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### Chrestien de Troyes's *Erec and Enide*, or Marriage Revisited

Traditionally, in terms of love, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are understood as divided roughly into two groups: the promoters of Courtly Love and those, monks and nuns, who, rejecting carnal intercourse, chose to focus their love and devotion on God alone, serving Him in prayers and works of charity and art. With *Erec and Enid*<sup>1</sup> considered the first of the Arthurian romances, penned by Chrestien de Troyes, very likely the greatest writer of the twelfth century, asserts that there is another, noble and worthy option that serves and honors God, brings fulfillment to husband and wife, and contributes fundamentally to the stability and welfare of society.

Such a stand is particularly interesting when we consider that Chrestien lived at the court of Marie, Countess of Champagne, daughter of the "great priestess" of Courtly Love, Queen Eleanor. Chrestien thus skillfully managed to entertain the court of Champagne, while presenting a moral, even religious message defying the aristocratic trend of the time, thereby demonstrating that courage and individualism need not be snuffed out by the exigencies of patronage.

### **Medieval Marriage and Courtly Love**

It is essential to first consider *Erec and Enide* within its cultural context, by stirring away from a revisionist interpretation<sup>2</sup> of the medieval marriage and by examining the philosophy of Courtly Love.

Modern analysts, such as Cristina Alvares or Neil Cartlidge, tend to view medieval marriages as arranged, therefore loveless, thus unhappy.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation may explain in part the popularity, even today, of famous adulterous couples such as Tristan and Iseut or Lancelot and Guinevere, who had to defy society's "unjust" conventions in order to find happiness in true love –the only thing worth living, or dying, for. However, there is no doubt that these adulterous relationships were viewed as condemnable

by the authors who related them, from Chrestien to Beroul to Malory, and that, in the case of Lancelot and Guinevere, it was blamed as a significant cause for the collapse of Camelot and the ideal of goodness and greatness for which it stood.

While there is no denying that bad marriages existed, it would be a faulty conclusion to believe it was the case *all* the time, as Joseph and Frances Gies indicate in their *Life in a Medieval Castle*, "There is evidence that many marriages were happy. " They give the example of nobleman Geoffrey de la Tour, who long after her death still mourned his wife in whom he "delighted so much." "It is more than twenty years," he says, "that I have been for her full of great sorrow. For a true lover's heart never forgets the woman he has truly loved" (Gies 78-79).

Indeed, from the dawn to the twilight of the Middle Ages, there are many examples in recorded history of marriages, arranged or not, where both partners were deeply in love with each other, such as Clovis and Clotilda<sup>4</sup>, Malcolm and Margaret of Scotland<sup>5</sup>, William the Conqueror and Mathilda,<sup>6</sup> Edward I and Eleanor of Castile<sup>7</sup>, Louis IX of France and Marguerite of Provence<sup>8</sup>, the Black Prince and Joan of Kent<sup>9</sup>, to name only a few.<sup>10</sup>

We must also remember, as Regine Pernoud underscores, and especially in contrast with their place in Roman and even Germanic societies, the importance the Christian faith gave women:

The Christian doctrine of marriage was established, little by little, on this fundamental principle of perfect equality in the union between two beings –union which was insolvable and inferred reciprocal duties. (*La Femme au Temps des Cathédrales*, "Woman in the Age of Cathedrals" 174).

and that the Church condemned forced marriages, which granted, in theory at least, the opportunity for the would-be couple to cry off. As Shulamith Shahar points out:

Thus although the agreement of the parents was desirable, a marriage was considered valid even if celebrated against the wishes of the parents. Even if the family exerted pressure to separate a young couple who had wed without permission, it was not possible, by ecclesiastical law, to enforce an annulment or separation. . . . An additional factor in the

Church's recognition of such marriages despite opposition was the theological view that it was the partners who bestowed the sacrament of marriage on one another. (Shahar 83)<sup>11</sup>

It would be also erroneous to believe that marriage was understood as solely validated for procreation, as some historians, like Aldo Scaglione infers:

The sacrament of marriage sanctified sex, but only as the means to obey the commandment to grow and multiply; passionate love had no place within marriage, since desire and enjoyment of sex were inherently and inescapably sinful, the fall's tragic mark, as St. Augustine had so eloquently put it. (Saglione 142).

first, because even if this were the Church's view, intimacy belonged primarily to the couple and could remain hidden from prying eyes; second, because although the Church may have put an emphasis on procreation, it was certainly favorable to loyal companionship in marriage, as Peter Lombard, Professor of Theology at Notre Dame, and later Archbishop of Paris, wrote in his *Book of Sentences*, in 1157: "Eve was not taken from the feet of Adam to be his slave, nor from his head to be his head, but from his side to be his partner." (Stott).<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is significant that marriage constituted one of the fundamental elements of society, was considered sacred by the Church, and guaranteed the stability of family and land.

Against this backdrop, rose the aristocratic game of Courtly Love. It was indeed "aristocratic" because the middle and lower classes were left pretty much untouched by it, and it was a "game" because those involved acted as performers, obeying an artificial set of rules and behaviors they had invented for themselves. Courtly Love drew from the chivalric code, one of the most detailed descriptions of which is found in *Girard de Roussillon*, written circa 1150. The model praised in this story stands as the pattern of attitude and conduct for all knights:

Brave, courtly, skillful, noble and of good lineage; eloquent, handsomely experienced in hunting and falconry; he knows to play chess and backgammon, gaming and dicing. His wealth was never denied to any. . . He has never been slow to perform honorable deeds. He dearly loves

God and the Trinity and since the day he was born, he has never entered a court of law where any wrong was done or discussed without grieving if he could do nothing about it. . . He honors the poor and lowly, and judges each according to his worth. (Scaglione 113).

