



EWA MEYNARCZYK

“To love one maiden only” —
The Images of Courtly Love
in Lord Alfred Tennyson’s
Idylls of the King

Published with the permission of the editors of *From Queen Anne to Queen Victoria. Readings in 18th and 19th century British literature and culture series.*

EWAMLYNARCZYK.PL

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN:

*From Queen Anne to Queen Victoria. Readings in 18th and 19th century
British literature and culture*, vol. 2, edited by G. Bystydzieńska, E. Harris.
Warszawa: Ośrodek Studiów Brytyjskich, 2010, pp. 343–350.

Ewa Młynarczyk
Uniwersytet Warszawski

“To love one maiden only” – The Images of Courtly Love in Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*

The Victorian fascination with the Middle Ages manifested itself in many aspects of Victorian culture, one of which was the use of medieval idiom. The Victorians employed certain medieval concepts to talk about new social roles and endow them with a deeper, romantic ideology. Thus, Kingsley presented philanthropy as a modern form of chivalry in his speech on sanitary reform, which aimed at improving the conditions of industrial workers¹. The same message reappears in Sir Edward Strachey’s introduction to his 1868 edition of Malory, in which he appealed to his contemporaries to engage in the battle “in the true spirit of chivalry”² in order to help “the poor, the weak, and the oppressed”³. In a similar way, Ruskin employed medieval imagery to talk about the role of woman as a spiritual and moral guide to her lord⁴. Yet, not all of the medieval concepts could be easily translated into the Victorian mode of thinking and its morality. This clash is especially visible when it comes to courtly love and its depiction in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Though dressed in a medieval guise, the poem is strongly permeated with the Victorian point of view.

Already in the Middle Ages the concept of courtly love appeared as a literary construct, a courtly play, and Arthurian legends proved an especially useful vehicle for its development, providing the necessary *dramatis personae* – Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolt. Yet, it seems that already in medieval literature the nature of courtly love is complex and ambivalent, as it raises the problems of marital happiness and adultery. Even Malory apparently felt somewhat awkward when he wrote about Lancelot and Guinevere, which can be

¹ Walter E. Houghton. *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*. New Haven; London 1985, p. 319.

² Edward Strachey (ed.). “Introduction” to *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory’s Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table*. London, New York [1868] 1901, p. lvi.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Ruskin. Of Queens’ Gardens, in Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies: Three Lectures*. Leipzig [1864-1865] 1906, pp. 142-145.

traced in his remark on the nobility of love in the past as opposed to the instability of feelings in his own times, and in the need to assert that “while she lived [Queen Guinevere] was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end”⁵.

Otherwise, however, Malory clearly glorifies the relationships of the most famous Arthurian lovers. He depicts both Lancelot and Tristan as the most worshipful Knights of the Round Table and their courtly behaviour towards their ladies is one of the signs of their greatness. Lewis observes that “only [the] courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous. Yet this love, though neither playful nor licentious in its expression, is always what the 19th century called ‘dishonourable’ love”⁶. This is also the case in the *Idylls*. In Tennyson, chivalric conduct towards ladies is also inscribed in the nature of knightliness, as it is expressed in the words of the vows by which Arthur binds his Knights:

To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they won her; for indeed I knew
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.
(*Guinevere*, ll. 471-480)

Yet, here the emphasis has been put on fidelity and chastity and hence, in the *Idylls*, the medieval concept of courtly love, implicitly suggesting adultery, has been shown in a strongly negative light. Tennyson ridicules these medieval conventions several times in the whole poem.

In one such case it is shown how, apparently in agreement with the rules of *fin amors*, this emphasis on chastity has been misunderstood and taken to excess by the Knights who want to follow the example set by their greatest knight, Sir Lancelot, and thus they

... hold
It more beseems the perfect virgin knight
To worship woman as true wife beyond
All hopes of gaining, than as maiden girl.
They place their pride in Lancelot and the Queen.
(*Merlin and Vivien*, ll. 21-5)

⁵ Thomas Malory. *Le Morte D'Arthur. In Two Volumes*. London [1485] 2004. Vol. 2, p. 426.

⁶ C. S. Lewis. *The Allegory of Love*. New York 1958, p. 2.

