

How Venus Got Her Furs: Courtly Romance as Sado-masochistic Erotica

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relevance of medieval courtly romance fiction to the development of sado-masochistic erotica. It addresses how sado-masochism influenced patterns of sexuality and media across medieval Europe and traces the evolution of these patterns over time. The bulk of the following analysis regards Chrétien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart* as an important precursor to modern sado-masochistic erotica in order to answer the following questions: To what extent is courtly romance fiction a precursor to modern sado-masochistic erotica? What is the historical trace of this genre? What were the social ramifications of courtly romance literature? To what extent does Chrétien's writing depict sado-masochistic relations? How did it affect patterns of sexual behavior in medieval Europe? How did it impact women's agency? How did the world of sado-masochistic erotica change after the Middle Ages? And likewise, how did its effect on society evolve over time?

KEYWORDS: medieval sexuality, courtly romance, Lancelot, Guinevere, sado-masochism

In 2018, Peter Tupper said that "Sado-masochism is a ritual for the modern age." He could not have been more incorrect. Sado-masochism may be well within the sociocultural strata of modern society, but it was practiced long before the so-called 'modern age.' Images of masochists and dominatrices are found all throughout history; a proliferation can be traced all the way back to the Middle Ages, to the cultural phenomenon of courtly love. Despite an overwhelming lack of recognition in the academic sphere, the courtly romance literature of the 12th century provides some of the earliest fully realized examples of sado-masochistic erotica. This lineage is best exemplified by the poetic endeavors of Chrétien de Troyes. One of his romances, *Knight of the Cart* (*Le Chevalier de la Charrete*) illustrates the extent to which the dichotomy of male subordination/female domination was embedded in courtly culture. It propagates a masochistic association between love, pain, and pleasure with the expressed purpose of titillating its readership. It reifies and recontextualizes public humiliation as an act with sexual connotations. As a result, this particular text bears striking resemblance to modern BDSM.¹

On a surface level, *Knight of the Cart* centers around the exploits of a knight (Sir Lancelot) and his endeavors to rescue his queen (Guinevere) from kidnappers. On a deeper level, however, *Knight of the Cart* tells the story of a masochist, who willingly suffers at his dominatrix's behest. With every step Lancelot takes, the line between pain and pleasure is blurred. In one particular instance, the knight braves a hazardous bridge of sharpened steel. He is wounded, but this pain soon becomes a source of gratification:

Love, which led and guided him,
Comforted and healed him at once
And made his suffering a pleasure²

In this passage, pain and pleasure appear conflated. This conflation is one of the central themes of Chrétien's narrative, and it perfectly encapsulates Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere. She exists simultaneously as a source of pain and pleasure. In fact, she is the very impetus of their coalescence. Lancelot's affection for Guinevere

¹ An acronym alluding to the dichotomies of dominance/submission and sadism/masochism.

² Chrétien de Troyes, *Knight of the Cart*, trans. William W. Kibler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981), 131.

and his status as a courtly lover act as driving forces that urge him ever onward, skewing his perception of pain and bringing him into a world of masochistic pleasure. Love is his guide, and she is a cruel and sadistic mistress.

The implications of this passage do not stop here, however. The association between pain and pleasure and the dichotomy of male subordination/female domination are as relevant to *Knight of the Cart* as they are to courtly culture at large. In Chrétien's writing, we see not only the passionate submission of one knight to one lady. We see one of the first, fully realized instances of sado-masochistic erotica. We see how Venus got her furs. Scholars and historians have recognized the pervading masochism of this text but have yet to attribute this masochism to a larger tradition of textual eroticism. In the following pages, we will explore the relationship between Lancelot and sado-masochistic erotica, the role of humiliation in Lancelot's masochism, and *Knight of the Cart's* connection to modern BDSM. There are stones in need of turning, and questions that remain unanswered by scholars. But before one can identify Chrétien's writing as sado-masochistic erotica, before one can determine how this literary tradition influenced patterns of literature and sexuality across medieval Europe, one must delve deeper into Chrétien's current place in the world of academia.

THE CRITIC AND THE CRITICAL

"Every lover serves" - Ovid

As the breadth of this academic inquiry finds itself based in the aftermath of Poststructuralism,³ it is imperative to conduct a preliminary examination of this antiquated school of thought, and explore its enduring relevance in the field of literary criticism. Structuralism proposes that one may understand human culture by way of language.⁴ In this theoretical framework, language is regarded as a way of knowing, whose meaning can only be amounted to the sum of its parts. It is static, and therefore formulaic. In this conception, everything that disseminates from human culture is defined and

³ More specifically, these analyses are aligned with the literary criticism of contemporary queer theory, gender studies, and new historicism.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, "How do we Recognize Structuralism?" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974* (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2004), 171-173.

interconnected by basic, underlying structures that serve as a bridge between perceived reality and actual reality. Even literature, with its infinite complexities, can be boiled down to a common series of patterns. In this way, the same basic elements of language are combined in different ways over and over again throughout history.

Poststructuralism, on the other hand, has argued that language is dynamic and that meaning cannot be extrapolated from literature through the understanding and application of language as a systemic constant. In this school of thought, conceptual instability and plurality of meaning are paramount. There is not one way to interpret a literary text, but many. The great irony of Poststructuralism is that it combats the binary oppositions implicit in certain linguistic structures while simultaneously existing as the product of said structures.⁵ The very nomenclature of the philosophy is defined by its relation to the nomenclature of another. Therefore, our understanding of Poststructuralism is invariably tied to its progenitor. Linguistically, it is a response to Structuralism. It is but one half of a dichotomous whole. However, this is not an indication of Poststructuralism's limitations. It is an indication of language's limitations.

Perhaps the most glaring among these limitations is the existence of binaries (more specifically, binaries concerning gender, sexuality, etc.). It is all too unfortunate that scholars, namely those who limit their inquiry to the temporal parameters of the Middle Ages, have a tendency to impress their binaries upon other time periods.⁶ Even with the advent of new historicism, gender studies, and queer theory, terms like "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are still attributed to the Middle Ages, despite medieval sexuality never having been defined by any such terminology. Again, this does not point to the limitations of academia; it points to the limitations of language. Because linguistic structures are fundamentally limiting when studying the distant past, it is impossible to completely circumvent the use of binaries in their entirety. The sheer distance between present and past is also a limiting factor when attempting to formulate an understanding of the Middle Ages.

This particular study is not exempt from these limitations: terms like sadomasochism were coined hundreds of years after the medieval period,⁷ yet they are strewn throughout these pages. The plain and simple truth is that Europe was ill-equipped to address sadistic and masochistic practices as a collective during the Middle Ages. It lacked the terminology necessary to express mass, public recognition. That is not to say that sadomasochism was not deeply embedded in the public consciousness, because it was. It was so ingrained that it began seeping into the realm of popular culture and media. Elements of sadomasochistic practices are found all throughout Europe during the medieval period, most notably during the 12th century, when courtly culture was still in its naissance.

During the 1100's, this cultural phenomena gave birth to what would come to be known as courtly romance. The courtly romance genre is perhaps the most abundant source of evidence that sadomasochism was not a foreign concept at the time. It was certainly no foreign concept to Chrétien de Troyes. As a troubadour, Chrétien committed several works to the courtly romance genre. One of his romances, *Knight of the Cart*, is laden with sadomasochistic subtext. But before one can explore the elements of sadomasochism that appear in this narrative, it is imperative to delve first into the preexisting scholarly responses to Chrétien's writing.

One branch of scholarly inquiry has explored the connections

⁵ Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (Nihilism to Quantum Mechanics) (Routledge, 1998), 597.

⁶ This tendency is alluded to in such articles as Jonathan Katz's "The Invention of Heterosexuality."

⁷ The term sadism is attributed to the Marquis de Sade, and the term masochism is attributed to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Both of these men lived during the 19th century.

between courtly romance and critical theory. In "Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* and Critical Theory," Robert S. Sturges surveys the process of adapting Poststructuralisms to the understanding of medieval texts. He ponders how older kinds of reading can be revised in light of recent Poststructuralist developments in the world of academia.⁸ Today, scholars are applying new theories to medieval texts, and in recent years, Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* has been a recurring subject of scholarly research.

With the application of new theoretical frameworks, the relevance of Chrétien's writing has been more or less rekindled in the academic sphere. Not only is *Knight of the Cart* "widely read and frequently taught" but it is also a "test case in the application of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theories to medieval texts."⁹ However, psychoanalysis is just the tip of the iceberg. According to Sturges, "much scholarship on Chrétien has also focused on semiotics, and seems to imply a basis in reception theory."¹⁰ This is exemplified by scholars like Peggy McCracken, whose analysis in *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero* regards the implications of blood as a symbol within courtly romance literature. Despite these recent feats, it can be said that courtly romance and deconstruction were not fast friends.

Though psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan were keen to focus their gaze on Chrétien in the years immediately following the advent of Poststructuralist critical theory, a vast majority of medievalists were not so keen. Sturges argues, "Deconstruction by and large proved a less tempting theoretical mode for most medievalists... because it was widely perceived as ahistorical," but in recent years scholars have begun to find that "deconstruction need not negate historicism."¹¹ Today, more and more medievalists are reconciling historicism with Poststructuralist sensibilities, and this is reflected in the scholarship. At this juncture, it is important to note that it is the intention of this study to follow suit.