As Scaglione explains, Courtly Love was a blend of aristocratic etiquette, chivalric heroism, but also elitism and even hedonism. This is, in fact, where the first clash with the Church occurs. The clergy, like Bishop John of Salisbury, saw kings, nobles, and knights as the secular extension of the Church. By defending and practicing the Christian faith, Church and civic rulers achieved a symbiosis of the spiritual and the secular for the welfare of all society. Salisbury viewed with alarm the propensity of the nobility towards a display of luxury, as knights and ladies' expensive tastes and lifestyle became staples of Courtly Love (Scaglione 131).

Contrarily to the chivalric code, Courtly Love is characterized by secrecy and illegitimacy, devotion, bordering on idolatry, not towards God, but to the lady, who is always viewed as superior to her lover. There are also requirements, on the lover's part, to accomplish feats of skill and bravery to serve and honor her, much, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, as a vassal would his overlord. Both lady and lover are generally high-born and possess education, refinement of manners, beauty of figure and clothing. Finally, if the lover has proved himself sufficiently worthy, the lady rewards him ultimately with sexual favors.

Courtly Love defied Church<sup>13</sup> and society norms concerning marriage and devotion. Several scholars, such as Debora Swartz and Michael Delahoyde, strongly suspect that Marie of Champagne herself asked her chaplain, Andreas Capellanus, to write his famous treatise, *The Art of Courtly Love* (Delahoyde). This medieval "love handbook" establishes a list of thirty-one rules based on the assumption that marriage and love are two separate things (Cf. rule one, "Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.") and that love must be both jealous and secret: rule two proclaims, "he who is not jealous cannot love"; rule twenty-one that, "real jealousy increases the feeling of love"; rule twenty-two adds that, "jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved"; while rule thirteen warns that, "when made public, love rarely endures." (Medieval Sourcebook). Although some scholars, like

Jeffrey Lyle, believe that Courtly Love was mostly, "a vehicle for political and social satire," a party game whose rules "depended on an undergirding high value for the normative principle of Christian marriage" based on the assumption "that the fruitful Christian was the glue upon which social stability and cohesion depended" (Lyle 516), many disapproving contemporaries of this game, like the Benedictine historian Guibert de Nogent, witnessed and deplored its potentially destructive consequences: "Today no one abstains from boasting of his good fortune and of his successful love affairs. There is bold and general licentiousness," (Decaux, 200-201). Meanwhile, courtly lovers found not only excitement in the requirements of secrecy, gallantry, and skill, but the adulterous side of the game further added, with the danger of being discovered, the thrill of a dare.<sup>14</sup>

Some historians, such as Peter Nolan or Debora Schwartz, have interpreted Courtly Love as an escape for women from the constraints of a male society,<sup>15</sup> but really this theory cannot stand because 1) men were willing participants in this new convention,--in fact its origins are credited to Eleanor's own grandfather, Guihem of Poitiers, Duke of Aquitaine, whose scandalous life brought an excommunication for having taken for mistress Viscountess Dangereuse, wife of his vassal Viscount Aimery of Chatellerault -- 2) the very leader of this fashionable game, Queen Eleanor of England, Duchess of Aquitaine, hardly fits the stereotype of the oppressed, powerless woman. Like her, many aristocratic ladies enjoyed great power and influence over the men and women of their class, and 3) even beyond the confines of the aristocracy, the Middle Ages is filled with women in positions of honor and influence, such as Hersende, the personal physician of Louis IX of France, in the thirteenth century, or Christine de Pisan, whose writings earned her world fame and a large aristocratic support.

As Pernoud further notes in her, *Pour en Finir avec le Moyen Age* ("Let us Be Done with the Middle Ages"), the Church also recognized women of faith, charity, or courage, and set them up as examples. Mary Martin McLaughlin, in "Peter Abelard and the Dignity of Women," observes that Abelard rooted his respect for women in the examples of the "women of Christ's following" as well as in the fact that women had occupied a "notable" place "in the apostolic community and the early Church." From this, Abelard asserted that "women are not to be distinguished from men in those things that pertain

to God or to any excellence of religion" (McLaughlin 295, 297). We find that such thoughts were not mere theories, but were put into practice as in the case of Petronille de Chemillé, who, in the early 1100s, was appointed by the abbot Robert d'Arbrissel, founder of the great Abbey of Fontevraud, as his successor, and who, as abbess, ruled over both monks and nuns (Venardes 96).

Although their liberties varied according to regions and status (married, single), women commoners often enjoyed far more freedom than our century realizes, since they could own a business (records reveal book binders, drapers, copyists, miniaturists, apothecaries) and even, in some cities, vote! (*Temps des Cathédrales* 94-97). In fact, the importance of women in the Middle Ages might best be symbolized, as Marilyn Yalom suggests in *The Birth of the Chess Queen: a History*, by the advent of the chess queen, the most powerful piece of the chess game, which replaced the vizier of the original Arabic chessboard, during that time.

## **Chrestien's *Erec and Enide***

### **1. Chrestien de Troyes and his introduction to *Erec and Enide***

Little is known about who Chrestien de Troyes was. It is generally accepted that he was a cleric, or received the education of one, and was associated with the courts of Marie of Champagne –which means he knew Capellanus--, and Philippe of Alsace, Count of Flanders (Vigneras 341). However, as Jean Frappier notes, this "poet and artist, painter of characters, novelist of an entire society, moralist of a refined civilization" is known to us essentially through his works. Frappier believes, for instance, that the fact that he refers to himself simply as "Chrestien" may indicate that he was already famous. (Frappier 5-9). Indeed, from the tone of Chrestien's introduction to *Erec and Enide*, there does not seem to be any doubt that he was at ease with his audience, not concerned with flatteries and the conventional dedication to any patron. He sounds sure of himself and independent-minded.

