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The Comic Image of the Courtly Love Ideals in Le Morte D'Arthur by Sir Thomas Malory

The Arthurian legends have fascinated and inspired people for ages. *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory is one of the best compilations of the stories about King Arthur and his peers. This romance deals with the enchanting world of knightly rituals and the ideals of the chivalric code. It is not a typical romance blindly glorifying the medieval world, though. Written in the time when these ideals are passing, the prose is dominated on the one hand, by melancholy and sentiment, but on the other, by irony and ambiguity. Malory seems to question the chivalric code through inconsistencies of his characters' behaviour, and absurdity of some situations they are involved in. The paper will focus on the ambivalent and comic picture of the courtly love ideals in Malory's prose. The main source of failure of some of the Arthurian knights in this aspect of knightly life is the clash between the real chivalric practice and the imagined ideals they pursue.

key words: courtly love, Malory, Arthur, knight, satire.

Le Morte D'Arthur by Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1405–1471) is a romance dealing with the world of knightly customs and rituals, as well as the great ideals of the chivalric code. The main themes Malory explores are love and hate, nobility and villainy, and all this is mingled with a pinch of magic and mystery. The author wrote in a period when the great ideals of knighthood were passing, thus his work is dominated by melancholy and sentiment. However, it does not lack irony and humour, which are revealed through inconsistencies in his characters' behaviour, as well as the absurdity of some situations in which they are involved. Malory is ambivalent about many aspects of knightly life, including courtly love. The romance questions the possibility of putting the courtly love ideals into practice. Malory uses humour not only to entertain the reader, but also to reveal the weaknesses of medieval chivalry. The aim of this article is to show some of the comic qualities of Malory's portrayal of the Arthurian practice of courtly love.

Courtly love (called in French *amour courtois*) is a philosophy of love and a code of lovemaking that thrived in chivalric times. Chris Baldick remarks that:

> the literary cult of heterosexual love . . . emerged among the French aristocracy from the late eleventh century onwards, with a profound effect on subsequent Western attitudes to love. Poetry converted sexual desire from a degrading necessity of physical life into a spiritually ennobling emotion, almost a religious vocation. An elaborate code of behaviour evolved around the tormented male lover's abject obedience to a disdainful, idealized lady, who was usually his social superior. (53)

The idea of courtly love quickly became a major theme in medieval romance. Chivalric love came to the fore during feudal times, determining the relationship between a knight and his lady. Poets writing about this type of love adopted and inverted the feudal concept of the

relationship between the lord and his vassal. The Lady assumed the role of the Lord, while the knight took the role of the vassal in the love ritual. In courtly literature, and often in reality, women were an inspiration for the practice of chivalric virtues. They encouraged knights to fight in tournaments or even in battles and motivated them to act in a socially accepted manner (Fries 88). Courtly love helped civilize the medieval world. In her essay "The Place of Women in *The Morte Darthur*," Elizabeth Archibald observes that "[t]he very sight of a sword [could] inspire wild chivalry. But in the absence of an organizing love, when the knight [had] only his martial prowess, he [had] no culture, no memory, and no sense of himself" (42). Thomas Malory mentions in his prose Sir Peris de Forest Savage, who is notorious for sexually harassing and abusing ladies. He acts like a barbarian until he is killed by Sir Launcelot (Malory 1: 210-12). Literature shows such examples, whereas the literary vision of courtly love was romantic: knights adored their ladies, praised their beauty, fought for their glory and honour and did their best to win their hearts. The ladies, in turn, were to show favour to their knights by charming smiles and small gifts (such as ribbons or handkerchiefs) and to inspire them to glorious and heroic deeds. The idealized literary vision was emulated in reality at the courts in France, where it was developed (Barber 79).