The reconciliation of historicism and deconstruction has paved the way for scholars to ask new kinds of questions and thereby receive new kinds of answers from medieval literature. According to Sturges, "The questions of medieval reading and of women's status in the Middle Ages decisively returned social history to the forefront of medieval studies."¹² This brings us to the dichotomy of poetic invention and the reality beyond literature. Because literary undertakings reflect the society from which they disseminate, any study of Chrétien's writing also warrants an analysis of the social history of Chrétien's France, despite *Knight of the Cart's* basis in fiction. Such an analysis is not alien to this study. In a more general sense, however, it can be said that Poststructuralism is responsible for the abundance of new scholarship that has surfaced in recent years regarding *Knight of the Cart*—scholarship that lends itself to such overarching issues as violence, gender, and sexuality. Or, in the case of this study, all three.

Of the existing scholarship on Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart*, two scholars in particular have addressed the elements of masochism present in the text: Jeffrey Cohen and Sandy Feinstein. In "Losing Your Head in Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart*," Feinstein unravels the underlying social implications coded in Chrétien's depiction of decapitation. Her analysis suggests that violence exists in this particular narrative as a point of intersection where issues of gender, sexuality, politics, and religion all converge.

This convergence is identified by Feinstein herself early on in the article. At one point, she directly states, "In Chrétien's *Lancelot*, beheading serves a complex sexual, political, and religious image

⁸ Robert S. Sturges, "Chrétien's 'Knight of the Cart' and Critical Theory," *Arthuriana*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1996): 1-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

representing power, particularly the power of speech.¹³ Decapitation exists in this narrative as a mirror, a reflection of the power dynamics implicit in the courtly romance tradition. In this tradition, power does not ultimately reside with men; it instead resides with women. Thus, Feinstein's intervention in the discourse of medieval scholarship is revealed in her linking of women's agency with depictions of decapitation. The major breakthrough of her study is how she recognizes Chrétien's depiction of beheading as an indication of male subordination/female domination.

This dominant/submissive dichotomy is not limited to the text. As stated earlier, much of Feinstein's article is devoted to her exploration of the societal implications at work in *Knight of the Cart*:

Like the controlling image of beheading itself, the ladies of this poem are implicitly powerful and subtextually dichotomous. In this poem written for a woman, beheading serves a sexual, political, and religious metaphor to represent the power of speech. In the context of the culture and its sexual politics, it is a power limited to literary wish-fulfillment, a wish expressed by a real woman to a court poet.¹⁴

Not only does Feinstein identify the implicit agency of women in *Knight of the Cart*, but she also parallels this agency with that of Marie de Champagne, the woman who commissioned the romance. For Feinstein's purposes, the fact (or rather strong possibility, given the abundance of primary sources) that Chrétien wrote *Knight of the Cart* for Marie de Champagne serves two particular functions. It reveals that Chrétien was willing to submit to Marie's wishes, and it reveals that Marie had the ability to have those wishes fulfilled. To put it plainly, this fulfillment exhibits her agency and resonates with the agency of the ladies Lancelot encounters in *Knight of the Cart*, whose wishes are also fulfilled by men (namely Lancelot). Because beheading is situated in this romance as the result of a woman's wishes, it can be seen as a metaphor for Marie's own wish fulfillment.

Feinstein's contextualization of Marie de Champagne's agency within the confines of courtly culture is also noteworthy. Though Marie was able to fulfill her wishes, her power was fundamentally limited by societal factors (limitations which were undoubtedly the product of the patriarchal structures of Europe during the high Middle Ages). The only way she was able to actualize her desires was through the efforts of another: a man. As previously stated, Feinstein argues that decapitation exists in *Knight of the Cart* as a metaphor representing women's power of speech, namely Marie's power of speech.¹⁵ This, coupled with the societal limitations of medieval womanhood, suggests that Marie's power of speech was one that could only be expressed through the actions of a man. This raises a question: how is Marie's power of speech offset by the context of its expression?

To answer this question, we must dive headfirst into the conceptual framework of (female) authorship, a subject that is not easily overlooked when discussing courtly romance. Feinstein suggests that Chrétien's submission to Marie de Champagne (and Marie's associated wish fulfillment) is the avenue through which her power of speech is expressed. But one simple truth cannot be ignored: decapitation may be situated in *Knight of the Cart* as a metaphor for Marie's power, but Chrétien is ultimately the one responsible for the construction and subsequent transmission of the metaphor. Marie may have exercised agency by commissioning *Knight of the Cart*, but Chrétien is the one responsible for its creation. Where (or rather with whom) does the power of speech truly reside? With the woman whose wishes were fulfilled as a result of a man's submission, or with the

man who actually put pen to paper as a result? Similarly, if women are dominant over men in *Knight of the Cart*, how is this dominance affected by the male authorship behind the romance?¹⁶ To what extent is the reverence of women in courtly romance an invention of the poets? To what extent was it actually practiced outside of the literature? These are some of the underlying questions that will be addressed in the following pages.

Turning back to Feinstein's article, her conjecture regarding the dominance of women and the submission of men, as depicted by Chrétien, is based on one particular instance of beheading: after Lancelot defeats a dishonorable knight, a maiden requests the fallen knight's head. She essentially puts Lancelot to the task of decapitating the knight he has just defeated. He is then torn between his desire to appease the lady, and his desire to satisfy his own, personal sense of justice (Lancelot's personal sense of justice entails having mercy for his fallen foe). Feinstein recognizes this inner turmoil when she alludes to "Lancelot's struggle as to how to keep both his promise to give the lady the head of the defeated knight and grant the defeated knight mercy, as is his custom."¹⁷ In the end, Lancelot submits to the lady's wishes, and this submission is central to the subordination/dominance that defines male/female relations in this text.

This courtly dichotomy of submissiveness and dominance is integral to Feinstein's interpretation and overall understanding of courtly romance, and beheading is one of the linchpins holding this dichotomy together. On the surface, the act of a man beheading another man (whether at the behest of a woman or not) would seem to be an immediate expression of masculine power, but this is not how beheading functions in Chrétien's narrative. Rather, it functions as an example of the lengths to which Lancelot will go to appease a lady. According to Feinstein, "Chrétien's use of beheading as closure becomes identified with issues of control or authority not as they refer to male rule, but as they relate specifically to women. . . In Chrétien's romance, love is defined and controlled by women."¹⁸ In *Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot is ultimately submissive to the wishes of every lady he comes across, and this is especially true of Guinevere. Their courtly love, and courtly love in general for that matter, is defined by this fundamental relationship of subordination and domination.

Again, this notion of female dominion is not limited to the text. Male to female subordination saturates the courtly romance genre on both sides, appearing both on and off the page. Lancelot's submission to the multitude of ladies he encounters throughout the narrative (namely Guinevere) mirrors Chrétien's submission to Marie de Champagne. Chrétien's relationship with Marie has been defined as "submission to the lady's control" and it has been said that "Chrétien's service to his implied female public" is "as submissive. . . and as confined as Lancelot's courtly service to Guinevere."¹⁹ When taking this into consideration, it becomes apparent that the dominant/submissive dichotomy at the center of courtly romance literature is a reflection of the male/female relations at work in courtly culture. Chrétien's compliance to Marie's wishes is reflected in Lancelot's compliance to Guinevere's. In this way, *Knight of the Cart* can be seen as a sort of window to the reality behind courtly romance fiction.

In Jeffrey Cohen's *Medieval Identity Machines*, there is an acute awareness of the "widespread fascination with male masochism" that has surfaced in academia over the last decade.²⁰ Chapter three, "Masoch/Lancelotism," is the most glaringly relevant chapter to this

¹³ Sandy Feinstein, "Losing Your Head in Chrétien's 'Knight of the Cart,'" *Arthuriana*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1999): 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-48.

¹⁶ Another prime example is found with the *Canterbury Tales*. Scholars have pondered how the agency of the Wife of Bath is challenged by the fact that she was conceived and written by Geoffrey Chaucer, a man.

¹⁷ Feinstein, "Losing Your Head in Chrétien's 'Knight of the Cart,'" 52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

²⁰ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 78.

particular study, as it explores courtly romance through the lens of masochism using Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* as a prime example.

Central to *Medieval Identity Machines* is the conceptual framework of the masochistic contract: an unspoken pact between two consenting individuals that dictates the parameters of the subordination and domination to which the masochist willingly subjects himself. According to Cohen, Lancelot "is bound to the missing queen [Guinevere] through the masochistic contract" which he defines as "a consensual agreement that delimits gender boundaries within a predetermined relationship of activity and submission. For the Knight of the Cart, body and identity are not his to construct."²¹ Like Feinstein, Cohen extrapolates a dynamic of male subordination and female domination from Chrétien's writing. Unlike Feinstein, however, Cohen takes things a step further, and speaks directly in terms of masochism. The use of such terminology is noteworthy in this instance, as it illustrates yet again how scholars are keen to impress modern signifiers upon the distant past. As previously stated, this kind of impressment does not implicate a flaw in Cohen's scholarship, but rather a flaw in the underlying linguistic structures at hand.