Even the minstrel of Caerleon who brings those tidings to King Mark's court at Tintagel admits that their yearning for purity contradicts the King's will, “For Arthur bound them not to singleness” (l. 28). Still, according to the medieval concept of courtly love, it was taken for granted that the lover addressed the wife of another man⁷. To King Mark and Vivien, however, this “naked knightlike purity” (l. 11) of Lancelot's worship for the Queen seems rather suspicious.

Another example of caricature of courtly love can be found in *Pelleas and Ettarre*. The tale, which is based on an episode from Malory, belongs to the latter part of the *Idylls*, and its altered, unhappy ending is there to illustrate the moral decline of the Arthurian world. On his coming to Arthur's court, Pelleas asks the King: “Make me thy knight, because I know, Sir King, / All that belongs to knighthood, and I love” (ll. 7-8). A few lines later, however, it turns out that “he loved all maidens, but no maid / In special” (ll. 39-40). Pelleas is convinced that loving a lady is a necessary condition for becoming a true knight. Yet he is so much concerned with following the code of courtly love that he takes the cruelty of his lady Ettarre for one of its conventions. His story may be perceived as a parallel to that of Gareth's coming to Camelot to become a Knight of the Round Table. But unlike Gareth, Pelleas is apparently much more interested in the outward prestige rather than in following the moral principles initially put forward by King Arthur in the vows.

Moreover, the glorious love of Tristram and Isolt of the medieval legends in *The Last Tournament* turns out to be the very reversal of the spiritual ideal of medieval courtly love, being merely sensual, transitory, and hence unhappy. During their final encounter at Tintagel, Tristram offends his beloved with his remarks on the transience of feelings and his defiance of any vows whatsoever. His disillusioned cynicism makes him unable to promise Isolt to love her “ev'n when old, / Gray-hair'd, and past desire, and in despair” (ll. 647-8). His attitude is best presented in his lyrics he sings earlier in the poem:

‘Free love – free field – we love but while we may:
The woods are hush'd, their music is no more:
The leaf is dead, the yearning past away:
New leaf, new life – the days of frost are o'er:
New life, new love, to suit the newer day:
New loves are sweet as those that went before:
Free love – free field – we love but while we may.’
(*The Last Tournament*, ll. 275-281)

His gift for Isolt, the jewels which he won in the Tournament of the Dead Innocence, just like his sinful love, is tainted, as is suggested by the blood-red

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

glow of rubies which turn into “frozen blood” (l. 412) in his dream of the two Isolts. Even though an antagonist of King Mark, in the *Idylls* Tristram proves to be his uncle’s equal in amorality.

The shift in reception of courtly love between the medieval and the Victorian rendition is probably best seen in attributing the blame for the destruction of the Arthurian world. While in Malory the fall is an unalterable consequence of Arthur’s breaking a taboo – in his incestuous relationship with his half-sister Morgause, even though he was unaware of their relationship – this motif has been completely omitted by Tennyson. Instead, the most direct reason for the tragedy is pinpointed by the King as the treason of his wife. What was considered in the Middle Ages as a courtly game of love can no longer be accepted in the Victorian world, in which chastity and honesty are placed among the highest values.

It is this adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere that proved to be the most problematic for the Victorian writers. Pearsall remarks that, in order to avoid impropriety, Lancelot “was made to worship the queen from afar, or else it was just a mysterious ‘treason’ that Lancelot and Guenevere were guilty of, adultery remaining unmentioned, or else the accusations were mentioned but condemned as false and as the product of others’ envy”⁸. Tennyson has adopted a different solution and decided to use the theme to teach a moral lesson to his contemporaries. The relationship between Lancelot and the Queen becomes an organizing principle, a point of reference for the later part of the *Idylls*, a sin that contaminates other stories and impedes their happy resolution.

