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Dethroning female desire : muted moments of pleasure in Chretien de Troyes' Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart

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Dethroning Female Desire: Muted Moments of Pleasure

in Chretien de Troyes'

Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart

by

Jennifer L. Black

A Thesis

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Abstract

In his article “Masoch/Lancelotism,” Jeffrey Cohen frames the adulterous relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot found in Chretien de Troyes’ *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart* within a discourse of masochism. Cohen argues, “Lancelot’s reduction to a knight without a horse, lance and name transpires because he is bound to the missing queen through the masochistic contract, a consensual agreement that delimits gender boundaries within a predetermined relationship of activity and submission” (Cohen 245). Interestingly, Cohen’s discussion of consuality fails to acknowledge moments in the poem when Guinevere’s pleasure is rendered mute. As a result, masochism is an inadequate framework through which to read *Lancelot* because it cannot explain these moments of unintelligible female pleasure.

In this paper, “Dethroning Female Desire: Muted Moments of Pleasure in Chretien de Troyes’ *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart*,” I examine the moment in the poem in which Guinevere’s pleasure is muted. I argue Chretien does not show his reader what female pleasure looks like/reads like during sexual intercourse because chances are Guinevere’s ecstasy would look/read like Lancelot’s, resulting in the feminization of this heroic knight. Therefore, muting female pleasure is a way to retain the privileges of masculinity. I suggest that medieval social ideologies and practices, such as chivalry, feudalism, and patronage reveal an intensely deep anxiety about female pleasure and these anxieties provide a constructive way of reading Chretien’s moments of muted female pleasure.

In his article “Masoch/Lancelotism,” Jeffrey Cohen frames the adulterous relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot found in Chretien de Troyes’ *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart* within a discourse of masochism. Cohen argues, “Lancelot’s reduction to a knight without a horse, lance and name transpires because he is bound to the missing queen through the masochistic contract, a consensual agreement that delimits gender boundaries within a predetermined relationship of activity and submission” (Cohen 245). Because masochism is a version of male desire that is authorized by what a female demands of him, it is tempting (and maybe pleasurable) to celebrate Chretien’s romance as one that aggressively attends to what women want in willing exchange for masculine subjugation. Dominant women, like Guinevere and the “beautiful girl” are (em)powered by language, uninhibited in expressing what it is they desire from/of Lancelot. And Chretien does not censor the articulation of female desire, be it the “beautiful girl’s” demand for sex as tender for lodging or Guinevere’s order, “I want you in” (4623)—tempting us to praise Chretien for writing such potent female characters alongside a knight who reduces himself to riding in a cart used “for every kind of criminal” (325) for the sake of a woman.

If we look to the scene of the “beautiful girl” and Lancelot, however, we come to understand why celebrating and praising Chretien for his treatment of female desire is merely a matter of temptation. When the “beautiful girl” meets Lancelot on his way to find Guinevere, the “elegantly dressed and bejeweled” (940) girl offers Lancelot the comfort of her home for the night but, she adamantly explains, “in order to enjoy my home/ You have to sleep with me./ My offer’s conditional and these are my terms”(948-51). Concerned for his comfort and “seeing he had no choice,/ Our knight accepted her

offer” (961-2). Following the girl’s directions to “try the night air for a bit...until you think I’ve been able to put myself to bed” (1044-5), Despite this it is against his will, Lancelot is “determined/ To keep his word” (1061-2) and fulfill his promise to the girl despite his heartache for Guinevere. When Lancelot returns to the house “he could not find the girl/ Who wanted to be his lover” (1056-7). Following the sounds of screams that echoed throughout the hall, Lancelot is lead to a room and sees “right in front of him,/ A knight who had tumbled the girl,/ Her clothes turned up, across/ A bed, and was holding her down” (1069-72). The girl pleads for Lancelot to rescue her before she is “dishonored” (78). “You’re the one I am supposed/ To sleep with—you promised!,” The girl demands. “Can you let him/ Take me like this by force/ Right under your eyes?” (1079-81).

