

# The many faces of love in arth



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The theme of love develops through several different levels in Arthurian Literature. Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace equate love with sexual desire, and little else. The concept becomes less one-dimensional in Hartmann von Aues romances. In Erec and Iwein, Hartmanns definition of love includes emotional attachment and a degree of commitment. He also discusses the importance of love in proper measure. Sex still plays an important part in Hartmanns discussion of love, but love in his works connotes far more than just physical desire. It can be an ennobling or a degenerating entity with the power to refine or to condemn.

Wolfram von Eschenbachs concept of love strays even further from sexual gratification and physical pleasure. In his epic poem, Parzival, Wolfram lauds the recognition and embracing of a divine love that transcends the earthly realm altogether. He, like Hartmann, acknowledges that earthly love can be a detrimental padlock on our reason (Wolfram, 153). Love in Parzival thus entails many of the same characteristics that it does in Hartmanns works as far as love among human beings is concerned. But Wolfram develops loves definition to the point where the only true love is the love and service of God. In order to clarify this development of the concept of love from simple human desire to a sublime commitment to the almighty, let us examine in detail the works of these perpetuators of Arthurian Legend.

Geoffrey of Monmouths History of the Kings of Britain contains an account of the events that lead up to the birth and reign of King Arthur. Geoffrey tells of Uther, the King of Britain whose longing for Queen Igerna culminates in Arthurs conception. When Uther sees Igerna at his Easter festival, an overwhelming desire for her ensnares him. Unfortunately for Uther, Igerna is

married to Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, who takes offense to the king's advances toward his wife. Uther laments this predicament as he expresses his feelings to a soldier of his:

I burn with love for Igraine, and I do not think I can avoid  
danger to my health unless I win her. Tell me how I can satisfy  
my desire, or I shall die from torment (Geoffrey, 61).

Uther says he burns with love in the first sentence, but then in the next one he speaks of desire. This suggests that from Uther's standpoint, love and desire are one and the same. His burning love is actually a powerful sexual drive that Uther feels impelled to satisfy. He makes no mention of any attraction or allure to Igraine for anything other than her stunning beauty. The author does not give any account of her other attributes, something Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach both do in their descriptions of various female characters. Geoffrey leaves the reader with a narrow image of Igraine. All he tells us is that her beauty surpassed that of all the other women in Britain (Geoffrey, 61).

Uther then summons Merlin to devise a plan that will enable the king to have sexual relations with Igraine. That is his primary goal: to sleep with Gorlois's wife. Uther's intent becomes explicitly clear on page 62, when Geoffrey states that The king then spent the night with Igraine and satisfied himself with the lovemaking he had longed for. Sex is most definitely foremost on Uther's mind. He longs for lovemaking, not interpersonal discourse. The author adds that Merlin marveled at Uther's great love (Geoffrey, 62), a

statement which gives additional weight to the idea that love equals sex or sexual desire in *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Merlin marvels at the intense anguish Uther's unfulfilled instinctual drives have placed on him; the wizard refers to that anguish brought about by physical attraction as love.

In *Waces Roman de Brut*, the exact same scenario unfolds with Uther and Igherna. Wace tells the reader that Uther's love for Igherna exceeded everything else (Wace, 13) and that it was constantly urging him forward (Wace, 13). The love urging Uther forward consists of sexual desire; Wace informs the reader that The king lay that night with Igherna (Wace, 14), but he does not say why Uther loves her for any reason other than her physical appeal. Here, as in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, there is no reference to any of Igherna's traits other than her beauty, when Wace calls her the most beautiful woman in the whole kingdom (Wace, 12). So, love appears to really mean sex in *Roman de Brut* just as it does in *The History of the Kings of Britain*.