The introduction gives us a first glimpse of Chrestien's religious convictions. From the start, Chrestien admonishes his readers to use their God-given talents to the fullest and that not doing so is a

mark of neglect and foolishness, terms that in the Christian context are expressions of ungodly stewardship, of sin. The Parable of the Talents in the Gospel is an obvious source here:

It is right for everybody always to devote his thoughts and efforts to telling and teaching what is good. . .there is no wisdom in not freely making one's knowledge available so far as God's grace allows."(p.1)

Chrestien also assures us that his story "will henceforth be remembered as long as Christendom endures." In other words, he infers that as long as people take the Christian faith and endorse Christian values seriously, this story will be of interest, inspiration, encouragement. A boastful claim? I would rather suggest the assurance of someone who knows his faith well and trusts that others who share it will be united by a bond that transcends time. Indeed, today's Christian values concerning marriage, leadership, private and public duties have remained much the same. It is also a reminder to his aristocratic audience that with power come responsibility and influence. Just as Erec and Enid have been gifted (by God) to be an example, the embodiment of Christian virtue to their people, so have the Count and Countess of Champagne and their courtiers; therefore, to a certain extent, *they* have an important part to play in contributing to the "endurance" of Christendom.

Donald Maddox observes that Chrestien sets out with a double concern for esthetics and didacticism, "The prologue to *Erec and Enide* provides evidence that Chrestien was consciously writing not only for the delight but also for the enlightenment of his contemporaries." (Maddox 15). Tom Artin believes that Chrestien feared that his intended audience "was likely to listen with only the fleshly ear, not the ear of the spirit, and so fail to hear [the] inner meaning." (Artin 31). By writing a captivating tale that is also a parable, Chrestien devises a way to be a sort of crypto-moralist and to be thus more effective, leaving each to discover life-changing truths in the privacy of his/her own heart, since, as Artin reminds us, "Truth is only apparently hidden in parables, in order that it might be revealed"(Artin 31-32). The adventure and chivalric elements, familiar to Chrestien's audience, would thus be the "shell" of both the tale and life, while the true love within the story would be the pearl in their core (Artin 54). Thus perceiving life's spiritual priorities through the external similarities between the tale and Chrestien's

audience's aristocratic existence would bring a moral reform, as well as a greater respect and desire for conjugal love built, like Erec and Enid's, on complete harmony, equality, devotion, and complementarity.

## **2. Date, origins, and plot summary**

Chrestien writes his text --composed in poem form, 6878 octosyllables in rhyming couplets-- around 1170; however, he states in his introduction that there existed other versions of the same story. He denounces them as incomplete and/or inaccurate and claims to have the real thing.

Erec, the greatest of King Arthur's knights, after Gawain (Arthur's nephew), in redressing a wrong done to Queen Guinevere, meets Enid. The two fall in love at first sight and marry soon after, at Arthur's court. A misunderstanding between the spouses prompts Erec to embark on a quest with Enid as his sole companion. After encountering numerous dangers and trials, each is assured of the love of the other, never to be put into question again. In the twelfth and final adventure, Erec breaks the spell of Courtly Love and restores joy at the court of King Evrain. Erec and Enid return triumphant to Arthur's court; their quest has deepened their love and their wisdom. Erec's father, King Lac, having died, they are crowned jointly by Arthur, and the book closes on the glorious promise of their long and happy reign.

## **3. Christian symbolism and structure**

While some consider that Chrestien drew little from the Bible, the textual evidence in *Erec and Enide* points to the contrary. For instance, Divine Providence is in evidence throughout the tale. When Erec follows Yder and his dwarf in order to punish the insult to Queen Guinevere and the abuse to her lady-in-waiting, he has no armor, but when he arrives at destination Divine Providence places before him the good vavassor who supplies him with food, shelter, armor, and even his future wife! Clearly, God himself has lined up events. This does not, by any means, annihilate free will; God works around human choices and rashness. When angry, hurt, worried, Erec suddenly takes Enid on a quest, he does not necessarily have a plan of action, but his instinct to take with him only his wife proves to be a good one through which God helps the couple to "clear the air" between them and to become closer even than before. The various encounters are orchestrated in such a way that the heroes might learn from their errors and their experiences. The whole story of Erec and Enid could easily be an illustration of Romans



8:28, "We do know that all things work together for good to those who love God." Indeed, what at first seems like a trial turns out to be of refinement of Erec and Enid's Christian walk, and ultimately a blessing. Although later Limors's crude and brutal lust precipitates his own end, Divine Providence uses even a villain such as he to prevent Enid from killing herself (emphasis, my own):

She draws the sword from the scabbard and begins to gaze at it. *God who is full of Mercy, caused her to pause a little.* . . . there suddenly arrives at great speed a count with a large number of knights, having heard the lady's loud cries from a long way off. *God had no wish to forget her;* for she would have killed herself there and then had not these people taken her unawares, seized the sword from her . . . (p.62).

Given Chrestien's religious convictions, it is not surprising that the story is structured around three major Christian celebrations. It begins at Easter, the most important feast in Christian belief for, as the apostle Paul points out, "If Christ is not risen [from the dead], then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty" (1 Corinthians 15:14). In the story, it is also a symbol of a new life for the hero about to meet his soul mate. Indeed, both spouses will leave their former life and begin together a new one.