Conflicted between his desire to please the girl, to do what she wants him to do, and to reach his devout love, Guinevere, Lancelot reasons that he can’t proceed to find Guinevere if “my heart/ Is only as brave as a rabbit’s” (1105-6). He chooses to save the beautiful girl from rape. Yet he will soon learn that it is staged, a trick to see if Lancelot would be the valorous knight his chivalric code warrants of him: “With a snap of the wrist, she waved/ Away knights and men/ And all” (1189-91). Following the staged rape, the girl leads Lancelot to a bed “beautifully made/ With soft, flowing white sheets” (1201-2). Bound by his promise to the girl, but with his heart endowed to Guinevere, Lancelot suffers a tug-of-war between his desire to be a good knight and his love for the queen. “The girl could see/ Her company caused him discomfort” (1248-9) and requests permission to leave the bed. “You’ll be more at ease alone,” she tells him and returns to

her own bed to sleep (1256). Chretien tells us Lancelot “was pleased to have her leave,
For his heart was fully committed/ To someone else” (1269-70).

Chretien structures this scene as one designed to test both Lancelot’s chivalric resolve and his ability to remain faithful to Guinevere when tempted by the body of another. As in all “good” romances, Lancelot turns out a hero, holding fast to the integrity of Arthurian chivalry by protecting the “beautiful girl” but not sleeping with her. Yet, while this scene suggests that women are given space to articulate desire, it also renders that desire inconsequential, at least to the women who never receive the pleasure they desire. That is why we must not be tricked by the predictability of the romance tropes in here: the damsel in distress, the knight in shining armor, the grand castle, the knight’s refusal to be disloyal to his true love. Instead, we must analyze the structure of this scene in terms of its representation of female desire. Just how much power does Chretien *really* assign his female characters?

For one, why is female desire expressed mainly as false, a mere scheme to test Lancelot’s commitment to the chivalric code? Chretien misuses female desire, posing it not as a worthy thing in and of itself, but as a device that ultimately concerns chivalry, or more accurately, masculinity. What starts as a representation of a woman’s sexual pursuit turns into a moral about knightly virtue. The “beautiful girl” is scripted as “temptress,” the corrupting female who tries to rock the ground on which Lancelot exists. Sadly, it is not surprising that the woman who asks for sex is associated with sin, temptation and trickery. Her presence, her very being, her every word is inserted in the poem not to establish the presence of the “beautiful girl” as a powerfully articulate desiring female character, but as a means to prove Lancelot’s devotion to Guinevere,

despite its effeminate qualities, is overflowing with masculinity. He is a knight of Arthur's court, unmoved by beast and woman alike.

Furthermore, why does the girl's desire for Lancelot become displaced onto another man? In spite of the charade she masterminds, the "beautiful girl" articulates her desire, only to be taken by another knight. Granted, the trickery of the rape suggests she does "consent" to this knight's ravishing of her for the sake of Lancelot's test, BUT, this seems to strongly suggest that female desire, even when articulated is insignificant because either a man will have to concede to those desires in order for them to be fulfilled, or the female body will be forced to fulfill an undesired man's desires; her own desire is compromised.

It is certainly clear the "beautiful girl" wants to have sex with Lancelot. She clearly, directly expresses this to him, leaving no doubt in his, or the reader's mind what her intentions are. But again, such intentions turn out to be meaningless because the girl ends up leaving Lancelot's bed entirely unsatisfied. Thinking about the function of this scene—to prove Lancelot's heroic and chivalric nature—Chretien knew the moment he wrote the "beautiful girl's" lines of desire, they were empty, false, never to result in the pleasure she so boldly demanded.