Women play an important role in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. The female characters are usually damsels, ladies or gentlewomen because courtly love rules were applied only to noble women. The concept of courtly love celebrated the chivalrous knight proving his love to his lady. In Malory's prose, it becomes clear that some precepts of the code do not always work when they are put into practice. Some English writers, including Sir Thomas Malory (*Le Morte D'Arthur*), Geoffrey Chaucer ("The Knight's Tale") or Marie de France (*Lanval*), were a little sceptical about the idea of chivalric love. Malory expresses his criticism about the concept explicitly, using the image of Sir Dinadan.[1] In the conversation with Queen Iseult, the knight states: "God defend me . . . for the joy of love is too short, and the sorrow thereof, and what come[s] thereof, dure[s] overlong" (Malory 2:114), which perfectly summarizes his views on *amour courtois*. Muriel C. Bradbrook sees the reason for the scepticism in the fact that

> [t]he elaborate and fanciful code of manners which in theory governed the behavior of courtly lovers, involving the absolute subjection of the knight to the lady, with all the artifice of courtly etiquette, and all the exotic ritual of a mock-religion, was never really acclimatized in England (18).

This state can be viewed as reflected in Malory's prose. For some of the literary knights, women are not the key to happiness and success in their lives. Sir Dinadan, mentioned above, doubts the idea of courtly love and the role of a woman as a knight's inspiration for brave deeds. He sees love as madness. In his conversation with Sir Tristram he betrays his view on this overwhelming infatuation saying:

> For such a foolish knight as ye are, . . . I saw but late this day lying by a well, and he fared as slept; and there he lay like a fool grinning, and would not speak, and his shield lay by him, and his horse stood by him; and well I wot he was a lover. (Malory 2:109)

The knight does not understand why Tristram and other knights can be so entranced by women. What is more, he does not want to be a lover or have a lady. To prove his point, he puts his words

[1] Cf. Nagy, "A Fool of a Knight, a Knight of a Fool: Malory's Comic Knights" (68). Sir Dinadan is a Knight of the Round Table in the Arthurian legends. He is the son of Sir Brunor and Roslyn of Camelot. He is a brother of Sir Breunor le Noir and Sir Daniel and a close friend of Sir Tristram.

into practice when he refuses to fight three knights for Queen Guinevere (109). On the one hand, Sir Dinadan appears to be clownish because he disregards some of the rules of the chivalric code, although he is a knight like the others, but on the other hand, he is the voice of common sense that Thomas Malory employs to question some of the absurdities of the chivalric code.[2]

According to P.E. Tucker, Malory's courtly love is often just a game to play (73). The fact that some of the knights fail to remember their ladies as they encounter their adventures serves as a good example that confirms their negligence as lovers. Sir Tristram, although in love with Queen Iseult, nearly forgets about his greatest passion under the influence of beautiful Iseult la Blanche Mains (Malory 1:368). As Malory puts it, "there grew great love betwixt Isoud [la Blanche Mains] and Sir Tristram for that lady was both good and fair, and a woman of noble blood and fame" (368). However, the knight feels guilty. To remain loyal to his queen, the young man does not consummate his marriage, persuading his wife that marital love is nothing more than kissing and cuddling. The woman accepts her husband's approach towards marriage. Sir Palomides reveals a different attitude toward the love to Queen Iseult. The Saracen knight resigns himself to the loss of his friendship with Sir Tristram (368). However, the initial fierce rivalry for the grace of the same lady gives way to their mutual friendship. For P.E. Tucker, it is friendship, not love that motivates Sir Palomides, who is a pagan, in his decision to be baptized (74-75). In Malory's prose, the knights often have to choose between their personal happiness and their adherence to the code. If they insist on following the code, they have to select which rule to abide by, as it sometimes happens that obeying one command entails breaking another. The case of Palomides can be analysed as an example of the primacy of knightly fellowship.[3] Friendship triumphs, showing that love is somewhat less important.

The knight should do his best to win the heart of his lady. In the Arthurian world, the roles are reversed at times, and it happens that some ladies fight for their knights' admiration. The idea of a woman struggling for a knight's attention could seem comical in the courtly discourse. A good instance exemplifying the phenomenon is Sir Launcelot, who is the most desired knight of all the Knights of the Round Table. Terence McCarthy, when commenting on the figure of the knight, states that "his physical prowess has inevitably earned him a reputation and made him sexually desirable" (22), adding that this "prowess has made him something of a sex symbol" (23). Nonetheless, the knight is not a ladies-man – he gives the impression of being afraid of women; still, ladies long for him. He is kidnapped by Morgan le Fay and three other queens with the use of magic (Malory 2:197). The women know that he is the best knight in the world, so they "[begin] to strive for that knight, every each one [says] they [will] have him to her love" (198).

