Champagne (Krueger 135). The impetus that drives this romance is Queen Guinevere's abduction by Meleagant, son of King Bademadu of Gore, which spurs Lancelot (and Sir Gawain) on a quest to recover her. It is here that we are introduced not only the figure of Sir Lancelot, but also the adulterous love affair between Lancelot and the queen<sup>4</sup>, a trope that would become standard in the Arthuriana. The liaison between Lancelot and Guinevere sets *Lancelot* apart from Chrétien's other romances in that it follows the trajectory of an adulterous affair that will not result in marriage while "confin[ing] itself to only a single sequence in the career of the titular hero and heroine" (Kelly 19). The quest to recover Guinevere, while successful, only spans roughly half of the narrative, with Lancelot ultimately needing to be rescued from Meleagant himself in the second half.

As is the case with *Erec and Enide*, the motifs and conventions of romance define *Lancelot* as well. Initially, Lancelot, the ideal chivalric knight, sets out alongside Sir Gawain on a quest to recover Guinevere, who has been abducted and detained in a tower in the mysterious land of Gorre. During the quest, Lancelot's chivalry is tested to the extreme when he encounters a dwarf (standard character), who will only provide him with crucial information about Guinevere's whereabouts if the hero agrees to a ride in his cart, typically reserved for criminals and so the ultimate sign of disgrace for a knight.

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth alludes to Guinevere's involvement in an affair, but it is with Mordred, Arthur's nephew.



Lancelot hesitates but steps into the cart, and his quest, after a series of adventures, eventually leads him to Guinevere, with whom he engages in an adulterous affair which inspires his knightly prowess to rescue her when faced with fighting the arrogant Meleagant. His fight is cut short by Meleagant's father, however, King Bademagu, with the plan that they would fight again in one year's time. From here, the sequence of events begins which result in Lancelot's imprisonment by Meleagant with the intent of preventing the promised fight. Thus, we see Chrétien develop the standard romance motifs: the chivalrous knight, the quest to rescue a lady during which his chivalry is tested, encounters with standard stock characters, and elevation of a lady through courtly love.

Importantly, *bele conjointure* functions to invite discussion of gender. Throughout the course of the narrative, female characters actively move the plot forward, at times as helpers, other times as harbingers, and even as saviors. Such unusual and, at times, contradictory "presentation of women invites our questions about women's place in the narrative of male desire" (Krueger 57). These damsels, who both serve as "vehicles for Lancelot's shame and honor, or as figures of his desire for the queen" contribute to Chrétien's deployment of romance's central defining feature, *conjointure*, "which, for all its ambiguity, is unified by the thread of the hero's trajectory," of which women play an active roles in continuation of the narrative (Krueger 55). Through the characterization of Guinevere and also the movement within the story of various key female figures, the poet "represents women paradoxically both as objects of masculine exchange and [also] as potentially troubling subjects whose desires can thwart the projects of empire, impose restrictions on a knight's freedom or obstacles to his yearnings or divert him from his

spiritual quest, as well as engender in men a more noble heart” (Krueger 138). In his representation of women in this romance, Chrétien highlights “the processes by which women are displaced . . . portray[ing] a gallery of memorable female characters . . . who refuse to play the courtly game by the expected rules” (Krueger 35). In doing so, he establishes a crucial framework for future romancers which causes the genre to become “one in which gender ideology can be examined and questioned by readers” (Krueger 39). When considering the presence of the host of female players who propel the story from the periphery, along with Marie’s providing Chrétien with the *matiere* of the romance, it becomes clear Chrétien created a space in *Lancelot* wherein the complex nature of gender invites critical reflection.

These women serve varying purposes which contributes to their inviting questions regarding women’s societal spaces. Chrétien portrays women in contradictory roles — some active, some passive, some subversive. As Krueger contends, “if one damsel forbids the hero a pleasurable bed, another seeks to sleep with him. While one maiden demands that Lancelot grant his opponent mercy, another asks for the rival’s head . . . [thus] the narrative emphasizes troublesome” contradictions which evoke questions regarding women’s place in chivalric romances (56- 57). One such example is Meleagant’s sister, who completely reverses expected gender roles. Fearing the eventual battle with Lancelot, Meleagant abducts Lancelot and locks him away in a “tower by the sea” (244). When King Bademagu condemns Meleagant for “perhaps confin[ing] Lancelot] in a prison with the gate so firmly locked,” Meleagant’s sister overhears all he said “[and a]t once without delay and making no disturbance” she left in search of Lancelot’s prison (247). The narrator relates that the maiden, fulfilling a quest of her

own, “searched through many countries, traveled to many places, and traversed many lands” before finding Lancelot. He then asks a rhetorical question to draw attention to the relatively little amount of time spent on this brave woman’s adventure, asking, “But why bother relating her journeys by day and her rests at night?” (248). Here, the narrator acknowledges the lack of equality paid to such female characters, despite their equally brave exploits, for it is this brave maiden who rescues our *hero*, then “place[s] him gently in front of her on her mule” in a symbolic reversal of gender roles (251). Although a marginal character, “Meleagant’s sister is an active figure who moves autonomously. Her force and ingenuity as she frees him contrast[s] with Lancelot’s feebleness; her initiative is indispensable to the hero’s survival and the narrative’s continuation” (Krueger 240). Moreover, her heroic actions dismantle and reverse binary distinctions as she completes feats typically reserved for male characters. Thus, through these female figures who populate the background of the narrative, troubling questions of gender plague the reader’s subconscious, much as the women survive within the subtext of “Chrétien’s rhetorical doubletalk . . . [which] introduces questions about the nature of female power” (Krueger 37). The women who populate the background introduce multiple perspectives of women and invite debate over the role women are expected to play in society. It is not only in his deployment of the damsels in *Lancelot* that Chrétien invites such questioning, however.

Chrétien first indicates the question of female power is important to his tale by crediting Marie de Champagne with providing his *matiere* in the Prologue. He establishes in the very first lines that “since [his] lady of Champagne wills [him] to undertake the making of a romance, [he] shall undertake it with great goodwill, as one so wholly

devoted that he will do anything in the world for her without any intention of flattery” (170). Some have posited that Marie requested this story be adapted to reflect how “her mother, Eleanor, [was] imprisoned by her husband Henry II in 1174” (Ferrante 119). Others speculate that Marie “commission[ed] a romance that paints adultery in terms of mystical adoration at roughly the same time as a neighboring aristocrat is basely executing an adulterous rival,” referring to Philip, Count of Flanders, who caught his wife in an affair and subsequently ordered that her lover be executed by “having his head held down a sewer” (Kay 82-83). Regardless of motive, beginning the story by proclaiming it was asked of him by a powerful woman lays the rhetorical groundwork for the reader to question women’s societal spaces from the start. Furthermore, at the end a clerk named Godfrey de Lagney claims to have written the story’s conclusion, though scholars are unsure whether this actually occurred or, as Sarah Kay posits, “Chrétien himself completed the romance under an assumed name; if true,” Kay continues, “this would represent an even more striking disavowal of its contents than his merely failing to finish it” (83). This becomes especially interesting when we consider that Marie is only mentioned in the Prologue but not the conclusion. Moreover, the romance’s heroine, Guinevere, is also noticeably absent from the conclusion. Whether Chrétien or Godfrey completed the story, as Krueger maintains, the “conclusion erases the woman from the last lines of a romance dedicated to her” and also erases the heroine from a plot to which she is integral (53). When pairing the “problematization of female presence” depicted throughout the story with Marie’s and Guinevere’s “absence in the frame,” we are invited “to scrutinize [the] representation of women” within the story (Krueger 54). Jane Burns, among others, observes that “Marie is positioned symbolically as equivalent in status to .

. . Guinevere, the courtly dame par excellence” (234). According to Angela Bruckner, “There has been a good deal of story-making about Chrétien and Marie that more often than not casts Marie as Queen and Chrétien as Lancelot in the tournament episode: capricious lady manipulates obedient servant” (84). But does this necessarily represent a negative viewpoint of Marie? After all, Chrétien writes Guinevere to resist chivalric expectations. She first defies the expectation that she would be grateful to the hero who rescues her, instead chastising Lancelot for at first hesitating to ride in the cart. In a powerful challenge to courtly conventions, she refuses to see Lancelot and claims, “he is unable to please [her. She] ha[s] no interest in seeing him” (218). She only changes her mind about him when she fears his death and realizes her love for him, not because she feels she owes it to him. Guinevere later forces Lancelot to “exemplify. . . the opposing poles of chivalric shame and prowess” (Krueger 62). She commands him to “do [his] worst” in a tournament before then reversing that request and bidding him to “do the best he could” in the joust (241). When considering Guinevere as a metaphor for Marie and Lancelot for Chrétien, “it transfers the determinant of the story’s outcome from male to female: Lancelot submits himself to her will, as Chrétien has done to Marie’s” (Krueger 60). As Jane Burns contends,

To read Marie. . . as an influential patron and a symbolic queen, as a cleric and a lady, opens new possibilities for acknowledging the complexity of the categories of women and men respectively in courtly love scenarios . . . [and] helps us to see how this brief prologue joins a number of other courtly texts in staging the phenomenon of courtly love as a site where genders are not fixed or certain, where highly codified relations of desire do not necessarily conform to

established heteronormative paradigms, where female protagonists positioned in love scenarios can evade or slide across presumed divisions of social rank. (236)

From the onset of *Charete* throughout the course of the narrative, “the image of female influence, power, and resistance” whispers from the background, and it becomes clear that “female critical reflection on the tensions of gender is pointedly invited by the text” (Krueger 66). When we juxtapose the marginal female characters, Marie de Champagne, and her reflection, Guinevere, we must confront the ways in which the story is moved forward by their active participation, whether in the background, as the heroine, or as the provider of the *matiere*.

As both *Erec and Enide* and *Lancelot* prove, Chrétien used his art to adapt *matiere* to new ends and weave societal commentary regarding gender. In these romances, Chrétien “cast[s] women as alternately dependent and spell-binding figures whose elusive presence was crucial to the knight’s quest for honor - yet who sometimes acted as disruptive forces or as catalysts for the author’s and reader’s critique” (Krueger 138). In doing so, he invites “debate about gender roles . . . [and] highlight[s] the paradoxical status of women within his romances . . . [thereby,] Chrétien creates a discursive place . . . to question [women’s] narrative appropriation” (Krueger 35). Chrétien does not outright present a profeminist or antifeminist argument, of course; rather, he deftly manipulates the complexities of these gender troubles through his “explicit presentation of woman’s influence and desire as a question — his problematization of female reception” which “resists our hasty judgement” (Krueger 65). As Jorgen Bruhn maintains, these romances should “be read as internally contradictory, not as a clear-cut position, and thus the main importance of Chrétien’s works is that he

introduces a ‘debate about gender roles,’ rather than presenting an opinion (80). It is this aspect of *romanz*, the nuanced incorporation of societal critique, that separates it from its predecessors; it does not only relate a story, but also raises a mirror to aristocratic society which can reveal unflattering truths. After all, the best way to initiate discourse, as beautifully exemplified by Chrétien in his *bele conjointures*, is to draw attention to those aspects of society, such as gender. As we will see throughout this thesis, it is this facet of romance that has endured. However, this presenting of a debate without taking a side is a distinctly medieval approach to gender issues.