Masochism is Impotent

The scene of the "beautiful girl" sets up the disturbing relationship between female desire and pleasure in *Lancelot*—women are given space to express desire but their pleasure is never achieved. In the opening of this essay, I noted Jeffrey Cohen's claim that *Lancelot* is a poem about masochism, a poem that wants to imagine a "configuration of identities, one in which the articulation of masculinity does not find its

dominance” (235). It is true that through Lancelot’s submission to Guinevere (a topic which will be addressed shortly) the supremacy of masculinity in the poem is called into question. But, if the scene of the “beautiful girl” is one that models an alternative to masculine dominance, then what the text wants to posit as female power is troublingly deflated. Female pleasure is never achieved. And herein lies the impotence of thinking about *Lancelot* in terms of masochism: It fails to analyze the problem of unachieved and unarticulated female pleasure. A masochistic reading of *Lancelot* avoids the problem of female pleasure in this structure; it conveniently evades the very true fact that this is a topic desirous of analysis, critique and awareness.

We need not go further than the scene of the cart to witness masochism at its best. In a masochistic structure, female desire does not result in female pleasure, but instead produces male pleasure because his desire to perform the very actions and words that women want are realized. His “satisfaction comes from suffering or humiliation” as directed by the woman he desires (Finke 32). Through the episode of the cart we gain access to understanding male desire in a masochistic structure. Chretien explains the “cart” was used “for every kind of criminal,/ Exactly like the pillory/ Today—murderers, thieves,/ Those defeated in judicial/ Combat, robbers who roamed/ In the dark, and those who rode/ The highways” (325-32). The repercussion of “being set in the cart/ And driven up and down/ The town” (333-5) was brutal, especially for a knight: “Their reputations/ Were lost, and the right to be present/ At court; they lost all honor/ And joy” (335-7). When the Dwarf offers Gawain a ride in the cart, Gawain is bitterly insulted and strikes him as “the height of absolute folly” (388). Lancelot, on the other hand, maddened by his love for the queen takes pleasure in the “shame” that “Love had commanded”

(375). Later in the poem, following Guinevere's "cold greeting" (4385) Lancelot is in a state of pleasurable pain as he debates in his mind why "my lady didn't like what he did" (4383-4) and declares that even though riding in the cart has showered him with "shame, and reproach," (4388) he would have "many times/ Over, and accepted it gladly" (4388-9). Not only does Lancelot claim he would shame himself repetitively in honor of Guinevere, but he also is pleased to receive the "cold greeting" that accompanies his shame because the pain or trouble it causes him brings about a pleasure that can only come out of his submission to her.

Laid out in these terms, reading *Lancelot* as a poem about the intricacies of masochism seems a perfect fit. The ingredients are in place: the "cold woman" and ever devout and submissive male. However, reading the whole of the poem in this way is problematic for a variety of important reasons. Yet, such a move only duplicates and does not analyze the problem of unarticulated female pleasure. It duplicates, as well, the familiar notion that women gain pleasure out of frustration of their desire. Whereas the "beautiful girl" is unable to obtain pleasure, Guinevere receives pleasure (or so Chretien leads us to believe) but it is made unintelligible, not articulated or described. On another level, the very dynamics that drive the masochistic structure are synonymous with the dynamics of major medieval social structures such as chivalry, feudalism, and patronage. Analyses of these structures suggest anxieties about female pleasure manifest or displace themselves in the form of masculine desire or masochism—a crucial insight into the problematics of female pleasure in *Lancelot*.

Masochism is an inadequate framework because it cannot explain the moments Chretien's text mutes female pleasure. To explain why a masochistic reading is not

entirely productive, I will turn next to the moment in the poem in which Guinevere's pleasure is muted. I hope to demystify female desire in Chretien's poem: the poet offers a mute representation of a female; he thus seems to represent as sexually inconsequential. I suggest that medieval social ideologies and practices reveal an intensely deep anxiety about female pleasure. These anxieties provide a way of reading Chretien's moments of muted female pleasure.