The rumour about Guinevere’s “guilty love for Lancelot” (*The Marriage of Geraint*, l. 25) is already present in one of the early idylls, in which Geraint decides to take his wife, Enid, away from court, as he fears that her chastity may suffer through her closeness to the Queen. The negative influence of this relationship also pervades the stories of Pelleas and Balin, who become acutely disillusioned about the moral values represented by Camelot when they learn about the unfaithfulness of the Queen. Moreover, as Tennyson comments in his notes to *The Last Tournament*, “Tristram the courteous has lost his courtesy, for the great sin of Lancelot was sapping the Round Table”⁹. In *Lancelot and Elaine*, the sinful love of Lancelot and Guinevere is depicted as an obstacle which stands in the way of a happy ending in the marriage of Elaine and Lancelot:

And peradventure had he seen her first
She might have made this and that other world
Another world for the sick man; but now

⁸ Derek Pearsall. *Arthurian Romance. A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA 2003, p. 137.

⁹ Alfred Tennyson. *The Works of Tennyson, Annotated. The Eversley Edition*, vol. 5 *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson, Hallam (ed.). London 1908, p. 502.

The shackles of an old love straiten'd him,
His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.
(*Lancelot and Elaine*, ll. 867-72)

Instead, the adulterous relationship of Lancelot and the Queen results in the death of an innocent maiden. Thus, in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* courtly love has become both a cause of and a vehicle for demoralization at Arthur's court.

Those negative portrayals of courtly love arise from the change in attitude concerning the relationship between the spouses. The Malorian Arthur does not appear to be too concerned about the loss of his wife, and he is much more worried about the breakdown of the knighthood of the Round Table. As he remarks, “queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company”¹⁰. Neither is the love affair the main cause of this split, as it is rather a pretext used by one party of knights against the other, a culminating point which reveals the antagonisms that have already been accumulating among the knights for a long time. On the other hand, the Tennysonian Arthur finds Guinevere essential to the very sense of his kingship and to the fulfillment of his ideal realm. This idea permeates his thoughts after seeing her for the first time:

... for saving I be joined
To her that is the fairest under heaven,
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
And cannot will my will, nor work my work
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,
Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
And power on this dead world to make it live.'
(*The Coming of Arthur*, ll. 84-93)

This passage may have had a familiar ring to the Victorian audience, being reminiscent of the duties of a Victorian wife to her husband: “Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give”¹¹.

Yet Guinevere refuses to be an obedient wife and to conform to Arthur's idealized vision. As Ryals observes, “Guinevere is not, however, made of the

¹⁰ Thomas Malory, *op.cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 473.

¹¹ John Ruskin, *op.cit.*, p. 144.

same metal as the King. A real woman and not an abstract ideal presence, she has all the passion and longing for life of a normal woman"¹². She bears herself with this insolent pride, which was so much criticised in women by Ruskin. "Proud and pale" (*Lancelot and Elaine*, l. 610) towards the people around her, she seems to be extremely lonely and torn by jealousy at the news about Lancelot's supposed affection towards Elaine on the one hand, and by some faint pangs of conscience about her unfaithfulness to Arthur on the other. This inconsistency between her haughty behaviour towards Lancelot and her inner feelings, to which she gives way only when alone in her chamber, makes her a much more interesting and convincing character than the stainless maidens from other idylls.

Even though adultery was perceived by the Victorians as one among the gravest sins, and Guinevere's infidelity seems to be the main and most immediate cause of the destruction of Arthur's ideal world of the Round Table, she may have been treated with sympathy, even by Tennyson's contemporaries. Her search for love and happiness in the relationship with Lancelot seems to be at least partly justified by her unhappy marriage. Apparently, she was left without choice as to her future spouse; it was Arthur who fell in love with her at first sight, seeing her in passing as she was standing by the castle walls, but:

... since he neither wore on helm or shield
The golden symbol of his kinglihood,
But rode a simple knight among his knights,
And many of these in richer arms than he,
She saw him not, or marked not, if she saw,
One among many, though his face was bare.
(*The Coming of Arthur*, ll. 49-54)

Moreover, being already a king, he did not even bring his bride to Camelot personally, but sent his best knight, Lancelot, instead.

Sir Lancelot went ambassador, at first,
To fetch her, and she watched him from her walls.
A rumour runs, she took him for the King,
So fixt her fancy on him: let them be.
(*Merlin and Vivien*, ll. 772-5)

Since Guinevere initially took Lancelot for her royal bridegroom, her love may be justified as love is the only rightful feeling that a maiden should bestow upon

¹² Clyde de L. Ryals. "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in the *Idylls of the King*." *English Literary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March, 1963) p. 59.

her future husband. Consequently, it is she who becomes the main victim of this unhappy mistake.

