

*Essays in Medieval Studies 4*

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**page 57****Lancelot and the Demoiselle Guérisseuse:**  
Spiritual vs. Physical Love in the French Prose *Lancelot***Stacey L. Hahn**

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Platonic love is a rather rare occurrence in prose romance. Every great advocate of "fin'amors," Lancelot included, consummates his heart's desire with the *factum*, that final step in the *gradus amoris*. In the prose *Lancelot*, one of the most powerful images of physical union between man and woman is the magic welding of the "écu fendu" (split shield). The shield becomes perfect and whole when Lancelot and Guenevere consummate their love. From this perspective, sex confers salutary powers for it makes love whole. Elsewhere, the split shield, symbolizing physical union with Guenevere, restores Lancelot's reason. However, the episode in which Carmadan's sister, the Demoiselle Guérisseuse, vows to love Lancelot platonically by preserving her virginity henceforth on his account, belies the idea that true love must necessarily be carnal. The power to heal, a quality often associated with virginity, plays a major part in the damsel's relation to Lancelot. She heals him twice: physically, after he drinks poisoned water, and morally, when he despairs after having been deceived by Brisane at the Grail Castle. In the latter instance, the maiden's imperiled virginity wrests Lancelot from a deep lethargy by restoring his faith in womankind and reminding him of his previous fidelity to Guenevere.

The sort of love the Demoiselle Guérisseuse espouses focuses on the necessity of fidelity and the importance of rank. The damsel vows to love Lancelot as befits a maiden, which in turn allows him to continue loving Guenevere in the manner befitting a lady of highest rank. The damsel's re-

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fusal to transgress implies that the sexual bond marks an important movement from one state of being to another. The troubling transformations occasioned by the sex act figure in much of the prose *Lancelot*. Keu d'Etraus's wife interprets sexual activity as an exchange of power during which the woman loses sovereignty over her lover. For Morgain and Guenevere, infidelity provokes jealousy. Amite's change in status from maiden to mother precludes bearing the Holy Grail. At the Castle of Escalon le Tenebros, sexual activity in a holy chapel causes the land to be laid waste. On the one hand, love confers health and prowess to certain individuals. On the other hand, it implies weakness and sin. The curative power of the chastity of the Demoiselle Guérisseuse, that is, her capacity to submit passion to reason, counterbalances the soothing, yet potentially disruptive, power of love as it is embodied by the split shield.

The conflicting attitudes toward love pervading the prose *Lancelot* may be elucidated by an analysis of Lancelot's relation to the Demoiselle Guérisseuse. His path crosses hers four times. Upon the occasion of the first meeting, Lancelot, overcome with heat, hunger, and thirst, dines with the damsel and her brother. The maiden, who has never experienced the sting of love's arrows, takes a fancy to Lancelot as she watches him dine. Before taking leave of them, Lancelot imbibes a large draught of water from a nearby fountain poisoned, unbeknownst to him, by two venomous snakes. The poison takes its effect immediately and Lancelot swoons (IV, 133-135: #56).<sup>1</sup>

The maiden, well-versed in the art of medicine, nurses him slowly back to health but in the middle of his convalescence, she too falls mortally ill--not from any physical cause, but out of lovesickness for Lancelot. The maiden finds all her knowledge of the medicinal properties of herbs and precious stones useless in the face of an illness her heart and mind find pleasing (IV, 140: #176). Lionel, perceiving the nature of the maiden's illness, urges

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Lancelot to requite her love since she alone can cure him of his malady.

Lancelot now finds himself in one of those impossible dilemmas with no honorable solution so common to medieval romance. Should he break his vow of fidelity to Guenevere and therefore live, or should he uphold his vow but by doing so cause the death of three persons--the maiden, himself, and Guenevere since her health depends on his? After much debate, Lionel, like Galehaut before him, acts as go-between. He informs the maiden that Lancelot will requite her love. In the meantime, Lionel rides to Arthur's court asking Guenevere's permission on Lancelot's behalf to grant his love to the damsel.