Though the two works are similar in that respect, a key difference is that Geoffrey makes the claim that love can refine and add depth to a person's character, especially a knight's. This courtly love idea is important because it comes up again more prominently in Hartmann von Aue's stories. One must keep in mind, though, that when Geoffrey discusses love, he gives no evidence that his concept of love involves more than sex. When he writes about how the women deigned to love no man till he was three times proven in combat (Geoffrey, 71) and the women therefore were made more chaste, and the knights more valiant because of their love of them (Geoffrey, 71), all he is saying is that the ability to delay gratification of the sexual urge spurs knights to engage in valorous activities. The women are chaste because they

are not having sexual relations with the men while the men work to enhance their desirability to the women in hopes of satisfying their sexual drives. Still, even this form of love has a somewhat ennobling effect the type of which Hartmann concerns himself with at greater length.

In Erec, sex remains a major part of the concept of love, but Hartmann refines it to include individual personality traits and emotional dedication. He also contemplates the honorable as well as the harmful effects of Lady Love in an effort to clarify the importance of moderation and love in proper measure.

Early on in the story, before Erec and Enite marry, there is a scene with the two of them in a meadow. Hartmann describes their feelings for each other in brilliantly poetic fashion:

When the two of them came out upon the meadow, Erec began to contemplate his maiden. She, too, repeatedly cast a shy glance at her beloved. Again and again they exchanged loving glances. Their hearts were filled with love, and they both charmed each other ever more. Neither jealousy nor hatred found a receptacle there to lodge.

They were, instead, possessed of faithfulness and constancy

(Hartmann, Erec, 76).

Sex never comes up in this passage at all. Instead, Hartmann presents love on an emotional level. He lauds the purity of Erec and Enites feelings for one

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another and the inherent goodness of love as an entity (Neither jealousy nor hatred found a receptacle there to lodge). The poet shows that qualities like faithfulness and constancy are important characteristics of love, in stark contrast to Geoffrey and Wace who do not take up this aspect of love at all.

Hartmann gives another example of the commitment and dedication characteristic of Erec and Enites union on page 129 of Erec, when Enite believes her husband is dead after a bout with a pair of giants. This passage also brings the element of religion and the work of divine hands into the discussion of love:

Save for the fact that all your works are without blemish, Lord,

I would accuse you of a misdeed in allowing me to live on, since  
you have taken from me the one man for whom I was to live my life.

Yet if it is not your will to return him to me, then be reminded, Lord

God, that all the world is familiar with the words that you have

spoken: that a man and his wife shall be one body.

The poet reminds us here that love involves, in his view, a lot more than physical pleasure. He does this in two ways. First, he paints this moving picture of a devoted wife heartbroken and distraught at the prospect of losing her husband to whom she is eternally faithful. This is a passion that goes beyond casual love or casual sex, something present in abundance in The History of the Kings of Britain and Roman de Brut. (Think of how in each account, Uther makes love to a woman he barely knows and the author

refers to his actions as love.) Enites feelings for Erec permeate her entire being.

The second way in which Hartmanns concept of love differs from that of the two previous authors discussed is his intermingling of love with the almighty. When Enite laments her plight to the Lord, she reminds Him that a man and wife shall be one body (Hartmann, Erec, 129). This brings a whole new variable into the equation of love: God. Neither Geoffrey nor Wace mention God as having anything to do with the love between two human beings. But Hartmann does make this connection, intimating that true love has divine qualities and that God Himself plays a part in its establishment and maintenance.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of love in Hartmanns Erec is its ability to honor or defame an individual. Love in proper measure is ideal. Too much of it can deter people, especially knights, from their duties, casting shame upon them. In Erec, the protagonists major error for which he must atone involves love in improper measure. Hartmann gives this account of Erecs behavior soon after his marriage to Enite:

Every morning he lay in bed to make love with his wife, until such time as the bells

rang for Mass. Then they hurriedly arose together and walked hand in hand to the

chapel, where they tarried only as long as it took to sing the Mass. This was the

extent of Erecs exertion. Because of his wife, Erec became accustomed to com-

placency. He was so deeply in love with her that for the sake of her alone he neglect-

ed all pursuit of honor, until finally he lay about in such complete inactivity that no

one was able to hold him in high regard any longer (Hartmann, Erec, 93-94).

