

The destructive effects of lovesickness in le morte d'arthur



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Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* presents an intent focus on the ill effects of anything not in accordance with Christian morality and teaching. Malory portrays these elements of his story negatively—showcasing how they alter the mind and deny characters the ability to properly function in a chivalric and penitent society. The most common of these drug-like aspects of Malory's tale is love. Conflated with lust, love drives the conflict of the Arthurian narrative and both psychologically and physically damages those who fall prey to it. Mary Wack's *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and its Commentaries* discusses how lovesickness acts as a disease that injures the soul, thus hindering spirituality. Although intensely pleasurable, love consumes the minds of those affected—rendering them unable to focus on God or reality. The adulterous relationship between Guenevere and Lancelot reveals the intense psychological and spiritual effects of lovesickness and how love removes the ability to exist in a penitent society.

Lovesickness in *Le Morte d'Arthur* is quite prevalent and afflicts many characters. The characters in Malory's narrative who claim to love someone tend emphasize their sexual desires and exhibit more symptoms of lust than the traditional notion of love. Those who experience love become completely enchanted and have intense sexual desires and excessive thoughts—hindering their mental and physical abilities—effectively falling into lovesickness. This behavior supports Mary Wack's claim that love acts as a disease of the brain “ for it is a great longing with intense sexual desire and affliction of the thoughts” (Wack 2) and derives from the “ intense natural need to expel a great excess of humors” (Wack 3). Wack's definition

presents lovesickness as Malory does in his text—as a physical need of the body. Wack explains how then this need affects the mind, “ this illness has more serious consequences for the soul, that is, excessive thoughts... because of the soul’s thoughts [and] worries to find and possess what they desire” (Wack 3). The psychological and physiological effects of lovesickness allow it to become a disease which in turn has spiritual ramifications.

The most notable depiction of lovesickness in Malory’s text is the affair between Guenevere and Lancelot. Not only do they harbor intense sexual cravings for one another, “ the queen sent for Sir Lancelot and bade him to come to her chamber that night” (Malory 430), but their lovesickness inflicts psychological damage upon both characters. Guenevere experiences intense mood swings, quickly switching between extreme hostility and affection for Lancelot. Throughout Chapter 62, Guenevere shifts between these two moods several times. At the beginning of the chapter Malory depicts how easily Guenevere’s mood changes, “ Queen Guenevere was angry. She rebuked Sir Lancelot constantly and called him a false knight. Then Sir Lancelot told the queen everything that happened...So the queen forgave Sir Lancelot” (429). Although the queen forgives Lancelot and returns to loving him, a short time later she once again becomes extremely angered by him and wishes to never see him again, “ she was angry beyond measure...and she said, ‘ You false traitor knight! See that you leave my court and my chamber immediately! Do not be so foolish false traitor knight, to ever come into my presence again!” (431), only to change her mind almost immediately and begs her knights to “ spare no expense until he is found” (432). Due to her intense feelings for Lancelot, Guenevere is unable to control her volatile

emotions and quickly switches between love and hatred for Lancelot for she does not truly understand what is happening to her mind and body.

Guenevere's severe mood swings directed solely at her lover expose how her lovesickness has psychologically affected her.

While Guenevere's lovesickness manifests as intense mood swings, Lancelot experiences complete madness. The madness of Lancelot derives from his lovesickness; he wishes to have an erotic release with the one he loves and if refuted or manipulated in some way, that release will be tainted and rejected by the body. After his night with Elaine, Lancelot realizes he is not with the woman he loves, and his body rejects the release it had the night before causing him to descend into a maddened state, " he well knew that he was not with the queen. He then leapt out of his bed in only his nightshirt, like a madman" (431). Once Guenevere rebukes him, Lancelot cannot bear the rejection and loss of his lover and loses control body, " he felt such anguish and sorrow at her words that he fell to the floor in a swoon" (431). Once he awakes from his faint, Lancelot " leap[s] out a bay window into the garden below...[running] forth, he knew not where, and was as crazy a man had been. He ran thus for two years; no one ever recognized him" (431). The effects of both the false sexual release and rejection from the queen cause Lancelot to have a physical and mental breakdown in which he loses his entire identity.

