

Charlotte Trollinger

Dr. Correa-Reyes

ENGL 4070

10 December 2024

### Love or Toxic Attachment?

The portrayal of love in Arthurian Romances is that of great amusement and bewilderment. Love is depicted in many stories of the Arthurian genre as deceitful, dramatic, and goes against all moral judgment, yet readers still are compelled to root for the love affairs. In two specific texts, *The Knight of the Cart* and *Tristan and Iseut*, the audience is brought through a whirlwind of emotions surrounding the main love stories, yet against all moral compasses, they are still inclined to support the relationships. These texts invite readers to support the love affairs, even though engaging in the affairs is objectively wrong. As each rendition of these Arthurian tales progresses, there is a larger question to explore- are these toxic love affairs?

Before exploring how *The Knight of the Cart* and *Tristan and Iseut* depict love, it is important to discuss what exactly makes an act of love. Both stories question what *true* love and *toxic* love are. Are they different based on circumstances? Does one's intentions, motivations, or true, blinding love power them in making their decisions regarding love? In both *The Knight of the Cart* and *Tristan and Iseut* it can be argued what the motivations are for each character's actions, but *love* is a tough motivation to blame. In each instance, some sort of adulterous affair is happening, but readers must think critically of what is causing these affairs, and if they will choose to support them still.

Focusing on *The Knight of the Cart* first, the concepts of love and toxicity go hand in hand. It is important to note how agency plays a role throughout the story, as Chretien

“acknowledges agency as a separate and integral component in the decision-making process”

(Klassen) as the characters develop and change throughout the story. Many instances of love and devotion are seen throughout *The Knight in the Cart*. At the beginning of the story, an unnamed knight is on his quest to save Queen Guinevere, as she has been taken captive by an evil lord. Throughout the knight's quest, it is obvious that he feels more loyalty to his queen than a regular knight would. In his pursuit of the queen, he rides two horses to death while in a complete mental haze. The only thing on his mind is finding his queen and this is the first introduction to the extremities that the knight would go to in his love and obsession with his queen. Later in his journey, he comes across a dwarf pulling a cart. According to the text, there would be nothing more shameful for a knight of high conduct to be seen in the cart carrying criminals and society's lowest members, yet the knight's devotion to finding the queen is tested when the cart driver tells him that he must ride in the cart if he wants to know anything about Guinevere's whereabouts. The knight hesitated for two steps before riding in the cart, dubbing him “The Knight of the Cart” for a large portion of the story.

The Knight of the Cart makes himself a mockery in the name of devotion and love for Queen Guinevere. When another knight, Gawain, arrives to find the knight inside the cart, he questions why he would even do that. As the story continues, the Knight of the Cart does whatever it takes to save Guinevere, including crossing an uncrossable bridge made of swords. As readers see the knight perform all these tasks for his queen, the concept of agency is important to remember. The Knight of the Cart has complete control over his actions, and he is choosing to continue this devoted pursuit of Guinevere. It is the knight's motivations that remain a question here, not his autonomy. Is he motivated to win her affections, or just to be a valiant knight for King Arthur? Once the knight rescues Guinevere, she instantly recognizes him as

Lancelot from her husband's court. Even though Lancelot had crossed the uncrossable and subjected himself to the lowest position in society just to save Guinevere, she is harsh and cold towards him and he does not know why. It is later revealed that she was not impressed by Lancelot because he hesitated those two steps before ruining his reputation and status and entering the cart.

This is a pivotal moment for Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. Guinevere's coldness towards Lancelot is the opposite of what would be expected from a damsel in distress who has just been saved by her knight in shining armor. This is where a switch in Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship changes towards that of a toxic love affair. Before, Lancelot's unwavering devotion was extreme, but the audience was not invested enough in both characters to deem it as anything other than devoted love. However, this moment of coldness from Guinevere may suggest that the love affair was not just pure love. Later in *The Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot is jailed but convinces his captors to let him compete in a tournament that he knows Queen Guinevere will be at. She decides to test his love for her by telling him to purposefully start to lose. Lancelot would do anything for her, so he begins losing the tournament and embarrassing himself. This pleased Guinevere, so she gave Lancelot her approval to begin winning.