The heroes marry at Pentecost, which celebrates the empowerment of the apostles by the Holy Spirit to go forth and preach the Good News of salvation by grace throughout the world. Parallely, Erec and Enid are empowered by their marriage, even when a miscommunication propels them into their Quest. They were formerly two separate entities; they are now two united as one, helping each other, sharing the same vision.

The quest ends with the celebration of their coronation at Christmas. The feast, whose very name draws its significance from Christ, is also a time of joy, warmth, and homecoming in the Christian tradition, which in the Middle Ages lasted a full twelve days. This ongoing festive time echoes the ongoing bliss of Erec and Enid, both as husband and wife and as wise and good rulers of their people, and closes their adventures with a glow of "happy ever after."

There are other symbols that appear through the novel, such as the white stag, which both in Celtic and Christian symbolism is understood as a supernatural and good omen, announcing that a

momentous event is at hand (*Dictionnaire des Symboles* 309-313). It is significant that while the story is divided like a triptych (Courtship and Marriage, Quest, and Coronation) the quest numbers twelve trials, much as a Christian adaptation of Hercules's tasks.

#### **4. Arthur and Guinevere**

Contrarily to Tom Artin, for instance, who views Arthur as pompous (Artin 88), I believe that Chretien wants us to understand both Arthur and Guinevere as role models. There is no shadow of betrayal over their union; on the contrary, they stand as surrogate parents to Erec and Enid and as mentors to them in the schooling of kingship. Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King* saw Arthur as one who attempted to appeal to the best in mankind and to create a perfect (Christian) kingdom. Even though this noble endeavor failed, as we know through Tennyson's and others' works, here we are as if transported in a whirl of optimism and enthusiasm and we can see that all things are possible to those with pure hearts and godly vision.

We could even make a case for Arthur representing God and Guinevere the Church, but without going so far there is no denying that Arthur sets the story in motion with the hunt of the white stag. The wise Gawain is alarmed because he fears this will create division among Arthur knights, each devoted to arguing that his own lady is the most beautiful, "Sire . . . this could lead to very great trouble, for here there are no fewer than five hundred high-born damsels, attractive and intelligent daughters of kings, all with knights as lovers. . ." (p. 1). Confident, Arthur shows no alarm, though he offers no explanation, but in the end, almost as if Arthur had "planned" it all along --he has not, but Divine Providence, of which he is the earthly representative, obviously has-- the final decision of bestowing the prize on Enid strengthens the unity of the court, because Enid is universally and wholeheartedly recognized as deserving of the honor (p. 24).

Erec and Enid, both as a couple and as rulers, rightfully look up to Arthur and Guinevere who are like an ideal blueprint from which the very human heroes can draw inspiration. In imitating these great models, Erec and Enid can make a difference in their own life and that of their subjects. It is interesting, in this regard, to note that more than King Lac or Enid's parents, Arthur and Guinevere are the

ones whose blessing is sought in Erec and Enid's union. In fact, King Lac is not even consulted. We may wonder why Erec refuses to array his future bride in garments fit for her rank, when he leaves with her for Arthur's court, but the gesture only re-enforces the importance of Arthur and Guinevere in the heroes' life. Of course, at one point in his youth, Erec left his father's court to serve in Arthur's, as squires learned at another nobleman's castle to become knights; but we can sense a greater dimension here: Arthur and Guinevere are clearly to be understood as "spiritual" more than "surrogate" parents. The respect and devotion Erec shows them demonstrate that they are the incarnation of godly rule on earth: Arthur and Guinevere, as well as Erec and Enid, who follow their example, set a pattern for all rulers in Christendom.

This may explain why, after being gravely wounded in his duel with Givret, Erec refuses to accept shelter at Arthur's camp. For one thing, Erec senses that his quest is yet incomplete. He is also reluctant to offer any kind of explanation and even more to receive advice since the matter to be settled is between his wife and himself: how could he share the situation with Arthur and Guinevere, who are a perfect couple? Finally, he does not want any help. But Arthur, in a magnanimous gesture, embraces Gawain's suggestion, and since Erec will not go to Arthur, Arthur will come to Erec. Another analogy with divine grace presents itself here: just as God reaches out to man, as Jesus—the Son of God—washes his disciples' feet, Arthur the most powerful king in this story, moves his camp to bring help to Erec without bruising his pride. In his wisdom, he serves and does not ask anything, he offers help without condition, and he accepts Erec's decision to leave on the next day, though it grieves and worries him for Erec's sake (pp.55-57).

### **5. Attack on Courtly Love**

At first, Chrestien's story seems to follow the conventions of courtly tales: the hero proves his greatness in protecting women, defeating Yder in a tournament, winning the prize hawk for his lady; he and his lady are the most beautiful, elegant, refined beings; they enjoy the pastimes of the aristocracy (hunts, courtly contests, arrays of splendid clothing). Soon, however, Chrestien makes his contempt for the immorality and vanity of Courtly Love clear. He begins with aside remarks that could be easily overlooked. For instance, at the first apparition of Enid, before we are even told her name, Chrestien

compares her to the famous Iseut and although he only speaks of her hair at this point, we are told that Iseut's magnificent blond hair --key feature of her beauty-- was little in comparison of Enid's (p. 6). Later, Erec's victory against Yder causes great rejoicing and Chrestien informs us that it overshadows Tristan's victory over the Morholt (p. 17). Why should Chrestien mention Tristan and Iseut at all? Those are subtle hints, but by them Chrestien purposely contrasts his own pair of heroes, with all their attributes, to the famed adulterous lovers and exposes the latter as failures.