In conjunction with these physical and psychological effects of Lancelot and Guenevere's lovesickness, the pair also displays the most prevalent symptom of the disease—excessive thoughts. More than just the want to " find and possess" (Wack 3) what is desired, this aspect of the illness results <https://assignbuster.com/the-destructive-effects-of-lovesickness-in-le-morte-darthur/>

in sleeplessness and utter consumption of one's mind and soul. Both Guenevere and Lancelot experience such symptoms, further revealing their lovesickness and its toll. Through Lancelot's sleep-talking, Malory reveals how even while unconscious thoughts about his lover pervade Lancelot's mind: " In his sleep he talked and chattered like a jaybird about the love that was between Queen Guenevere and him" (431). Guenevere also exhibits signs of excessive thoughts when she cannot sleep because of her concern for Lancelot, " the queen went nearly out of her mind, writhing and tossing about like a madwoman, and unable to sleep for four or five hours" (430). This consumption of thought then transcribes to the soul. According to Wack: " If the patient sinks into thoughts, the action of the soul and body is damaged since the body follows the soul in its action, and the soul accompanies the body in its passion" (3), meaning that lovesickness has a detrimental effect on the soul—tainting it and leading to spiritual deterioration.

If a mind is entirely consumed by thoughts for their lover due to their lovesickness, then little room is left for focus on anything else—a dangerous state in medieval society. Malory emphasizes the importance of Christian ideals and having God be the primary focus throughout the tale, and with Lancelot unable to think of anything other than Guenevere, he cannot fully devote himself to his faith, thus hindering him spiritually, " if Sir Lancelot had not been so focused on the queen in all his innermost thoughts and feelings while only outwardly seeming to serve God, no knight would have been able to surpass him in the quest for the Holy Grail" (538). By dismissing his penitence and thinking only of Guenevere, Lancelot shows how lovesickness

causes utter devotion to the object of the affections and a dearth of spirituality.

Once those who have lovesickness fully surrender to the disease, the one they love becomes their motivation and focus in life. The intense infatuation becomes nearly impossible to stay, and the ill individual becomes willing to do anything for the one they love. When Guenevere requires a champion in Chapter 78, Sir Bors tells her “[Lancelot] would not have failed to fight for you whether your cause was right or wrong” (542), and Lancelot comes out of exile just to defend her. By allowing Guenevere to become the most important aspect of his life, Lancelot replaces God as his primary focus. Even when Lancelot promises to be holy and follow the morals of his faith, he quickly dismisses those oaths and once again begins an adulterous affair, “Sir Lancelot began to renew his attentions to Queen Guenevere, forgetting the promise he had made and the perfection he had attained while on the quest” (538). This refusal to follow the spiritual principles of his society due to his lovesickness keeps Lancelot from achieving his full potential and being entirely faithful to God and the Christian faith he is expected to follow.

Lancelot’s spiritual detachment becomes most damaging when on the quest for the Holy Grail and reveals how lovesickness disallows someone to be entirely pure of heart and moral, thus destroying their ability to be completely functional in a moral and Christian society. During his search for the grail, the holy vessel passes by him, however, because of his lovesickness, Lancelot has “no power to awake when the holy vessel was brought hither” (474). This physical inability to have the grail causes him to realize that due to his sin, he cannot “seek holy things” (475). Even though <https://assignbuster.com/the-destructive-effects-of-lovesickness-in-le-morte-darthur/>

Lancelot eventually confesses his sin, his insincerity and underlying lovesickness still inhibit him from seeing the grail and fully pursue a moral Christian life.

By applying Mary Wack's definition of lovesickness to Guenevere and Lancelot in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, we can see how lovesickness affects and hinders spirituality. The physical effects of lovesickness cause it to become a disease which affects both the mind and the soul. Causing volatile emotions and even madness, lovesickness forces its victims into excessive thinking—making the object of affection the only thing the lovesick individual can focus on—effectively becoming the most important aspect of the person's life. In a society where God is meant to be the primary focus, replacing religion with love—especially a lustful one—causes a spiritual deterioration of the soul. With the lovesick person unable to achieve true morality and devote themselves entirely to their faith due to their physical, psychological, and spiritual impairments, they then cannot function properly in the penitent society in which they live.

Works Cited

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