What sets Cohen's scholarship apart as a major breakthrough in the academic sphere is the connection it draws between *Knight of the Cart* and sadomasochism. Not only does Cohen identify Lancelot as a masochist, but he also implicates Guinevere as his dominatrix and explores what their relations reveal about medieval culture (namely France in the 12th century):

If Lancelot is providing the script that assigns the queen her role as dominatrix, it is a text already inscribed within other, dominating cultural narratives. Lancelot's desire, moreover, is to some extent socially useful, replicating the existing structure of the court of Champagne... In other words, sex is not separable from culture, and desire expands to fill the contours of preexistent social structures, reproducing and solidifying them.²²

This notion of socio-literary inseparability suggests that the reality beyond courtly romance fiction/literature was equally fraught with relationships defined by the masochistic contract. In fiction, it informs Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere, and in the court of Champagne in the 12th century, it informed Chrétien's relationship with Marie de Champagne.

In a general sense, Cohen, like Feinstein, presents Chrétien's relationship with Marie de Champagne as one defined by an unyielding male subordination to female domination/dominion. Once again, this dichotomy mirrors that of Lancelot and Guinevere: According to Cohen, "The gesture of abasement" extrapolated from Lancelot's submission to Guinevere "must also be read within the relationship of patronage that connects Chrétien to Marie de Champagne. The script that Chrétien creates for Marie is uncannily familiar. She is *his* imperious Guinevere, his dominatrix to whom he cannot say no."²³ In the eternal conflict between the world of fiction and the reality beyond that fiction, it can be said that Chrétien's obedience to Marie lends itself to the notion that sadomasochism existed in the Middle Ages, even if it was not directly identified as such. Thus, if we consider the medieval period in accordance with these terms, regarding Chrétien's relationship with Marie as evidentiary to the existence of submissive/dominatrix dynamics in 12th century France, *Knight of the Cart* suddenly becomes enveloped by a secondary function (its primary function being the satisfaction and entertainment of the commissioner, Marie de Champagne, and other literate members of the upper crest): the titillation of individuals with sadomasochistic tendencies, a widely unrecognized

²¹ Ibid, 99.

²² Ibid, 108.

²³ Ibid, 108.

demographic of medieval readership.

When it comes to forming a synthesis of these three branches of scholarship, that is, the scholarship that explores Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* through the respective lenses of Poststructuralism, violence, and masochism, it can be said that each has effectively set the stage for a deeper exploration of *Lancelot* as a work of sadomasochistic erotica. Sturges's scholarship elucidates how a Poststructuralist analysis of medieval literature can be bolstered by historicism and how scholars have started to apply such frameworks as psychoanalysis and semiotics to their textual analyses. Perhaps the most relevant takeaway from Sturges, however, is the notion that medievalists are asking new kinds of questions of courtly romance: questions concerning gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, among other relevant social issues. In accordance with this trajectory, the following textual analysis lends itself to a series of underlying questions that concern medieval sexuality. It is held together by the application of social history and textual analysis.

The scholarship of Feinstein and Cohen, on the other hand, is crucial to this particular study because it illustrates how gender, sexuality, and power are all interconnected in *Knight of the Cart*. Both scholars recognize this intersectionality, but they do so in slightly different ways. Feinstein's writing reveals a growing realization that violence and sexuality were intrinsically linked in the courtly romance tradition. It also unveils a dynamic of male subservience to women. As previously stated, Cohen recognizes this dynamic as well, but takes things a step further. He attributes the dynamic in the masochistic contract. Cohen's conclusion that the masochistic contract pervades both courtly romance and courtly culture resonates with Feinstein's and speaks to the historical transience of sadomasochism as situated in fiction as well as the reality beyond fiction.

These breakthroughs are all crucial to understanding *Lancelot* as a work of sadomasochistic erotica, but there are questions that remain unanswered: Can the origins of sadomasochistic erotica be traced to Chrétien de Troyes? What were the social circumstances and ramifications of courtly romance literature? To what extent does Chrétien's writing depict sadomasochistic relations? How did it reflect/inform patterns of sexual behavior in medieval Europe? What does it reveal about women's agency in the Middle Ages? How has the world of sadomasochistic erotica evolved/changed over time? To answer these questions, one must dive headfirst not only into the text, but also into the culture from which it disseminates.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT: THE BILATERAL PERMEATION OF CULTURE AND MEDIA

"Love is a stranger who'll beckon you on" - Leslie Bricusse

To understand courtly romance is to understand courtly culture, which is an admittedly daunting task: one scarcely taken up in modern academia. This reluctance is identified by Joachim Bumke in *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages*. In this text, he states, "In the newer works on social history the courtly society of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries rarely appears at all."²⁴ What is it about the endeavor to reconstruct courtly culture that repels so many capable literary scholars and historians? One possible explanation lies within the evasiveness of the subject. Despite the recent shift in focus from material culture to "the 'cultural ideals' that supposedly determined the social life of that age," there is still a lack of consensus that cannot be ignored.²⁵ Even the conceptual framework of chivalry

²⁴ Joachim Bumke, *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: The Overlook Press, 2000), 5.

²⁵ Ibid, 7.

leaves scholars divided to this day.²⁶ To put it simply, it is difficult to pinpoint the social behaviors of an antiquated cultural phenomenon when historical distance, abstraction, and subjectivity stand between the scholar and a comprehensive, underlying terminology. Unlike chivalry, however, courtly love was propagated as a systemic code of conduct with explicit rules.

Another answer to why so few scholars have endeavored to reconstruct courtly culture in the academic sphere lies with the reluctance of historians to regard literary texts as valid sources:

The question as to the value of literary texts as historical sources cannot be answered theoretically. It is difficult to contend with the view that fundamental methodological problems do not permit us to draw inferences from fictional statements about the reality beyond literature... Important aspects of social as well as literary history in the Middle Ages will, however, remain hidden if one rejects out of hand the use of texts based on aesthetic principles. It is therefore preferable to accept the difficulties and limitations that attach to poetic sources, and to try and counterbalance them by making certain that one's conclusions at all times reflect the methodological uncertainties.²⁷

With the recent focus on medieval social behaviors also came the emergence of literary analysis as a historian's tool. There may be limitations to utilizing poetic sources as historical evidence of courtly cultural identities, practices, etc., but these limitations must be countenanced in order to better understand the reality beyond the fiction. In fact, it has been argued that literature may be the only reliable way to achieve such an understanding.²⁸

This reassessment of literary analysis as a valid mode of socio-historical inquiry has slowly but surely made its way into the realm of practical application. Scholars like Bumke and Sturges have begun to reconcile historicism and literary analysis, and scholars like Feinstein and Cohen demonstrate this reconciliation through their marriage and utilization of historical and textual evidence. For example, Feinstein and Cohen both allude to the historical context of Chrétien's writing, citing the submissive/dominant relationship between Chrétien and Marie de Champagne as an analogue for the submissive/dominant relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. Evidence derived from history is used to support evidence drawn from literature. Evidence derived from literature is used to support evidence drawn from history. It is a two-way street that works especially in scholars' favor when the focus of their inquiry relates to social behavior: "The more we focus on the norms of social behavior, the greater the evidentiary value of literary texts... The ideals of courtly society are reflected almost exclusively in literature. The new concept of courtly perfection in knighthood and love can be drawn directly from an analysis of the literary texts."²⁹ As such, one can learn a great deal about courtly culture from the poetry of Chrétien de Troyes.

This brief preamble began with the notion that to understand courtly romance is to understand courtly culture. When taking the revelations of courtly romance into consideration, it is perhaps more accurate to state that to understand courtly culture is to understand courtly romance.

One of the crucial facets of courtly culture is the concept of the courtly lady. According to Bumke, "In opposition to deeply embedded notions of the inferiority and wickedness of the female sex, the

courtly poets created a new picture of beauty and perfection."³⁰ In courtly romance fiction, the courtly lady is venerated as the source of a knight's strength; she is the quasi-divine female figure who commands male subordination. But, as Bumke suggests, this status was created by the troubadours: "The courtly image of women was an invention of the poets. The idea that noble lords adoringly looked up to the ladies because they owed them all their knightly ability and social renown turned the relationship between the sexes upside down."³¹ Courtly romance literature may offer a window to the reality of courtly culture, but the reverence of ladies was by and large the result of poetic fabrication. It was little more than a fantasy, but the implications of that fantasy resonate with the idea that sadomasochism was a ritual practiced in the Middle Ages (in both reality and fiction).

Another important thing to consider when analyzing courtly culture is the dichotomy of women-worship and misogyny. As previously stated, the notion of female wickedness and inferiority was deeply rooted in medieval society (no small part due to the spread of Latin Christendom throughout Europe in the years leading up to the 12th century). In response to this misogyny, it would seem that the reverence of ladies propagated by courtly romance fiction offers a sufficient challenge to the overwhelming sexism of the period: "The image of women constructed by the courtly poets seems like a counter-projection to the predominant tradition of Christian misogyny, which was rooted in the fundamental Christian rejection and contempt for the world and its hostility to the body and the senses."³² However, it can be said that the courtly poets were often just as guilty of sexism as the Christian misogynistic tradition.