### CHAPTER III

#### *Le Roman de Silence* and Thirteenth-Century Constructs of Gender

As established in chapter one, certain recurrent tropes, themes, and motifs appear in romance, as the male protagonist, a chivalrous knight, has his chivalry tested throughout the course of an adventure — but how would conventional ideas of romance be questioned if the chivalrous knight were a woman? Such is the case in the thirteenth-century romance *Le Roman de Silence*, attributed to Heldris de Cornuälle. Heldris' tale of the woman knight, Silence, was inspired by book nine of the *Metamorphoses*, in which Ovid's narrator recounts the story of Iphis<sup>5</sup>, whose mother, Telethusa, hides her daughter's biological sex from her husband by dressing her as a boy (Hess 38). As a result, the narrator tells us, "The beautiful, cross-dressed Iphis, with her ambiguous name, grows up as a boy and receives a boy's education" until the goddess "Isis miraculously transforms Iphis into a young man, thereby realigning Iphis's sex with her gender performance" (Hess 38). We find kernels of Ovid's story in *Silence*, where parents Cador and Eufemie raise their daughter, Silence, as a boy to circumvent a law that prevents women from inheriting. Although inspired by the tale of Iphis, there is not a magical transformation of Silence's sex, but rather a restoration of Silence into the societally acceptable role for her sex at the end of the story. Throughout the course of the tale, Silence excels in traditionally masculine roles and easily passes as the chivalric knight. This causes the personified Nature and Nurture to argue about the role they each play in Silence's formation, an argument we are told that Nature is destined to win. The notion

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<sup>5</sup> Iphis comes from the Greek term *ifithemos*, which means strong or mighty one.



that “Nature passe noretüre,” is a familiar Old French proverb and, thus, integral to the story (Roche-Madhi xviii). After all, as Simon Gaunt argues,

a proverb is not usually cited to undermine its contention. On the contrary, proverbs suggest that what is said is self-evident, giving the impression of an irrefutable consensus. If Heldris is inviting his readers to interpret the text in the light of his proverb, he creates the expectation, from the very beginning of Silence’s story, that Nature will triumph. (204)

After a number of knightly adventures, Silence’s true sex is revealed at the end, when she captures Merlin, who, according to legend, could only be captured by a woman. Merlin reveals Silence’s true sex, and she is returned to the woman’s sphere (Cornuälle 297). Silence trades her armor for women’s garments, marries King Ebain, and assumes her societal role as a woman. But does Nature triumph because Nature actually overcomes Nurture, or because it is expected, as the proverb suggests, causing Silence to eventually fall in line with cultural codes?

The triumph of Nature over Nurture, paired with other aspects of the romance, has led scholars, such as Roberta Krueger and Simon Gaunt, to maintain that Heldris set out to prove that a woman’s place is within the domestic sphere. Speculation aside, by questioning whether nature or nurture has a larger impact on identity, Heldris highlights that gender can be fluid, regardless of intention. Thus, Heldris created a space in which the constructed nature of gender comes into question. The impact of such a successful reversal of expectations throughout the course of the narrative stands out within the genre, as conventionally “Notions of idealized ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ comportment were so forcefully articulated in medieval romances” (Krueger 132). Although he

ultimately returns to it, Heldris deviates from the norm that “well-bred men should exercise courage and prudence in the public domains of government and war” and that, conversely, “ladies should devote themselves to the private sphere and cultivate the arts of adornment, sentimental refinement, and mothering,” as Silence is successful outside of the latter realm (Krueger 132). Silence’s success as a man — as a knight — invites a conversation about the biological nature of gender roles. Her transgression is a prime example of how “courtly fictions” especially, with their stringent articulation of gender roles are ideally situated to “open up a discursive space where gender roles [can be] scrutinized and where underlying social and sexual tensions [are] explored” (Krueger 132). It is important that Heldris wrote a tale which “strikingly reverses the traditional knight-pursues-lady plot,” where gender roles are transgressed (Krueger 134). In reversing archetypal expectations, Heldris draws attention to the constructed nature of gender. Although fascinating to explore a medieval text which ruminates on philosophical questions of gender norms, it is equally important to remember that *Silence* was written from a vastly different historical vantage point from our own, the thirteenth century. As we filter the tale through a modern, feminist lens, then we must be careful to resist making assumptions regarding Heldris’ concerns; his writing reflects thirteenth-century, not modern, concerns, and we must remain mindful of that before we extrapolate and project modern sentimentality onto a historical text (203). That being said, it is certainly an interesting phenomenon when we encounter historical literature that seems to interrogate issues in the forefront of modern politics. As Simon Gaunt explains,

The emergence in a medieval text of an idea which appears anachronistic [it] can perhaps be explained by what Fredric Jameson calls the political unconscious . . .

although literary texts tend to preserve only a single voice, that of the hegemonic class, they are necessarily dialogical. (203)

Although I will not claim in this chapter to understand Heldris' reasoning for deploying gender commentary, I believe it is important to pinpoint its significance. Not every person fits neatly into a societal mold, and those who are forced into a role for which they are unsuited suffer for it. My contention is that this is a struggle, which we see reflected in *Silence*, that is shared by many throughout history, and although it has looked different according to place, time, and societal group, romance has captured this tension throughout the ages. Silence suffers, as she lives in between realities, equally constrained by being woman and by not being woman. In this chapter, I examine how Silence's liminality is represented grammatically, physically, and internally, and highlights for modern readers the ways in which identities are constructed by societal expectations. Moreover, this liminal space opens up the possibility of a threshold between (or outside of) the reality constructed by social obligation, a space that would feel a lot less isolating if gender fluidity were normalized.

The time period in which *Silence* was written was a particularly tumultuous historical moment for women in medieval France, a shift from the twelfth century which was a time women could attain public power. Women and men were increasingly being separated by institutions and, thus, relegated to different societal spaces (Krueger 106). Women were denied access to higher levels of education and increasingly becoming restricted to certain arenas: those within the home and the church. Especially among the ruling class, "women's central role as producer of male heirs made the female body a source of considerable anxiety, and female sexuality a force to be controlled" (Krueger

106). Whereas previously mothers had played a more active role in the rearing of their children, sons were more often being sent away at young ages to train as a member of the clergy or pursue an apprenticeship. This division further served to create closer ties among men rather than fostering an inherent respect for their mothers and, therefore, women (Krueger 106). Such a restructuring of the family system created an unbalanced social hierarchy with women at the bottom and contributed to some themes that we see conveyed in *Silence*: that there are “‘good’ women, wives and mothers,” and there are “‘bad’ women, adulteresses and aborters, [who would] ruin the family line and could cause the entire edifice to crumble” (Krueger 107). In *Silence*, the pervasiveness of these ideologies comes through in the tirades by Silence’s narrator and King Ebain, which are “symptom[atic] of political regulation and sexual division” (Krueger 108). As Krueger maintains,

The dialogue about woman’s subordination that misogynistic discourse attempts to silence erupts intermittently as a powerful signal of the precariousness of the antifeminist stance . . . Antifeminism flags its speaker’s anxiety about the imposition of gender order. . . arguments against women and in favor of women’s ‘subordination’ inscribe the persistent insubordination of at least some historical women and invite women’s resistance. (110)

Thus, by engaging with such rhetoric, regardless of intention, Heldris invites readers to consider these questions of gender.

When categorizing *Silence*’s genre, there is no question that it is a chivalric romance. As discussed in Chapter One, *romanz* as a genre was popularized by Chrétien de Troyes and adapted to suit different audiences and frame arguments important to their

cultural moment. As *romanz* was a palatable way to invite sociopolitical ruminations, it was thus the ideal genre in which to probe questions of gender. *Silence* is an “elaborate biopolitical drama” which certainly follows the conventions discussed in Chapter one (Bloch 82). Although truly a woman masquerading as a man, Silence is a knight who embodies the chivalric ideal, who sets off on a quest to find her own identity; in an interesting twist, Silence is simultaneously the chivalrous knight and the lady elevated to importance within the romance. There are marvelous encounters (with dragons and the personified Nature and Nurture) and courtly stock characters, including seneschals, minstrels, and Merlin himself. Indeed, there are even numerous references to King Arthur’s court, the romance court *par excellence*. Not only does Heldris adapt *matiere*, but the story is built from interlaced episodes which are *conjoined* together within the frame of the story, following the ultimate structure (and defining feature) of romance. Moreover, the romance serves as a means of providing societal commentary on the role women should play and the spheres in which they should reside.

Throughout *Silence*, the notion of liminality is represented through word play. Heldris especially plays with language with the names of characters, beginning with Silence, who Cador determines “will be called Silentius” whose name can be “change[d from] -us to -a” in the event her sex is discovered, and “she’ll be called Silentia” (99). For the majority of references, however, both the suffixes “us” and “a” are removed, and she is referred to merely as Silence, with the absence of the masculine or feminine ending. As Erika Hess points out, Silence’s

parents do not actually call him/her by either of the gendered Latin variants. They use instead the French version of the name which designates no gender at all . . .

the name 'Silence' therefore incorporates both genders; it successfully negotiates the need to choose one or the other. (51)

Thus, the name Silence represents liminality while also “paradoxically suggest[ing] her removal from the symbolic order of language as it inscribes her in it” (Gaunt 213). Simon Gaunt, too, points to the importance of Silence’s name and how word play seems to intentionally draw attention to “the indeterminacy of signifiers” (13). Even starting with her name, “which quite apart from the ambiguity it allows in relation to her gender, cannot be uttered without paradox since it derives its significance from its designation of an inability to signify” (Gaunt 13). Gaunt, too, notes that it is important how Silence’s name is not gendered in French, yet it is the Latin name which Cadour considers (206). Thus, not only are Cadour and Eufemie breaking from the norms of their culture by raising Silence as a boy, they are also “break[ing] linguistic rules, in this case by using an inappropriately gendered signifier” and, therefore, “us[ing] language misleadingly. . . a serious offense contre nature, against the true order of things” (Gaunt 207).

We also see this word play in the names of Silence’s mother, Eufemie, and King Ebain’s wife, Eufeme, (who tries to seduce Silence and is the impetus for the revelation of Silence’s true sex). More than just a vowel in their names separates their characterization. Eufemie reflects the attributes of a good woman, “a beautiful gem” who is “the gloss of one” (her husband) but “doesn’t dare take it as a reference to herself” (9, 47). Eufeme, conversely, is full of “deceitful madness and burning lust” and is described as a “female Satan” (173). Eufeme and Eufemie are contrasted and both become caricatures of women as a result, and this juxtaposition is represented linguistically in their names (Tanner 149). Translated from Greek, Eufeme means “Alas, woman”

whereas Eufemie means “good speech” (Tanner 149). While Eufeme is typified as a character who maintains all of the qualities society condemns in women, Eufemie, conversely, represents the ideal, demure, and (this is key) subordinate woman, a woman who holds her tongue (Tanner 149). These characters, along with Silence, with their linguistic importance, become an important triad who symbolize a spectrum of difference, as they all

suggest the broad range of roles enacted by women in romance. The clever, virtuous maiden is framed by two contrasting women: her mother Eufemie, the good mother whose love for her husband provides a model of reciprocal love and consensual marriage; and Queen Eufeme the wicked queen whose arranged marriage to the King is sterile, who attempts to seduce Silence, and who carries on an adulterous affair with a knight cross-dressed as a priest. Between these two extremes of idealized female comportment, Silence evolves as a character who hides her femaleness and adapts the male roles of young man, jongleur, knight, and courtier. (Krueger 139)

Silence’s success in transgressing societal gender norms opens up “the possibility of an ‘outside’ or a ‘beyond’ language” that there is such an “outside” of the constructs of gender that are represented literally within the frame of the story (Bloch 89). If it is, in fact, true that “Read at the level of the letter, the *Roman de Silence* . . . [is] based upon a series of graphemic displacements - of prefixes (Nature/Noretture . . . ); [and] of suffixes (Eufeme/Eufemie, Silentius/Silentia),” the text incidentally highlights the entrapment of such binary systems (Bloch 96). Cador and Eufemie successfully manipulate language to construct an alternate reality, which reflects how tenuously identity is constructed. By

drawing attention to how easily we can stray from the truth, or the correct order, Heldris questions the notion of truth and there being such a correct order in the first place, as reality can be easily manipulated alongside language. As we conceptualize that reality is constructed, it becomes clear that so, too, is Nature constructed. As Gaunt attests,

Recent work on gender and the nature/culture opposition disputes the symmetry and universality of the paradigm and stresses that like gender nature and culture are constructs, the symbolic value of which will vary, and that such binary oppositions may be fruitfully deconstructed. The symbolic value of Nature in the Roman de Silence is its justification of the sex/gender system: appropriating the culturally constructed idea of Nature for his text, Heldris transforms it into a rhetorical device which he deploys to suggest that the sex/gender system he wishes to endorse is part of a 'natural' order . . . Nature must be marginalized and shown to be impotent, but the artificiality of the constructed opposition is evident as flaws in its underlying logic emerge. (209)

When we dismantle Nature, unmasking it as a concept that, like other systems has become its own binary system directly opposed to Nurture/Environment, the argument that something is against Nature becomes irrelevant as we seek a liminal space between (or outside of) the two.

Silence's liminality is not only represented linguistically but also spatially, as the wilderness, or *bos*, was crucial to her becoming, both to her literal conception and self-conception. The wilderness is an important representative space, especially when considering its position outside of the locus of patrilineal control, which is represented from the very onset of *Silence*, when King Ebain is described as having total "rule over



the English” (15). Early in the tale, Ebain agrees to marry Eufeme to end a war with the King of Norway. He then contrived marriages between two Counts and orphaned twins that resulted in “a quarrel over [their] inheritance” and ended with the counts being “so wounded in the fight/ that they both died trying to prove themselves” (17). This tragedy caused King Ebain to “fl[y] into a terrible rage” since there was such “a loss on account of two orphaned girls” (17). After losing two “good men” over the inheritance of two girls, Ebain proclaimed that “no woman shall ever inherit again/ in the kingdom of England/ as long as [he] reign[s] over the land” (17). Thus, the impetus for the conflict of the plot is born out of Ebain’s strict patrilineal rules regarding women and inheritance. Immediately after making this decision, King Ebain sets off for Winchester. While passing through the woods (or “*par le bos*” which is outside of his ruling power), their party encounters “a great big dragon” that makes him “greatly disconcerted” and “really worried” that he will be “disgraced” (17-19). Here, Cador steps up to slay the dragon, and King Ebain rewards him with a marriage to Eufemie that results in the birth of Silence. It is significant that Silence is conceived as a result of an encounter in the *bos*, a space outside of Ebain’s control, for “[i]n the wilderness of the bos, . . . Ebain’s power dissipates [and] The first sign of this dissipation is the early episode of the dragon” directly juxtaposed with his decision to cut off female inheritance (Barr 6). The only way he is able to emerge unscathed from his encounter with the dragon is “to reward the killer of the dragon with the woman of his choice — another recourse to the patriarchal trade in women that seems to be his go-to governing strategy” (Barr 6). This early moment foreshadows how the wilderness will become the ultimate literal (and liminal) space

outside of Ebain's control where Silence can become someone outside of the societal order.

When Silence is born, Cadour and Eufemie “devise a plan/ to keep [their] heir from losing her lands” and decide to “disguise her/ . . . to make a male of a female” (97). They contrive to send Silence to be raised by a seneschal who “lived in a forest near the sea” [“en un bos mest, devers la mer”] (100-101). It is here, “in the woods, isolated and solitary” [“El bos, soltive et solitaire”] where Silence grows up outside of the natural order of society in a liminal space symbolic of her gender identity (100-101). It is “Only in the asocial space of the wilderness that the romance's characters can imagine lives away from the restrictive systems of patrilineal reproduction and inheritance that govern gendered behavior and sexuality” (Barr 3). In the context of the story, the romance genre is used “to promote the interests of baronial lineage. Thus, Silence's exploration of the bos as an imagined site of escape from Ebain's patriarchal order” also imagines the genre as a site to examine cultural codes, safely outside of societal expectations (Barr 4). This emphasis on “The bos [as] the locus of such changed possibilities” contributes to “the romance's refusal to be categorized easily as either pro-or anti-gender fluidity [and] suggests that a rigid adherence to cisgender identities [identities that correlate with birth sex] is a product and tool of patrilineal systems of inheritance and governance” (Barr 4). In *Silence* the wilderness is juxtaposed with society, and it becomes a middle ground between society and society's other, creating a new binary (Barr 5). Such a space draws attention to the possibilities outside of constrictive codes of behavior. We watch as despite her true gender, Silence grows up masculine, as her sense of self is molded by her environment (Barr 6). As a result of time spent in the wilderness, Silence succeeds at

passing as a man, a knight. It is only when this identity is threatened that “Silence flees [further] into the wilderness to pursue a life with the itinerant jongleurs,” into the liminal space between the feminine and the masculine (Barr 6).

Silence ultimately grows to seek an androgynous existence outside of society, which is reminiscent of another character who exists in the periphery of societal expectations: Merlin. After meeting with Nature and Nurture, Silence meets two minstrels and begins to contemplate their lifestyle. Silence becomes bothered by the reality that if King Ebain were suddenly to die, and women could inherit, she “know[s] nothing of women’s arts” should she find herself returned to the woman’s sphere at the behest of her family (133). Silence seeks “to learn something that would serve [her] in good stead,/ for all that might come to pass,” whether as a man or a woman (133). Silence determines to “go with these jongleurs/ . . . [and] learn how to play instruments,” which is an art she could practice if “slow at chivalry” but also “in a chamber” if restored to the women’s sphere since she never learned “how to embroider a fringe or border” (135). Thus, to ensure “something to fall back on,” Silence escapes with the minstrels to exist somewhere between the life of a chivalrous knight and a courtly lady (135). Silence conceptualizes a possible “life with the jongleurs as enabling him to escape the bind of ill-fitting gender roles and to learn a craft that suits both men and women” to evade choosing (or being chosen) between the two (Barr 13). In leaving with the jongleurs, Silence escapes from the courtly milieu altogether, as jongleurs are outsiders to the patrilineal order (Barr 13). Silence realizes that in pursuing the life of a jongleur, “[she] can, in effect, retain both genders . . . the bos is the liminal space from which the jongleurs emerge and to which they return, and the space through which Silence [her]self

passes in order to become a jongleur” (Barr 13). For Silence, the decision to flee with the minstrels frees her from having to choose between the genders or be concerned with the notion of inheritance (Barr 15). Silence even takes a new name, “Malduit,” which means badly brought up, to acknowledge that she had been “very badly educated with regard to [her] nature” and, thus, constructs a new identity, becoming “an accomplished musician” (149). Silence’s interiority and decision to forge a life outside of the patrilineal order, seeking a world between societal expectations of the masculine and feminine, parallels that of Merlin, who also does not follow “social convention[s]” (Barr 8). Like Silence, Merlin forgoes courtly life, preferring instead to live in the forest. Barr argues that,

There is evidence to suggest Merlin’s own gender bivalence . . . Merlin’s indifference to the traditional masculine activities of ‘martial puissance, sexual virility, or potency’ and his engineering of his own capture — a feat that is only to be accomplished by a woman — indicate his position outside of a strict gender binary. (Barr 15)

At the end of the narrative, when Silence is sent to capture Merlin by setting out “honey, milk, and wine . . . [and] salted meat,” Merlin, too, encounters Nature and Nurture, who argue about his own choice to reside in the woods and live on herbs and roots in much the same way as they argue about Silence’s gender transgressions. When Merlin is tempted by the food, Nurture laments how

Whatever [she] work[s] for and accomplish[es],  
Nature deprives [her] of in one day.  
[as] Merlin was nurtured in the woods for so long  
that he certainly should have put his human nature behind him,

and should have wanted to continue eating herbs,  
the way that he was used to. (281)

This leaves Merlin, much like Silence, feeling conflicted about his habitation between society and the wilderness. Nature argues that Nurture “completely failed with Merlin” by encouraging him to transgress societal norms and contends that “whatever evil men do / all stems from transgression” (285). Here, the concept of wilderness versus society is discussed as if it is its own binary, when, in reality, there is nothing more natural than what exists in nature. Transforming wilderness and society into a duality of its own reveals that there is a space between (our outside of) all binary systems, including gender, and including Nature and Nurture. In *Le Roman de Silence*, “Heldris’ setting up of Nature and Nurture as an oppositional binary that ultimately collapses into confusion erases not only Nature but even Nurture as a meaningful signifier” (Barr 17). It is important that both Silence and Merlin thrive outside of the boundaries of society. As Barr explains,

The repeated projection of the bos as a place where gender norms and patriarchal systems can be overcome indicates the unnaturalness . . . of these norms and systems . . . [and] engages with the possibility that there is an Outside to heteronormative patriarchy, that transgender identities can be maintained, and that gender itself is distinct from personal identity. (17)

By engaging in philosophical arguments regarding the essential nature of gender, Heldris de Cornuälle revealed flaws in the Old French proverb — that Nature will always surpass Nurture. Not only does “Silence’s ability to cross the lines of gender performance demonstrate the artificiality of this dichotomy,” but the juxtaposition (and collapse) of multiple binary systems within language leads the reader to resist such dichotomies

altogether (Barr 9). Throughout the narrative, we watch as “Silence’s inner self, like his/her flexible Old French name, evades binary gender categorization,” as she creates an identity outside of society or her parent’s expectations (Hess 41). In revealing these ontological issues, “Heldris deliberately problematizes gender and posits a view of sexual difference that is culturally rather than biologically determined” (Gaunt 209). *Silence* includes a conventional ending, but it is in the “central episodes” that it departs from expectations and “explore how gender roles and social identities may be shaped in new ways” (Krueger 141). Such an interrogation of gender invites readers to consider gender “as fluid and open to question, rather than fixed and immutable,” open to successful transgression (Krueger 145). The result of deploying such commentary not only “invited their readers to observe the ways that gender identities are constructed” but also “to explore the transformative possibilities of fiction” (Krueger 146). Especially from our modern purview, it is important to remember that the notion of gender as a cultural construct is an idea which had “no currency in the Middle Ages” (Gaunt 203). Rooted in the subconscious of *Silence*, however, similar questions of gender emerge, and although it reads as if it “could be said to be a product of twentieth-century feminism,” it is not (203). Like Chrétien, Heldris participates in the medieval presentation of a debate, encouraging audiences to come to their own conclusion about gender roles rather than presenting an argument. Still, in engaging with such questions, both Chrétien’s and Heldris’ treatment of gender commentary proves that the experience of encountering roles in which we are arbitrarily cast because of our sex is not new to modern women (or men, for that matter. The idea that our identity is shaped by the role we are expected to play is one that clearly has had lasting intrigue and, moreover, consequences for those

constrained by such systems. Cadot was wrong when he proclaimed “por cho que silensce tolt ance,” or “silence relieves anxiety,” for silence does not relieve anxiety, after all, but self-knowledge, acceptance, and freedom to be our authentic self does (97).

## CHAPTER VI

### **Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*: Victorian Medievalism**

During the Victorian age (1837 – 1901), the very shape of the world was shifting for those who were subject to the Industrial Revolution and growing urbanization. As industry and population were expanding, so, too, were jobs, which were increasingly becoming available to both men and women; some jobs were even perceived as more suitable for women, drawing them out of the home and hearth. Many responded to the changing culture by rooting themselves firmly in tradition, trying their best to quell the growing “Religious doubt and the viciously competitive atmosphere of business [which] combined to threaten the stability of many traditional religious and moral values” (Christ 146). Gender norms were not exempt from the changing tides as the evolving world necessitated a reconception of roles for both women and men. Those who resisted societal change were “Experiencing at once the breakdown of faith and the dehumanizing pressure of the marketplace” (Christ 146). As a result, as Carol Christ explains, society placed women —wives and mothers— as saviors who could re-instill traditional values from their hearth (146). Traditionalists firmly believed that the preservation of “those values [began] in the home” and that only the “woman who was its center . . . could create a sanctuary both from the anxieties of modern life and for those values no longer confirmed by religious faith or relevant to modern business” (Christ 146). At the same time, there was also a growing anxiety “that Philistines . . . were coming to dominate the tone of society,” and these fears generated a “renewed emphasis on a notion of gentility . . . [and] a courtly reverence for women” (Christ 146).



Such a focus on the ideal, elevated woman contributed to the emergence of medievalism which existed in all realms from the political, to the literary, to the arts, and more (Harrison 19). Whereas medieval is the historical period between ca. 500 – 1500, medievalism is “any attempt to reimagine or reinvent the medieval” (Ashton 3). The Victorian era is particularly important to the transition from medieval to medievalism to neomedievalism, as the “impact of . . . Victorian scholars and artists on the way the contemporary popular zeitgeist understands the Middle Ages is inescapable” (Carroll Introduction). Such medievalism was “characterized by a specialized vocabulary, a distinctive iconography, and the use of particular literary genres,” such as the chivalric romance (Harrison 19). In the Victorian era, the idea of the Middle Ages became increasingly romanticized “as a time of unity and chivalry,” in which the Victorians saw “the roots of their contemporary culture” (Carroll Introduction). In a time of great ideological discord, “Medievalist discourse . . . denoted particular belief systems and modes of conduct wholly integrated into middle- and upper-class culture: chivalry, manliness, selflessness, gallantry, nobility, honor, duty, and fidelity (to the Crown as well as to a beloved)” (Harrison 19). Such themes and ideals were used both promote traditional ideals and explore the need for societal change. For traditionalists, “This discourse . . . promulgated a belief in the spiritual power of love and in the positive moral influence of women” (Harrison 19). For others, such as poet Matthew Arnold, medievalism was a means to safely explore unseemly aspects of society, such as harm that befalls Victorian women who were constrained to the role of the domestic savior, or the “Angel in the House.” In this chapter, I will first examine traditional and evolving gender roles in Victorian society and the factors that necessitated such change. I will then

explore how poet Matthew Arnold, himself, experienced internal conflict between perceptions of his character as effeminate as measured by nineteenth-century expectations of masculinity. Lastly, I will investigate what made the reified chivalric romance genre such an alluring mode for a poet like Arnold to critique societal expectations of gender by examining his *Tristram and Iseult*, where he reimagines the Tristan tradition by radically shifting the focus of the traditional love story between Iseult of Cornwall and Tristram to the oppression of the hero's wife, Iseult of Brittany. I will maintain that Arnold employs such a revisionist strategy to highlight how expectations promulgated from the family hearth ultimately served to doom future generations to lives that were ultimately unfulfilling. Arnold's poem exemplifies the emergence of medievalism which was deployed again in the Victorian age — not merely to entertain, but to interrogate the sociopolitical climate.

