

Riding to Lancelot's rescue.

Dalrock | 17 March, 2017 | by Dalrock

Several commenters have objected to my [previous post](#), including Hugh Mann:

I think our gracious host doth read too much into these tales – I was brought up on them, and in none of the printed retellings popular in the pre-60s was it implied that the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere was anything but a betrayal and a tragedy – THE betrayal, in that from it springs the shattering of the fellowship.

What Hollywood's made of it since might be a different matter.

Commenter Sean Toddington also felt the need to defend Lancelot's honor:

Firstly it is important to remember that these are fictional characters, and there are a few versions of it all. If you can't be bothered to read the originals – Mallory is the main one – I suggest that you treat C.S. Lewis with caution.

Note that Toddington incorrectly claims that Thomas Malory's Lancelot is the original that inspired Chrétien de Troyes. Yet this isn't the case, as Malory was born several hundred years later. More importantly, both Toddington and Mann are missing the fundamental point of my previous post. The post was not a treatise on the King Arthur legend but about the way that the concept of *courtly love* has transformed our moral thinking. As C.S. Lewis explains in [The Allegory of Love](#):

French poets, in the eleventh century, discovered or invented, or were the first to express, that romantic species of passion which English poets were still writing about in the nineteenth. They effected a change which has left no corner of our ethics, our imagination, or our daily life untouched, and they erected impassable barriers between us and the classical past or the Oriental present. Compared with this revolution the Renaissance is a mere ripple on the surface of literature. There can be no mistake about the novelty of romantic love: our only difficulty is to imagine in all its bareness the mental world that existed before its coming—to wipe out of our minds, for a moment, nearly all that makes the food both of modern sentimentality and modern cynicism. We must conceive a world emptied of that ideal of 'happiness'—a happiness grounded on successful romantic love—which still supplies the motive of our popular fiction

This transformation is so deep that we aren't aware it ever happened, as we can't conceive of any other way of thinking. The concept of courtly love has infected all forms of literature, and is the [philosophical foundation for no fault divorce](#). Even (and especially) conservative Christian theology has [adopted the concept of courtly love](#). Again from Lewis:

If the thing at first escapes our notice, this is because we are so familiar with the erotic tradition of modern Europe that we mistake it for something natural and universal and therefore do not inquire into its origins. It seems to us natural that love should be the commonest theme of serious imaginative literature: but a glance at classical antiquity or at the Dark Ages at once shows us that what we took for 'nature' is really a special state of affairs, which will probably have an end, and which certainly had a beginning in eleventh-century Provence. It seems—or it seemed to us till lately—a natural thing that love (under certain conditions) should be regarded as a noble and ennobling passion: it is only if we imagine ourselves trying to explain this doctrine to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul, or the author of Beowulf, that we become aware how far

from natural it is. Even our code of etiquette, with its rule that women always have precedence, is a legacy from courtly love and is felt to be far from natural in modern Japan or India. Many of the features of this sentiment, as it was known to the Troubadours, have indeed disappeared; but this must not blind us to the fact that the most momentous and the most revolutionary elements in it have made the background of European literature for eight hundred years.

Anyone who is tempted to write knight for Lancelot tales *in general* after reading my post illustrating the absurdity of courtly love using Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* is missing the broader point entirely. And yet there is also a reason we use the term *white knight* to describe men who feel compelled to rescue women from the consequences of their own bad behavior. As [Know Your Meme](#) explains (emphasis mine):

The term “white knight” is derived from the knight-errant stock character, a medieval figure in romance literature that would perform various acts to prove his chivalry. According to Wikipedia,[1] **the term “knight-errant” was first recorded in the 14th-century poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but was developed as a romance genre character during the late 12th century.** The first Urban Dictionary[4] definition was submitted by user Jake on November 3rd, 2004, which defined the phrase as a male who attempts to aid a woman in distress.

The “romance genre” in question is the chivalric concept of courtly love, which brings us back to Lancelot and Chrétien de Troyes. From the [Infogalactic](#) version of the Wikipedia article referenced in Know Your Meme:

A knight-errant[1] (or knight errant[2]) is a figure of medieval chivalric romance literature. The adjective errant (meaning “wandering, roving”) indicates how the knight-errant would wander the land in search of adventures to prove his chivalric virtues, either in knightly duels (pas d’armes) or in some other **pursuit of courtly love.**

The template of the knight-errant are the heroes of the Round Table of the Arthurian cycle such as Gawain, Lancelot and Percival. The quest par excellence in pursuit of which these knights wander the lands is that of the Holy Grail, such as in Perceval, the Story of the Grail written by **Chrétien de Troyes** in the 1180s.

According to [Infogalactic](#), while there is no canonical version of the Arthur tales, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* is generally the starting point for Arthur, Guinevere, and Excalibur. Yet it was Chrétien de Troyes who added Lancelot and transformed the story into romance:

Many elements and incidents that are now an integral part of the Arthurian story appear in Geoffrey's *Historia*, including Arthur's father Uther Pendragon, the wizard Merlin, Arthur's wife Guinevere, the sword Excalibur, Arthur's conception at Tintagel, his final battle against Mordred at Camlann, and final rest in Avalon. The 12th-century French writer **Chrétien de Troyes, who added Lancelot and the Holy Grail to the story, began the genre of Arthurian romance** that became a significant strand of medieval literature. In these French stories, the narrative focus often shifts from King Arthur himself to other characters, such as various Knights of the Round Table.

Chances are if you have a cherished tale of Lancelot, it has an embedded philosophy of courtly love and you never even noticed it. This is after all what we love about these tales, even though we aren't aware that the very concept was manufactured some time in the twelfth century. We love it without being

consciously aware that it even exists, because as Lewis explains it simply seems *normal*. Thomas Malory's *The Knight of the Cart*, as just one example, is clearly based on Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*. In fact, it includes a nearly identical scene where Lancelot fights for Guinevere's honor after she is rightly accused of adultery. From the [Cliff's Notes](#):

That night Launcelot goes to the queen's room, tears an iron grill from her window, cutting his hand, and at her request lies with her. Melliagaunce sees the blood on the bed in the morning and accuses her of faithlessness to Arthur. To save Guinevere from execution at the stake, Launcelot says he will be her champion and sets a day for trial by battle.

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