Guinevere is very disappointed with her real bridegroom, who turns out to be “cold”, “high”, “self-contain’d” and “passionless”, the very opposite of the gentle Lancelot (*Guinevere*, ll. 402-4). This notion of being simply sold in marriage also reverberates in William Morris’s attempt to vindicate the Queen in his poem, *The Defence of Guenevere*, in which she claims that she “was bought / By Arthur’s great name and his little love” (*The Defence of Guenevere*, ll. 82-3). She is depicted as if she were living in a trap, with no honourable solution that would release her. She states that she

Would shun to break those bounds of courtesy
In which as Arthur’s Queen I move and rule:
So cannot speak my mind. ...
(*Lancelot and Elaine*, ll. 1213-15).

After all, it seems that the blame for the unhappy marriage of Arthur and Guinevere should not be attributed solely to the Queen. Even though marriages of convenience still took place in the Victorian age, the general opinion was becoming more and more in favour of marriage for love. As Houghton observes, since the former ended up in “personal misery and made one or both partners cruel and selfish and cold, it was both foolish and wrong to marry without love”¹³.

Since in the Middle Ages all marriages were “matches of interest”¹⁴ which excluded the very idea of passionate love within the marriage or a free choice of the spouse, courtly tradition emerged as a natural means to fill this gap. Lewis remarks that “[t]he love which is to be the source of all that is beautiful in life and manners must be the reward freely given by the lady, and only our superiors can reward”¹⁵. Still, he adds, “a wife is not a superior”¹⁶. He concludes that “where marriage does not depend upon the free will of the married, any theory which takes love for a noble form of experience must be a theory of adultery”¹⁷. By the beginning of the Victorian epoch, these ideals had been absorbed into the idea of marital love. Unfortunately, they are absent in the marriage of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Ironically, it is Arthur himself who utters this truth about ideal love: “Let love be free; free love is for the best” (*Lancelot and Elaine*, l. 1370); but he means it as advice to Lancelot concerning Elaine’s unrequited affection, whereas he does not follow this rule in his own marriage. This emotional blindness of Arthur’s can be taken as lying at the root of the

¹³ Walter E. Houghton, op.cit., 383.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, op.cit., p. 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

personal tragedy that takes place in the *Idylls* between the King, the Queen and Sir Lancelot.

The analysis of the images of courtly love in the *Idylls of the King* shows that this medieval concept has been used to illustrate the degeneration at Arthur's court. While in Malory courtly love is portrayed as an ennobling passion, in Tennyson this very passion becomes a destructive force which leads to the moral decline of the two greatest Knights of the Round Table, Lancelot and Tristram. This dissonance can be traced to the changing pattern of matchmaking which was gaining popularity in the Victorian epoch. The spiritual aspect of love, verging on religious veneration, which in the Middle Ages was fulfilled by the code of courtly love, was channeled into the Victorian ideal of connubial happiness, hence leading to the portrayal of an extramarital relationship as sinful and devoid of any positive feelings.

Bibliography

- Houghton, Walter E. 1985. *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. 1958. *The Allegory of Love*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Malory, Thomas. [1485] 2004. *Le Morte D'Arthur. In Two Volumes*. London: Penguin Books.
- Morris, William. [1892] 1914. *The Defence of Guinevere. The Life and Death of Jason and Other Poems*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Pearsall, Derek. 2003. *Arthurian Romance. A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ruskin, John. *Of Queens' Gardens*, in Ruskin, John. [1864-1865] 1906. *Sesame and Lilies: Three Lectures*. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, pp. 125-179.
- Ryals, Clyde de L. "The Moral Paradox of the Hero in the *Idylls of the King*." *English Literary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (March, 1963) pp. 53-69.
<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-8304%28196303%2930%3A1%3C53%3ATMPOTH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U> (27.10.2008).
- Strachey, Edward (ed.) [1868] 1901. "Introduction" to *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table*. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd.; New York: The Macmillan Company, pp. ix-lvi.
- Tennyson, Alfred. 1908. *The Works of Tennyson, Annotated. The Eversley Edition*, vol. 5 *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson, Hallam (ed.) London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd.