

Behind the courtly  
facade: the function  
of irony in chretien de  
troyes' le cheval...



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Jordan Reid Berkow Final Paper Medieval Court December 14, 2002 Behind the Courtly Facade: The Function of Irony in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* But love is blind, and lovers cannot see The pretty follies that themselves commit.- William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* The tale of Lancelot, or *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, proffers a most interesting challenge to a reader of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian Romances, for the story presents a compelling paradox, simultaneously glorifying Lancelot's devotion to Queen Guinevere while undercutting the depiction of love with a biting sense of irony. Few modern scholars contend that the depiction of courtly love in Lancelot is wholeheartedly positive, intended to portray Lancelot as the flower of chivalry and a paragon of virtue, holding instead that irony is pervasive throughout the tale as Chrétien's own voice and sense of morality jousts with the conflicting sense commissioned by his patron, the Countess Marie de Champagne, daughter of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Irony is present in Lancelot for a wide variety of reasons common to many writers of the era, but predominantly because of Chrétien's discomfort with the material. The following pages will contain a discussion of how and why irony presents itself in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* as a criticism of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, followed by an exploration of additional reasons for why Chrétien and his contemporaries might have utilized irony as a literary tool. Although it may, perhaps, be surprising that irony is even present in the medieval romance, Daniel Green, author of *Irony in the Medieval Romance*, writes that "even in the medieval genre which devoted its energies most exclusively to the cultivation of an ideal of love, the lyric, irony is no stranger" (101). Irony was, indeed, an integral part of the courtly romance, deeply imbedded in its very nature and <https://assignbuster.com/behind-the-courtly-facade-the-function-of-irony-in-chretien-de-troyes-le-chevalier-de-la-charrette/>

essential to its purposes, for reasons that will be discussed below. In Chrétien's Arthurian Romances, in particular, "irony has been readily acknowledged as integral" (Green 391) as Chrétien displays a leaning towards the critical that seems to invite an ironic subtext. It seems likely that Chrétien's apparent discomfort with the story of Lancelot stems from the implied romanticization of adulterous relationships, an endorsement with which his clerical background was possibly at odds. He was conscious of creating a romantic, passionate story for the female patron and the predominantly female audience, but seems to have found it difficult to extol a lifestyle with which he felt morally at odds. Jean Frappier, author of *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work* writes that "it may seem disconcerting to find prowess, adventure and love exalted in courtly romances authored by clerics" (11) but that the clerics who composed for the courtly ladies more often than not were not deeply entrenched in the church, having gone through clerical studies predominantly to gain knowledge that could only be learned in this manner. Chrétien, however, may for all we know have been particularly struck by his ecclesiastical training, and while he most likely was attracted to composition for the same reasons that his contemporaries were, feeling a tie to antiquity and a responsibility to continue the transmission of cultural heritage through text, his true values, somewhat opposed to the values implicit in a story of adulterous courtly love, may in the end have proven quite powerful. Chrétien was most likely also uncomfortable with the blasé attitude towards betrayal implicit in Lancelot. "Perfect courtliness," writes Frappier, "involved respect for the actions and feelings of others" (7). Clearly, then, Chrétien's

protagonist cannot be regarded as perfectly courtly, for he has no regard  
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whatsoever for King Arthur, whose wife he woos with abandon. The only reference made to the deep betrayal that Lancelot is committing against his lord comes when Meleagant accuses Kay of having slept with the Queen, and Kay retorts that he “ would much rather be dead than have committed such a base and blameworthy act against my lord.” The actions of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere are clearly abominable in Chrétien’s eyes, and he presents Lancelot in an ironic light in order to convey his disapproval of such disloyalty. Chrétien’s value system, or at least what we understand of it based upon his other compositions, was almost directly opposed to the values within the story of Lancelot, and it is for this reason that Lancelot takes on a far more ironic tone than many of his other works. Frappier writes about Chrétien’s desire to “ please but also to instruct” (46) and his condemnation of “ futile excess and lack of balance” (47) - arguably the defining characteristics of the protagonist of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. Indeed, at the time in which Chrétien was writing the “ northern conception of courtly love...encouraged the refinement of emotion and resistance to impulsive desires” (Frappier 9). Chrétien’s other works also include characters who become excessively involved in either love (Erec and Enide) or knightly pursuits (Yvain), but Chrétien has less difficulty with these topics because in each of these stories the knight learns that he must not allow himself such excesses. Lancelot, by contrast, never learns this lesson, and it is this fact with which Chrétien has difficulty, necessitating the use of irony in order to demonstrate that he does not morally agree with what is ostensibly being said in the story. Frappier explains the discrepancy between Lancelot and Chrétien’s other works by taking note of the fact that Lancelot was written at the behest of Marie de Champagne, and thus is not necessarily a <https://assignbuster.com/behind-the-courtly-facade-the-function-of-irony-in-chretien-de-troyes-le-chevalier-de-la-charrette/>

good example of the endorsement of restraint and moral strength that seem to have characterized Chrétien's value system. So far as we know, Chrétien chose in complete freedom the subjects of Erec and Cliges, but in the prologue of [Lancelot] he stated explicitly that he obeyed the 'command' of Countess Marie de Champagne and that she alone decided upon its 'subject matter' and 'controlling purpose.' One might say that, even though adroitly complimenting his patroness, he seems to be carefully excusing himself for both. It is surprising also that he entrusted to Godefroi de Lagny the composition of the last 1,000 lines. The current view is that Chrétien lacked enthusiasm or that he followed the countess's instructions (however capricious) with reluctance. (Frappier 93) It seems, then, that Lancelot presented a unique situation for Chrétien: He found himself being commissioned to write a story which supported values with which he may not have been comfortable, and sought to balance his distaste for the subject matter by infusing the tale with irony, thus expressing his criticism relatively "safely." Most likely as a result of Chrétien's discomfort with the sense of the story, the tale of Lancelot du Lac is rife with ironic subtext from start to finish - Chrétien rests his critical, ironic eye on many aspects of the tale, from chivalry to jousting to knighthood, but he is at his most biting when he deals with the topic of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere. While the adulterous love that is the focus of Lancelot is outwardly endorsed by Chrétien's tale, the ironic undertones with which he suffuses the episodes dealing with the two lovers lays bare the true values of the writer. In each of the three episodes that will be discussed below, Lancelot is outwardly performing the tasks of a handsome, courtly, passionate lover, but in each episode, he is - subtly or not - being portrayed as somewhat absurd. The <https://assignbuster.com/behind-the-courtly-facade-the-function-of-irony-in-chretien-de-troyes-le-chevalier-de-la-charrette/>

episode in which Lancelot encounters strands of Guinevere's golden hair intertwined between the teeth of a comb, and proceeds to fall into raptures over them, is a clear example of how outwardly Lancelot is being portrayed as a passionate lover - sure to appeal to female listeners - and yet Chrétien's own values are quite apparent. Upon learning that the strands of hair do indeed belong to his great love, Lancelot "did not have strength enough to keep from falling forward and was obliged to catch himself upon the saddle-bow...he began to adore the hair, touching it a hundred thousand times to his eye, his mouth, his forehead and his cheeks" (225). Yes, Lancelot is behaving in a romantic fashion; yes, he is devoted and courtly - but his actions are, objectively, quite ridiculous. According to Frappier, "courtly" as the term is used in medieval romances refers to "a refined art of love inaccessible to common mortals" (7). This kind of love is certainly inaccessible to "common mortals", but in truth, who would consider falling into a faint at the mere sight of a loved one's dead, fallen-out hair "refined"? This episode demonstrates how Chrétien is able to subtly mock the kind of love between Lancelot and Guinevere, never outwardly criticizing, merely suffusing the tale with his own values through the use of irony. Later in the tale, after Lancelot has come face to face with Meleagant, Chrétien again mocks the single-minded devotion Lancelot has for Queen Guinevere, as the portrayal of Lancelot as he fights Meleagant is, in truth, quite ludicrous. When Lancelot hears the Queen call his name, "he began to defend himself from behind his back so he would not have to turn or divert his face or eyes from her" (253). Certainly a listener could have interpreted this episode as depicting the greatness of Lancelot's love for the Queen, but it seems more likely that Chrétien's personal view of this moment was rather comical. The <https://assignbuster.com/behind-the-courtly-facade-the-function-of-irony-in-chretien-de-troyes-le-chevalier-de-la-charrette/>

ironic tone that Chrétien takes towards Lancelot in this episode again demonstrates Chrétien's apparent distaste for his protagonist, and for the values endorsed by the tale. A third episode in which Lancelot's actions could be read as chivalrous and passionate, but which, in the context of the way he is portrayed throughout the rest of the tale, come off as somewhat absurd, occurs during Lancelot's bizarre "suicide attempt" after he has heard the rumor that Queen Guinevere has died. "Without waiting, he put the loop [of rope] over his head until it was taut about his neck; and to be sure of death, he tied the other end of the belt tightly to his saddle horn, without attracting anyone's attention. Then he let himself slip towards the ground, wishing to be dragged by his horse until dead" (260). Such conduct hardly casts the knight in a heroic, refined, courtly light - rather, this episode appears to be mocking the depth of emotion that Lancelot feels for Guinevere. His emotions are all-or-nothing, far too extreme to exist in real life, and it is this truth with which Chrétien is playing: The fact that such a love cannot - and probably should not - exist. This description of Lancelot is clearly intended to cast the passion that the character feels in a somewhat ironic, almost absurd, light. Although the primary goal of the irony employed in Chrétien's Lancelot was to safely demonstrate the author's discomfort with the material, there are a number of other possible reasons for the existence of irony in the text. Modern scholars agree that irony does, in fact, appear quite frequently in medieval romances, and have considered how modern readers, viewing the text from such a distance, can infer that a particular passage is intended to be read ironically. How can we be sure that a narrative composed hundreds of years ago is intended to be interpreted in an ironic, as opposed to a straightforward, manner? Indeed, courtly literature

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is largely centered around the idealization of chivalric virtue, knighthood, and love – and so, asks Green, “ have we any right to expect an ironic view, with its reservations and even criticism, of a value [love] which, as countless medieval poets remind us, was regarded as the inspiration of all virtues?” (91). Is it possible that there was room for irony within the overriding goal of the elevation of chivalry and courtly values? The answer, according to most modern scholars, appears to be yes: There are a number of signals that justify the appearance of irony in the medieval romance, each of which should be taken into consideration when considering the function of irony in Lancelot. To begin with, one must consider the social station of those writing the narratives within the court. Ecclesiastically trained clerics who had decided not to become priests, but even so not entirely integrated into court society, the composers of the medieval romance were outsiders both to their past, and to their present. “ Court poets were outsiders...from the Church to which they owed their education, but also from the aristocratic courts where they sought positions as secretaries, tutors, counsellors, and poets” (Green 360). Thus bestowed with critical distance, far enough “ from the court’s values for the spark of irony to be lighted” (Green 361), court poets such as Chrétien de Troyes were able to attain greater objectivity about the people and events that they were observing, and felt more comfortable taking an ironic stance than they would have had they truly been a part of the world about which they were writing. The second reason why we are not surprised to find irony deeply embedded within medieval romances such as Lancelot is that medieval writers were quite comfortable with the ironic technique.

During the period in which Chrétien and his contemporaries were writing, there was an emphasis on indirect statements, hiding the true meaning of a <https://assignbuster.com/behind-the-courtly-facade-the-function-of-irony-in-chretien-de-troyes-le-chevalier-de-la-charrette/>



statement in a more roundabout manner of discourse. Indeed, courtly etiquette held that social intercourse would proceed more smoothly if modes of speech were less straightforward (Green 365). The writer, therefore, could demonstrate this well-regarded skill through irony, thus “ displaying a noble and refined mind by saying less, rather than more what he means” (Green 365). Troubadour poets frequently utilized this method as a way to distinguish the non-initiated, who were not learned enough to infer the true meaning behind the elevated text, from the initiated, those who could enjoy the compositions to their fullest because of their ability to read between the lines, as it were. The emphasis on modes of speech that lent themselves easily to irony made the placement of ironic subtext within medieval writing much more comfortable for the court poets. A writer such as Chrétien de Troyes, comfortable with the use of irony in everyday court interactions, was therefore easily able to translate this skill into his works. Perhaps one of the most important reasons why irony was commonly found in the medieval romance, particularly when we consider the case of Chrétien de Troyes, was that irony, as discussed earlier, was a way for the composer to insinuate his true values into a piece with which he did not necessarily agree without directly insulting the values of the patron and those who would be listening to the composition. Green writes that “ the risk is [great] when the poet criticizes or calls into doubt a fictional character with whom patron and listeners can identify, or even their contemporary mode of existence which they would rather see legitimised by undiluted praise...If [the writer] is to minimise the danger of giving offence and frustrating his didactic intention it will be tactically advisable to disguise his criticism, to approach his goal by an indirect route, in short to realise that the insinuations of irony might be

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more effective, and are certainly safer, than the openness of satire" (374).

Chrétien certainly may have found himself in an awkward position when the Countess of Champagne commissioned Lancelot, a work with which he found himself morally at odds, and he imbued the narrative with irony in order to mitigate his discomfort with the values outwardly endorsed by the text.

Given the greater objectivity that many medieval composers held by virtue of their distance from court society, it would seem that this technique would have been utilized frequently in order to convey criticism of the courtly lifestyle without insulting the patron - literally, without biting the hand that fed them. The effect of the irony present in medieval romances was further enhanced by the excessively normative structure of these tales. The themes, symbols, and features were so consistent that the shock of ironic statements was greatly increased, making them more effective. Green writes that the "conventional and normative" structure of the medieval romance provides a breeding ground for irony (384) in that the "art-form...suggests such a degree of acceptance of what has been inherited from others that it is difficult to reconcile these conditions with what irony naturally implies, a questioning of what is taken for granted...Although these conditions cannot have brought irony about, it can be argued that, once irony had been generated in the romance for various reasons, the presence of typical, normative conditions would make the shock of that irony much more effective than if the obstacle they presented had not existed" (384-385).

While irony took seed in the medieval romance largely for the reasons delineated above, its effect is so striking for the very reason that the narrative form of the medieval romance is so unwaveringly standardized. It has been established, then, that irony did, indeed, exist in the medieval

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romance for a number of reasons, but what draws our attention to the story of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* in particular? The tale of Lancelot is one in which the ironic undertones are particularly apparent, in large part, as has been discussed, due to Chrétien's distaste for the subject matter that had been commissioned by Marie de Champagne. Certainly, Chrétien was eager to please his patron, as is clearly seen in the opening paragraph of *Lancelot*, in which he directly flatters the Countess, declaring himself "entirely at her service" (207). Frappier writes that "as a professional writer, Chrétien was eager for success, liberal in praise of his patrons" - he would endeavor to fulfill his commission, regardless of his discomfort with the sense she requested, and so he utilized irony in order to refrain from insulting his patron, criticizing the values she proposed only indirectly. "In the medieval times," writes Green, "criticism tend[ed] to be voiced indirectly, as a concealed undermining of apparent praise" (376). Irony, therefore, was a mechanism by which Chrétien could express his true views without alienating both his patron and his audience. One must, of course, consider the possibility that Chrétien may have been rather excited by the opportunity to be forced to write an entirely objective story - one with a sense stemming not from his own value system, but one invented for him by a patron. The challenge may indeed have been quite alluring, and Chrétien may have enjoyed outwardly endorsing passionate, adulterous love while simultaneously building irony into the story in order to demonstrate his true beliefs to any listener astute enough to grasp his meaning. Most members of the audience would most likely not have picked up on the ironic subtext - Green writes that "because so many of these signals [of irony] avoid any heavy explicitness and can thereby achieve very subtle effects, it is possible

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that some medieval listeners may not have noticed [the irony]" (29) - but it must certainly be taken into consideration that a writer of Chrétien's skill may have enjoyed the game of interweaving his own beliefs and the sen requested by the Countess. Not all scholars on medieval romance agree that Lancelot is intended to be read ironically, but this disagreement is the very reason why the impact of the irony in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* is so great. Karl D. Uitti, author of *Chrétien de Troyes Revisited*, presents a counter-argument, positing that Lancelot, far from being a somewhat ridiculous, ironic character, is rather intended to be portrayed as the flower of chivalry. Uitti writes that " Lancelot incarnates a pure and absolute love for the queen...Lancelot appears to be telling us [that] the service of Woman, Love and the Heart constitutes a proper...venue of authentic knightly prowess" (72). According to our analysis of Lancelot, what Uitti is reading is the top layer of Chrétien's story, neglecting to take note of the underlying irony. As Green writes, however, many listeners would not have noticed the irony in Lancelot, and this is surely Chrétien's intended effect: Were each and every listener to pick up on the ironic subtext, the effect would be destroyed, not to mention the fact that the female patron and listeners would be dissatisfied with the work. Although there are many reasons, from critical distance to comfort with roundabout ways of phrasing, for medieval writers to have utilized irony in their romances, the primary aim of the irony in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* was to subtly criticize the sen with which his patroness had provided him, safely indicating his true values while still abiding by the material he had been asked to work with.

Lancelot continues to fascinate us to this day not only because it is the remarkable achievement of a great and highly influential medieval writer, <https://assignbuster.com/behind-the-courtly-facade-the-function-of-irony-in-chretien-de-troyes-le-chevalier-de-la-charrette/>

but because it gives the modern reader insight into who Chrétien truly was, not only as a willing composer-for-hire, but as a man. References Chrétien de Troyes. *Le Chevalier de la Charrette: Lancelot*. Trans. W. W. Kibler.

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