However, the women's obsession with the knight can also be preposterous or even terrifying. Some women, unhappily in love, are ready to humiliate themselves. The fair Maid of Astolat, Elaine le Blank, falls in love with Sir Launcelot and wants him to marry her (411-12). When the knight refuses her proposal, she openly admits that being his lover will satisfy her. Because the knight rejects the girl, she dies of love even though the couple have known each other for a very short time.

Launcelot is attractive both alive and dead. The witch Hellawes, Lady of the Castle Nigramous, has loved him, as she claims, for seven years. Knowing that the knight is devoted to Queen Guinevere, she devises a plan to get him "[b]ut sithen [she] may not rejoice [him] to have [his] body alive" (Malory 2:223) she would have him dead. She "would have balmed it and served it, and so have kept it [her] life days, and daily [she] should have clipped [him], and kissed

[2] Cf. Witalisz, "A (Crooked) Mirror for Knights – the Case of Dinadan" (457-62).
[3] Cf. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, lines: 625-33.

[him]"(223). Thomas Malory, describing the knights' relationships with females, often tends to exaggerate the qualities of the lovers and the power of their feelings. He often reminds the readers, who might be surprised by this exaggerated vision, that love in the Golden Age of King Arthur's reign was different than in their own times.

The noble idea of courtly love obliged the knight to help ladies when in need and to protect them. Although Arthurian knights swear the oath in which they promise to guard ladies: "always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen soccour, upon pain, of death" (Malory 1:116), some of them fail as ladies' protectors. Sir Gawain, together with Sir Marhaus and Sir Uwain, goes in search of adventures, honour and worship (148). They meet three "damosels" (60-, 30- and 15 years old), and each knight takes one woman with him. Sir Gawain is very enthusiastic about his lady because she is young and beautiful. The words he says to Sir Marhaus: "I thank you, for ye have left me the youngest and the fairest, and she is most levest to me" (148), reveal not only his sensitivity to feminine beauty, but also his emotional immaturity. His joy is momentary, however. After many adventures, when they finally come back, "the damosel that Sir Gawain had [can] say but little worship of him" (165) because he has lost her. In the Arthurian world, attachment to women often disappears when adventure is at hand. This lack of commitment is clearly one of the faults Malory sees in the world of Arthurian knights. Thomas C. Rumble remarks that in *Le Morte D'Arthur* "people are seen for what they are in terms of what they do, and their actions are allowed to stand silently symbolic of the causes which are constantly at work bringing about the ruin of a world that seems so fair" (in Lumiansky 147). Sir Pellinor is another knight who ignores a lady that later turns out to be his daughter (Malory 1:109). At first his hastiness may seem to be a little funny or grotesque, but it very quickly turns out to be more seriously disconcerting. Being so obsessed with looking for adventure, he fails to help the woman and her wounded knight, and although "she crie[s] an hundred times after help" he "[will] not tarry, he [is] so eager in his quest" (110). In consequence, the woman curses him and kills herself with a sword. Some of the knights fail as protectors of women because they appreciate fame, adventure and war more than courtly love (McCarthy 50). In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, there is a dichotomy between love and adventure, and, as Elizabeth Edwards claims, Malory seems to focus more on adventure – the choice of his characters (38-39). A woman whom a knight meets during his journey is often not the object of his quest but the means to achieve his goal. Even Sir Launcelot, considered "the flower of knights" (Malory 1:224), does not undertake all his adventures in the service of ladies. Malory reports a shameful incident, when the knight agrees to help a lady only after having made sure that she knows his name (206-7).

The ladies asking for help are often unusual and enigmatic themselves. They appear out of the blue at the court of King Arthur, preceded by a group of various animals (98), or arrive bringing marvelous objects with them, such as a great black shield (383-84), to ask one of the knights to go on a quest. They often wander alone in forests waiting for a knight to ask him for a favour. McCarthy ironically comments about this:

> None of the knights dreams of compromising his gallantry by even hesitating to help, and as they ride off having immediately and unquestioningly taken the adventure, none of them seems to be wondering what a nice girl like that was actually doing in the forest alone. It would have been rather caddish after all to ask if she was carrying any ID. (15)

Feminine beauty seems to evoke problems in the medieval world. Praising a lady's beauty is not an easy task, as it can lead to serious quarrels among the Knights of the Round Table. The beauty of women in the Arthurian world is peculiar. The ladies are, as McCarthy notices, "above the norm, but no one is below" (52). Yet, their beauty can be graded in an interesting way.