It is interesting to note the role that sex plays in Erecs dishonor. Sex is a major reason that Erec spends too much time with Enite. His hormones get the better of him in shameful fashion. When Hartmann says that Erec is so deeply in love with her, does he mean that Erec just wants to make love to Enite all of the time? Is it merely the joys of the flesh that drive him to complacency?

No. The love that enraptures Erec has plenty to do with Enites personal attributes and their mutual feelings for one another, as Hartmann illustrates in the faithfulness and constancy passage from page 76. Erecs error has much to do with his simple wish to be near the one he cherishes. Love in improper measure can entail spending too much time with someone out of sheer affection and emotional attachment to the point of distraction. There is no question that Erec has tremendously strong feelings for Enite, feelings which contribute to his need to remain in her company.

However, it is also clear from this excerpt on pages 93-94 that sex is still a major part of the concept of love in Hartmanns Erec. Love in improper

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measure also consists of an overindulgence in sexual activity, hinting that sex and love may be somewhat synonymous. Later on in the poem, when Count Oringles forces himself upon Enite on page 135, Hartmann remarks, how great the power of love is: the Count desired to lie together with Enite that very night! This solidifies the idea that there is a strong link between sex and love in Erec. Oringles is out of order here because he, like Erec, has no sense of moderation in love or sexual energy.

Thus, both the sexual and emotional aspects of love contribute to Erecs dishonor and constitute love in improper measure. Even the deep, abiding feelings that lend a more human and less animalistic quality to Hartmanns concept of love can have detrimental effects.

Despite its potentially destructive element, Hartmann shows in Erec that love in proper measure can indeed be an asset. Toward the end of the story, after a series of perilous duels against robbers, giants, and stealthy knights, Erec mentions a great source for his unrelenting courage when he says to Enite:

I wish to tell you in truth, if I possessed not the slightest shred of courage save that bit which I derive from you, then I could never go wrong. Whenever my thoughts turn to you, my hand is blessed with victory, for your love is the fount of my strength, so that nothing can trouble me the whole day long (Hartmann, Erec, 166).

This type of appreciation signifies a sincere dedication on Erecs part to the woman he loves. When his thoughts turn to Enite, they turn to the

faithfulness and constancy inherent in her nature. He says he thinks about her, Enite, the person, not just about her captivating beauty. The love and concern she expresses for Erec help maintain him in times of dire struggle. This type of commitment to another person can be highly beneficial.

By the end of the story Erec restores his honor through gallant exploits and the practicing of love in proper measure. Hartmann explains that this newfound state of moderation in love helps Erec gain favor with God:

Whenever possible, King Erec was attentive to Enites wishes himself, and yet in a way proper for him not as once had been his wont, when he had lain about idly on Enites account. For Erec conducted his life in accordance with honor, and in such a way that God, after conferring upon him the worldly crown, then granted the fatherly reward of everlasting life to both Erec and his wife (Hartmann, Erec, 181).

This is the supreme reward for a life of honor, something that includes love in proper measure: the gift of everlasting life. Love plays an extremely important role in Erecs salvation. Through his error of overindulgence in love and subsequent adoption of more moderate ways, Erec gains favor with God. Love is therefore a towering issue in this poem, because of its power to save or to damn. It is clear from the many faces of love as a beneficial or destructive agent in Erec that the concept is substantially more complex

than in either *The History of the Kings of Britain* or *Roman de Brut*, where it is an almost exclusively sexual concept.