The first encounter with Guivret evidences the pointlessness of duels that aim solely at proving the combatants' skills and bravery. The fight lasts nine hours; Erec and Guivret nearly kill each other only to end up friends; meanwhile, Enid, the only one who seems to have any common sense in the matter, is beside herself with anguish and is left with bandaging her husband's wounds and worrying some more about their healing (pp. 49-52). Later, his weakened condition will contribute to plunging Enid in real danger when she is taken by the Count of Limors (61-65). Through all this, we do not feel really impressed by Erec's prowess; by contrast, his rescue of Cadoc of Tabriol from the giants springs from a genuine desire to help the weak and redress injustice, two essential duties of the chivalric code. Here Chrestien boldly asserts that true nobility, true courage, true manliness are shown in worthy deeds and selflessness, not in "showing off" in dangerous but immature and futile war games! Chrestien further denounces the artificiality of Courtly Love as the lustful and violent nature of Gaolain and Limors quickly dissolves the veneer of their gallant, courtly demeanor.

The most striking attack against Courtly Love comes with the defeat of Mabonagrain and his mistress. The episode is both a caricature and a scathing criticism of the rules and artificiality of Courtly Love. The two couples are shown in sharp contrast of each other. Where the lovers kept their love a secret, Erec and Enid's was known and approved by all; where Mabonagrain is enslaved by his mistress's love, Erec is empowered by Enid's; the mistress seeks her own satisfaction, the wife seeks the welfare of her husband before her own, and together Erec and Enid are willing to sacrifice their own comfort and happiness for the sake of others, while Mabonagrain and his unnamed mistress never hesitated to destroy others and to plunge Evrain's entire court into mourning. It is interesting to note that throughout the entire

episode (pp.77-84), Mabonagrain's lady is never named. It is almost as if Chrestien makes it a point to show that such a woman, who does not care that her lover is miserable, an outcast, and a public threat because of the foolish vow he made her -- "I made her the pledge, but without knowing what" (p. 80)—who revels in the power she exerts over him, does not deserve to be named; the emptiness and self-absorption of the life she has chosen have robbed her of her own identity.

Both Erec and Enid understand that Erec must fight Mabonagrain. Unlike the people at King Evrain's court, who try to dissuade Erec to fight for fear he would die like his predecessors, Enid "keeps silent" though she is in anguish. Husband and wife, the true couple, do the only thing Christian spouses can do in such circumstances: "Then he kisses her and commands her to God, and she him" (p.77). No tantrum, no demands or threats, no questioning of the other's love; they face danger and the possibility of separation with selflessness: their mutual assent to the combat is based on their concern for the greater good of others. Indeed they act already as responsible rulers should. Through their example, Chrestien challenges the emprise of Courtly Love on the upper class, advocates its end, and its replacement by a godly, wholesome standard. The illustration is self-evident: where Mabonagrain and his mistress' selfishness had caused the death of many and the grief of all at Evrain's court, genuine love, shared vision, and mutual respect and understanding bring about the end of this spell of Courtly Love, of its absurd demands, and of its devastating ramifications for society and grant liberation to all; thus the "Joy of the Court" is truly achieved.

We should also note that Chrestien's denunciation of Courtly Love is not without humor. After Erec has recovered of his wounds at Guivret's, the latter give Enid a new palfrey (her horse was lost at Limors's castle), but most significantly, a superb saddle engraved with the tragic love affair of Aeneas and Dido. The magnificence of the craftsmanship is amply described, yet the scene represented is one of complete failure (sexual abandon, deceit, and suicide). Enid, the righteous wife, literally sits on the story of the ill-fated lovers, in so doing the bad example of Aeneas and Dido is obliterated, and all we see is the good example of Enid. This caustic detail may yet be the most humiliating insult given to the disciples of Courtly Love! We certainly have here another subtle comparison between unbridled love, that leads to

destruction, and true love, that leads to fulfillment. It is also a foreshadowing of the ultimate defeat of Courtly Love in the episode of the Joy of the Court. The contrast between true and licentious loves is further underscored by the two opposite colors, black and white, on the horse's head (p. 70)

### **6. Chrestien apologist of marriage**

By denouncing the artificiality and the immorality of Courtly Love, Chrestien de Troyes makes himself an advocate of biblically-grounded marriage. It is obvious that his understanding of marriage focuses on fulfilling, life-long companionship, a precious and joyful relationship designed by God Himself. Where others would have ended the tale with Erec and Enid's wedding, Chrestien begins the most important part of his story there, clearly inferring that marriage is not an end but a beginning. We can already hear Robert Browning's "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in His hand who saith, 'A whole I planned, youth shows but half; Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!'" (Browning *Victorian Web*).

Chrestien does not approve of marriage as business arrangement, though many of his contemporaries had no problem with it. For him, marriage is a godly, rewarding, empowering union, provided it is built on Christ, mutual love, and matching intellect and virtues. Husband and wife are to be equal in all essentials (love, intelligence, talents, devotion, faithfulness)—it is significant, for instance, that in many ways Erec and Enid mirror each other-- and they must share all things. For Chrestien, husband and wife must truly be one (another biblical principle); for this reason the marriage takes place as both Erec and Enid are apart from their respective parents, as Genesis 2:24 tells us, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

For two to be one, there must be complete trust, absolute openness. While many scholars, such as are convinced that Erec decides to embark on his quest because he has been wounded in his pride when Enid reports that his barons are criticizing him for his neglect of knightly duties. For instance, Myrrha Borodine claims that Erec, "wants to be obeyed by [Enid] because he is the master" (Borodine 42), while Tom Artin asserts that, "Erec is shocked into action by the image he sees of himself [in Enid's eyes]," and

considers Erec's decision to go on a quest as one excess succeeding another (too much love, then too much austerity), both prompted by lack of measure and "spiritual blindness." (Artin 101-103).