At a glance, the efforts of courtly poets to revere courtly ladies appears as just that: reverence. Where the Christian misogynistic tradition condemned "a woman's pride, arrogance, quarrelsomeness, deceitfulness, [and] thirst for power"³³ the courtly romance tradition seemingly did the opposite by speaking to women's idealized traits.³⁴ But let us not be fooled: In courtly romance fiction, the courtly lady is simultaneously exemplified and objectified. She is put on a pedestal and judged according to her physical attributes and her "virtue" as determined by the overarching patriarchal power structures of medieval Europe. According to Bumke, "Condemnation and praise of women was not as far apart as one might think... In fact, even in courtly poetry the negative sides of the image of women played a greater role than one would suspect at first glance."³⁵ All of this is to say that despite the sadomasochistic implications of courtly poetry and despite the literary wish fulfillment enjoyed by individuals like Marie de Champagne, women were still objectified and condemned in courtly romance. Even though the breadth of this particular study explores how the dynamic of male subordination and female domination pervades courtly romance fiction, it also endeavors to recognize the reality of women's oppression in this pursuit. It is important, however, to reiterate that courtly romance literature did provide women like Marie de Champagne a means to fulfil their wishes, and this wish fulfillment does suggest a degree of male subordination, but to truly understand whether or not Chrétien's submission to Marie was typical of courtly culture, one must wade even deeper into the subject of courtly love.

In these last few pages, we have explored the gender relations implicit in courtly culture, but this does not address the obvious:

²⁶ For a more detailed exploration of the scholarly debate on chivalry, consult Craig Taylor's "Alain Chartier and chivalry: debating knighthood in the context of the Hundred Years War."

²⁷ Bumke, *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages*, 10.

²⁸ "The more we focus on the norms of social behavior, the greater the evidentiary value of literature" Ibid, 11.

²⁹ Ibid, 11-13.

³⁰ Ibid, 325.

³¹ Ibid, 326.

³² Ibid, 327.

³³ The Christian misogynistic tradition instituted this condemnation through the handbook of canon law, the *Decretum* of Gratia c.1160, which stated that "woman shall be subject to man in all things." Ibid, 328.

³⁴ Ibid, 328.

³⁵ Ibid, 329-330.

What exactly is courtly culture? We often take this phrase for granted, but what exactly is at the heart of this cultural phenomena, and what are the defining terms? For starters, it can be said that courtly culture is deeply tied to the idea of courtly love. For a definition of courtly love, we turn once again to Bumke:

The phrase 'courtly love' [or amour Courtois]... was not coined until the nineteenth century. Its creator was the French scholar Gaston Paris, who in an 1883 essay on Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot* highlighted four characteristics:

1. Courtly love is illegitimate, illégitime, and therefore necessarily secretive. It includes total physical surrender.
2. Courtly love manifests itself in the submissiveness of the man, who considers himself the servant of his lady and seeks to fulfill her desires.
3. Courtly love demands that a man strive to become better and more perfect in order to be more worthy of his lady.
4. Courtly love is 'an art, a scene, a virtue' with its own rules and laws that lovers must master.³⁶

These four characteristics perfectly encapsulate the sadomasochism that lies just beneath the surface of courtly culture and its literature. For the purposes of this study, we will focus primarily on the first and second characteristics, as their terminology is fraught with notions of physical surrender and male submissiveness to female domination. If *Lancelot* is bound to Guinevere (the way Chrétien is bound to Marie) through the masochistic contract, then these four characteristics are the literal stipulations of that contract. They exist to codify the expectations of conduct between the masochist and his dominatrix, between the dominatrix and her masochist.

Needless to say, Paris's definition of courtly love has incurred a great deal of scholarly debate over the years. One important thing to consider, however, is that although courtly love existed "within the framework of the poetic conception of courtly society," it was often grounded in real relationships.³⁷ Chrétien's relationship with Marie de Champagne effectively captures the essence of the second characteristic of courtly love: the notion of male subservience to women. Chrétien was not alone in this. Evidence that courtly love was practiced outside courtly romance fiction can also be found in the statements of minnesingers (the German equivalent to a French troubadour): "It is very painful when someone loves deeply in those lofty ranks..." 'She rules and is mistress in my heart and is nobler than I am.' 'I cannot resist her power: she is above and I am below.'³⁸ These statements illustrate the existence of courtly love outside courtly romance fiction. They also provide further support for the notion that love and pain were intrinsically linked in the courtly tradition.

What is most telling, however, is the tendency among minnesingers to regard their lady lovers as mistresses who hold absolute power. If we look at courtly love through the lens of sadomasochism, the romantic proclivities of the courtly poets begin to reflect the same gravitation towards the masochist/dominatrix paradigm observable in their literature. Thus, the fictional and nonfictional interpersonal relations of courtly culture are both informed by the same dynamic of male subordination and female domination. If we regard courtly romance literature in this way, as a reflection of high medieval culture, Chrétien's work suddenly appears drenched in a sea of social implications, and at the epicenter of these implications lies medieval sexuality.

³⁶ Ibid, 360.

³⁷ Ibid, 361.

³⁸ Ibid, 363-364.

Similar to the study of courtly culture, medieval sexuality has also been traditionally neglected in the academic sphere. Recent generations of academics have reversed the trend, however, and today there exists a vast wealth of knowledge on medieval sexual practices. This wealth is exemplified by James A. Brundage and Vern Bullough's *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. In their book, Brundage and Bullough point to confessional literature³⁹ as a potential source of information on medieval sexuality: "The confessional literature of the later Middle Ages offers a marvelous opportunity to study the sexual beliefs of the period. . . Pastoral manuals and handbooks for confessors often dealt at such great length and in such detail with sexual sins that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that these behaviors flourished rather vigorously among medieval people."⁴⁰ As revealing as this statement is, it offers little more than conjecture. We need something more concrete.

A study of confessional literature may be sufficient to clarify late medieval, ecclesiastical canon law (i.e. laws forbidding fornication, masturbation, sodomy, etc.), but it fails to capture the actual behavioral patterns of the age in a reliable way. The existence of laws against certain sexual behaviors does not prove the abundance of said behaviors in the public sphere. This begs the question: how does one go about reconstructing the sexual habits of a bygone age? According to Brundage and Bullough, "One source for such information would be the accounts of confessors themselves."⁴¹ The exempla collection of Thomas of Chantimpré, for example, tells us a lot about medieval notions of homosexuality. More specifically, his writing reflects a concern for male homosexuality. This concern (based on Thomas' own experiences of hearing confessions) seems to imply a modicum of ubiquity in late medieval society.⁴² With this, we arrive yet again at the subject of modern versus medieval terminology.

In the last paragraph, the term "homosexuality" appears twice. In both instances it is used to describe the sexual practices of medieval society. However, it is a term utterly alien to the Middle Ages. This temporal space is also devoid of terms like "sex" and "sexuality." According to Brundage and Bullough, "There are no treatises entitled 'on sex,' not even any Latin counterparts for our terms 'sex,' 'sexuality,' and 'sexual.' Studies of medieval beliefs about sex must pay attention to medieval contexts and categories if they want faithfully to reflect those beliefs."⁴³ With this in mind, is it ignorant to impress modern signifiers/modern understandings upon the distant past? In most cases, the consensus among academics is a resounding "yes," but to what extent is the application of modern terminology unavoidable? Every major title on the socio-cultural history of medieval sexuality refers to its subject matter in those modern terms: "medieval sexuality." In short, the limited use of modern signifiers must be sanctioned for the sake of clarity and consistency.

Turning back to behavioral patterns, scholars have argued that the conceptual framework of sin offers another avenue for exploring medieval sexuality. It is often held that the medieval period was an era of sexual modesty and repression: a time when sex was only practiced for the purpose of procreation. A deeper look at the relationship between the clergy and the masses, however, reveals an entirely different narrative: "The energetic efforts of the clergy to convince ordinary people that sexual pleasure was inherently sinful seem to have made little impression on the great mass of medieval Christians. Ample evidence suggests that a great many medieval people rejected the more rigorous theological prohibitions of common sexual

³⁹ Literature derived from the reinvigorated pastoral function instituted in the wake of the Third Lateran Council.

⁴⁰ Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland, 2000), 13 & 41.

⁴¹ Ibid, 14.

⁴² Ibid, 4.

⁴³ Ibid, 14.

practices.⁴⁴ All of this is to say that Chrétien's writing would have been received by a widely sexually active readership, an audience that would have been receptive to the sadomasochistic, erotic subtext of *Knight of the Cart*.

Once again, the relationship between literature and its readership is crucial to this particular study, as it illustrates how courtly romance fiction was informed by the sexual practices of the late Middle Ages, and vice versa. The fact that "medieval culture had room for a broader sense of sexual pleasure and experience" elucidates how Chrétien's writing, with all its sadomasochistic, erotic implications, is actually a product of its time.⁴⁵ Thus, literary texts like *Knight of the Cart* can be used to better understand the sexual practices of France in the 12th century. This is supported by Brundage and Bullough, who argue that "literary and artistic materials. . . may provide better evidence about particular beliefs and practices than texts devoted to medicine or natural philosophy."⁴⁶ With this in mind, it stands to reason that the presence of sadomasochism in Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* may be a reflection of its presence in late medieval society, if not simply a reflection of the author's own life experiences (i.e. his relationship with Marie de Champagne). It also stands to reason that the erotic content of Chrétien's writing may have had a direct impact on the sexual behaviors of its readership.⁴⁷

The last important thing to consider when exploring medieval sexuality is the relevance of patriarchal structures to the gender/sexual relations of the high Middle Ages. As previously established, the reverence of ladies in courtly romance fiction effectively inverted the male/female relations of medieval culture: a culture dominated by overarching patriarchal structures (i.e. the clergy of Latin Christendom) and misogynistic practices (laws governing inheritance, for example). For the most part, ideas about gender in Europe during the high Middle Ages were by and large sexist and oppressive to women, and this is supported by medieval medical theory: "Medical theory. . . exercised an important influence on the development of medieval ideas about sexuality and supported the evaluation of men as the dominant and active force."⁴⁸ This understanding of men as dominant and women as submissive also made its way into the realm of sexuality. The medieval understanding was that "men were sexually active and women were sexually passive, dependent, and ultimately subordinate."⁴⁹ But this is not what we see in both the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere and the relationship between Chrétien and Marie de Champagne (with the expressed caveat that there are no records that indicate Chrétien and Marie engaged in any sort of physical relationship). It is also not what one finds when they begin to explore the psychology behind sadomasochism.