Hartmanns Iwein tends to focus on the negative facets of love. The author equates it more closely with baseness and vulgarity in this romance than he does in *Erec*. The fact that love seems to involve such poor decorum in Iwein strengthens its association with sex and commonality. This is in accordance with the works general distaste for the emptiness the author perceives in knightly society. Toward the beginning of the story, Hartmann portrays Lady Loves grip on Iwein in a rather negative fashion:

One thing is regrettable: although Love is so strong that she captures whomever she wishes and subdues all the kings alive more easily than a child, she is still vulgar in that she has always lowered herself to the extent of desiring that which is common and seeking out trifling places that should have been mean and petty for her. In spite of her charm, she has often fallen under the feet of shame. (Hartmann, Iwein, 73).

These are strong words from a man who in his other Arthurian romance extols the virtues of true love, proclaiming that it is marked by faithfulness and constancy. Hartmann says that love has always lowered herself to the extent of desiring that which is common, not sometimes or on occasion.

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Perhaps the author has changed his outlook since he penned Erec. In that story, he brings the pros and cons of love to life, stating that love can be ennobling. Here, though, he states that love has always had this negative impact. The author creates an image of love that captures and subdues. This gives the impression that love is something one must resist and combat.

In all likelihood, Hartmann is referring to sex when he speaks of love desiring that which is common in the most recent passage from page 73. He brings up that subject quite subtly throughout the story. This indicates that sex is indeed still inextricably interwoven with the notion of love.

For example, Iwein embarks on a year's worth of adventures with Gawain immediately after he marries Lunete. He forgets completely about her deadline to return until he feels a sexual impulse:

Sir Iwein began to feel love's desire, and it occurred to him that he had been away from his wife for a long time, in deed that he had disregarded her request and her command. His heart was seized by a painful devotion and such remorse that he forgot where he was and sat silently, like a fool, neither hearing what was said nor seeing what was going on (Hartmann, Iwein, 92).

Only when he feels love's desire does Iwein remember his promise to his wife. Love's desire is obviously a desire for sex. Iwein goes an entire year without thinking about his marital commitment until the day when his sex drive reminds him of it. This is the type of commonality and baseness that Hartmann laments in this work. He expresses disapproval of behavior like <https://assignbuster.com/the-many-faces-of-love-in-arth/>

this which runs counter to the notion of true love in proper measure that he establishes in Erec.

Even in the most recent passage, though, there is still a glimmer of the kind of devotion and fidelity commensurate with Hartmann's idea of true love.

While a longing for sexual activity spurs Iwein to remember his wife, he is seized by a painful devotion and remorse as soon as he realizes what he has failed to do. There is a sense of genuine dedication to Lunete in this painful devotion Iwein suddenly feels. This type of devotion is an ideal in love.

Hartmann indicates through this example that it should be ever-present, not just when one feels the urge to engage in sexual activity. He finds it common that love has regressed to this point, but that does not mean that he alters his perception of what true love ought to entail. Rather, he expresses his frustration in Iwein that Lady Love does not live up to his standards in practice.

Regardless of Hartmann's reasons for emphasizing different aspects of love in his two Arthurian romances, it is certain that he develops the concept to a much greater degree than either Geoffrey or Wace. Hartmann explores love's beneficial and harmful qualities and he lends complexity to the concept.

Geoffrey does mention that love can be ennobling, but that is the extent of his development of the concept.

Wolfram von Eschenbach takes Hartmann's idea of love even further in the epic poem, *Parzival*. He, too, states that true love involves fidelity and faithfulness, but he also makes the claim that the only true love is divine love: the love and service of God. There are similarities to Hartmann's

portrayal of love, however, because Wolfram praises fidelity and loathes the blinding, shameful hold love can take on human beings in much the same way that Hartmann does.

Consider one of the narrators many interjections in Parzival, and note the similarity between the following and Hartmanns earlier remarks:

if true fidelity dwells within ones heart, one will never be free of love, one will know joy and sometimes sorrow. Benign love is true fidelity. If I am to say I know true love, it can come to me only through fidelity (Wolfram, 270).