Guinevere seems to be a touchstone of the beauty of others. It happens at times that there is a knight who does not want to accept the queen's superiority over his lady and an argument starts. Sir Lamorak and Sir Meleagant quarrel over whose lady is more beautiful: Queen Guinevere or Morgawse of Orkney (Malory 1:403-5). A more serious misadventure happens to Sir Tristram and Queen Iseult when they are imprisoned in the so-called Weeping Castle. According to the old custom, the knight has to fight with its lord, Sir Breunor, and the one who is defeated loses his life. His lady is in no better position: if she turns out to be less beautiful than the lady of the castle, she will lose her head (346-49). At first, the way of the knights' reasoning and justifying their claims sounds very childish, but, at a deeper level, the episode touches upon a more serious problem. Elizabeth Edwards claims that "[i]t is the confusion of objective and subjective categories, that is, whether the fairness of the lady is the source of love, or love the source of fairness, a quality of the beloved or of the loving gaze" (46). On the one hand, the quarrel over the subjectivity of beauty is an instance of a limited understanding of love; on the other hand, it reveals a dangerous power of the feeling. Love has a destructive potential, it can be a starting point of serious military conflicts leading to the downfall both of the whole community and of the individual, not only in their earthly reality, but also in the context of one's salvation.

Chastity is one of the virtues of the code of chivalry which is Christian in its origin. Some of the Arthurian knights have problems with sexual abstinence and need women only to satisfy their desire. In "The Tale of the Sankgreall: Human Frailty," Charles Moorman notices that "the Arthurian world is undermined from the beginning by 'lechery'" (189). To begin with, the conception of King Arthur is highly controversial. His father, Uther Pendragon, a "lusty king and wifeless" man (189), falls in love with Igraine, the wife of the Duke of Cornwall (Malory 1:9-10). He is obsessed by the desire to have sex with her. This obsession makes him fail not only as a knight but also as a Christian. To achieve his goal he wages war on her husband, uses underhand magic methods advised by Merlin and agrees to relinquish his parental right to his son Arthur, who will be conceived in the future. His promise to hand over the royal heir just to satisfy his sexual desire does not make him a reliable and trustworthy king. Uther's choice is morally and politically questionable. However, the Arthurian world is one with its own peculiar law and logic (McCarthy 6).

King Arthur turns out to be a womanizer like his father. His love affairs result in children born out of wedlock. Liners, a daughter of one of his earls, Samna, "a passing fair damosel" (Malory 1:42), gives him the son Borre, who in the future will be one of the best knights of the Round Table. Queen Morgawse bears Arthur his son Mordred. She is the wife of King Lot of Orkneyand the mother of his sons; this fact, however, does not discourage the monarch from sleeping with her. Malory reports that "[f]or she was a passing fair lady, therefore the king cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her" (45). Their relationship is incestuous as "she is his sister, on the mother's side, Igraine" (45). Despite the fact that Arthur does not know about their family bonds, he will be punished for his sin: "God is displeased with [him], for [he] ha[s] lain by [his] sister, and on her [he] ha[s] gotten a child that shall destroy [him] and all the knights of [his] realm" (47). Looking at the love affairs of some of the knights, one can have an impression that ladies who belong to other men are the most desirable, and there are many examples proving the knights' interest in married and betrothed women.

Sir Gawain, who has a reputation of a ladies' man, promises King Pelleas to help him win the heart of his beloved, the proud Lady Ettard. The lady, fed up with Pelleas' advances, wants him dead (152-55). Gawain visits her castle, claiming he has killed her admirer. The atmosphere of their meeting is so pleasant that they "[sup] in a pavilon, and . . . [go] to bed together" (155),

where they are caught red-handed by Sir Pelleas. By this deed, Sir Gawain reveals himself to be a lustful and false knight who breaks his promises easily.