In 2016, Joris Lammers and Roland Imhoff conducted a study in which they surveyed 14,306 participants in an attempt to determine the psychological circumstances behind sadomasochistic tendencies. Their findings were published in the journal of *Social Psychological and Personality Science* later that year:

Results showed that power increases the arousal to sadomasochism, after controlling for age and dominance. Furthermore, the effect of power on arousal by sadistic thoughts is stronger among women than men, while the effect of power on arousal by masochistic thoughts is stronger among men than women... The effect of power is driven through a process of disinhibition that leads people to disregard sexual norms in general, and disregard sexual norms associated with gender in particular. These results

⁴⁴ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 53.

⁴⁷ The impact of Chrétien's writing on medieval sexual practices is certainly recognized by Dante, who cites the love affair between Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta as the result of the two having read *Knight of the Cart*.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 127.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 131.

add to an emerging literature that social power changes traditional gender patterns in sex.⁵⁰

Before these findings can be applied to medieval sexuality, it is important to note the glaring issues of the study: biological sex and gender are equated, there is an assumption of a gender binary, and it is aimed at modern sexuality, not medieval sexuality. Despite these issues, Lammers and Imhoff's findings are widely relevant to the sexual history of Europe.

The main takeaway here is the notion that traditional patterns in sex are informed by social power. In courtly culture, an abundance of socially powerful poets gave rise to the notion of courtly love, propagating male subordination to female domination. Socially powerful men (like Chrétien) fanaticized about being at the mercy of women and began to submit themselves to a projected dominatrix (like Marie de Champagne). Both their writing and their interactions with ladies went against the traditional beliefs of gender/sexual behavior at the time, and it is from this relationship, the relationship between social power and traditional gender patterns, behaviors, etc. that the historical trace of male masochism originates. This is exemplified by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, a socially powerful man who went against traditional patterns and beliefs regarding sexual behavior by submitting himself to the domination/sexual power of women. This dynamic also illustrates how courtly romance literature offers a reflection of the sexual power women wield over men, which brings us, once again, to the study of sadomasochism.

As Peter Tupper's quotation from the beginning of this analysis suggests, it is common practice to place sadomasochistic sexual practices within the parameters of the modern age. Even those who trace its origins often fail to recognize the connections between sadomasochism and its cultural significance. Rather, there is often a tendency among scholars to regard sadomasochism on a small scale, in a strictly pathological sense, if they regard it at all. From a cultural standpoint, the notion of voluntary suffering at the hands of a higher power is not only paramount to sadomasochism, but it was very much embedded in the medieval subconscious: from Latin Christendom, to fiefdom, to courtly romance. This suffering plays out in Chrétien's writing, as Lancelot suffers at the hands of a quasi-divine figure (Guinevere) and to a much larger extent, love. More specifically, Lancelot suffers as a result of the courtly love in which he willingly indulges. Within the parameters of the narrative, it functions as a higher power, a contract, that cannot be denied or broken.

In this particular study, sadomasochistic erotica is defined as any media that sexually arouses or titillates based on its representation of sadomasochism. But what is sadomasochism? What it essentially boils down to is the ability to consensually derive pleasure from inflicting or receiving pain/humiliation. Sadomasochists are typically divided into two categories: dominants and submissives or sadists and masochists. When it comes to regarding sadomasochism as a ritual, it is important to note that the "Ritual is a powerful force in human affairs... in some rituals, individuals transition from one social role to another. . . In the liminal phase of the ritual, participants inhabit a social space with new social rules that can be inversions of normal society."⁵¹ In courtly culture we see men (be them courtly poets, lovers, or fictional characters) transition from the dominant role to the submissive role. We also see women transition from the submissive role to the dominant role. The understanding of courtly love as a (masochistic) contract is also noteworthy in this instance, as it constitutes a social space with very specific rules. These rules are

⁵⁰ Joris Lammers and Roland Imhoff, "Power and Sadomasochism: Understanding the Antecedents of a Knotty Relationship," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* vol. 7, no. 2 (2016): 1.

⁵¹ Peter Tupper, *A Lover's Pinch: A Cultural History of Sadomasochism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2018), 17-18.

very much an inversion of the norms of medieval gender relations. In short, because courtly love emulates the crucial elements of the sadomasochistic ritual, it is essential to regard courtly romance literature as part of the cultural history of sadomasochism.

So we return to the text, to that bridge of sharpened steel where pain and pleasure become one:

Love, which led and guided him,
Comforted and healed him at once
And made his suffering a pleasure⁵²

As previously stated, there is a masochistic association between love, pain, and pleasure throughout this text. Because the suffering Lancelot endures is facilitated by Guinevere, and the two are bound by the masochistic contract, she is situated as his dominatrix. According to Cohen, this is “the role of the woman of cold pleasure who enjoys the negation of her lover rather than of her self. . . the role of *domna/dominatrix* whose distant delectation Lancelot’s own suffering is predicated upon.”⁵³ However, Lancelot’s excursion on the sword bridge is not the only instance in *Knight of the Cart* where suffering and satisfaction are conflated.

Another precedent of pleasurable pain is set early on in the narrative. As with Lancelot’s experience on the sword ridge, this scene also establishes a direct connection between love and wounding:

Love frequently reopened
The wound it had dealt him;
Yet he never wrapped it
To let it heal or recover,
For he had no desire or thought
To find a doctor or to bandage it,
Unless the wound grew deeper.
But willingly would he seek that certain one⁵⁴

This passage is especially noteworthy, as it illustrates how Guinevere (Lancelot’s “certain one”) is viewed as the disseminator of both pain and remedies. Lancelot does not want to consult a doctor: the only remedy he desires lies with his queen. Yet it is at her behest that Lancelot has received his wounds in the first place. Thus, love is responsible for injuring Lancelot while simultaneously holding the key to his recovery. This discrepancy between hurting and healing plays a big role in sadomasochism, wherein the application of aftercare is often overseen by the same dominant party that subjects the submissive party to physical pain. It is also important to note that Lancelot intentionally leaves his wounds unbandaged; he has no desire for them to heal. In other words, he is content enduring the pain of his injuries. It is as if Lancelot enjoys the pain and would only consult a medical professional if absolutely necessary.

Along with the masochistic association between love, pain, and pleasure, Lancelot’s quest is fraught with elements of sadomasochistic ritualism. According to Peter Tupper, sadomasochistic erotica often appears with an air of spiritual resonance: “Sacher-Masoch [*Venus in Furs*] explicitly drew connections between. . . desires, Catholicism, and paganism, which give his novel suggestion of a personal religious rite.”⁵⁵ Chrétien’s writing establishes the same connections. For example, as Lancelot pursues the missing queen, “Mundane objects acquire great symbolic value” while he wades deeper and deeper into the sadomasochistic ritual.⁵⁶ One example of this can be seen

when Lancelot discovers a piece of Guinevere’s hair. What follows is nothing short of worship:

Never will the eye of man see
Anything so highly honored
As those strands, which he began to adore,
Touching them a hundred thousand times
To his eyes, his mouth,
His forehead, and his cheeks.
He showed his joy in every way
And felt himself most happy and rewarded.
He placed them on his breast near his heart,
Between his chemise and his skin.
He would not trade them for a cart loaded
With emeralds and carbuncles;
Nor did he fear that ulcers
Or any other disease would afflict him;
He had no use for magic potions mixed with pearls,
For drugs to combat pleurisy, for theriaca...
No use for prayers to St. Martin and St. James!
He placed so much faith in these strands of hair
That he had no need of any other aid.⁵⁷

Not only does this passage illustrate Lancelot’s association between mundane objects (strands of hair) and a greater allusive value, but it also elucidates Lancelot’s worship of Guinevere as a quasi-divine figure. The strands of hair are cherished as a relic that eclipses all other remedies (both spiritual and secular). In tandem with this worship, Lancelot seems to take an erotic pleasure in rubbing Guinevere’s hair all over his body. This pleasure plays out in such vivid detail that it resembles a scene of sexual gratification. Guinevere’s hair acts as a stand-in for the queen herself, and when Lancelot comes across these strands, he projects his sexual desires onto them. It is a scene ripe with the potential for titillation, one that foreshadows Lancelot’s subsequent sexual union with the queen.

Lancelot’s worship of Guinevere is fully realized when the two consummate their physical relationship. The scene plays out as a religious rite turned sexual romp:⁵⁸

He came next to that [bed] of the Queen;
Lancelot bowed and worshiped before her,
For he did not have that much faith in any saint.
The Queen stretched out
Her arms toward him, embraced him,
Hugged him to her breast
And drew him into the bed beside her.⁵⁹

In this passage, Lancelot’s adoration of Guinevere is actualized in religious, albeit sexual, terms. He literally bows before her in worship. In this moment, Lancelot’s submission to Guinevere is at its most overt. The use of the word “worship” is especially noteworthy to this end, as it expresses in literal terms the subordination Lancelot willingly endures for his dominatrix. In this scene, Lancelot’s masochistic desires play out as a religious rite: this is supported by Cohen, who argues that “Lancelot’s reverence [of Guinevere] translates the sexual into the spiritual.”⁶⁰ The spiritual resonance of this scene along with the titillation implicit in their sexually charged embrace help cement this work as a piece of sadomasochistic erotica.