Muted Moments

When "finally the thick, dark/ Night fought the day/ To its knees and slowly covered it/ Over with its heavy cloak...[Lancelot] slipped outdoors, careful/ That no one was watching" and stole to Guinevere's window for their planned rendezvous (4550-3, 4571-2). Acknowledging her lover has arrived, Guinevere tells him, "I want you in" (4623). Such a statement, no doubt a pun on the word "in," offers an expectation on Guinevere's part that Lancelot will, in fact, enter and pleasure her. Eager "to pull the window apart" (4643) and remove the bars in order to come into the room, Lancelot tells Guinevere to "Go back to bed, lady,/ But have no fear: this/ Is work I can do quietly" (4634-6). Guinevere says, "It's better for me/ To be back in bed, not standing/ Here for everyone to see" (4631-3). Interestingly, the text never shows Lancelot performing the "work" that the statement above is actually alluding to, and he never "works" in "their lovemaking" as well. For example, upon "Bowling in adoration" (4659) before the queen, she "reached out/ her arms and drew him down,/ Holding him tight/ Against her breast; making the knight/ As welcome in her bed, and as happy,/ As she possibly could" (4661-6). Similarly, "the knight had/ What he wanted, for the queen willingly/ Gave him all the pleasures/Of herself, held him in her arms/As he was holding her" (4679-80). Lancelot's

pleasure is welcomed and satisfied “all night long” as he “experienced incredible joy” (4692-3). It is Guinevere who does the holding, kissing, pleasuring. Guinevere is repetitively positioned as the pleasure-provider for Lancelot. She is the impetus of “the kisses, the embraces” (4682).

In his submissive position to Guinevere, Lancelot appears to be worshipping her. Yet, ultimately, it is she that worships his body, fulfilling his desires for her. And although he “was holding her,” his desires and pleasures remain the focus of the narrative; articulated and satisfied. Yet, if “he/ Loved her a hundred thousand/ Times more” (4669-71) then why do we never see any signs of Guinevere’s satisfaction?

Guinevere’s decision to return to bed so that she is not seen while Lancelot removes the bars from the window parallels and speaks to the idea that female pleasure in this masochistic structure is blocked, or at least unarticulated. Her inability to “be seen” as present to Lancelot’s entry indicates the text’s inability to create a space where Lancelot satisfies Guinevere. This is even more troubling if the scene of Lancelot’s “entering” the window is read as the scene of sexual “entering.” Guinevere’s removal from the window ultimately suggests the placement of her body does not matter in the sex act; and if her body is inconsequential then so are the desires which may throb within it. In other words, Guinevere’s hiding in bed functions as a subtext of concealment. Her body is hidden, unseen, invisible. Without a body, there can be no voice, no pleasure. Just as she is screened by her bed, so are her pleasures screened by the text. While some may argue that her position “in bed” alludes to her pleasure, such an assumption reiterates centuries and centuries of attitudes that situate women as less important, less worthy, less sexual. It would seem that if a woman is powerful enough to forge a

masochistic contract then she is powerful enough to have an orgasm—not one that is assumed, but one that is as intensely sensual, vocal and poetic as the very lines of verse that contain it.

As Guinevere takes Lancelot to the moment of climax, Chretien describes Lancelot's arousal as "a delight/ So fine, so wondrous, that no one/ In the world had ever before/ Known anything like it, so help me/ God!" (4683-7). And sadly, neither would Guinevere! Immediately, the narrator warns, "And that's all I'm allowed/ To tell you; I can say no more./These pleasures I'm forbidden to report" (4687-9). Chretien writes that he is "forbidden to report" the remaining details of the Queen and her Knight's love making. At the precise, crucial moment when the text might logically shift from Guinevere pleasuring Lancelot to Lancelot pleasuring Guinevere, Chretien turns mute. Just as Guinevere's screened body is "muted" from the window and hidden in bed, so is her voice, her sexual ecstasy muted at the moment she might be seen to experience pleasure. Earlier, we recall, the "beautiful girl" is also denied pleasure in this poem. In these repeated representations of female sexuality, Chretien duplicates oppressive/depressive notions that serve and elevate masculinity by containing femininity—keeping women as quiet, meek, invisible bodies rather than energized, articulate and passionate individuals.