Perhaps, as Lydia Murdoch maintains, the origin of the idyllic *Angel in the House* persona is an intimate image of the royal family. A drawing published in *The Illustrated London News* in 1848 captured “Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and the royal children gathered around a tabletop Christmas tree at Windsor Castle in what became a celebrated image of domestic harmony” and inspired other families to begin decorating their own Christmas trees (Murdoch 73). This was not the only drawing which reflected a similar scene, however, and such images of Queen Victoria became important, as they represented “the middle-class domestic queen encircled by children” (Murdoch 73). These intimate portraits of the royal family's private moments became emblematic of the societal importance of an ideal mother devoted to her children as these “scenes placed

religion, family, and the home as foundations of the English social order and national prosperity” (Murdoch 73).

Such domestic visions inspired Coventry Patmore to write his influential, *The Angel in the House*, a poem that conveyed a Victorian ideal of motherhood. In this poem, the wife and mother, or angel, “creates and sanctifies” the home and is idealized with a “religious reverence” (Christ 146). In *The Angel in the House*, “Patmore associates woman with . . . traditionally feminine values — love, intuition, beauty, virtue” but emphasizes that such value systems are attributed to those who “lack [a] desire to act” (Christ 149). In Patmore’s view, women, unlike men, do not have “ego investment in success or failure” naturally and are “unaffected by others’ blame or praise because [they have] no desire to achieve” due to their natural passivity (Christ 149). It is this passivity for which Patmore believes women should be exalted. He considers that equilibrium within the family dynamic only comes about when “Man is truth, [and] woman is love” (Christ 149). Men, according to Patmore, are burdened by the “desire to achieve” which results only in anguish, as “failure and success . . . lead to self-hatred” (Christ 149). Man not only suffers from the despair of failure, but is unsatisfied with successful outcomes as well, which contributes to “an inherent ugliness” within his core nature” (Christ 149). Although Patmore uses language which conveys “an intense ambivalence in his definition of manhood,” ultimately the words of his poem paint a portrait that seems to elevate the woman while the man suffers, but the reality proliferated by his message reflects a stark contrast (Christ 149). Women did not, in fact “represent a possibility of freedom from impulses” nor were they being spared “from the obligation of accomplishment that man finds so burdensome” (Christ 149). For some, they were being

relegated to an unfulfilling sphere through the manipulation of language which spurred such ideologies. The feigned “worship of the angel” was actually the clipping of the angel’s wings (Christ 152). Patmore’s rhetoric became harmful in that it “alternate[d] between praising woman’s superiority to man” while simultaneously “asserting her absolute domination by him” (Christ 152)

Although such rhetoric was pervasive, reality made the becoming an “angel in the house” a statistical improbability; figures from the 1851 census show that there were 2,765,000 single women in Victorian England, a number which grew to 3,228,700 by 1871 (Foster 7). This disparity in the population was caused, in part, by men choosing bachelorhood over marriage and also in part by men deciding to emigrate alone to the US colonies (Foster 7). Consequently, for many women, “fulfillment . . . of one of society’s most insistent ideals was literally impossible” (Foster 7). Thus, the “New Woman” emerged, a woman who found work in places where “masculine force” was becoming unnecessary, such as clerical work, and the need for such work due to new technology was “undermin[ing] the gendered division of labor that had been in place since the 1840s” (Danahay 157). As Martin Danahay maintains, the idea of this “New Woman” contributed to a “fear of competition” and an “implicit threat to men as the ‘breadwinner’ of the family” and although clerical work was becoming increasingly feminized, there were those who tried to gain background by arguing that man “is not ‘unmanned’ by office work” (Danahay 158). Thus, the Victorian age was defined in large part by changes in society, as gender norms became an increasingly polarizing topic.

One of the men who was affected by the conflict between his nature and societal expectations was the poet Matthew Arnold. Both Arnold’s affinity for poetry and also his

penchant for isolation led to his “characteri[zation] as effeminate in his days as a student at Oxford between 1841 and 1844” (Ellis 98). Over the previous decades, there had been a growing belief that “the study of poetry, especially classical poetry, led . . . to the intellectual emasculation of students” (Ellis 98); it was perceived to be too imaginative and fanciful and, consequently, it did not cultivate masculinity (Ellis 99). The qualities of poetry, such as “meekness, gentleness, compassion” were understood to align more with those “qualities which popular gender ideals considered inherently feminine” (Ellis 99). Arnold’s fascination with “figures of lonely, isolated thinkers” and his own reclusive nature also opened him up to further “charges of effeminacy” (Ellis 100). Critics soon began attacking Arnold’s masculinity, saying he lacked “severe manliness” and painting Arnold “as an effeminate fop” (Ellis 100). Such criticism became even more vitriolic. In the *Daily Telegraph*, he was called an “elegant creature” with “gentle limbs” that wore “a flowered dressing gown” (qtd in Ellis 101). In *Fraser’s Magazine*, James Macdonell dubbed Arnold “the downcradled darling of the revolutionary boudoir . . . lisping in silvery tones” (qtd in Ellis 101). Arnold did not take such attacks on his nature without slight, and he considered them inhumane (Ellis 102).

The public perception of Arnold’s character was particularly challenging for him as his father, Dr. Thomas Arnold, was, as “the reforming headmaster of Rugby” the epitome of conventional manhood, and he was a harsh critic of “men of elegant minds” (Ellis 102). Arnold grew up “idoli[zing] his father” and had internalized “a deep respect for the paradigm of active, dynamic manliness” for which his father was a proponent (Ellis 102). Dr. Arnold was notoriously more interested in employing “active men” with “common sense” with little regard for men of learning (Ellis 103). Thomas Arnold

studied “military heroes and political leaders” since he had a more “utilitarian nature,” believing that the most important lessons were learned by studying the prowess of ancient leaders (Ellis 103). Such preferences were instilled in his son, and “correspondence between” the two while Arnold was in school proves “that Thomas expected his son to live up to the Rugby ideal” (Ellis 103). Arnold admired his father and even depicted him in his poem “Rugby Chapel,” where “Thomas appears as an energetic, manly Christian warrior, a soldier of Christ” (Ellis 104). In “Rugby Chapel,” though, Arnold not only lauds his father but also conveys his own internal conflict between his introspective nature and his father’s ideals (Ellis 106). Despite wanting to have “a more manly character, he [was] powerless to change it” (Ellis 107). In other words, Arnold was trapped in the matrix of gender himself.

In his poem, *Tristram and Iseult*, Arnold explores the consequences of rigid societal expectations of gender. Like other Victorian poets, Matthew Arnold drew from “the language of chivalry, courtly love . . . [and] materials from Arthurian mythology” in his reworking of the Tristan romance (Harrison 20). Victorian medievalism emerged as a popular mode of deploying “social and political force [through] its ideological operations” (Harrison 21). When Arnold composed *Tristram and Iseult*, he “displace[d] the political and other contexts” of society and, instead, projected issues regarding gender roles, “onto a distant historical moment . . . suppress[ing] historical particulars . . . [and] reconceptualiz[ing] them as abstract universals” (Harrison 22). As a result, readers who immersed themselves into stories of distant lands, lords, and ladies, found that the subject matter was not quite so distant after all. Arnold, himself, experienced this distant relatability when he discovered the Tristan tale and turned to Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*,

finding himself sufficiently distracted “from the explosive political events going on around him” (Harrison 22). As inspired by Malory, *Tristram and Iseult* “became a vehicle for the repudiation of ‘the talk of the day’ and the sociopolitical issues privileged by such discourse” (Harrison 23). Missing from the foreground of Arnold’s poem is politics, but nestled in the subtext of the romance, such “generalized metaphors . . . suggest and disguise an array of urgent public issues and refocus[es] the discourse” surrounding gender (Harrison 23). As Harrison argues, in *Tristram and Iseult*, Arnold “exploits a medieval topos and setting to disparage in generalized but absolute terms the ‘furnace’ of a world in which fulfillment is unattainable through the usual” (25).

The origins of the Tristan tale were not originally connected to the Arthuriana, but, as with so many other independent traditions, it eventually became part of “the matter of Britain” (Davenport 157). Like Chrétien’s works, the Tristan corpus “captured the imagination” by combining *matiere* from Geoffrey of Monmouth and Robert Wace with “fantastic motifs and themes . . . drawn from Celtic legends” in which “love and chivalry were prominent” and the hero must grapple with the conflict between personal and societal demands (Davenport 157). While allusions to Arthur and his court can be found in the verse tales of Tristan, in the Prose Tristan the hero joins Arthur’s Round Table, and the “two legends intersect fruitfully” (Davenport 158). Tony Davenport speculates that Chrétien was inspired by the Tristan corpus when composing his tales of adultery in *Cligés* and *Lancelot* (158). Historians cannot pinpoint the source of the legend, but “scholars have found analogues in the tales of the Celts, and certain motifs may have been borrowed from Hellenic, Persian, and Arabic sources” (Davenport 158). It is those variations which were composed in Europe from the twelfth to thirteenth

centuries which inspired the adaptations for centuries to come (Davenport 158). These variations are divided into two, the “version commune,” which reflects the origins of the legend, and the “version *courtoise*,” which reflects the culture of the court (Davenport 158). It is the version *courtoise* of the Tristan story that fits so neatly into the genre of *romanz*.

The essential storyline of the courtly narrative is as follows: Tristan is orphaned as a child and raised in the court of his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall. He grows up to become the embodiment of the chivalric ideal, and eventually defeats Morholt, an Irish champion who is sent to Cornwall to collect tribute for the king of Ireland; in the battle, Tristan is grazed by Morholt’s poisonous sword: grievously injured, he is put out to sea on a funeral boat and ends up in Ireland, where he disguises himself and is cured by the Irish princess, Iseult. When Tristan returns to Cornwall, Mark has been convinced to marry, and Tristan volunteers to help Mark win a bride. Thus, he returns to Ireland to win Mark’s bride by slaying a dragon and, in doing so, gets injured a second time by the dragon’s flame. Iseult, again restores him to health, this time learning his true identity as Morholt’s slayer. Tristan’s victory over the dragon wins Iseult for Mark, and they set out to sea to return to Cornwall, but during the journey, they accidentally partake in a love potion and, falling in love with each other as a result, they consummate their forbidden relationship. They continue to meet secretly even after Iseult’s marriage to Mark, while Mark’s jealous barons contrive their capture. Mark remains loyal and trusting until his nephew and wife are caught in an encounter, and he condemns Tristan and Iseult both to ill fates. They escape together into the wilderness. Mark searches for them and finds them asleep with a sword in between them, causing his trust in Tristan to return, and he invites



them back to court. Mark is persuaded to again take Iseult as his wife but banish Tristan. Iseult must proclaim her innocence in the presence of King Arthur, and Tristan joins King Arthur's court, increasing his chivalric prowess. Tristan eventually settles in Brittany and marries the Duke's daughter, Iseult of Brittany. Although initially attracted to her (in large part due to her name), his feelings for his new Iseult quickly fade. He erects statues of Iseult of Cornwall in a cave that he visits. Tristan occasionally visits Cornwall in disguise until he is poisoned by a spear in Brittany. He sends for Iseult of Cornwall and instructs the sailors to hoist a white sail upon their return if she is on board or a black sail if she is not. Iseult of Brittany, who overheard these instructions, tells Tristan the ship's sail is black when it arrives, and Tristan succumbs to his wound. When Iseult of Cornwall arrives to find Tristan dead, she, too, dies (Davenport 159-160). As seen in this long summary, the focus of the story is on the love affair between Tristan and Iseult of Cornwall; the other, Iseult of Brittany, only appears at the end of the story to play the role of a bitter, deceitful wife. It is she, however, whom Arnold brings to the foreground in his poem.

Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult* is inspired by (and certainly displays some) romantic conventions but is not, in and of itself, a romance. Rather, his poem "is a formally hybrid medievalist poem" adapted from the *romanz* genre (Harrison 24). In his version of the tale, Arnold "undercuts traditional versions of the myth" by transforming the once heroic Tristram into a feeble figure, but although the story opens on Tristram's deathbed, this version of the tale is, as Harrison rightly notes, "Iseult of Brittany's tragedy, not Tristram's" (24). Nor is it Iseult of Cornwall's. In Arnold's poem, Iseult of Brittany is the focus, and Arnold chooses to treat how she is "tortured rather than fulfilled by her love"

for Tristan rather than focus on the love affair between the hero and his uncle's wife (Harrison 25). Arnold thus reframes the Tristan myth, using the medieval idealization of love to convey the dangers of domestic duty that "ruin[s] human lives" (Harrison 25).

Arnold split his poem into three sections. The first section of the poem, titled "Tristram," finds the hero on his deathbed, hoping for a last visit from Iseult of Cornwall. The second section, titled "Iseult of Ireland," details his final moments when he and Iseult die together after finally meeting again. The third section, titled "Iseult of Brittany," details the unfulfilled life of Iseult after the death of her husband and his paramour. Although attention in the poem is certainly paid to Tristram and Iseult of Cornwall, "the whole of the poem really belongs to Iseult of Brittany [as] her presence contextualizes all of the action in the poem" (Ranum 403). In Iseult of Brittany, we see the reversal of medieval ideals exemplified. As Ingrid Ranum maintains,

This Iseult has the characteristics of a fairytale heroine. She is "the lovely orphan child" [not the daughter of a duke] who meets her knight, falls in love, and lives with him in a castle by the sea. She is also, though, a distinctly domestic figure. As "chatelaine," she was the keeper of "her castle" before Tristram arrived (I.193-194), and she makes that castle into a home in which she nurses her wasting husband and raises their children. She is idealized as a "timid youthful bride" (I.214), "lovely youthful wife" (I.269), "the sweetest Christian soul alive" (I.54), and as a mother who is as innocent even as her own children (I.325-326). And, of course, she is the last character standing at the end of the poem. (403)

Although Arnold's Iseult may play the role of a *romanz* heroine, the clear subtext of a life not lived paints a harsh picture of the real roles women were expected to play. In a

society conditioned by the notion of an ideal “angel in the house,” Arnold’s Iseult “provides a complex and troubling view of the good woman/wife who seems to embody Victorian ideals of domestic femininity,” while she invites readers to reconsider “the capacity of that model . . . to sustain . . . an entirely vital human self” (Ranum 404). In reframing the Tristan narrative, Arnold houses an argument for the liberation from societal expectations regarding gender.

In the first section of the poem, the two Iseults become their own binary that highlights how the Victorian ideal of the “angel in the house” is problematic. Tristram, who is wasting and pining away for Iseult of Cornwall, ironically finds himself “incapable of any productive action” and in despair at his current “domestic situation” (Ranum 407). His previous heroic exploits are juxtaposed with his new reality, and as he awaits Iseult of Cornwall, he contemplates the Iseult beside him, whom he “cognitively replaces . . . with her rival” (Ranum 407). The section begins with descriptions of Iseult of Brittany that paint a “bleak” portrait, and it is established from the outset that she is “not the Iseult [he] desire[s]” (Arnold 1, ln 33). Her features are merely “mild,” and she has “slight” fingers and “cheeks [that] are sunk and pale” (30-33). Moreover, Tristram claims she suffers from “a deep fatigue” after “passing all her youthful hour/ Spinning with her maidens,” spending her time staring “listlessly through the window bars” in a “lonely shore-built tower” (37-43). This initial description ends with the narrator claiming that Iseult of Brittany is “The sweetest Christian soul alive,” perhaps the kindest thing said about her, although it merely comments on her dutiful character (54). As Barbara Leavy points out, “innocence is probably the most emphasized characteristic of Iseult of Brittany in Part I,” and phrases such as “fragile loveliness . . . patient flower . . .

snowdrop” contribute to “an image of frigidity as well as delicacy . . . [an] asexual childishness” (13). In this way, Iseult of Brittany is emblematic of the Victorian ideal, as passivity and frigidity were to be admired in the *Angel in the House* (Christ 152).

Tristram’s coldness toward Iseult of Brittany, contrasted by his inflamed passion for Iseult of Cornwall, highlights that the Victorian ideal woman is not so ideal after all, as both partner’s are dissatisfied. Immediately after describing Iseult of Brittany, Tristram begins juxtaposing her with “that other Iseult fair,/ that proud, first Iseult” (56-57).

Tristram acknowledges there were “two Iseults” in his life — one who “possess’d his waning time” and the other who represents his “resplendent prime” (69-71). He laments that the Iseult who attends his bedside now is the one who “possess’d the darker hour / . . . the one who had his gloom” and not the Iseult who “hadst his bloom” (73-77). In this section, such “contrasted binaries” as the absence and presence of the two Iseults, the storm outside versus the warmth of the hearth, the future and the past convey the realities of a “domestic failure” (Ranum 407).

In the second section of the poem, “Iseult of Ireland,” Iseult of Cornwall meets Tristram at his deathbed. Iseult laments their fate and claims they “both have suffer’d. / Both have passed a youth consumed and sad, / . . . [but] have now short space for being glad” (53-55). Iseult of Brittany is cast aside, and her emotions are assumed by Iseult of Cornwall, who claims that the “younger Iseult [will not] take it ill, / That a rival shares her office” (58-60). Iseult of Cornwall says that she desires to “rouse no anger, make no rivals more” but predicts the other Iseult will be heartened by her fading beauty and “cry: ‘is this the foe I dreaded? This his idol? This that his royal bride?’” and gracefully allow Iseult of Cornwall to nurse him in his dying moments (65-66). Here, Iseult of Cornwall

imposes on the final moments between a dying husband and his wife, casting the wife aside. Neither is Tristram, typified as a heroic figure in most versions, represented nobly here (Ranum 405). Iseult of Cornwall, too, has left the side of her own husband, whom she wronged with Tristram, to replace his wife at his bedside during the hour of his death. She spends that hour beside him (and in the presence of his wife) “describ[ing] her life and Tristram’s in terms of passive anguish,” proclaiming that “they have dissipated their lives on fruitless longing for one another” (Ranum 405). In such statements, she undermines years of marriage to her own husband while ignoring Tristram’s marriage to his dutiful angel. When Tristram dies, Iseult of Cornwall, too, perishes, claiming she will leave Tristram “never more” (100). As Ingrid Ranum points out, Iseult “has not nearly the power in her passion that the narrator had supposed when he charged, ‘One such kiss as those of yore / Might thy dying knight restore’ (78-79), Rather, their ‘last kiss upon the living shore’ . . . seems to have almost the opposite effect” (Ranum 405). In these last moments, a harsh light is shown on the love affair between Tristram and Iseult. Their love is not enough to save them, after all, and, instead, their life spent pining for each other has negatively impacted others like Iseult of Brittany, who was unceremoniously cast aside until the very end of her marriage. This scene creates a sharp lack of empathy for the dying lovers, as the visual of Tristram and Iseult of Cornwall, again, casting aside their partners for each other in yet another act of selfishness shows that such love is not to be idealized, nor, for that matter, is duty to a wrongful husband (or wife).

It is in section three, “Iseult of Brittany,” that Arnold shifts Iseult of Brittany to the center of the poem to interrogate the problematic nature of the “angel in the house.” Through “centering Iseult and remaking her into a domestic paragon, Arnold has made

this courtly romance into a domestic tragedy of a man unable to respond to the influence of his preternaturally beneficent wife” (Ranum 413). Arnold uses this section to highlight the impact of “that self-abnegating paragon to be a complete and fulfilled human being” (Ranum 413). As Ingrid Ranum maintains,

Up to this point, Iseult has contented herself with being the personification of the domestic angel and found that her husband still does not want her. He does not ever get over his inappropriate attraction to Iseult of Ireland and come to truly love Iseult of Brittany. This Iseult, Tristram’s wife, has invested her whole self and her potential happiness in the hope that her husband will see her worth and that his erotic attachment to his old lover will cool; however, this investment has paid off in an empty marriage and profound unhappiness because Tristram, once and always, wants someone else. (413)

This final section is set a year after the death of Tristram and Iseult of Cornwall, and it is here that Arnold drives home his argument against the Victorian domestic ideal. After describing Iseult’s day of mothering, the narrator asks,

And is she happy? Does she see unmoved  
The days in which she might have lived and loved  
Slip without bringing bliss slowly away,  
One after one, to-morrow like to-day?  
Joy has not found her yet, nor ever will--  
Is it this thought which, makes her mien so still,  
Her features so fatigued, her eyes, though sweet,  
So sunk, so rarely lifted save to meet

Her children's. (64-72)

Although the picture painted with her children is seemingly happy, Arnold immediately contrasts such a portrait with the reality of a life less lived, where the only happiness Iseult finds is with her children. In raising such questions, Arnold casts a harsh light on the notion that being a dutiful wife and mother will provide happiness or sustain a family, as neither has happened in his tragedy of *Tristram and Iseult of Brittany*. Arnold uses irony to indicate this truth a few lines later, conveying that although her home “is lonely for her in her hall/. . . [with only her] children, and the grey-hair’d seneschal, / Her women, and Sir Tristram’s aged hound” for company, a “noiser life . . . / She would find ill to bear, weak as she is” (96-101). In these lines, we see the modesty expected of a perfect, fragile, self-sacrificing housewife, but Arnold reminds us that Iseult is yet another victim of the “gradual furnace of the world, / in whose hot air [her] spirits are upcurl’d/ until they crumble” (119-121).

The poem ends with a reflection on the Breton tale Iseult tells her children, and although she has been notable in this poem throughout, this is the first time we hear her speak, making her, in Ranum’s words, “one of the most absent central characters in all of literature” (416). She is not only displaced by Iseult of Cornwall in her marriage to Tristram, but she is even treated distantly by the narrator, a representation of the displacement of women’s voices who quietly and dutifully survive in the background. Throughout most of the poem, “Iseult is distinctly and bizarrely voiceless,” with both Tristram and Iseult of Cornwall exchanging dialogue freely (Ranum 416). Even unnamed characters in the poem speak and a “woven huntsman in [a] tapestry is imagined to speak” (Ranum 416). This last example illustrates that even “[i]nanimate objects speak

more than” Iseult of Brittany (Ranum 416). It is not until the end of section three that we hear Iseult’s own words as she tells her children an ancient Arthurian tale about Vivian seducing and then binding Merlin with her magic to the earth before abandoning him.

The fact that Arnold ends his poem with this tale points to its importance symbolically. Some, such as Tinker and Lowry, relate Iseult to the character of Merlin since he is abandoned by Vivian, arguing that both Iseult and Merlin fall prey to “disastrous love” (124). Barbara Leavy argues this scene has more psychological underpinnings, claiming that in Arnold’s poem, Iseult is representative of the *Angel in the House* “who has spent her youth at stereotyped female tasks while the men she knew were occupied with more exciting pursuits” (2). Not only did Iseult faithfully tend the home and children, she also remained dutiful to her husband into his dying days despite his pining for a different Iseult who, also, is unsatisfied with her own husband. Leavy points out that even after Tristram’s death, Iseult “continue[s] to care for their children in a faultlessly maternal fashion, living an existence whose monotony and emptiness are described so emphatically that the description cannot possibly be read as a minor element in the poem” (2). She argues further that Iseult, “the stoical, long-suffering wife has an extraordinarily rich fantasy life . . . a fantasy existence in which she can draw on . . . the story of Merlin and Vivian, to project herself imaginatively into the role of her rival and conceive of a relationship in which she is the adventurous and dominating rather than passive and submissive partner” (Leavy 3). Regardless of whether Iseult was providing a cautionary tale to warn her children of the dangers of love, or whether she is psychologically projecting herself into the role of the adored, in relaying a Breton tale to the next generation, Iseult continues to play her societal role faithfully after her unfaithful



husband's death. By the end of the poem, "[i]t is clear that Iseult's perfect domesticity cannot rescue Tristram from his greater passion or herself from her oppressive loneliness and sorrow, but to the end of the poem Iseult continues to act, and to act effectively: she mothers" (Ranum 418). Such tales that she passes onto her children ultimately promulgate the ideologies that will lead them into the respective cycles of their mother, father, or, possibly, worse.