When Lancelot fully recovers, Carmadan's sister asks that he return her love as the debt he owes her for saving his life. He tells her what the Dame de Malehout and Morgain could not wrest from him by force--that he already loves a lady of high rank. The maiden, impressed by Lancelot's honesty and fidelity, ingeniously proposes a solution. She will love Lancelot platonically as befits a "pucele" which will at the same time allow him to preserve the "honor" of his lady (IV, 157-158: #76). Two points in the girl's proposal merit comment. One is the curious use of the word "honor" as regards Guenevere--"honor" being associated with physical love for a lady--and the second concerns the question of rank. Among its several connotations, the word "honor" can signify loyalty and the agreement to uphold certain social covenants which would be, in this instance, Lancelot's vow of fidelity to Guenevere.<sup>2</sup> Also, love for a "pucele" is evidently qualitatively different from that addressed to a lady. Previously, when the first inklings of love entered the damsel's heart, she deemed the love impossible because of her inferior rank: "Mais je se Diex plaist n'i vandrai, ainz vos lairai, car je sai bien que vos ne daingneriez amer si povre damoisele com je sui" (IV, 140: #76). The damsel, although beautiful, does not consider herself a valid object of

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love because of her poverty nor does she think any other maiden worthy of Lancelot's love: "Et certes je nel di mie por ce qu'il ait pucele el siecle qui fust digne de vos amer... (IV, 157: #56).<sup>3</sup> It appears that great knights ought to love only ladies.

The debate over the love of a lady vs. the love of a "pucele" was not a new one, but the debates generally had an eventual physical consummation in mind. In the prose *Lancelot* the dichotomy between lady and maiden occurs during the episode of the tournament of the Castle of Ladies vs. the Castle of Maidens (II, 123-131: #43). Lancelot, true to nature, battles on behalf of ladies and defeats both Lionel and Hector, who, incidentally, love maidens. Furthermore, at the Grail Castle, when Lancelot is asked by King Pell6s to comment on the Holy Grail and he comments instead upon Amite's beauty he qualifies his appreciation of her beauty by stating that he speaks of the beauty of maidens only, and not of ladies: "Il me samble, fet il, que de damoisele ne vi je onques si bele; de dame ne di je mie" (IV, 206: #78).

In a recent article, Christiane Marchello-Nizia discusses the love between knights and married ladies. She states that errant knights like Tristan and Lancelot choose to love married women because of their association with men of great authority and power. Royal women have value in that they have been previously selected by another masculine eye invested with collective authority. The winning of the lady then becomes a sign of power with political overtones arising from the social conflict which opposes the young knight (juvenis) to the powerful seigneur (senior).<sup>4</sup> Love for married ladies, viewed in this light, carries with it subversive connotations because it reflects the young man's effort to gain control in a milieu where he has none. If we examine such love in these terms, we see that the prose *Lancelot* possesses vestiges of twelfth-century social conflicts which slowly diminish in the face of new social exigencies, in this case, the growing influence of the Cistercian scribes who valorize

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virginity at the expense of the previously valorized adulterous love. Lancelot's love for Guenevere, following in the tradition of the troubadours and Tristan verse romances, has associations with the old value system that gradually dies away while platonic spiritual love bears a new emphasis on or witness to the new ideal which will be more elaborately defined in the *Queste*.

The condemnation of physical love first manifests itself when Lancelot fails at the adventure of Symeu's tomb, then gradually becomes more evident in the *Agravain*, which sets up implicitly the Cistercian ideals that will later become explicit in the *Queste*. One of the tenets of the Cistercian ideal is virginity and its equation with spiritual perfection. Lancelot's first meeting with the Demoiselle Gu6risseuse immediately precedes the presentation of another virgin, Amite, the bearer of the Holy Grail. When Gauvain first sees Amite at the Grail Castle, the text compares her in beauty