This resonates of the faithfulness and constancy idea so prevalent in Erec. It is evident from this passage that in Wolframs opinion, like Hartmanns, love involves a strong commitment. Love among human beings in Parzival comprises the complex feelings and emotions that accompany faithfulness, just as it does in Hartmanns work. This is not to say that sex has no place in Parzival (after all, Parzival does have children), it just does not constitute the proportion of Wolframs concept of love the way it does in the work of the authors previously discussed.

Wolfram also presents love as a pristine, decent entity. A portion of the dialog between wise Gurnemanz and young Parzival follows, in which Gurnemanz teaches the nave boy about noble love:

cunning prospers only for a while as against noble love.

Many a fight breaks out in park and wasteland. Compare this with noble love, which has its remedies for cunning and deceit. Man and woman are all one, like the sun that shone this mornin and what we call day. Neither can be parted from the other, they blossom from the self-same seed (Wolfram, 96-97).

This resembles Hartmanns image of the true love between Erec and Enite in the meadow, where neither hatred nor jealousy found a receptacle there to lodge (Hartmann, Erec, 76). Loves ability according to Gurnemanz to remedy cunning and dece t suggests that it has a power as an external force that exists within and without human beings. Love appears in Erec in a similar way when the protagonist mentions it as the source of his courage. Love takes on a life of its own in the work of Hartmann and Wolfram. In addition, there are reminders in the most recently-cited passage from Wolfram of the idea that man and wife are one body, a notion that Hartmann brings to life with his poignant portrayal of Enite angrily begging the Lord to take her life when she believes that Erec is dead.

Despite these positive qualities, Wolfram also highlights loves destructive power and its potential to lead people astray from an honest, righteous path. The narrator of Parzival censures this hold love has on humans in yet another portion of his running commentary on the persons and events in the story. At this point, the narrator reflects on loves grip on Parzival, who is about to engage the seneschal, Keie in combat in an effort to restore his

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honor in the eyes of the court and, more importantly, to prove his love and worthiness to his wife, Condwiramurs. The narrator laments the ways in which love can drive a man to his downfall:

Mistress Love, with old ways ever-new you foster disloyal ties.

Under your suasion many a lord has wronged his vassal, vassals their lords,  
friends their companions: thus do your ways lead to Hell. Mistress Love, you  
should be ashamed that you inure the body to such craving as will bring  
the soul to torment. Mistress Love, since you have the power to age the  
young

in this fashion when youth is in any case so brief, your works bear the  
cast of perfidy. You, Mistress Love, are a padlock on our reason.

Neither shield nor sword, nor swift charger nor lofty fortress avails against  
you: you overpower all our opposition. On land and in the sea,  
what can elude your onslaught (Wolfram, 152-153)?

This is reminiscent of Hartmann's attitude toward love in Iwein. Wolfram associates love with perfidy and torment. He calls its influence an onslaught, something against which people must fight. Love invokes people to commit misdeeds and to act unfairly; it is shameful in that it drives the body to intense physical desire (you inure the body to such craving as will bring the



soul to torment). This is actually an even more vituperative condemnation of the negative aspects of love than those in Iwein.

It is also interesting to note the reference to sex in this passage. It seems that Wolfram does not disapprove of sexual activity per se, he just dislikes the foolish behavior such drives engender in people. Sex is still interwoven with the concept of love in Parzival, at least with this earthly sort of love for which many strive, including the protagonist.

The culmination of Parzivals quest to find the Grail turns out to be a discovery of a true love that knows no earthly definition. This is at the heart of the story: the recognition and submission to a divine love free of this inherent depravity that forces people to act irrationally, harming each other and themselves. God bestows his flawless and perfect love upon those who atone for their sins and strive to love and serve him. He exhibits a sublime commitment that transcends human nature.