Not only did Arnold pay homage to romance in his *Tristram and Iseult*, he reworked *romanz matiere* to explore the harm that befalls women who are constrained to the domestic sphere. The realities for both men and women of the era stood in stark contrast to societal expectations, a conflict to which the more effeminate Arnold was not immune. Thus, Arnold uses *Tristram and Iseult* to put the idyllic "angel in the house" under a microscope by transforming Iseult of Brittany into a metaphor that conveys how such rigid societal expectations are dangerous, and humans are left without those things that it means to be human in the first place — passion, adventure, freedom. Moreover, such rhetoric is passed down, dooming future generations to the same cycles of unhappiness for the sake of tradition — at the expense of the soul.

## CHAPTER V

### Neomedieval Fantasy: The Resurgence of Romance

Industrialization and urbanization of the mid-nineteenth century changed the very face of English society. The social sciences, too, were evolving. The disciplines of archaeology and anthropology emerged: archaeologists discovered, among the artifacts and ruins of ancient civilizations, hitherto unknown stories and histories inscribed in stone and on clay tablets (later translated by linguists), while folklorists, interested in cultural behaviors and practices of particular groups, gathered oral traditions and legends (Mathews 475). Richard Mathews explains that as understanding and definitions of our history expanded, the literary genre of science fiction emerged “as part of the literary impulse to cope with all these changes and discoveries through the projection of potential scenarios to emulate or avoid” (475). These advancements —scientific, technological, archaeological, historical — contributed to a growing audience of readers who “felt the need to set forth and explore unknown worlds,” including past worlds (Mathews 475). Over the following century, science fiction branched out into fantasy, which also helped readers cope by “offering escape from change by creating the opportunity to enter a completely different reality for a while” (Mathews 475). Ironically, the more society advanced technologically, the more audiences hungered for the past and found a return to romance particularly alluring; thus, according to Mathews, “[r]omance was reincarnated and revitalized in brilliant works of modern fantasy” written by authors like George Macdonald, J. R. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis (475). Corinne Saunders remarks that born again were the “great motifs of medieval romance — the knight errant, the quest, the chivalric test,” and these building blocks contributed to “a whole range of genres” (1).

The resurgence of romance allowed audiences to escape into fantastical worlds while still retaining traces of the familiar. Indeed, as Saunders asserts, romance's fluidity allows the genre to span "mimetic and non-mimetic, actuality and fantasy, history and legend, past and present," thereby creating a space for societal discourse from a safe distance (2). Interwoven in the pages of seemingly far-off lands with distant concerns are societal messages pertinent to readers; while enjoying a reprieve from the real world at the surface level, readers can, at the same time, find commonalities and raise important questions subconsciously about their material reality. This chapter turns to a recent incarnation of romance categorized as neomedievalism, as found in the modern fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, by George R. R. Martin. Like Chrétien, Heldris, and Arnold (among many other authors), Martin uses romance to comment on gender by subverting tropes and expectations, such as the chivalrous knight, with a number of his characters, including Sansa Stark, who learns the hard way that not all knights are like the stories, Jaime Lannister, the knight whose incestuous love for his sister leads him to commit atrocities, or The Hound, who by all conventions would make the ideal knight but believes chivalry is a farce. Most notably, perhaps, is his characterization of two characters, the female knight Brienne of Tarth and the gentle-natured (and disowned heir of Horn Hill) Samwell Tarly. The plights of both Brienne and Samwell mirror each other, and their respective story arcs invite audiences to consider how people can reach their fullest potential when left to explore fully their individual innate strengths in spite of gender expectations or social pressures. Martin's series demonstrates that romance, in its current form, continues to be an effective means to examine pertinent and on-going societal questions of gender identity.

George R. R. Martin's seven volume series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, is set in a feudal society reminiscent of the Middle Ages. Martin develops a thorough history of Westeros, which is referred to from the beginning and throughout the narrative. The history began with a war between the children of the forest, a magical race of child-like humans, and the First Men, from whom the characters in the series are descended, ending in a pact between the two. Over time, their pact was threatened by the emergence of the Others, a malevolent race of undead beings that brought death, destruction, and endless cold and darkness. The children of the forest and the First Men ultimately had to join forces to push back the Others, and they built a giant wall of ice interwoven with magical spells to separate society from the Others, should they return. Over a period of two thousand years, Westeros developed on the safe side of the Wall and split into six Kingdoms. These kingdoms were conquered by Aegon Targaryen with his three fully-grown dragons, the last of their kind. The Targaryen rule, thus, was quickly established, and although their dragons died off over a period of a century and a half, their rule went unchallenged until Aerys Targaryen, known as the Mad King, was defeated by several noble houses led by Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark. Robert Baratheon did not stop at defeating the Targaryens, however, but also killed those who would descend in the line of succession (or so he thought). Robert Baratheon seized the Iron Throne and thus became King of Westeros.

It is with this complex historical backdrop that the many parallel character arcs are developed. At the beginning of the series, Robert Baratheon, who has been king of Westeros for many years, is killed, and his death is the impetus of many political maneuvers for the Iron Throne. Robert's son, Joffrey, claims the throne, but Renly

Baratheon, Robert's brother, contests his legitimacy (and rightly so, as Joffrey is actually the illegitimate child of his mother, Cersei, and her twin brother, Jaime). Ned Stark, who was Robert Baratheon's Hand of the King (or second in command) is beheaded for learning the truth of Joffrey's parentage, and these rifts spiral into the War of the Five Kings, as Westeros devolves into political unrest. Meanwhile, dark and mysterious things are happening at the Wall (and beyond it, where the Wildlings, a group of humans who fled Westerosi rule, are being picked off one by one). Through the arc of Jon Snow, the bastard son of Ned Stark who was sent to the Wall, and Samwell Tarly, who becomes Jon's friend after also being sent to the wall, readers learn about a more sinister threat that is being dangerously overlooked as the Westerosi war against each other: the return of the Others. Lastly, readers follow the arc of Daenerys Targaryen, the last of the Targaryen line who was raised in secret on another continent across the narrow sea, as she transforms from a naïve, young girl, to a ruler intent on restoring her family to the Iron Throne. Along the way, she hatches three dragons, and as her dragons grow, so, too, does her power. Although the series is yet unfinished, there are currently five books: *A Game of Thrones*, *A Clash of Kings*, *A Storm of Swords*, *A Feast for Crows*, and *A Dance with Dragons* with two more books in the works: *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. The narrative is structured using a parallel plot where several character points-of-view are established, allowing for audiences to watch the three overarching plot points develop separately, converge slowly over time through certain, unexpected character meetings, and also build a thorough history through utilizing a non-linear structure with flashbacks to previous times.

Fantasy as a sub-genre of romance is characterized by a movement away from reality, wherein a hero called to a quest encounters conflicts between good and evil that are broken down into episodes of seemingly unrelated events that only become meaningful and significant when put together (Mathews 476). Even from this basic definition, the conventions and structures of romance as found in medieval romance are apparent — the chivalric hero's noble quest and marvelous encounters split into episodes that converge. As Richard Mathews maintains,

Fantasy introduces several radical ideas drawn from the romance tradition, it looks back to an idealized Middle Ages, a time when superstition and religion commanded stronger allegiances than science and logic. While not entirely rejecting the idea of progress . . . the writing nonetheless does not presuppose that 'new' is 'better.' It seeks preservation or 'restoration' of the fragile elements of a golden time. (477)

Mathews points to the rapid advancement of “technologies of mass production and the development of new, cheaper, and faster printing and binding processes” as well as “the rapidly developing mass media of film, radio, and television” in the later twentieth century that fueled the growth of fantasy literature (480). As the cult followings of romances grew (and continues to grow today), such as audiences inspired by *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, by J. R. R. Tolkien, or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis, or the more modern *Harry Potter*, by J. K. Rowling and Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* continue to synthesize references from the Middle Ages into their subconscious. As we encounter the conventions of romance, references to the Arthuriana, and more, we are reminded that it is “the oldest stories have such power still that they call each new

generation not only to read them but to retell them” (Mathews 484). As this thesis has traced the development from the medieval to medievalism and, now, to neo-medievalism, the staying power of romance, is clear. Romance has endured, firmly rooting audiences to history and legend as the world around them changes irrevocably, providing a sense of reality within the unreality.

As touched upon throughout this thesis, medieval is distinct from medievalism, which is further distinct from neomedievalism. Whereas medieval refers to the Middle Ages directly and medievalism refers to art and literature inspired by the Middle Ages, neomedievalism is defined by its distance from the Middle Ages (Pugh 3). As Shiloh Carroll explains, neomedievalism reflects “yet another remov[al] of medievalism; neomedieval texts use the trappings of the medieval as filtered through a ‘medievalist intermediary’” (Carroll Introduction). Thus, modern fantasy is derived from the medieval literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century, such as the Victorian or Romantic writers of medievalism and even J. R. R. Tolkien; in other words, literature or media falls into the category of neomedieval when it is inspired by literature that was (in turn) inspired by the medieval (Carroll Introduction). Carroll goes on to say that neomedieval texts often intentionally paint the Middle Ages inaccurately as a self-reflexive way to comment on itself (Introduction). Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* has been dubbed a neomedievalist series by many; Martin, however, has tried to set his works apart from the label of neomedievalism by “imply[ing] that neomedievalism is for children,” whereas his series, clearly intended for adult readers, is distinguished by its realism and complexity (Carroll Introduction). Martin’s rejection of neomedievalism reflects his

displeasure with portrayals of the Middle Ages as idyllic not necessarily with the genre itself. As Shiloh Carroll explains,

[i]f fantasy neomedievalism is an insulating layer between contemporary concerns and a contemporary audience, creating a safe distance from which these concerns can be examined, then Martin's insistence on realism is an attempt to bridge that gap. (Introduction)

Further, and perhaps ironically, Martin's intentional aim to subvert medieval and medievalist romance and fantasy actually showcases his deep understanding of their conventions and of the Middle Ages that "leads to an inconsistent approach to rejecting and undercutting those established patterns" (Introduction).

Not only does Martin engage with the tropes, motifs, and archetypes found in medieval, medievalist, and neomedievalist literature, he also slyly places 'Easter eggs' throughout his series, playful references to other medieval and medievalist works, a particularly neomedieval technique. For example, Martin alludes to Chrétien de Troyes in the first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, when the Dothraki tribe members mockingly refer to Viserys Targaryen (the dispossessed heir of the Iron Throne) as "*Khal Rhagat*," or "the cart king" (Martin 385). This reference to Chrétien's *Lancelot* is particularly humorous because the narrator specifies that Viserys did not know "he was being mocked [by the Dothraki because] carts were for eunuchs, cripples, women giving birth, the very young and the very old" (Martin 385). Lancelot, of course, was well aware (and constantly reminded) that riding in a cart is a sign of dishonor, which is exactly part of what makes his riding in the cart a noble act because he placed more value on his duty to rescue Guinevere than on his honor. With Viserys, however, the shame of riding in a



cart is lost on him — but not the Dothraki; more to the point, as Carol Jamison notes, “the shame associated with riding in the cart cannot be lost on readers who are familiar with these medieval narratives” such as *Lancelot* (Jamison 57).

Martin does not only make allusions to medieval romances, he also engages with known conventions of medievalism and neomedievalism, for example, “parod[ying] the chant of Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*,” who repeated, “My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” (Jamison 59). In *A Storm of Swords*, Martin’s character Oberyn Martell nods to Inigo Montoya by having his own obsessive chant of “You raped her. You murdered her. You killed her children,” when engaging in one-on-one combat with his sister’s murderer, Gregor Clegane (Martin 971). Both Inigo Montoya and Oberyn Martell’s story arcs revolve around obsessively seeking revenge for a lost love one and repeating a similar, staccato chant. Martin also invokes J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series with his characters Harry Sawyer and Robin Potter, two of Brienne of Tarth’s tormentors, and the Red Priest’s God of Light and the Other, in reference to Lord Voldemort, “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” (Jamison 59-60). Such layering of fictional tales upon fictional tales contributes to Martin’s neomedieval strategy; regardless of his intentions with *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Martin’s constant (and consistent) references to other fantasy and romance works has, as Jamison argues, “create[d], for fans and scholars of medievalism, a deeply textured fictional world rich in lore and literature” (61). Not only do his novels recall the medieval chivalric romance and also comment on Victorian medievalism, they also are incredibly familiar and relatable to modern readers, inspiring new audiences to engage with the romance genre (Jamison 61).

Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, though realistic and complex, still fits neatly within the fantasy genre. Modern fantasy literature "is in some ways a direct descendent of medieval romance, though it picked up influences from various genres and ideologies on its way to the late twentieth century, when George R.R. Martin began writing *A Song of Ice and Fire*" (Carroll Chapter 1). Tales from the Middle Ages feel safe and comfortable for modern readers since most were brought up with fairy-tales and legends that made such works feel familiar and nostalgic, while also allowing readers to suspend their belief for the more fantastical, marvelous elements (Carroll Chapter 1). Raymond Thompson studied the parallels between medieval romance and fantasy literature and found that they both follow a chivalric hero through adventures where the hero's strength (both inner and outer) and virtues of "prowess, courage, loyalty, courtesy, and wisdom" are tested in a distant, past land (qtd in Carroll Chapter 1). As synthesized by W.R.J. Barron, the overarching plot structure and motifs of romance (and fantasy) progress typically as follows:

The court gathered around an archetypical feudal monarch in embodiment of chivalric values, the challenge to those values provoked by its reputation, the solitary quest of its representative along forest pathways to answer that challenge, adventures *en route* and temptations which beset him in welcoming wayside castles, the eventual encounter with the challenger and triumphant return to court.  
(166-167)

In representing the inner-workings of a feudal system, "[r]omances wrestle with issues such as the effects of unrestrained violence on the land and people, licit versus illicit violence, gender roles, the stability of bloodlines, and the structure of society as a whole,"

themes that make it fertile grounds for planting commentary (Carroll Introduction).

Martin was particularly taken by the conflict between the ideals expressed in romance versus reality. Martin does not fit neatly into the genre, however, as he enjoys subverting the expectations of these motifs “creating a fascinating tension between medievalism and cynical modernism” (Carroll Chapter 1). Specifically, Martin’s fascination with realistic depictions of what is otherwise portrayed as idyllic is a unique foray for the genre.

Although he does not entirely dismiss the conventions, he often deliberately subverts them, such as making the character who would typify the chivalric knight a wretched human being, while elevating a woman and cowardly man as the truly chivalrous characters.

Whether falling in line with or subverting expectations, Martin not only employs the themes and motifs of romance but also adopts its structure, including the use of *interlacement* and episodes to advance the narrative. Martin’s use of *interlacement* is particularly deliberate. He artfully interweaves parallel plots, such as that of Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow, who are both potentially the fated ‘Azor Ahai’ who will save the realm, or sisters Arya and Sansa Stark, whose trajectories diverge substantially as Arya becomes an assassin while Sansa learns that life as a lady is not like the stories. These multiple storylines allow for juxtaposition and, although the series is not finished, most fans speculate that the more important protagonists, such as Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen, will eventually intersect. Each story is a strand, which when woven together with the other strands works together to create a woven tapestry of language. In using this medieval technique, Martin juxtaposes characters to highlight certain qualities (good or bad) and also to set the present against the past, leaving it to

readers to braid together the connections among the disparate storylines and gain a more comprehensive understanding of his series as a whole. As Carroll maintains, such overlapping and interweaving of storylines creates “a multitude of voices with the *trouvère* [minstrel or, in this case, narrator] silently pulling the narrative strings playing one voice against another by means of the implicit relations of correspondence and contrast emerging in the juxtaposition of the individual points of view” (Chapter 1). The building block of *interlacement* is an episodic structure, constructed of several episodes of individual plot lines, and it is this organization which “structures the narrative in individual episodes that share similar motifs but build on each other toward completion of the plot” (Carroll Chapter 1). Martin uses parallel plots to build his episodic structure. Each chapter reflects the point of view of a different character with a unique perspective and interpretation of the world and events unfolding in his imagined world. This allows for multiple view-points on the state of that world. Martin is lauded for his ability to write such diverse and believable personalities and perspectives for each character point of view, such as his realistic depiction of Sansa Stark’s interiority, and, moreover, her disillusionment with society over time. Martin can shift from Sansa, to Samwell, to Jon, to Cersei seamlessly, and each character chapter has a unique feel.

Martin may have drawn from the medieval chivalric romance conventions in creating his fantasy world, but he also sets out to dismantle notions of Victorian medievalism. As outlined in chapter three, Victorian writers including Arnold were experiencing a time of great ideological discord and societal change; as a result, they were drawn in by the idea that medieval works reflected “particular belief systems and modes of conduct wholly integrated into middle- and upper-class culture: chivalry,

manliness, selflessness, gallantry, nobility, honor, duty, and fidelity (to the Crown as well as to a beloved)” (Harrison 19). Martin, conversely, wholly disagrees that the Middle Ages was an exemplar of an ideal society; this is especially seen in the ways in which he constantly undermines the ideals of chivalry as seen most explicitly in his treatment of one of the central characters in the series, Eddard Stark. Ned, who from the outset of the series appears to be the true protagonist of the story, is killed off at the beginning of the series, and his death sets the stage for a great number of deaths of main characters. This moment of Ned’s death is particularly important in setting a more macabre tone for the rest of the series and signaling to readers to expect the unexpected in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. When Ned dies, it shows that the chivalric hero is not safe in Westeros, and, more importantly, separates Martin’s writing as realistic fiction, where just as in real life, bad things can happen to good people (and vice versa).

As seen in Arnold’s *Tristram and Iseult*, the Victorian notion of gender roles reflected submissive women who knew that their proper place in society was at home. In Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, gender issues are much more complicated. In Martin’s handling of gender dynamics, he is careful to note the implications for both men and women who are subject to societal expectations. He explores all sides of what women are expected to do (i.e. join houses and birth children) and what men are expected to do (grow into strong warriors and protectors of the realm) and conveys the harsher realities of those who follow their intended paths, as is the case with Sansa Stark and Cersei Lannister who both suffer in their forced societal space, or Ned Stark and his son, Robb, who both die in their respective roles. Moreover, Martin deflates the idea of chivalry, that “men fought only to protect their women or in grand, bloodless tournaments” and

conveys, instead, “a society in which chivalry is a thin veneer over a violent, toxic masculinity that victimizes men, women, and children alike” (Carroll Chapter 2). Martin transforms those characters who would be chivalrous if the world was actually idyllic into perpetrators of violence and misogyny, whereas those who emerge as chivalrous are the least likely contenders, such as Brienne of Tarth, a woman knight, or Samwell Tarly, who was disowned by his father for not falling into line with his birth-right as an heir and warrior. Further, Martin dismantles notions of chivalry through other characters, most notably with Sansa Stark, Ned’s daughter who transforms from a naïve aristocrat, who, eager to marry (the sadistic) Prince Joffrey Baratheon, believes in the “Disneyland Middle Ages” represented in songs and stories she hears to a world-wise woman who, after watching her father beheaded by the man who she was to marry (and would later abuse her) learns that the songs and stories are not reality. Although there are many other characters through whom Martin explores issues surrounding gender, Brienne and Samwell are striking examples of those who either refuse to fit into the societal mold for his or her respective sex or those who desperately long to fit into the societal mold until they see the stark reality of those constraints.

As discussed throughout this thesis, not every person fits neatly into a societal mold, and those expected to fit themselves into a mold that is unsuitable suffer for it. Whereas medieval authors invited their audiences to debate the societal expectations for women and Arnold critiqued his society’s expectations for women, Martin openly explores how gender is often fluid, existing on a spectrum of difference, where some women are more masculine, and some men are more feminine. Although feminism is often, by nature, feminocentric, it is not only women who are oppressed by patriarchal

power structures, but men as well. Martin shows the struggles for men and women to fit gender roles with the knight Brienne of Tarth and the gentle nobleman Samwell Tarly. Brienne, the eldest daughter of Lord Selwyn Tarth, does not follow the traditional path of a lady, marrying a nobleman or entering a convent; instead, she chooses to become a knight. In *A Feast for Crows*, the narrator describes her as

huge. Freakish was the word she had heard all her life. She was broad in the shoulder and broader in the hips. Her legs were long, her arms were thick. Her chest was more muscle than bosom. Her hands were big, her feet enormous. And she was ugly besides, with a freckled, horsey face and teeth that seemed almost too big for her mouth. (Martin 84)

Although she had three marriage prospects in her life, which she reflects on throughout the course of the series, none of them pan out. Her first betrothal was arranged when she was seven to another Lord's son, but two years thereafter he died of an illness. In *A Feast for Crows*, Brienne reflects that

[h]ad he lived, they would have been wed within a year of her first flowering, and her whole life would have been different. She would not be here now, dressed in man's mail and carrying a sword, hunting for a dead woman's child. More like she'd be at Nightsong, swaddling a child of her own and nursing another. It was not a new thought for Brienne. It always made her feel a little sad, but a little relieved as well. (288)

Thus, Brienne is not unaware of the role she was meant to play, yet thankful she was not forced to do so by her Father, although he tried. The second attempted betrothal ended with the betrothed, Ser Ronnet Connington refusing to marry Brienne due to her

masculine appearance. The final attempt at betrothal was to Ser Humphrey Wagstaff, who told Brienne she would have to abandon her armor and sword and become a lady “lest [he] be forced to chastise [her]” (Martin 202). Brienne, sixteen years old at the time, bit back “that she would accept chastisement only from a man who could outfight her,” and then proceeded to break “Sir Humfrey’s collarbone, two ribs, and their betrothal” (Martin 202). After this third and final attempt, her father gave up trying to wed her and, instead, facilitated her training to become a knight by allowing the master-at-arms, Ser Goodwin, to train her (Martin 411). Ser Goodwin tells Brienne that she has “a man’s strength in [her] arms . . . but [her] heart is as soft as any maids,” so he works to desensitize her to death by forcing her to butcher suckling pigs and lambs (Martin 411). Brienne’s backstory, given in bits and pieces throughout the long narrative, is particularly important to the argument that gender is fluid in that she was presented with opportunities to follow a more traditional path but, each time, diverged after considering what diverging from that path would mean for her future. Moreover, her character sends the message that individuality, free choice should be promoted. Brienne’s father’s concession that Brienne would not be happy with the life of a lady enables her to become (arguably) the greatest, most chivalrous knight of her time, despite her sex.

Martin juxtaposes Brienne’s character with Jaime Lannister, who is revered as the greatest knight of his time. Adversaries at first, and thus unlikely companions, Jaime Lannister and Brienne find themselves on an adventure together that is detailed throughout *A Storm of Swords*. The juxtaposition of Brienne and Jaime is significant, as it highlights that Martin intentionally works against chivalric tropes. On the surface, Jaime should be the chivalric ideal, a handsome knight of the King’s Guard, but he has a



great flaw, incestual love of his sister, which leads him to commit horrific acts, such as the attempted murder of the young child Bran Stark. Instead of writing Jaime as the chivalric ideal, Martin makes Brienne, a woman knight, like Silence, the embodiment of the chivalric ideal. This partnership becomes important as their contrast highlights that Brienne “embodies chivalric ideals in a nostalgic way, contrasting with all the other knights she encounters who do not believe in chivalry anymore” (Marques 61). Through their series of adventures, Jaime is transformed and softened by his experience with her and ultimately concedes to Brienne’s greatness of both skill and character, bestowing upon her “a sword fit for a hero,” *Oathbreaker* (Martin 99). As Jamison attests, “Brienne adopts the typically masculine aspects of the chivalric code, assuming the male role of warrior and for all intents and purposes becoming a female knight” (Jamison 106). Caroline Spector echoes that statement, affirming that “Brienne is a woman who moves through the world, having taken for herself most of the attributes of male power” (178). Indeed, her success lies, in part, with following her heart’s passions because she is permitted to step outside the bounds of societal expectations. She remains true to herself and her mission to locate and protect Sansa and Arya Stark despite consistent backlash from characters who mock her, threaten her, and criticize her aims as pointless, including Randyll Tarly. When Brienne encounters Tarly, a friend of her father’s, his comments are scathing, as he tells her, “[g]o where you want and do as you will . . . but when you’re raped don’t look to me for justice. You will have earned it with your folly” (Martin 296). He tells her that she “never should have donned mail, nor buckled on a sword. [She] never should have left [her] father’s hall” (Martin 298). When he must send men away

for plotting to rape her, Brienne is “stunned” that “anointed knights” would plot such things; Tully, however, contends that they are “honorable men” and that

[t]he blame is [hers] . . . [her] being here encouraged them. If a woman will behave like a camp follower, she cannot object to being treated like one. A war host is no place for a maiden. If [she had] any regard for [her] virtue or the honor of [her] House, [she would] take off that mail, return home, and beg [her] father to find a husband for [her]. (301)

Brienne remains strong in her convictions during encounters like these, however. Like Silence, Brienne fits the archetype of the exceptional woman, one who follows her own path and is not “shamed, beaten, or otherwise forced back into line” but becomes “isolated due to the liminal space they inhabit” instead (Carroll Chapter 2). As Caroline Spector explains,

All of these parts of Brienne’s life show the burden she endures for defying cultural expectations. How dare she not be born beautiful, failing to conform to what a woman “should” look like? How dare she wear male armor rather than attire more befitting a woman? And how dare she display her abilities as a fighter, abilities that are most certainly not in line with the Westerosi feminine ideal? . . . Her devotion to this task remains unswerving, no matter the personal cost. In that, she remains a shining example of honor and dedication in a world where those things are more spoken of than practiced. (179-180)

Through the character of Brienne, Martin undermines romance generic conventions while he also uses her character to develop the idea that gender is fluid, that there is room for women to find success in arenas traditionally reserved for men; in her, Martin’s message

is clear: when individuals are untethered from life trajectories that do not suit them, they can follow a path of greatness.

Martin further uses the character arc of Samwell Tarly to develop these ideas from a masculine perspective. Unlike Brienne, Samwell Tarly, does not have a supportive father. Samwell was formerly the eldest son of the aforementioned Randyll Tarly, which meant he “was born heir to rich lands, a strong keep, and a storied two-handed greatsword named Heartsbane” (Martin 267). Much to the hyper-masculine Randyll Tarly’s dismay, however, Samwell

grew up plump, soft, and awkward. Sam loved to listen to music and make his own songs, to wear soft velvets, to play in the castle kitchens beside the cooks, drinking in the rich smells as he snatched lemon cakes and blueberry tarts. His passions were books and kittens and dancing, clumsy as he was. But he grew ill at the sight of blood, and wept to see even a chicken slaughtered. (Martin 268)

In an attempt to harden Samwell, his father hired men-at-arms to train him, who “cursed and caned, slapped and starved [him] . . . had him sleep in his chainmail to make him more martial. . . dressed him in his mother’s clothing and paraded him through the bailey to shame him into valor” (Martin 268). When none of these methods worked, his father’s shame grew to hate, and he hired “warlocks from Qarth . . . [who] slaughtered a bull aurochs and made [him] bathe in the hot blood” and then had the warlocks “scourged” when instead of strengthening Samwell it made him sick (Martin 268). When Lord Randyll Tarly’s wife had a second son, Dickon, Lord Randyll paid Samwell no attention in lieu of Dickon, “a fierce, robust child more to his liking,” leaving Samwell a few years of peace to pursue his own interests (Martin 268). On his fifteenth birthday, however, “he

had been awakened to find his horse saddled,” and he was led into the woods where his father, while skinning a deer, delivered a heartless warning:

You are almost a man grown now, and my heir . . . You have given me no cause to disown you, but neither will I allow you to inherit the land and title that should be Dickon’s. Heartsbane must go to a man strong enough to wield her, and you are not worthy to touch her hilt. So I have decided that you shall this day announce that you wish to take the black. You will forsake all claim to your brother’s inheritance and start north before evenfall. If you do not, then on the morrow we shall have a hunt, and somewhere in these woods your horse will stumble, and you will be thrown from the saddle to die . . . or so I will tell your mother. She has a woman’s heart and finds it in her to cherish even you . .

. Please do not imagine that it will truly be that easy, should you think to defy me. Nothing would please me more than to hunt you down like the pig you are . . . So. There is your choice. The Night’s Watch — he reached inside the deer, ripped out its heart, and held it in his fist, red and dripping — or this. (Martin 269)

His personality radically differs from the masculine nature expected of an heir, someone who would grow to become a true knight and warrior; as a result of his not conforming to this expectation, his life is one of abuse.

Men who join the Night’s Watch, a group of men who protect the realm by serving at The Wall, must forsake all titles and lands, becoming brothers of the Night’s Watch only; most join it to avoid capital punishment, but for Samwell it ends up being a haven. Samwell finds support in a new family member, Jon Snow, a brother of the Night’s Watch who becomes his friend and ally. He also finds a home for his talents with

reading/learning. On his arrival to the Night's Watch, the narrator describes him as "the fattest boy [Jon] has ever seen" who "must have weighted twenty stone" with multiple chins and "pale eyes [that] moved nervously in a great round moon of a face [as] plump sweaty fingers wiped themselves on the velvet of his doublet" (Martin 259). He is quickly dubbed "Ser Piggy" by the other new recruits of the Night's Watch (Martin 260). When Samwell confides to Jon the truth behind his joining the Night's Watch, he reveals that it is not only women who suffer for not falling into the societal ideal. Before telling the story, his sensitivity is implied, as he "began to cry, huge choking sobs that made his whole body shake" (Martin 266).

The trauma from a life of abuse deeply impacted Samwell's self-confidence, and his self-image suffers. As the series progresses, however, Samwell overcomes his fears and insecurities and displays truly heroic feats of physical and emotional strength. The first indication of Samwell's bravery is his ability to stand up to his friend Jon Snow when he plans to abandon the Night's Watch, something for which he would be condemned to death. As Jon prepares to leave, Samwell stands before his horse and says, "Jon, you can't . . . I won't let you." (Martin 773). As Jon rides away, Samwell sends their brothers to track him down and bring him back. He also performs acts of physical bravery, killing two Others (undead, malevolent beings) single-handedly. When he encounters the first Other, he hears his father mocking him in his mind, "Do it now. Stop crying and fight, you baby. Fight, craven," but then imagines Jon instead, urging him on "You can do it, you can, just do it" (Martin 252). This inspires him to push forward, "falling more than running, really, closing his eyes and shoving the dagger blindly out before him with both hands," stabbing the Other with an obsidian dagger and slaying it

(Martin 252). As a result, he earns a new epithet, “Sam the Slayer,” a far reach from “Ser Piggy” (Martin 252). When he offered the dagger to his friend Grenn, saying “You keep it . . . You’re not craven like me,” Grenn reminds him of his bravery, quipping back, “So craven you killed an Other” (Martin 253). Shortly thereafter, Samwell rescues and protects the pregnant Gilly, a woman who had been forced to marry her abusive and incestuous father and whose husband/father is plotting to give their child to the Others. In a truly chivalrous moment, When Samwell is met with an Other, he tells himself, “God give me courage . . . for once, give me a little courage. Just long enough for her to get away” (Martin 644). After an intense battle, he succeeds in setting it on fire, thus saving himself and Gilly. Samwell and Gilly then encounter a mysterious man named Cold Hands, who informs them they will meet someone in the entrance to the Nightfort that should be sent to him. They meet Jon’s half-brother, Bran Stark, and, along with a crew of helpers, he escorts him safely to Coldhands.

These acts of chivalry, while comedic and sometimes bumbling, are nonetheless the beginning of Samwell’s transformation of his self-image. This is further developed when he determines that he is the only person who could sway the brotherhood to vote for Jon Snow as the new Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, As with the battles with the Others, Martin shares Samwell’s internal monologue,

I could . . . I have to. He had to do it right away, too. If he hesitated he was certain to lose his courage . . . there had been a time when he had quaked and squeaked if the Lord Mormont so much as looked at him, but that was the old Sam, before the Fist of the First Men and Craster’s Keep, before the wights and Coldhands and the Other on his dead horse. He was braver now. (Martin 1081)

Samwell has much more to offer society than his abusive father believes: “[h]is treatment of Sam leads to Sam becoming a timid, anxiety-ridden young man who cannot see his talents as worthwhile and cannot even admit that killing an Other was his doing” (Carroll Chapter 2). As Samwell encounters opportunities to test his strength and bravery, it becomes clear that he is one of the most chivalrous character in the series, but he does not realize it because of societal biases. Samwell is evidence of what happens when a person’s true identity, which can be nuanced, is misunderstood and overlooked. Samwell’s gentle nature makes his father shun him as heir, but he eventually excels in the masculine sphere when faced with danger. He eschews a manly life upon return to the Wall for the life of a Scholar; even so, he still battles his trauma. When Samwell is sent to the Citadel to train as a maester, something he wished for as a child who loved books, as an adult, it terrifies him since his father previously chained him up for three days to remind him “[n]o son of House Tully will ever wear a chain” when he expressed his interest (Martin 118). Voted Lord Commander because of Samwell’s bravery, Jon insists that Samwell go to the Citadel. Once again, Samwell faces the challenge to overcome his childhood trauma and forge a new path. With Samwell, Martin reflects on the psychological impact of assigning people societal spaces when, as is the case with Samwell, identities exist on a spectrum. Samwell may not have been the most traditionally masculine, but he certainly turned out to be heroic, with his own strengths that allowed him to thrive, once fostered.

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to illustrate how the romance genre has served as the ideal template in which to explore the nuances of gender identity. When we juxtapose the medieval, medievalism, and neomedievalism, as I have done here, a space

is opened “for frictions, fressons and follow-ons” (Ashton 4). We saw this friction in regards to gender in Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide* and *Lancelot* with women characters who actively pushed the narrative forward, and also in Heldris’ *Silence* where the protagonist was a woman knight caught between societal expectations of men and women, and in Matthew Arnold’s *Tristram and Iseult* which highlighted the sad reality Iseult of Britany’s life in her societal space, and, lastly, in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* with his exploration of gender fluidity in the characterizations of Brienne of Tarth and Samwell Tarly. What this indicates is that the beauty of romance is that each age contributes to the network of stories and “mak[es] the genre its own and yet retain[s] those crucial structures” (Saunders 539). When reframed by the Victorian writers, “the images and structures of romance [were] refracted through a distinctive moral lens,” whereas today, romance reflects postmodern concerns and critique (Saunders 539). Romance has a particular “duality of historicity and timelessness” that makes it, even now, such “an enduring mode of infinite potential that can both reach beyond the everyday and remain firmly rooted in it” (Saunders 539). The backdrops of romance, the “political, social, and moral” environments represented are “set against societies on the one hand distant, on the other rooted in the customs and behaviors of their audiences,” allowing for romance to simultaneously be escapist, while also incisively socially reflective (Saunders 540). The opposition of the real and the fanciful allows for archetypes that explore “the human psyche and engag[e] with the universals of human experience,” and the safe distance that is created allows for romance to appeal to “the human impulse away from realism, the desire to look into the depths of the psyche,” the focus of which in this thesis has been the impact of societal gender expectations on the



psyche (Saunders 540). Reality for men and women differed substantially from the Middle Ages to the Victorian era through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, but the tension surrounding societal expectations of gender, although varied, is shared. There have always been individuals who have not fit neatly into the roles expected from society, whether a wife struggling with her societal role, like Enide or Iseult, or a woman knight, like Brienne and Silence. What the works of Chrétien de Troyes, Heldris, Matthew Arnold, and George R. R. Martin have shown is, I hope, evidence that these issues of gender and gender identity have been recognized and explored. Collectively, what is seen here is that those men and women who have or who are expected to fit themselves into a narrow category, men and women like Enide, Silence, Iseult, Brienne of Tarth, and Samwell Tarly, have suffered — and continue to suffer — for it. Conversely, those who pursue their individuality thrive, paving a new frontier of possibilities for the readers; these characters are created in part to let the audience see what happens to them, what is possible for them. Romance is an appropriate genre in which authors can explore these issues, as it can serve as a microscope through which we can investigate the implications of societal expectations on gender from a safe distance.

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