The consequence of this *lack* of narration, this muted moment of sexual bliss, is the breakdown in what Cohen calls "consensuality." Cohen advocates consensuality in *Lancelot*, describing it as "the reiteration of power over time which is 'gender' (a process of citation which preconditions subjectivity itself), a space existed for realigning that *dispositif du pouvoir* so that it could function self consciously, visibly, rather than silently

and submerged” (236). Ideally, this structure calls for the normative positions of power associated with heterosexuality to disassociate. Traditionally masculinity or femininity norms would relinquish their grip, opening up new configurations of power between men and women. In terms of Guinevere and Lancelot, Cohen reads Guinevere as dominatrix successfully realigning positions of power in a way that is contractual, “a reworking of gender relationality through a technology of visibility” (236). Cohen claims Chretien writes a voyeuristic “lingering description of their love-making,” that revokes, “at the last moment the attainment of that joy” (248). Indeed, Guinevere may be the woman Lancelot subjects himself to, but Guinevere is also the woman that is throughout the romance furthest from visibility. Yet to frame this interaction as one of mutuality—“*their* love making”—does not address the fact that we never see Guinevere being made love to; the “joy” that is visible is not “theirs” so much as his.

While Cohen, thus importantly, calls attention to the problems of equality that arise in a system of relations that thrive on subordination and domination, he neglects to consider that a system that poses women as dominant actually seeks to undermine that portrayal of dominance. In other words, what seems consensual and contractual, what seems like a poem about men pleasing women, a poem about women having power over men turns out to be a representation of masculine power. This supposed female “power” lacks, it’s hidden, unseen, invisible, helpless, muted—it is “woman” as she is traditionally gendered. Nothing is rewritten, reordered, reworked in *Lancelot*. A familiar story of “woman” is only recoded, reinscribed, retold.

Since the text can’t speak for itself, since Chretien is apparently “forbidden” to tell the whole story, just what would Guinevere’s passion look like? In the opening of his article,

Cohen describes the love between Lancelot and Guinevere as an “uncomfortable account of bodies in pain that are indistinguishable from bodies in pleasure” (230). As this paper has tried to prove, the bodies in question are, in fact, utterly distinguishable from one another—one writhes in pleasure, one does not. However, by muting Guinevere’s pleasure, masculine pleasure and female pleasure are seen as “indistinguishable.”

I would argue that Chretien wants us to assume (or maybe even imagine) that the “joy” Lancelot experiences accounts for the joy that the poet refuses to assign Guinevere. It seems significant, however that he doesn’t show this sameness; only alludes to it. Chretien does not show his reader what female pleasure looks like/reads like during the sex act because chances are Guinevere’s ecstasy would look/read like her partner’s. Because his role is one of submission, Lancelot is feminized in his passion for Guinevere. Chretien differentiates between submission, or submissive desire, and female desire. Both are feminized, but submissive desire is favored, even masculinized by its capacity for articulation in the sex act. By not showing the reader what female desire/pleasure looks like/reads like, Chretien recuperates Lancelot from his “feminized” position, offering a view of a heroic knight, masculine even when submissive to love. In effect, female sexual pleasure cannot be articulated because of the need to retain and maintain masculinity as the center of power. The irony, of course, is that masochism pretends to posit the woman as the center of power. In actuality, she is denied the full manifestation of that power so as to retain the privileges of masculinity.