to the Virgin Mary. For the first time in the prose *Lancelot*, it seems, beauty is associated with virginity.<sup>5</sup> The text also emphasizes Amite's social stature through her ancient Christian lineage as opposed to the social and contemporary Arthurian one.<sup>6</sup> Although Amite soon loses her status of "pucele," the two maidens show similarities in character in that they strive to maintain their virginity. Motherhood confers to Amite more honor than she had as a maiden (IV, 213: #79), but she regrets the loss of her former status so poignantly that she reproaches her father for no longer being allowed to carry the grail (IV, 271: #81). Further, when Galaad is conceived, the text clarifies that the loss of Amite's virginity is sinful, yet necessary for the salvation of her people. Later, Galaad will recuperate through his own virginity, that lost by his mother. Galaad's virginity, a sign of spiritual purity, will heal the spiritual wounds of others including that occasioned by his mother's loss of virginity (IV, 211: #78). Here, virginity and healing are clearly linked.

When the Demoiselle Guérisseuse makes her ap-

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pearance a second time, she too effects a spiritual sort of healing. The despondent Lancelot, infuriated by his deception at Corbenic, falls into a mental torpor so great he allows a knight to unhorse him at a bridge. He awakens to reality upon hearing the desperate pleas of the Demoiselle Guérisseuse whom Claudas's cousin attempts to seduce. She reaffirms her vow of fidelity to Lancelot, which acts as a stimulus moving him to her rescue. The damsel's pledge of loyalty renews Lancelot's faith in womankind and reminds him of his previous fidelity to Guenevere. The damsel fulfills a function similar to that of the "demoiselles tentatrices" in that she stands as proof of Lancelot's loyalty. Her appearance after the conception of Galaad is significant because her presence reminds the reader that Lancelot was indeed deceived at the Grail Castle and implies his will was not involved in Galaad's conception since he has proved the capacity to love platonically. In spite of Brisane's subterfuge at Corbenic, love retains its position as a force motivating his activities. In a way, the Demoiselle Guérisseuse excuses Lancelot from his interlude with Amite by proving his original commitment to Guenevere. In fact, before Lancelot's journey to the Grail Castle, the text states that were it not for Guenevere, Lancelot would willingly opt for the Demoiselle Guérisseuse: "...si la vit de si grant biauté et tant li plot que, s'il n'amast la roine de si grant amor, il ne se tenist pas qu'il ne feist la volenté a la damoisele. Mais il aime si leaument qu'il ne li fauseroit en nule manniere" (IV 155: #76). And again, after the Grail Castle, Lancelot is said to love her second to Guenevere: "Quant Lanceloz le voit plourer, se est molt dolanz, car il n'amoit nule fame plus de li fors la roine" (IV, 215: #79). And even a third time when their paths cross yet again: "Et quant il la voit, si en est moult liez, car ce estoit la riens ou monde que il plus amoit ..." (V, 293: #99). The same statement is not made with reference to Amite, who should more rightly be loved since she is the mother of Lance-

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lot's child.<sup>7</sup> Evidently Lancelot respects Carmadan's sister more because she does not interfere with his love for Guenevere.

After Lancelot rescues the maiden, they ride to her uncle's castle to seek shelter for the night. The next morning the maiden departs, informing Lancelot of an upcoming tournament at Camaalot where she hopes to see him next. Her uncle accompanies Lancelot back to the castle where he had previously been unhorsed. At this juncture, the Demoiselle Guérisseuse serves as a link between Lancelot's future and past. She meets him after Galaad has been conceived--a sign of Lancelot's genealogical future--and her uncle informs him that Hector is his half-brother engendered adulterously at the very castle where Lancelot was unhorsed, which calls forth Ban of Benoyc's past. The two illicit couplings take place in close proximity to each other and the Demoiselle Guérisseuse allows the transition from one locus to the other. Questions of genealogy play a further role when the damsel's uncle turns out to be cousin to Hector's uncle (IV, 224: #79). Indeed, it was Hector's uncle who unhorsed Lancelot at the bridge. The Demoiselle Guérisseuse, then, is distantly related to Lancelot and Hector through Hector's mother. Another link to Lancelot's genealogical past occurs indirectly through Claudas's cousin, who denigrates Ban for having been deposed by his uncle. The damsel's plea for help concerns not only the injustice done her through abduction but the shame Claudas's cousin imputes to Ban, and through Ban to Lancelot (IV, 218: #79).