Trevrizent, an ex-knight who renounced chivalry to do penance for his brother, advises young Parzival in the ways of true love. He helps Parzival recognize the omnipotent power and love of God:

In His divine love He that is the highest of all released us in Hell and left the wicked inside. These glad tidings tell of the True Lover. He is a light that shines through all things, unwavering in His love. Those to whom He shows His

love find contentment in it. The unrepentant sinner flees from Gods love: but

he that atones for his sins serves Him for His noble favour (Wolfram, 238).

Trevrizents reference to God as the True Lover is extremely important because it illuminates the idea that only God loves in a way free of the selfishness and imperfections typical of human love. His love is unwavering, unlike that of the common person. In order to receive Gods love, one must love and accept Him, a kind of love distinct from romantic love for another person. The bulk of Parzivals struggle consists of his difficulty accepting God and knowing through God the kind of love that will offer contentment unmatched by any woman.

For proof of human loves frailty in this literature, consider the number times knights fight gallantly to prove and justify their worthiness to the female figures in the stories. Part of the reason Parzival fights so gallantly is to restore his image in the eyes of Cunneware and Condwiramurs, his wife. If womens love were as firm and unwavering as Gods, knights would not engage in a majority of their battles, wars would lessen in number, and they would be able to avoid much of the anxiety and frustration they experience. This is not to criticize the women in the tales for being fickle and shallow because they are female. Imperfect love is not indigenous to women, even in Arthurian literature. Erecs love for Enite is anything but stable. He mistreats her out of his own vanity and shame in Erec, all the while she lives and breathes in devotion to him. Trevrizent helps Parzival understand that the only true love is divine love; only Gods love will ease his earthly burden.

Just as Gods love for man is the only true love, so mankinds love for God is the only kind of love humans can give that approaches perfect. Parzival

comes to this realization at the end of the story, after he becomes Grail King and decides to devote his life to the service of a higher love:

I have chosen humility. Possessions and love of women are far from my thoughts.

I shall ride many a joust, fighting in service of the Grail. Never again shall I fight for love

of a woman (Wolfram, 407).

Parzival chooses humility instead of the vanity that characterizes so many knightly pursuits in search of honor and women's esteem. He decides not to fight for the love of women because he now believes that the only love worth fighting for is God's love. As we have seen, the way to procure God's love is to serve Him through repentance. Parzival repents for his ignorance and sin by championing the cause of the Grail above all else. This is a truer form of love than any he can offer to a woman because it serves a greater purpose than any earthly union.

It is no accident that this passage from page 407 comes at the end of the story. It is the culmination of Wolfram's message that the concept of love as it existed during the middle ages up until the telling of Parzival, as it still exists today for many, is incomplete and inadequate. While human love ought to and can concern itself with more than selfishness, vanity, and sexual gratification, the only true love is divine love. Wolfram concludes the story on this note to underscore this idea's significance.

Thus it is possible to trace the development of love as a concept among Arthurian authors from the purely sexual in the early works of Geoffrey and Wace to the religious and truly divine in Wolframs Parzival. In a way, each authors interpretation of love lives on today in every one of us. Sometimes we live and act out of pure sexual desire, chasing after an object to fulfill our primal urges. Other times, we fall in love and crave companionship and intimacy on a personal level. There are likewise many in our society who feel impelled to live and work for a cause in the service of something greater than their own well-being. The presentation of the different interpretations in the format of this paper makes them appear to be incompatible. But in reality, they do not have to be as long as one keeps in mind the pros and cons of sexual or romantic love. People must familiarize themselves with their sexual instincts and control them appropriately without denying their existence or their rightful purpose. We need to exercise love in proper measure; we cannot let our interpersonal relationships dominate our existence, no matter how rewarding or satisfying they may be. It is also important to keep in mind that there is some greater power to serve the way that Parzival serves God, whether we call it God, Humanity, Truth, or Justice. With an awareness and balance of all of these things, one can successfully negotiate ones sexual drives, romantic relationships, and duty to society.