Courtly Love and Chivalry

This type of female “submergence” or “muting” isn’t something Chretien invents for *Lancelot*. Instead, Chretien duplicates attitudes about women that were very real and

essentially were the essence of the social structures and conventions of which he is a product. In the same way masochism masks the woman as powerful, courtly love does as well, making women, like Queen Guinevere, seemingly filled with importance, only to be empty and meaningless, purely markers that bolster male identity and order. Medieval singer-poets, or troubadours, of the south of France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries wrote poetry addressed to women of high nobility, to whom they vowed everlasting obedience and homage. In exchange for their deference, these poets believed they would be “ennobled, enriched, or simply made better” (9). In “The Rhetoric of Desire in the Courtly Lyric.” Laurie A. Finke explores this idea of the “ennobled knight.” Finke reads the courtly lyric as a veneration of the *dompna*, a term of address for the married noble woman, usually the wife of the poet’s employer. Viewed as the most virtuous and beautiful woman in the land, the lover, or the chivalrous knight, worships his beloved unwaveringly while she tests his love and valor. Finke explains, “His joy and his pain equally proceed from her. When she is kind, he is joyful. When she is cold, he suffers, even to the point of death...But his love for her is ennobling, it makes him a better man” (Finke 35). Notions of courtly love, like those Finke explains, emanate from Andreas Capellanus’s *Art of Courtly Love* (ca. 1185)¹.

While love that venerates a lady in the way Lancelot venerates Guinevere may appear pleasingly erotic to readers, the elevated placement of women in poetry did not reflect the actual status of women in the Middle Ages. Kathryn Gravdal, wonders

¹ Andreas defines love as, “A certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex. Among the rules as set forth by Andreas are that the lover should obey the commands of ladies in all manners and devote himself to the service of love, that love cannot exist within the bonds of matrimony (marriage being a contract and thus not a relationship of free giving), and that love is the source of all good (Dugan 234).

whether female characters, like Guinevere, are “placed on pedestals at all or rather insidiously disempowered” (Gravdal 208). Chretien’s disavowal of Guinevere’s pleasure represents disempowerment, especially in the way her silence renders her as a body that quietly disappears in the moments she would be most “bodily,” most visible, most “woman.” Like the masochistic model, the chivalric system appears to be overflowing with female representation and power. Yet, in this poetic matrix “the feminine object is emptied of all real substance” (Lacan 149) and women are understood simply as “pawns in a patrilinear culture, sacrificed to the need to assure the ‘legitimate’ succession of a male line through monogamy and to achieve the widest dispersion of family influence through exogamy” (Finke 41).

Fuedalism: Queen-less Guinevere

Peggy McCracken explains that the queen’s position in the court was both a precarious and vulnerable one, a position defined entirely by her marriage to the king and dependence on him for status (McCracken 3). “The influence that she gained over her husband through affection and sexual intimacy, and her status as mother of a son could all compensate at least partially for the inherent vulnerability of her position,” however, through her sexual relationship with the king and maternity she was simultaneously vulnerable to accusations of adultery and responsible for the failure to reproduce masculine heirs (3,10). Romance narratives centered on a queen’s adulterous relationship with one of her husband’s knights, according to McCracken, is a response, “sometimes indirectly, to issues raised by the evolving shape of queenship during the period of their production: the role of the queen in government, the importance of childbirth and succession in the royal family, and the importance of the queen’s chastity in the rituals

and symbolic structures of the royal court” (15). At stake for the adulterous queen “is the threat to the king’s honor that could be posed by his wife’s sexual transgression” and the disrupted “succession in the royal family” (2). So while the queen’s adultery is represented as a form of “true love,” romances about adultery address anxieties about status and legitimacy.

If romances concerned with adultery do in fact take up anxieties about status and legitimacy then Guinevere’s adulterous relationship with Lancelot would no doubt stir up and attend to anxieties about the queen’s ability to produce an illegitimate child, disgracing Arthur, and disrupting the royal line of succession. At the same time, because the goals of accusations of adultery in court are not intended to displace the queen, but instead “her lover from a privileged position in the court,” Lancelot is also a threat to the stability of the king’s ruling (23). Given that anxiety about illegitimacy ultimately is “an anxiety about women and power: about women’s power to hide paternity, about women’s power to subvert succession, and about women’s illegitimate access to power” (24) and also that the finding out of the adulterous relationship would banish Lancelot from the court, does it not make complete sense that Chretien would block Guinevere’s sexual pleasure and desire during the sex act from the text to skirt these scenarios of disruption? By not articulating her pleasure, the fear of an illegitimate child, as well as an “illegitimate access to power” is lessened, or even eliminated. Furthermore, if her pleasure is not articulated then there is no real evidence that Lancelot did penetrate her, sparing him of any guilt that might lead to Lancelot’s removal from the court. Once again, female articulation is repressed because of the threat it poses to masculine agendas of rule and power. In the same way Guinevere’s articulated pleasures would corrupt the