As the story comes together in the pivotal tournament moment, the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is nothing short of toxic. It is interesting to look at the power dynamic throughout *The Knight in the Cart*, especially when examining the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. Lancelot is a man, so in society, he has more rights than Guinevere. However, she is a queen. An article by Theresa Sears describes Guinevere's position as a ruler of none in society as she notes, "elevated to a position of honor and power, Guinevere remains nonetheless a queen without anyone to rule. Once Lancelot arrives, however, everything changes: Lancelot is

Guinevere's kingdom" (Sears). Guinevere is clearly manipulating Lancelot to do what she wants and continually re-prove his devotion to her as if his previous actions to save her were not enough. Taking into account Lancelot's zeal to prove his love for Guinevere and embarrass himself doing so, it is this passion for Guinevere that no longer seems pure, but rather toxic in the fact that Lancelot allows himself to be ridiculed by the fallout from Guinevere's demands.

*Tristan and Iseut* follows Tristan, a knight, on his quest to retrieve Iseut from Ireland so she can marry his uncle, King Mark. When he finds Iseut, he is wounded and Iseut concocts a healing salve and saves him from his affliction. On the trip back to England, Tristan and Iseut accidentally drink a love potion that was intended for King Mark and Iseut to share once they were married. This sparks an adulterous love and lust affair between Tristan and Iseut, but the validity of their love is called into question, much like in *The Knight in the Cart*. While *The Knight in the Cart*'s relationship flaws stem from toxicity from the characters, *Tristan and Iseut* are a part of a toxic love affair because of the love potion the couple unknowingly drinks. True, pure love is not forced, but Tristan and Iseut are victims of circumstance and unable to consent to their adulterous relationship. This then poses the question- is love consensual? Do we choose who we love? Tristan and Iseut are the perfect examples of nonconsensual love. They are subjugated into this affair because of a love potion they did not know they consumed, yet readers feel obligated to root for their love story. In contrast, Lancelot and Guinevere in *The Knight of the Cart* have consensual love, but it still is not healthy by modern standards. Regardless, both stories feature a dysfunctional love affair.

As *Tristan and Iseut* continues, the couple tries to keep their relationship a secret, but King Mark eventually discovers their affair and Tristan leaves Iseut so she can be with her husband. However, his obsession with Iseut continues after he leaves her, and he marries another

woman with the same name. Tristan's choice to marry and have relations with another beautiful woman named Iseut calls into question the difference between love and obsession. It is clear that Tristan's marriage to the new Iseut is only because he cannot have the one he loves, but the identical names indicate that he is using this new woman as a very obvious placeholder for the woman he really wants to be with but cannot. This is yet another instance of toxicity in Arthurian Romance. Love in these stories is all-consuming, even when it is not healthy. Obsession is romanticized, and characters subject themselves and each other to extremes to prove their devotion through toxicity.

*Tristan and Iseut* comes to an end after Tristan is poisoned and needs the original Iseut to save him. As he asks his new wife, Iseut, if his old lover is coming, she lies and says no. Tristan subsequently dies because of a broken heart, seconds before his lover arrives by his side. Alan Fredrick analyzed Tristan and Iseut's relationship, noting that their love "sets them permanently at odds with their environment" (Fredrick). This manipulation and deceit of Tristan leaves him dead, but his wife Iseut's motives are not entirely clear. It can be inferred that her choice to lie to Tristan comes from an internal desire for control. As a woman in medieval society, Iseut did not have many freedoms or rights. She was not even the first choice Iseut in her own marriage. Iseut probably chose to lie and have one part of her life controlled rather than be powerless forever. Regardless, she lost Tristan either way. Her choice to be toxic is for similar reasons as Guinevere in *The Knight of the Cart*. Guinevere chose to subject Lancelot to societal torture and humiliate himself over and over again to prove his love. She, as a woman in medieval England, had limited power even though she was a queen. Her choice to be so toxic and manipulative could have been her misconstrued route to achieving social power over men.