⁵² Troyes, *Lancelot*, 131.

⁵³ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 102-103.

⁵⁴ Troyes, *Lancelot*, 59.

⁵⁵ Tupper, *A Lover’s Pinch*, 137.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁸ Bearing in mind that it is only classifiable as a “romp” according to medieval standards, as anyone with modern sensibilities would certainly not classify it as such.

⁵⁹ Troyes, *Lancelot*, 195.

⁶⁰ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 104.

This religious connection also thrusts Lancelot into the role of the masochistic martyr. When Lancelot makes his way to Guinevere's chambers, he receives yet another injury:

Lancelot prepared and readied himself
To loosen the window.
He grasped the bars, strained, and pulled,
Until he bent them all
And was able to free them from their fittings.
But the iron was so sharp
That he cut the end
Of his little finger to the quick
And severed the whole
First joint of the next finger⁶¹

Once again, this scene suggests a connection between pain and pleasure, as Lancelot receives these injuries as he makes his way to Guinevere's bed: as he makes his way to sexual gratification. He must enter a world of pain to enter a world of pleasure. For Lancelot, pleasure always entails pain, and vice versa. In this particular instance, however, Lancelot becomes a martyr for love. More specifically, he "suffers and bleeds, his martyrdom for love."⁶² This notion of martyrdom provides yet another connection between love, pain, and pleasure. It also supports the notion that Lancelot's masochism plays out in spiritual terms.

When it comes to sadomasochistic erotica, it can be said that Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* bears striking similarities to other works in this literary tradition. In Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, for example, the sadomasochistic ritual is "performed with contracts, disguises, whippings, masks, cuckolding, and role play."⁶³ Similarly, Lancelot is bound to Guinevere through the masochistic contract, through the rules of courtly love. Also, disguise plays a major role in Lancelot's quest; he bares the moniker of knight of the cart for a lengthy period, his true name left unknown until Guinevere restores his identity:

she [Guinevere] rushed forward and called to him,
Shouting for all to hear
In a very loud voice: 'Lancelot!
Turn around and behold
Who is watching you'⁶⁴

The connections between Lancelot and the sadomasochistic ritual do not stop here, however.

The imagery Chrétien employs also lends itself to the literary tradition of sadomasochistic erotica. The most iconic and enduring among these images is that of a powerful woman holding a whip. This image is not foreign to *Knight of the Cart*:

There came a girl riding
Across the heath
On a tawny mule,
With her mantle unpinned and hair disheveled.
She had a whip⁶⁵

As previously stated, whips and whippings are very crucial to sadomasochistic ritualism. They are symbolic of the dominatrix's power over her subordinate masochist. Likewise, this whip-wielding woman demands satisfaction from Lancelot, and like a good masochist, he submits to her wishes. Specifically, she demands

the head of an individual Lancelot has just defeated in combat. As Feinstein suggests, Lancelot endures a "struggle as to how to keep both his promise to give the lady the head of the defeated knight and grant the defeated knight mercy, as is his custom."⁶⁶ In the end, Lancelot submits to the lady's wishes, and this submission is central to the submission/domination that defines male/female relations in this text.

Cuckolding and role play are also central to *Knight of the Cart's* status as a work of sadomasochistic erotica. In one particular instance, a lady puts Lancelot in a situation where he has the potential to be made a cuckold:

Help! Help!
Sir knight – you who are my guest --
If you do not pull this other knight from off me,
I'll not find anyone to pull him away;
And if you do not help me at once
He will shame me before your eyes!
You are the one to share my bed,
As you have sworn to me!
Will this man forcibly have his will
With me before your eyes?⁶⁷

In this moment, the lady is not in any real danger. She is role playing with her personal guards to create the illusion that she is being assaulted. This illusion places Lancelot in a position where he believes he will be made a cuckold if he does not intervene. The role play and cuckolding may not disseminate from Guinevere, Lancelot's primary dominatrix, but it is still a widely relevant narrative device that helps situate Chrétien's writing as sadomasochistic erotica.

Another important thing to consider is the role that public humiliation plays in Lancelot's quest. Throughout the narrative, the knight endures a thorough social stigmatization. The stigma itself stems from his status as the eponymous knight of the cart. According to Cohen, "The cart is described as a space wholly outside of chivalric identity. To enter its ignoble confines is to become a mere subject of the law rather than its agent."⁶⁸ Therefore, Lancelot's decision to enter the cart is understood as a willing act of self-emasculatation that effectively strips him of his social clout and renders him a pariah in the public eye. No longer is he regarded with renown as an executor of the King's laws; he is regarded as a common criminal. In fact, Lancelot remains symbolically branded throughout a bulk of the narrative and is subject to mass ridicule on several occasions. In one instance, a group of revelers actively avoid him:

Look at that knight, look!
It's the one who was driven in the cart.
Let no one dare continue
His play while he is among us.⁶⁹

In another instance, he is directly admonished: "The one who was watching him reproached him / Bitterly for having ridden in the cart."⁷⁰ Both cases illustrate the ramifications of Lancelot's decision to ride in the cart. His quest to rescue Guinevere leaves him marked, and the lasting effect of this mark is ridicule in the public sphere.

Lancelot's ridicule is essential to understanding him as a masochist. In the world of sadomasochism,⁷¹ the dominant party

⁶⁶ Feinstein, "Losing your Head," 52.

⁶⁷ Troyes, *Lancelot*, 47.

⁶⁸ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 93.

⁶⁹ Troyes, *Lancelot*, 71.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷¹ The general information on sadomasochism used throughout the breadth of this academic inquiry is based, in part, on the personal accounts of members from the BDSM community (who will remain anonymous for the purposes of this particular study).

(the dominatrix, master, etc.) often takes great pleasure in leaving marks on the submissive party (the masochist, slave, etc.). These marks are widely superficial (bruises, hickeys, etc.), but they can also be of symbolic nature. In any case, they are meant to denote the dominant party's complete and total ownership over the submissive party. Lancelot's experience with the cart allows Guinevere to leave a lasting, albeit indirect, mark on her subordinate rescuer. To secure her favor and affection, Lancelot must receive this mark willingly⁷² and endure every modicum of humiliation that comes with it.⁷³ This brings us to the point where the existing scholarship on *Knight of the Cart* ends and the intervention of this particular study begins.

Cohen and Feinstein may recognize the male subordination/female domination, the various elements of masochism, and the resulting psychological implications within and without the text, but they fail to recognize the role and importance of humiliation to Lancelot's quest and subsequent relationship with Guinevere. According to *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, "sadism and masochism refer to taking pleasure in others' or one's own pain or humiliation."⁷⁴ In other words, humiliation is just as crucial to sadomasochism as pain. This is why we find Lancelot's entire identity cloaked by the veil of social disgrace. Another connection Cohen and Feinstein fail to make is the connection between Lancelot, Guinevere, and modern BDSM. In modern BDSM, the dominant party dominates "through spanking, flogging, verbal humiliation, bondage, cross-dressing, and other tactics."⁷⁵ This verbal humiliation is central to Guinevere's domination of Lancelot throughout the narrative.

As previously stated, along with pain, humiliation is a condition of the masochistic contract. It may be delivered, overseen, or set in motion by the dominatrix, but it must always entail some degree of shame or emasculation. Similarly, Guinevere subjects Lancelot to public humiliation on several occasions. In one particular instance, she chides him during his engagement with Maleagant: "Ah, Lancelot! What could it be / That makes you act so foolishly?"⁷⁶ This question has a profound effect on Lancelot. It leaves him retreating inward, into the realm of introspection. Lancelot's self-reflection is made evident in the following passage: "Lancelot was most ashamed / And vexed and hated himself."⁷⁷ Even after he endures the pain and humiliation of his quest, successfully rescuing Guinevere from her imprisonment, she chastises him.

When Lancelot is victorious in his battle against Maleagant, Guinevere denies any and all gratitude towards him. She publicly and intentionally embarrasses him at the very moment when he believes his suffering is at an end: "to pain and embarrass him further / She refused to answer him a single word / And passed into another room instead."⁷⁸ This process of denying satisfaction is another crucial element of sadomasochism. It involves the dominatrix withholding pleasure from her submissive partner until she believes they have suffered to an appropriate degree or for an appropriate amount of time. This brings us to the subject of titillation.

To assess how titillation functions within Chrétien's larger poetic design, one must take a closer look at the imagery of *Knight of the*

Cart. Not only do we find images of dominatrices with whips, but we also find images of cuckoldry and sexual union. Let us return to that moment where Guinevere embraces Lancelot, and accepts him as her lover:

The Queen stretched out
Her arms toward him, embraced him,
Hugged him to her breast
And drew him into the bed beside her.⁷⁹

This is a viscerally sensual moment for Guinevere and Lancelot, and Chrétien spares no linguistic expense in playing up the provocative nature of his subject matter. The titillation here is multifaceted: Not only does Guinevere press her breast against Lancelot, but she is also the one to initiate the movement from one social space to another. The contextual parameters of Guinevere's bed constitute a sexual space, and when she brings Lancelot into this space, their status as lovers is solidified. As such, the imagery of Guinevere drawing Lancelot into bed with her could be construed as sexually stimulating because of the potential sexual energy implicit in the act. It is also erotic because of the power Guinevere holds over Lancelot. She is in control, and when she pulls Lancelot into bed with her there is an anticipation that she will retain this control throughout the sexual engagement. Images like this may be titillating, but what do they say about Chrétien's relationship with Marie de Champagne?