The Demoiselle Guérisseuse makes a third appearance at the tournament of Camaalot where she is harshly interrogated by Guenevere who cleverly poses as a jealous woman's friend wanting to know the exact status of the damsel's relation to Lancelot. Guenevere identifies her by the belt she wears--a belt that Guenevere originally gave to Lancelot who then gave it to the damsel as a symbol of his love (IV, 354: #84). Although the queen already gave

Lancelot permission to love the girl, she has been

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troubled by a nightmare foreshadowing Lancelot's second deception by Brisane but, as Irony would have it, Guenevere suspects the wrong woman. The angry queen ponders whether to put the maiden to death if indeed her suspicions prove correct. However, the damsel allays Guenevere's fears and gains her respect in the process.

Lancelot's final meeting with the Demoiselle Guérisseuse occurs after he unwittingly defeats four Arthurian knights (Gauvain, Yvain, Hector, and Sagremor) while disguised in Keu's armor. Troubled by this unfortunate occurrence, Lancelot seeks lodging, which brings him fortuitously to her tent. He purposely wears his helmet so as not to be recognized in order to test her. He asks her whether it is not foolish to remain celibate when so many highborn men have already sought to marry her. When the damsel remains true to her vow, Lancelot reveals himself and asks that she hide him from the knights he defeated. As they speak, King Brangorre's daughter, the mother of Bohort's son, rides by. The damsel introduces Lancelot to the mother and his young relative and explains how Bohort was deceived into fathering the child. Again, Lancelot's meeting with the damsel makes clear certain facts concerning his genealogy. Her presence has not only linked Lancelot's illicit coupling to Ban's, but now also to Bohort's. The Demoiselle Guérisseuse, who formerly possessed deep knowledge of medicine, now possesses a deeper and more cryptic knowledge of Lancelot's lineage. The virgin's fervent commitment to chastity and her blood affiliation to Lancelot's clan confer on her this power.

Indeed, the character of the damsel evolves. When Lancelot first meets her, she is portrayed as having the proud, distant nature of those who refuse to love. Then she suddenly becomes enflamed with passion for Lancelot. She experiences all the agonies of love--the inner debate, self-doubts, mortal lovesickness--yet a word of hope from Lionel immediately restores her to health. When she learns of Lancelot's previous vow to Guenevere, she bravely

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proposes a new solution which demonstrates her capacity to submit the impulses of the heart to reason. From this moment on her role becomes similar to that of hermits who instruct those with whom they come in contact or that of the "fée" who possesses special knowledge and uses it to inform privileged knights. Her virginity, which Lancelot admires, points in the direction of a higher love. Her blood affiliation to Lancelot gives her a privileged status and seems linked to her knowledge of Lancelot's genealogy. In this respect, she resembles Perceval's female cousin in Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* who instructs Perceval concerning the Grail and his lineage.

The Demoiselle Guérisseuse fulfills yet another role in that she proves that Lancelot experiences love on all levels. He loves Guenevere in mind and in body as was proved at the adventure of the Valley of No Return, he has experienced love at its physical level as evidenced by the conception of Galaad, and love at the spiritual level directed toward Carmadan's sister. This tripartite ladder of human love corresponds to what Galaad, Perceval, and Bohort will achieve concerning spiritual love in the *Queste*, since Galaad attains spiritual perfection in both mind and body while Perceval achieves purity of body through virginity and Bohort purity of mind through chastity.