I believe that it is precisely the lack of openness on Enid's part about the situation that triggers Erec's anger and his decision. If he were concerned with regaining his honor before his knights, he would have taken *them*, or at least a good number of them, along; instead he takes only Enid. Evidently her hesitation, worse, her lame attempt at lying about the cause of her grief has made him doubt that she loves him still. The misunderstanding between them is compounded by the fact that his harshness in telling her not to speak even if she sees danger ahead makes Enid believe that Erec hates her. Thus, because of this lack of openness and communication, each believes the other has fallen out of love. Here Chrestien forcefully rejects Capellanus's absurd rule twenty, that a lover must always be fearful, thus that love can only be kept alive by a constant sense of insecurity. Instead, he demonstrates that happiness is achievable through complete openness; keeping one's feeling hidden only leads to needless grief. Because Erec and Enid are indeed bound by true love, they are soon reunited and stronger in their marriage than ever before: "Sweet sister, I've put you completely to proof! Don't be at all fearful, for now I love you more than ever, and I'm again certain that you love me perfectly" (p. 65).

Where some consider Erec's order of silence imposed upon Enid the illustration of the husband asserting his authority as "head of the wife," I see a test of Enid's love: paradoxically, her actual obedience would prove her lack of love for her husband, since she would put her own safety (contingent upon not angering him) before his (preventing his being killed by opponents). In fact the more Enid disobeys, the greater the threat in Erec's voice, but the lesser the anger and doubt in his heart. By the time the couple finds a little reprieve at Arthur's camp, we already know that Erec's assurance in Enid's love for him is complete: "He threatens her, but has no mind to harm her, for he perceives and truly understands that she loves him above all else, and his love for her cannot be greater" (p.50). Unfortunately for both their peace of mind, he does not get the opportunity of telling her so until after they have escaped together, symbolically two on one horse, from Limors's castle. This explains why at that moment Erec tells Enid he forgives her, "And if you've ever spoken ill of me, you have my

forgiveness and pardon for both the offense and what you said," (p. 65) when others would think it should be the other way around. He forgives her for not telling him the truth directly when he asked what was the cause of her sadness before they embarked on the quest, and also for letting the opinion of others intrude into their intimacy. In other words, because of the bond of true love that unites them so completely, she should have known better than to doubt or than to not confide in him. The biblical term for conjugal intimacy, "to know," comes significantly to mind here, for it encompasses intimate understanding and complementarity of minds and bodies Chrestien infers here.

Chrestien is, in fact, very blunt in his approval of conjugal intimacy. Twice we are given to understand in no ambiguous terms, that Erec and Enid enjoyed each other in bed. There is no mention of procreation or even of projected procreation here: "Now to [Enid's] great delight they lie naked together in one bed, exchanging embraces and kisses –nothing gives them such pleasure" (p. 69). It is significant that Enid answers Limors's question, "whether she was [Erec's] wife or his mistress" by, "both the one and the other" (p. 62). This is doubly important because on the one hand Chrestien exalts legitimate, conjugal love, but he also boldly affirms that, contrarily to those in the Church who viewed sexual relations as acceptable solely in the hope of progeny, sexuality in marriage is a natural, pure, even God-designed expression of love between husband and wife. We find the same daring assertion in the erotic drawings the famous clergyman and writer Charles Kingsley made of himself and his wife in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> There is a sense that conjugal intimacy brings back a state of pre-Fall joy between husband and wife. Chrestien demonstrates with great common sense that true love is the greatest thing because it is founded on trust, not jealousy or doubt. Incidentally, this also explains why the Christian wife enjoyed far more freedom than others. Francesco Gabrieli, for instance, relates the anecdote in which Usama ibn Munqidh, a Muslim leader and man of letters, was shocked to see a knight leave his wife alone to talk to another man (Gabrieli 77). Evidently the knight, like Erec letting Enid speak alone with Gaolain, had not doubt about his wife's faithfulness.

Some interpret Erec's reaction to Enid's words as one of shame, as he realizes that he has been remiss of his knightly duties. I disagree. As we saw before, Erec takes no witness to see that he not what



his barons say of him. Most of his chivalric deeds during the quest are reported, indirectly, if at all, to King Arthur, so evidently, his reputation as a brave knight is not a primary concern. I suggest that he is probably, at least in part, irritated at his barons with whom he lived in a state of bachelor/knight brotherhood before he met Enid. It is in human nature that where friends were very close, when one marries, the other feels left out and can prove quite disagreeable; this is true actually of men as well as of women. More importantly yet, Erec's annoyance at being thus deprived of the fullness of his honeymoon has a biblical foundation. Indeed, Deuteronomy 24:5 tells us, "If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married." Therefore, with Erec justified even by Scripture, it is easy to see how he resents the trouble he meets in his own home!

Finally, the fact that Erec and Enid are also rulers sheds even greater importance on their love and closeness as a couple. We are reminded of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who set for their kingdom an example of conjugal and familial blessedness and stability which brought a happy change in British society after the carousing lifestyle of Victoria's uncles and predecessors. In the same way, Chrestien is convinced that the happiness of the people depends greatly on the harmony between their king and queen, much like happy, harmonious marriages today are more likely to produce wholesome children and stable future citizens.