chivalric system, so would it disrupt structures of feudalism and royalty by dismantling social relationships between men—a king and his knight, the king and his patriarchal lineage.

Patronage and Wish Fulfillment

Chretien's devotion to his patron Marie, countess of Champagne, daughter of King Louis VII of France and Eleanor of Aquitaine, seems to play a crucial role in Chretien's protection of masculine structures via the refusal to articulate female sexual desire. Because marriage in the middle ages was primarily

the means by which men at the apex of the feudal hierarchy defined their relations with one another, through political alliances or through the orderly succession of the patrimony from father to eldest son...the disinherited second sons and other members of the lower nobility, who were often unable to marry, were largely excluded from these means of establishing social identity. They depended on the patronage of their feudal overlords, and the women worshipped in their lyrics were most likely the wives of their patrons and thus themselves powerful patronesses (Finke 41).

Under this structure, poets essentially had the nerve-racking task of pleasing the lord himself, the lord's wife and her female attendants, and the various degrees of noblemen of the court. In *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*, C. Stephen Jaeger asserts that inseparable from the poet's production of poems praising his patron "is also the motive of favor and advancement" (Jaeger 23). Therefore, Chretien, writing for a patron in a culture in which economic activity was executed through the exchange of gifts and goods, his poems serve as a valuable means of exchange with motives for promotion and favor. Chretien opens *Lancelot* with expressions of praise and statements of his indebted service to Marie, a move that illustrates this notion of devotion in exchange for promotion:

What I have to say is that this
Story has been better polished
By her work and wisdom than by mine.
As Chretien begins this tale
Of Lancelot, the Knight
Of the Cart, he declares that the subject
And its meaning come from his lady.
She gave him the idea, and the story;
His words do the work of her matter (21-9).

Chretien's introductory lines to *Lancelot* generate numerous implications and complexities in relation to this discussion of female sexual pleasure. Firstly, if we believe Chretien's declaration that "his words do the work of her matter," then the question that immediately comes to mind is: what does it mean that Marie "forbids" Chretien to tell his readers about Guinevere's desire and pleasure? In other words, what does it mean that women are forbidding men to represent female pleasure? This, yet again, holds a mirror to masochistic dynamics. Marie is demanding her male poet to write for her. And he performs "the work of her matter." Yet, her matter is censored for the sake of upholding masculine norms. While she is perceived as powerful, there are forces that mute her, that keep her from saying more. She, even in her role of power, is limited to higher, masculine powers and agendas.

Perhaps a productive way to look at this scenario is in terms of what Marie does permit Chretien to express rather than what she forbids of him. *Lancelot* is the earliest of romances to take up the theme of adultery. Considering the submissive, silent role of women in the Middle Ages, even noble women like Marie, her desire and wish for Chretien to write about adultery can be read as a brave, even bold move that signifies a step *towards* the articulation of female pleasure. Marie's request of Chretien to write

about such a brazen and threatening topic reasonably is accompanied by caution (the “forbidding”) on her part, especially considering the extreme laws and punishments for women who commit sexual offenses. As the mind behind Chretien’s words, Marie could be suspect as sexually criminal.