The Demoiselle Guérisseuse stands at the crossroads where the paths of physical and spiritual love meet. She experiences all the pangs of lovesickness, yet out of respect for the principle of fidelity transcends it. She is not fully enlightened because she directs her love toward Lancelot and not toward God, but for this reason the type of love she represents marks a point of transition. The evolution of her character incarnates the tendency on the part of the scribes of the *Vulgate Cycle* to separate love from sexuality through rationalization and the division of love into a hierarchy. The damsel brings to light the important question of fidelity and the qualitative difference between damsels and

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ladies. The love for married women, a vestige of the poetry of the troubadours and the Tristan legend, is slowly superseded by the new ethic of spiritual love. The beneficial adjuncts of platonic love include the power to heal and the knowledge of secret things. Formerly, the Dame du Lac alone possessed these powers. But at the end of the *Agravain*, the Dame du Lac's character has progressed inversely to that of the Demoiselle Guérisseuse. Originally portrayed as a virgin who cleverly resists Merlin's advances, the Dame du Lac soon obtains a lover (VII, 189-190: #15a), and during the war against Claudas, a husband (VI, 121: #104). Her role diminishes as the text unfolds and at

one point her foreknowledge seems limited when she reacts with surprise to Bohort's engendering of Helain Le Blanc. Healing and knowledge, once qualities of the "fée," now adhere to descendants linked to Lancelot's lineage and to those who practice the Cistercian ethic. As the Dame du Lac's importance fades, so too does the virtue of the love graced by her magical powers and so aptly symbolized by the "écu fendu."

## Notes

1. All references to the prose *Lancelot* are based on Alexandre Micha's edition: *Lancelot, roman en prose du XIIIe siècle*. 9 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1978-82).
2. Yvonne Robreau, in her extensive examination of the meanings of the words "honor" and "honte," furnishes a definition that fits the sense of this passage particularly well: "--l'idée de loyauté, de rigueur morale nécessaire au respect d'accords essentiellement fondés selon les lois du temps sur la confiance mutuelle, s'exprime à travers le devoir imposé à chacun d'être fidele à ses engagements, de quelque nature qu'ils soient..." in *L'Honneur et la honte* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), p. 27.
3. Another virgin in the *Agravain*, the one Guerrehet rescues from an abductor and then tries to seduce, **page 67**  
also considers rank a barrier between herself and Guerrehet since it is rumored that he loves a damsel of higher rank than herself (IV, 36: #71). She considers such socially unbalanced love inappropriate. Like the Demoiselle Guérisseuse, she adheres to the principle of fidelity in love. This maiden also loves platonically: "Il est voirs qu'il a en cest pais .I. chevalier qui m'a amee lonc tans par amors et tant a fait par sa pouesce que je li ai m'amor donnee sanz ce que onques ne toucha a moi de si pres comme vos estes ores" (iV, 37: #71).
4. Christiane Marchello-Nizia, "Amour courtois, société masculine et figures du pouvoir," *Annales*, 36 (1981), 979: "La dame est nécessairement mariée, c'est-à-dire déjà choisie, élue préalablement par un autre regard masculin. Élire à son tour cette dame, c'est peut-être pour le *juvenis*, se poser comme le rival, se penser à la place du *senior* qui est l'époux de la dame. Mais aimer ce qu'a élu, ce qu'aime le seigneur, ne serait-ce pas désirer être soi-même cet objet d'amour ou d'élection, désirer être à la place de la dame? ... On peut soutenir que, dans cette figure de l'amour courtois, une part essentielle de la séduction de la l'amour tient à ce qu'elle est reine: ne serait-ce pas avant tout les marques de la puissance qu'aime en elle, à travers elle, le jeune chevalier? ... il ne s'agit pas de n'importe quelles femmes: il s'agit toujours de femmes, si l'on peut dire, préalablement valorisées par un regard royal."
5. "La damoisele fu desliee et estoit treciee en bende et avoit le plus bel chief que feme portast, si estoit si bele de totes bialtes qui a feme aperent que onques plus bele feme ne fu veue fors solement la Virge Mere qui porta Jhesu Crist dedens son ventre" (II, 376-77: #66).
6. Einsinc sont mis ensemble le millor chevalier et le plus bel qui or fust et la plus bele pucele et de haut lignage qui fust alors..." (IV, 209: #78).
7. If Lancelot were not so taken with Guenevere, Amite would most probably be his true wife according to rank and lineage.