As the aforementioned synthesis of Feinstein and Cohen's scholarship suggests, the reality beyond Lancelot's masochistic submission to Guinevere is not particularly divergent from the fiction. By Chrétien's own admission, he is "one who is entirely at her [Marie de Champagne's] service / In anything he can undertake in this world."⁸⁰ By that same token, he wrote *Knight of the Cart* at her behest, presenting himself as her humble servant in the prologue. Like Lancelot, Chrétien is a slave to "Love's commands" who willingly submits himself to the rule of a dominatrix.⁸¹ Chrétien's masochistic proclivities resonate through Lancelot, and vice versa. They speak to the existence of male masochism in both courtly culture and its fiction. According to Cohen, "The story of Lancelot's passionate submission to Guinevere as told by Chrétien de Troyes is no doubt visible as a historical trace within that critical discourse that reified male masochism and attached its painful pleasures to a specific sexuality. . . Chrétien's well-known narrative established a trajectory for masochisms to come."⁸² Inciteful words, to be sure, but they fail to capture the role Chrétien played in developing a new kind of fiction. *Knight of the Cart* may have established a trajectory of masochistic behavior, but it also established a trajectory of sadomasochistic erotica.

THE DAWNING OF A GENRE

"Women's power lies in man's passion"

- Leopold von Sacher-Masoch

The legacy of Chrétien's eroticism lives on in the literary endeavors of two particular authors: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Marquis de Sade. The first of these authors, Sacher-Masoch, is the result of the masochistic trajectory Cohen cites in relation to *Knight of the Cart* and the circumstances of its conception. One of his works, *Venus in Furs*, explores the masochistic proclivities of a man called Severin, who fantasizes about being dominated by women adorned with garments of fur. The notion of male subordination/female

⁷⁹ Ibid, 195.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 3.

⁸¹ Ibid, 155.

⁸² Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 78-79.

⁷² This notion of willingness is supported by Cohen, who argues that "masochism belongs to a willing victim."

⁷³ That being said, it is important to note that although Lancelot willingly endures public humiliation, he derives no direct satisfaction from the humiliation itself. In this way, Lancelot's public humiliation does not carry the same degree of masochistic pleasure associated with his frequent woundings.

⁷⁴ Ali Hébert and Angela Weaver, "An examination of personality characteristics associated with BDSM orientations," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* vol. 23, no. 2 (2014): 106.

⁷⁵ Danielle Lindemann, "Will the Real Dominatrix Please Stand Up: Artistic Purity and Professionalism in the S&M Dungeon," *Sociological Forum* vol. 25, no. 3 (2010): 588.

⁷⁶ Troyes, *Lancelot*, 155.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 155.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 167.

domination is central to Severin's desire: "If I were faced with the choice of dominating or being dominated, I would choose the latter. It would be far more satisfying to be the slave of a beautiful woman."⁸³ What emerges in Sacher-Masoch's writing is an eroticism more overt, more self-aware than the titillation present in Chrétien's writing. No longer is the masochistic contract stipulated in terms of lady and servant; it is stipulated in terms of master and slave. Despite this fundamental development, the similarities between Sacher-Masoch's literature and Chrétien's literature abound.

One such commonality can be found with the implementation of fur and whips to establish erotic imagery. In the case of *Knight of the Cart*, the two images appear separate. In one instance, a woman on a mule comes riding up to Lancelot holding a whip. In another instance, Guinevere herself is depicted in fur:

the queen came up
In a spotless white gown;
She had no tunic or coat over it,
Only a short mantle
Of rich cloth and marmot fur⁸⁴

This motif of dominatrix figures in fur and wielding whips has become firmly cemented in the world of sadomasochistic erotica. In Sacher-Masoch's writing, the two images are delivered in tandem: "She goes over to the mantelpiece, takes the whip off the ledge and, watching me with a smile, makes it whistle through the air; then she slowly rolls up the sleeves of her fur jacket."⁸⁵ The innovation of Sacher-Masoch's contribution to the sadomasochistic erotica is not with the genesis of fur and whip imagery, as Chrétien committed these images to the genre hundreds of years before *Venus in Furs* was written, but rather with their proximity. Not only does Sacher-Masoch bring these images into close association with one another, but he does so in an unabashedly erotic fashion. No longer is the dominatrix figure simply a vehicle for male subordination/female domination. In this text, the fur-clad dominatrix holds a whip and has no qualms with using it on her masochistic slave in scenes directly intended to titillate.

Another similarity is found with the socio-cultural transgressions of both texts. As we have established, the male subordination/female domination behind Chrétien's writing (and his relationship with Marie de Champagne) effectively inverted the normative gender roles of the Middle Ages. Also noteworthy is the presence of class transgression in *Knight of the Cart*. As Lancelot jumps into the cart and reaps the associated social consequences, he effectively abandons his previous status as an upstanding knight and willingly assumes the social stigma of a common criminal. This kind of class transgression is also found in *Venus in Furs*: "When Severin abandons his life as a privileged aristocrat to become Wanda's servant in *Venus in Furs*, this class cross-dressing carries a potent eroticism, but the desires it performs are also economic, nationalistic, and historical."⁸⁶ Again, the presence of female mastery/male servitude undoes the typical gender assignments instituted by both Sacher-Masoch's environment (19th century France) and the social climate of his text.

In fact, Sacher-Masoch's ideas of masochistic eroticism were such an inversion of the normative gender roles and values of his time that his name became forever associated with a certain breed of "perversion." According to Cohen, Sacher-Masoch was "horrified to learn that Krafft-Ebing had named a perversion after him in the *Psychopathia Sexualis*, wholly missing the point of the 'folklore,

history, politics, mysticism, eroticism, nationalism' condensed around the scenes of flagellation in his narratives."⁸⁷ In the end, masochism is the legacy of Sacher-Masoch. Despite his sincerest efforts to break convention, he has been pigeonholed by clinical psychoanalysis. This raises the question, does lumping all these authors into such categories as masochistic and sadomasochistic fundamentally undermine their achievements? Is it a limiting factor? Is it yet another example of language's limitations? According to Cohen, "for masochism to be useful in philosophical inquiry it must be depathologized, stripped of the stigma of perversion and rewritten as a phenomenon simultaneously social, epistemological, and sexual."⁸⁸ Categorization may reflect the limitations of language, but for the purposes of academic inquiry, a name must be employed to account for such a unique and illustrious sexuality/literary tradition. So long as we recognize masochism in its own terms, in a non-stigmatizing fashion, the terminology need not negate the socio-cultural transgressions achieved by both Chrétien and Sacher-Masoch. This brings us to Marquis de Sade.

When it comes to Marquis de Sade, it can be said that his writing was equally integral to the evolution of sadomasochistic erotica. One of his texts, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, reifies the association between pain and pleasure propagated throughout *Knight of the Cart*: "It has pleased Nature so to make us that we attain happiness only by way of pain."⁸⁹ Along with this association between pain and pleasure, it can be said that there are many similarities between Sade's writing and Sacher-Masoch's writing. *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and *Venus in Furs* both make repeated allusions to Venus. In a more general sense, however, Marquis de Sade and Sacher-Masoch made integral contributions to what Tupper has called "the evolving form of sadomasochistic erotica."⁹⁰ The evolution of sadomasochistic erotica from Chrétien, to Sade, to Sacher-Masoch reveals how eroticism has become more overt and more self-aware than the titillation present in Chrétien's writing/era. Our modern understanding of sadomasochism lends itself to the developments these two authors contributed to this particular genre. Their writing was an elaboration on the themes present in Chrétien's writing.

Another important thing to consider is the spatial register of France with respect to sadomasochistic erotica. All three of the aforementioned authors exist as part of the larger French literary tradition. Even Sacher-Masoch, a natural born Austrian, was "the literary darling of France in the 1880s."⁹¹ In any case there seems to be a connection between this particular brand of erotica and French culture. However, some scholars have noticed an even larger correlation between France and erotic literature. According to Henry L. Marchand, "it is an indisputable fact that France has for many centuries been renowned as the home par excellence of eroticism" and this fact is "buttressed by numerous phenomena, historical and social."⁹² But how is all of this relevant? *Knight of the Cart* and the larger French tradition may have spawned some of the first, fully realized works of sadomasochistic erotica, but how is this lineage relevant in light of recent cultural developments? To answer these questions, we must shift our gaze to the present, to that so-called "modern" age.

When it comes to sadomasochistic erotica in the modern age, the first work that comes to mind is E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Although the presence of such works as the *Fifty Shades* series

⁸⁷ Ibid, 90.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 90.

⁸⁹ Marquis de Sade, *The Marquis de Sade: Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, and Other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 202.

⁹⁰ Tupper, *A Lover's Pinch*, 136.

⁹¹ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 90.

⁹² Henry L. Marchand, *The Erotic History of France* (New York: The Panurge Press, 1933), 16.

⁸³ Sacher-Masoch, "Venus in Furs," 163.