There is only one knight, Sir Gareth, who chooses marriage over adultery. He opts for being a good Christian, violating the rule of courtly love, as this kind of admiration is a pre-marital experience. However, he also has problems with maintaining pre-marital chastity, in fact. When he is finally united with his beloved Lady Lyonesse, the lovers are willing to go to bed together (McCarthy 24). Magic needs to be used to prevent the lovers from consummating their love, thus protecting their honour. The situation is hilarious, because the couple do not give up easily. Sir Gareth fights against a marvelous knight during the two following nights and he becomes severely wounded. However, the fact that the knight has to be protected from sexual misdemeanour makes him "more frankly human" (McCarthy 27). Charles Moorman sees this relationship as Malory's rebelling against courtly love, which is conventionalized and artificial. "The Tale of Gareth" emphasizes the role of marriage as a natural crowning of real love (169-71).

Launcelot's relationship with Queen Guinevere on the one hand is nearly perfect, while on the other it is destructive both for them and the kingdom. Sir Launcelot pays a high price for it: the price is his partial failure in the Grail Quest and the loss of fame and honour he has strived for all his life (Dosanjh 64). These failures do not teach him a lesson, however. Malory reports that

> Sir Launcelot beg[ins] to resort unto Queen Guinevere again, and forg[ets] the promise and the perfection that he made in the quest. . . . and so they [love] together more hotter than they did toforehand, and ha[ve] such privy draughts together, than many in the court sp[eak] of it. (Malory 2: 373)

Although the affair is presented as very serious, it does not lack humorous and even grotesque elements. Launcelot's passion leads him to the queen's chamber. The nature of the relationship between the knight and Queen Guinevere is shrouded in mystery (contrary to that of Tristram and Iseult). Malory does not openly admit whether it was merely platonic. He mysteriously mentions that "love that time was not as it is nowadays [in Malory's time]" (460). However, the adventure Sir Launcelot has there, having rescued her from Sir Meliagaunt's hands, is a parody of courtly service (434-41). The couple arranges that the man will come through a barred window looking on a garden when everybody is asleep. Sir Launcelot "set[s] his hands upon the bars of irons, and he pull[s] at them with such a might that he brasts them clean out of the stone walls" (438) cutting his hand severely and enters the chamber. The next day, Sir Meliagaunt finds the queen's bed stained with blood, in order to hide his own misbehaviour, he accuses her of being unfaithful to King Arthur.

In the quoted examples of lechery, both men and women are to blame. For some couples (Launcelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Iseult) sex is an act of love, for the others just a momentary whim. McCarthy observes that "[j]ust as there are knights . . . who have, but do not deserve the title of a knight, so there are ladies who are ladies in name only" (21). And he is right. Some of the Knights of the Round Table fail at serving ladies, but there are also ladies who are unworthy of being served. The idea of platonic love does not work in the Arthurian world, because the characters presented by Malory are people driven by emotions and feelings. Nevertheless, for the author, as McCarthy notices, "Arthurian chivalry embodied an ideal far superior to anything that survives today" (xiv). It can be assumed that when writing about courtly

love and the life of medieval knighthood, Thomas Malory bases his knowledge on his own experience4 and he tries to incorporate it into the myth about brave warriors.

To conclude, *Le Morte D'Arthur* is not an example of comic literature; however, it contains comic elements. The author often uses humour and irony in his representation of courtly love. The image of the noble relationship between the knight and his lady is ambivalent because there is a clash between literary ideals and real life. Malory's view on Arthurian chivalry is not naive: being fully aware of its flaws he does not try to hide the imperfection of some of the knights. The comic discourse he applies aims at revealing the typically human aspect of medieval chivalry.

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[4] There are three people named Sir Thomas Malory taken into account as far as the authorship of the book is concerned. The most likely candidate for the real Malory was born c. 1400 and was a soldier and a Member of Parliament for Warwickshire. He was charged with breaking into the Abbey at Coombe, insulting the abbot and the monks, stealing money, organizing violent robberies and raping a woman (Ch. R. Sanders, Ch. E. Ward, *The Morte Darthur by Sir Thomas Malory. An Abridgement with an Introduction*, New York 1940, p. ix-xxii).