Chrestien's praise of marriage constitutes a stellar opposition to Marie de Champagne, who once wrote in a letter to Capellanus that true love could not exist without true jealousy, and shows the art of Courtly Love for what it truly was: the description of "an art practiced, not a passion felt" (Delahoyde). Instead of the courtly triangle of lover, lady, jealous husband, Chrestien presents the rightful triangle of husband, wife, and God, creator and provider of all things good for mankind, thus designer of marriage as holy and blissful.

### **7. Woman's importance**

Enid presents, much like the woman of Proverbs 31, the example of an ideal woman. She defies the image of the medieval woman constructed through the lenses of modern feminism—Borodine, for

instance, is convinced that Enid, "understands that the duty of the man is to show valor and that of the woman is to eclipse herself discreetly and to live in the shadow projected by her lord." (Borodine 75). Feminine and beautiful, Enid is however neither shallow, nor fragile; most importantly, her external beauty is the outward expression of her inner priceless. Her father is fond and proud of her:

Very beautiful she is, but her intelligence is far superior to her beauty. Never did God create anyone so wise or noble-hearted. With my daughter beside me I don't care a marble for the whole world. She's my delight and my pleasure, my cheer and my comfort, she's my wealth and my treasure. I love nothing so much as her (p. 7)

He has given her a rounded education: she is refined in her manners, knows all of the traditional feminine duties, but she also takes care of her father's horses, which means she is strong, not afraid of hard physical work, and proves to be a worthy squire to her husband later on, as well as a pretty, kind, interesting companion.

She has been raised in relative poverty. Her father explains that his brother-in-law could have changed Enid's life to one of comfort and luxury, but the vavassor wanted something more independent for his daughter. In the same way, Erec accepts nothing of Enid's wealthy uncle, except a horse. We are not told why, but since he accepts Guinevere and Arthur's gifts, we can assume that he would feel somehow "tainted" in accepting gifts from someone whom he does esteem.

Gentle and sweet in general, she is capable of strength, endurance (she *demand*s to keep watch at night, in the forest, while Erec sleeps after defeating eight attackers), defiance, cunning, and even fierceness when so required by circumstances. For instance, following the Christian principle to be pure as a dove and shrewd as a serpent, she tricks Galoain and saves Erec from being murdered. She is prepared to die rather than cower before the odious Count of Limors's threats and physical abuse; later, when after escaping Limors's castle at night, Erec is unhorsed by Guivret who has not recognized him, Enid rushes to Erec's rescue, "She came up to Guivret and, seizing him by the rein, said to him: 'Curse on you knight!' and then she proceeds to upbraid him and demands that he repair the damage done (p. 66).

In many ways, Enid's education fits the norm. Alain Decaux explain that women of the nobility had some notions of surgery and nursing (Decaux 199) . Medieval art shows us women in a multitude of activities: reading, riding, hunting with falcons. With Enid as well as Guinevere, we also see the refining influence of women and their recognition in society. For instance, where Aude is only mentioned in *The Song of Roland* in a cameo, dying of a broken heart upon learning of Roland's death, women in Chrestien's *Erec and Enide* hold considerable importance in par with men.

## CONCLUSION

Chrestien presents us with heroes that are truly inspiring because they are real, human. No magic involved here. Erec's knightly skills are admirable, but he gets tired and even wounded. Enid and Erec show enviable qualities of wisdom, love, and goodness, but they still know doubt and fear; they act rashly at times and hurt each other, despite their immense mutual love. Part of Chrestien's realism is the place he gives in his story to divine Providence. Mockers would call it "convenient," but the Christian reader of any age recognizes it for a fact of real life, having experienced it as well. This brings us to the more miraculous awakening of Erec from his apparent death. One could consider modern recorded cases of clinical deaths in which patients have "returned" to life.<sup>17</sup> There are also recorded examples of premature burials, when the dead were only apparently dead, in a state of deep unconsciousness or catalepsy.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the case for Erec, yes, it is a miracle but at the same time only a more spectacular illustration of God's Providence. We are never dealing here with magic swords or potions. Even the spell that holds Mabonagrain and his mistress captive in the garden is a prison of their own making; much like a drug or alcohol addiction would be in our modern context.

Chrestien's *Erec and Enide* is not only an entertaining tale, but a daring and blunt defense of marriage as well as a call for the aristocracy to set an example of godly morality and conjugal happiness for those they rule. The flirtatious, if not adulterous, games of Courtly Love he denounces as the very threat to society because they seek to twist and defy what God Himself has established for the welfare and happiness of all.

Chrestien's influence was great in the Middle Ages, as testifies Herman von Aue's *Erec*, but it transcended his own time, inspiring later writers such as Tennyson, or more recently, Olier whose adaptation of Chrestien's story appears in comic book form for children. Not least importantly, *Erec and Enid* may have something to offer to our own divorce-riddled century about happiness in marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> Chrestien spells his heroine's name, "Enide", while the final "e" is dropped in both the *Mabinogion* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*; for the purpose of this essay, which focuses in the union and partnership of Erec and Enid, I chose the version without "e" which, by making it of equal length with Erec's name, further symbolizes and underscores the perfect pairing and equality of the two heroes.