These stories explore love within different plotlines, but share the same question of what encapsulates true love. *The Knight of the Cart* demonstrates love as something that must be tried and tested. Guinevere forced Lancelot to humiliate himself in front of all of society. *Tristan and Iseut* focus on jealousy and obsession as the main characteristics between lovers. These traits do not seem to support the fairytale thinking that surrounds what it means to be truly in love- that it is passionate, pure, and absolutely not toxic or manipulative. While both stories have readers wanting to root for the lovers' success, if one takes a more pragmatic and rhetorical approach to these texts it is evident that the love affairs described are not true love, but toxic relationships built on manipulation and lies.

*Tristan and Iseut* follows the extramarital affair of two people under the influence of a love potion. It could be argued that Tristan and Iseut are not even truly in love, just overwhelmed with lust that resulted from the love potion. *The Knight of the Cart* has Guinevere constantly testing Lancelot's love towards her, yet is unsatisfied with his actions. She made him sacrifice everything he stood for as a knight just to possibly have a chance to be her forbidden lover. In both stories, the lovers faced challenges that were unnecessary just to be in a relationship that was not allowed. These scenes make skeptical readers question whether these stories are healthy depictions of love. The constant testing by Guinevere does not seem like a healthy or mature way to measure a partner's feelings. *Tristan and Iseut* depicts Tristan's extreme devotion to Iseut, even going so far as to marry another woman resembling her also named Iseut. The obsession of Tristan is too far for their relationship to be normal or healthy, but it does make for a good story. *The Knight of the Cart* and *Tristan and Iseut* both use ridiculous displays of affection to demonstrate "true love."

Both stories also contain manipulative characters, calling into question whether or not these love affairs were one-sided or not. Guinevere puts Lancelot through trials and tests of his love for her. She manipulates him into complying with her demands because she dangles the possibility of her love towards him as a prize to be earned, even though she never leaves her husband and the two do not end up together. Tristan's wife, Iseut, also manipulates her lover. While their marriage may not have been a love match, Tristan still chose to marry her as a replacement for the original Iseut. His choice to do so is manipulation of the new Iseut, as she was uninvolved in the original affair and slung along when most convenient for Tristan. However, she also took advantage of Tristan when he was dying of a poisoned wound as she told him that Iseut was not coming to save him, thus resulting in his death. Her jealousy led to his death.

Ultimately, the toxicity displayed in the romances throughout *The Knight of the Cart* and *Tristan and Iseut* pragmatically explore what it means to have “true love.” What relationships readers are rooting for are simultaneously the ones that, when further examined, make readers question why the two would want to be together at all. From adultery to manipulation to deceit, these stories depict love as a toxic yet all-consuming force. When the audience takes a step back from the texts and takes the time to question the motives and driving forces behind these love stories, it shows a very toxic and manipulative relationship between lovers. The choice of each character to remain in these forbidden relationships is frustrating, yet at first glance, it is the easier choice to root for their success.

### Works Cited

- Fedrick, Alan. "The Love Potion in the French Prose 'Tristan.'" *Romance Philology*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1967, pp. 23–34. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44940306>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
- Klassen, Norman. "The Lover's Largesse: Agency and Selfhood in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de La Charrette* (Lancelot)." *French Forum*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1999, pp. 5–20. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40552028>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.
- Sears, Theresa Ann. "'And Fall Down at His Feet': Signifying Guinevere in Chrétien's 'Le Chevalier de La Charrette.'" *Arthuriana*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1996, pp. 44–53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869181>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.