⁸⁴ Troyes, *Lancelot*, 191.

⁸⁵ Sacher-Masoch, "Venus in Furs," 185.

⁸⁶ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 90.

illustrates the enduring relevance of sadomasochism in popular culture, it also reflects a departure in the realm of sadomasochistic erotica. According to Tupper, “The *Fifty Shades* phenomenon does not mean that the mainstream has embraced mainstream BDSM. Instead, the popularity indicates a redrawing of the borders between vanilla and kink. BDSM sexuality is acceptable to the mainstream as long as it is contained within a traditional monogamous heterosexual romance plot, reactionary gender roles, [etc.]”⁹³ In this way, the integration of sadomasochistic erotica into the realm of popular culture has effectively forced normative gender roles into a genre that has always existed to subvert them. The very nature of courtly love and courtly romance literature is found in its inversion of medieval gender roles. Viewing Chrétien’s *Knight of the Cart* as the progenitor of sadomasochistic erotica allows us to see how people have historically disregarded the sexual norms associated with gender and how a trajectory of male masochism surfaced and influenced subsequent patterns of sexual/literary exploits.

This subversion of gendered sexual norms raged onward in the writings of Sade and Sacher-Masoch, the latter of which based his entire erotica on the premise of men submitting themselves to the domination of women. This transgression of normativity is at the heart of sadomasochistic erotica, and it is sorely lacking in the *Fifty Shades* series. According to Tupper, criticisms against *Fifty Shades of Grey* included that “the BDSM depicted was too soft and tame... this is the unresolvable dilemma of the mainstreaming of kink. For BDSM to appear in the beer commercial or the Hollywood romance, it must, by definition, have lost nearly all its transgressive, authentic edge.”⁹⁴ Because the *Fifty Shades* series represents such a vast departure from the boundary-breaking⁹⁵ efforts of Chrétien, Sade, and Sacher-Masoch, it stands to reason that it may not be a veritable entry in the genre to begin with.

In fact, one could even argue that the *Fifty Shades* series fails to capture the essence of sadomasochism completely: “The trilogy’s blatant misunderstanding of consent shows that the mainstream wants the toys and the glamour of BDSM, but not the ethos of negotiated roles.”⁹⁶ Even in Chrétien’s writing, the dominant and submissive roles are clearly spelled out in the masochistic contract that binds Lancelot and Guinevere through rules of courtly love that establish male subordination and female domination. This is not to say that all modern depictions miss the mark, however.

A Knight’s Tale (2001) may not exemplify sadomasochism as overtly as Sade or Sacher-Masoch, but it does pay homage to the roots of the masochistic trajectory established during the Middle Ages with courtly romance. In one particular sequence, the protagonist, a peasant by the name of William who is posing as a knight to compete in jousting tournaments, submits to his lover Jocelyn’s wish to have him lose a number of matches until she is satisfied. What follows is a montage of William being battered and struck repeatedly by enemy lances, intercut with close-up shots of Jocelyn’s face as she seems to take an erotic pleasure in watching her lover suffer. This sequence functions on multiple levels: It conflates pain and pleasure, it illustrates William’s complete submission to his lover, and it elucidates the public humiliation he willingly endures for her (however, much like Lancelot, William does not derive an overt pleasure in the humiliation itself, which admittedly calls his degree of masochism into question). Where the *Fifty Shades* series affirms normative gender paradigms, *A Knight’s Tale* (2001) subverts them. It is no coincidence that one of the only modern depictions of sexually

charged male subordination/female domination appears in a film set in the Middle Ages, as this dichotomy permeates the poetic endeavors of Chrétien de Troyes. By including scenes like this, *A Knight’s Tale* (2001) effectively pays homage to courtly culture and to the social and temporal parameters of the high Middle Ages.

In a general sense, the film recognizes the historical trace of male masochism instituted during the medieval period by drawing direct inspiration from Chrétien’s writing in its representation of male subordination/female domination. In fact, the character Geoffrey Chaucer directly identifies the similarity between the protagonists of the film and the protagonists of *Knight of the Cart*. In one particular sequence, he notices Jocelyn approaching William’s bed chamber in the night. In response to this sight, Chaucer says to himself, “Guinevere comes to Lancelot.”⁹⁷ The film recognizes the similarities between Jocelyn and Guinevere and between William and Lancelot. Like Lancelot, William submits himself to a dominatrix figure and consents to her every wish, even when it results in his own physical pain. Representations like this in modern media speak to the relevance of *Knight of the Cart* and the sadomasochism it eroticizes. Both transgress. Both titillate.

At this juncture it is important to note that although the Middle Ages spawned some of the first fully realized works of sadomasochistic erotica (*Knight of the Cart* acting as an important, pre-modern precursor to modern sadomasochism as we know it), the historical trace of sadomasochism itself arguably goes back even further, to the classical period. In Ovid’s *Amores*, men who fall in love are struck with Cupid’s arrow, and when they become enamored, they are “miserably in love.”⁹⁸ This conflation of love and misery is the exact same conflation observable throughout *Knight of the Cart*. Furthermore, in Ovid’s writing, the impetus of love is the receiving of a wound via Cupid’s bow and arrow. Love and pain are inextricably linked, and this link is virtually indistinguishable from the link Chrétien creates in his own writing. Also noteworthy is the fact that any individual struck with Cupid’s arrow becomes an “abject slave of love” thereafter.⁹⁹ This association between love and servitude is strikingly similar to the male subordination/female domination observable throughout Chrétien’s writing. With these similarities in mind, it is possible that Chrétien may have been inspired by Ovid’s writing to some degree when he wove his tale of masochistic love. As a result, sadomasochism may have been embedded in the public consciousness as early as the classical period, with authors like Ovid readily using it as a motif. Despite Ovid’s masochistic depiction of love, there is one crucial difference between *Amores* and *Knight of the Cart* that cannot be ignored.

The major difference between these two depictions of masochistic love is found with the impetus of said love. In Ovid’s writing, male lovers are struck by Cupid’s arrow, an outside force completely beyond mortal control. Thus, the sadomasochistic romance is thrust upon the lover without his own consent, and he becomes a slave to his lover without having made a prior decision to become her willing servant. The masochistic contract never enters into the equation. In Chrétien’s writing, however, the masochistic lover wades into his servitude with complete submission. He willingly consents to the masochistic contract: He is not struck by some overwhelming force beyond his own control, and he willingly chooses to be a slave to his mistress. This is the key difference between the

⁹⁷ *A Knight’s Tale*, Directed by Brian Helgeland, Columbia Pictures, 11 May, 2001.

⁹⁸ Ovid, *Amores (Book 1)*, trans. William Turpin (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 22.

⁹⁹ Phyllis Katz, “Teaching the Elegiac Lover in Ovid’s ‘Amores,’” *The Classical World* vol. 102, no. 2 (2009): 163.

⁹³ Tupper, *A Lover’s Pinch*, 258.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁹⁵ As Cohen states, masochism is “an inherently boundary-smashing phenomenon” that “potentially undoes the world” Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 90.

⁹⁶ Tupper, *A Lover’s Pinch*, 258.

depiction of masochistic romance observable in the classical period and the medieval period. This difference places Chrétien's writing a step closer to modern sadomasochistic erotica, as it illustrates a consensually masochistic depiction of romance. *Knight of the Cart* may only be a precursor to modern sadomasochistic erotica, but unlike Amores, it is a fully realized entry in the genre.

THE GREAT COALESCENCE

"The questions we ask of a text determine, in part, what that text says to us. That is to say, our critical approaches, methods, or theories will contribute to the interpretation or meaning that emerges from any text."¹⁰⁰

The critical approaches of this particular study have involved the social, historical, and literary factors responsible for sadomasochistic erotica and its subsequent evolution in popular culture. Therefore, the conclusion that Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* exists as a progenitor of this genre reveals just as much about courtly romance literature as it does about courtly culture. In the text, we see the masochistic association of love, pain, and pleasure, elements of sadomasochistic ritualism, and iconography that has endured for centuries. We see women in fur and women with whips: elements central to Sade and Sacher-Masoch, the individuals responsible for sadism and masochism as we know them today.

Scholars like Cohen and Feinstein have extrapolated these elements from Chrétien's writing, but there has yet to be a complete recognition and universal acceptance of *Knight of the Cart* as a work of sadomasochistic erotica in the academic sphere. Not only does Lancelot play on S&M in order to titillate, but it was among the first to do so in a way that is recognizable with other works in the genre. Scholars have also overlooked the presence and importance of public humiliation to Lancelot's masochism, the sexually stimulating imagery, and the connection to modern BDSM that permeates the text. Even the historical trace of male masochism Cohen alludes to does not encompass the trace of eroticism that has also resulted from Chrétien's poetic endeavors.

This brings us to the titular question: How did Venus get her furs? The answer only comes through the marriage of multiple disciplines. It cannot be extrapolated from the text alone, nor can it be plucked from the annals of history with equivalent shortsightedness. In the end, the social history of medieval France tells us as much about their literature as their literature tells us about the social history of medieval France. They form and inform one another in an endless cycle of cultural expression and re-expression. In the case of sadomasochistic erotica, it is a cycle that became palpable with courtly romance fiction: a cycle that lives on in popular culture. The answer to the question, then, is quite simple: How did Venus get her furs? She inherited them from Guinevere.

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¹⁰⁰ Sturges, "Chrétien's *Knight of the Cart* and Critical Theory," 2.

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