<sup>2</sup> Too often, a feminist bias prejudices the reading of primary texts that are anterior to the feminist movement of the 1960s and "tailors" them to fit politically correct tastes. For instance, William Nitze, in "The Romance of Erec, Son of Lac" (p. 448) and Myrrha Borodine, in *La Femme et l'Amour d'Après les Poèmes de Chrétien de Troyes* (p. 42), assert that Erec's anger at the beginning of the quest is a manifestation of male pride (Erec wants to be recognized and obeyed as lord and master), when, as we shall see later in this paper, Chrestien may have had a far more complex idea, much more in harmony with the fact that he treats both his heroes as perfect equals and complements of each other.

<sup>3</sup> Alvares, for instance, agrees with Claude Levi-Strauss on the topic of medieval marriages and asserts that, "matrimonial agreements are the business of men in which women have no say." If it were so, how, indeed, could there ever have been any happiness in medieval unions? Similarly, Neil Cartlidge, in his *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300*, assumes that Chrestien's "representation of Enid's total commitment to her husband is a consciously romantic ideal, rather than a blueprint for marriage in the real world." (Cartlidge 54). However, such an assessment is founded on the greater preconceived idea that such love could never exist in medieval marriages.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Tours, in his second volume of his *History of the Franks* makes clear the love and respect Clovis had for Clotilde: even before he converted to Christianity, he allowed her to have their first child baptized. Although he believed the child died because Clovis's gods were displeased, he nonetheless let Clotilde have their second son baptized. Gregory and later historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are convinced that Clotilde played a pivotal role in bringing Christianity to France through her influence on her husband. George Bizet wrote a cantata, *Clovis et Clotilde; Te Deum*, in 1857 a very religious and patriotic work celebrating Clovis's conversion and showing husband and wife as one both in love and faith.

<sup>5</sup> Turgot of Durham, confessor and biographer of Margaret of Scotland tells us in his *Life of Saint Margaret* that King Malcolm had complete trust in and devotion for his admirable wife: "Whatever she refused, he refused also; whatever pleased her, he also loved for the love of her."

<sup>6</sup> David Douglas, in *William the Conqueror: the Norman Impact upon England*, not only explains that the marriage between William and Mathilda was a happy one but that on her coronation, Mathilda, "was acclaimed as having been placed by God to be queen over the people, and hallowed by unction as a sharer in the royal dominion." (Douglas 249). William had certainly complete trust in her since he left Normandy in her capable hands for extended periods of time. After her death, his behavior became darker and more irascible, which has been commonly attributed to his grief.

<sup>7</sup> Both Sandra Raban (*England under Edward I and Edward II*) and Michael Prestwich (*Edward I*) confirm the partnership marriage that was Edward I and Eleanor of Castile's. His grief at her death was immense and the twelve crosses he had built along the funerary path to her burial remain today a reminder of his love for her.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Joinville, close friend and chronicler of King Louis IX, reports that the king and queen were much in love but had to fend off the queen mother's efforts to restrain their intimacy. The castle of Pontoise was their favorite residence in that respect, with a secret staircase connecting their bedrooms located on two different floors. Like Eleanor of Castile, Margaret of Provence followed her husband to the crusades.

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<sup>9</sup> *Lives of the Princesses of Wales* gives a detailed account of Joan of Kent's life. A widow with three children from a first (love) marriage, she found happiness with her first cousin Edward. Although the king and queen first frowned upon a union that brought no diplomatic advantages and the couple had to obtain dispensation from the Pope for their marriage to be legal, they proved to be well matched and happy.

<sup>10</sup> Such couples existed also in the middle class, but the records are more difficult to locate; however, we know of Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer as well as of Estienne de Castel and Christine de Pisan, and, of course of Peter Abelard and Heloise.

<sup>11</sup> *The Fourth Estate: a History of Women in the Middle Ages* from which the above quotation is extracted has been considered ground-breaking in scholarly research about women, when it first appeared in 1983; it was the first of its kind, examining specifically the role and importance of the medieval woman. Reprinted six times since its first publication, it continues to prove an invaluable source for women studies.

<sup>12</sup> John Stott also quotes Matthew Henry, a British minister (Dissenter) and Bible commentator of the 18th century, who expanded the idea thus: "Eve was not out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, made under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved."

<sup>13</sup> In her introduction to *Literature of Courtly Love*, Kathleen Forni justly speaks of "sacred parody," with poems whose very topic and wording bordered on the blasphemous as they paralleled key rituals or figures of the liturgy; For instance, "Misa de Amores" ("The Lovers' Mass") or "Ave Formosissima" ("Hail, Most Beautiful One"), a rather shocking parody of the "Ave Maria."

<sup>14</sup> Neil Cartlige, in *Medieval Marriage. Literary Approaches, 1100-1300*, reports that C. S. Lewis interpreted the courtly lovers' "erotic ethics as a conscious subversion of the prevailing ideological systems of the day—that is, the aristocratic and the ecclesiastical," because both systems valued marriage highly.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Debora Schwartz, for instance, in her introduction to various courses on medieval literature, contributes to propagate this interpretation, while she minimizes the moral (or rather immoral) impact of Courtly Love on society: "The idea that a marriage could be based on love . . . was a radical notion. But the audience for romance was perfectly aware that these romances were *fictions*, not models for actual behavior. The adulterous aspect that bothers many 20th-century readers was somewhat beside the point, which was to explore the potential influence of love on human behavior."

<sup>16</sup> These illustrations are found in Susan Chitty's *The Beast and the Monk; a Life of Charles Kingsley*.

<sup>17</sup> An article published in *USA TODAY*, in March 2009, claimed that an estimated eight million Americans have had a NDE (Near Death Experience).

<sup>18</sup> See *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear*, in which the author, Jan Bondeson, an MD, relates recorded cases of premature burials through the centuries.

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