Secondly, in terms of the feudal system and its hierarchy, by Marie desiring her poet to articulate Guinevere’s desire but not achieve pleasure, Marie is able to bask in a romance that brings about disorder without disruption to the feudal system, keeping its structures in tact. The act of adultery between Lancelot and the queen is disorderly—the queen is unfaithful to her spouse and the knight is unfaithful to his king. Yet, at the same time, because Lancelot is never in the position to pleasure Guinevere, feudal hierarchy is maintained and not disrupted. In the feudal system, the woman is a fool who loves someone of lesser rank. However, there is never any suggestion in the corpus of courtly lyrics that men who love women of higher rank is frowned upon or punished in any way (Finke 65). As queen, Guinevere, through her intimacy with the king and her ability to mother his children, is assigned a higher rank than Lancelot. This suggests that Guinevere’s domination over Lancelot in her bedchamber is symbolic of her domination of her rank over his. And finally, we are not exposed to Guinevere’s sexual pleasure because according to hierarchy in this system, a knight does not dominate a queen.

Many critics have located Marie’s control over Chretien’s poem as detrimental because the subject matter caused the poet unease, forcing him to abandon the poem and leaving the work to be finished by another author, Godefroi de Lagny (Cohen 232). In fact, Cohen aligns Chretien with his protagonist, arguing Chretien is “oppressed by a superior, even capricious lady who requires unquestioning obedience from her

lover/servant,” and “unlike Lancelot, Chretien resisted the demand for subordination” (232). Yet, given my argument, and in part because submission is ideological in this period, we can align Chretien not with Lancelot, but with Guinevere. Taking this comparison one step further, both Chretien and Marie may be aligned with Guinevere. The poet, the patron and Guinevere each have desires that exist, but remain to a degree unarticulated. For Chretien, his desire for patronage and status is indirectly stated through his act of creating art that meets the demands and liking of his patron in the same way that Guinevere expresses her desire but is refused a space to experience and express pleasure. Like Guinevere, Marie is assigned “power” but it is also limited and forced to mute its full potentiality. All three, bound to structures of feudalism and patronage—ideologies of submission—are required to be faithful and chaste to their “contracts” with patron or spouse. Just as the queen is expected to produce sons for the king’s royal patrilineage, so is the poet and expected to produce art for his patron to ensure her continuous pleasure, the irony being her “pleasure” is limited. Ultimately, Chretien, Marie and Guinevere represent the ways ideologies grounded in submission silence those whose articulated desires have the potential to devastate those very ideologies.

The script of the masochistic hero, which testifies to “the woman of cold pleasure who enjoys the negations of her lover rather than of herself” (Cohen 247) is contestable when applied to subjects of structures fastened to ideologies of submission like chivalry, feudalism and patronage in the Middle Ages. The fact that Guinevere is reduced to a self-erased state in the bedchamber scene indicates not a “consensual” negation of the masochistic hero by his lover (so to keep his desire in process), but a binding or mandatory negation of the female—a contract devoid of pleasure and finally of non-

negotiable sexual sacrifice for her. Because we can not find the articulation of female pleasure in *Lancelot*, the limitations of romance for revealing such female sexual pleasures is exposed. And while a discourse of masochism is applicable to the relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere, it appears to join other prevalent discourses that share an anxiety about the nature and power of female pleasure, making it both problematic for examining issues of female desire and a point of departure for such a discourse to open that celebrates rather than banishes female pleasure.

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Publications

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Work Experience

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Created and maintained the "Competitive Corner Web site"—a web site which aimed to keep the sales force abreast of Unisys competitors and their products.

Interfaced with key marketing managers to coordinate and write Unisys responses to competitors' activities.

Web Account Manager, Unisys Corporation, Blue Bell, Pennsylvania (January 1999-April 2000)

Managed and maintained various internal and external Unisys web sites.

Wrote and edited content for these websites.

Interfaced with internal clients to explore ways to improve the effectiveness of the websites.

Engel Publishing Partners, West Trenton, New Jersey (Summer 1998)

Researched and compiled information for CD ROM Directory of pharmaceutical companies.

Utilized press releases, annual reports, and the Worldwide Web to obtain and compile pertinent information.

Externship with author Rebecca Price Janney, Horsham, Pennsylvania (January 1998)

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**END OF
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