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Love is a Battlefield

The theme of love is— and seemingly always has been— one of the most popular and frequently explored in all of literature. In Chrétien de Troyes’s “Cligès,” there is a focus on the courtship and romance of the title character’s parents. Chrétien employs the established rules of courtly love to describe the couple’s interactions, but in his article “Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and Perceval,” author Peter Haidu argues that these ideas and practices are little more than parodies of themselves. Lines 453-542 of “Cligès” describe the beginnings of the mutual attraction between Alexander and Soredamor and are crucial to the text in that they lay the foundation for the rest of the story. Most of this passage focuses on Soredamor’s internal struggle, her questioning of the authenticity of her feelings, and kicking herself for desiring something that causes her so much pain. The last paragraph of this excerpt incorporates Soredamor’s mother, who gives the reader an anchor within the text, and looks upon this budding love with questionable knowledge of the topic.

The aforementioned passage comes towards the beginning of the text, as Alexander and Soredamor find themselves together on a boat en route to France, and after the narrator has established that Soredamor— in spite of her great beauty— has no interest in love. The first two lines of this passage come directly after this establishment: “Now Love would make her suffer. Love was planning to avenge himself well for the haughty pride and imperious disregard she had shown him always” (92). Love acts almost as a character itself in this context, and the fact that the word “love” is capitalized supports the theory that Chrétien is trying to personify it. In these two lines, love is a vengeful, angry character who wants to take revenge on someone who has ignored it. True to form, love will make both Alexander and Soredamor suffer deeply before anything comes of their mutual attraction.

The idea of love as a character extends past these two lines, and into the rest of the selected passage. Throughout the next few paragraphs, Chrétien portrays love as something of a cruel caretaker, who “heated [Soredamor] a bath that tormented and scalded her painfully” (93), and who toys with Soredamor’s heart and mind as she questions both her reason for falling in love, as well as the loyalty of her eyes to her heart. According to Soredamor, “the heart does not lament what the eye does not see” (93), and, therefore, if Alexander is out of her sight, she will be content. Because he is not, though, and she is forced to look upon him, and blames her eyes for making her fall further in love with Alexander.

Although it is clear to Soredamor and those around her— such as her mother— that she has fallen for Alexander, she questions whether or not he feels the same, and is tormented by the uncertainty. However, lines 534 and 535 inform the audience of Alexander’s feelings: “Although she believed she defended herself against Love, defense helped her not. God, if only she knew that Alexander, for his part, was thinking of her!” (93). In this passage, Chrétien adds to love’s character, and portrays it as a sort of annoying bully against whom Soredamor must defend herself. This passage is also crucial to the text in that it establishes Alexander’s love for Soredamor without having him inform her of the fact. This creates a sense of tension between the reader and the two lovers, and gives the reader a sense of the awkwardness that exists between two people who are unaware that the attraction between them is mutual.

One of the most pivotal sections of the excerpt states, “Had they known each other’s desires, this love would have been unhampered and true, but Alexander did not know her desire, and she did not know the cause of his pain” (93). Here, love is no longer a character, but a noun. Chrétien has knocked love down from its original role as a meddling troublemaker, and marks its maturity into a sophisticated emotion. This passage also shows the reader that Alexander, like Soredamor, is pining painfully in the name of love.

The final paragraph— lines 538 through 542— are centered on Soredamor’s mother, the queen. Although she can sense something is happening between her daughter and Alexander, she attributes the strange looks they are giving each other to seasickness, and lets the matter lie. However, this can lead the reader to wonder whether the queen has ever experienced love herself. If she had, it seems only natural that she would be able to recognize the signs from experience, rather than chalking them up to motion sickness. The queen quickly places blame on the sea, as though she is looking for someone to hold in contempt for her daughter’s illness. However, Chrétien makes it clear to the reader here that the sea has done nothing wrong, and that love is the one to blame. The queen gives the reader a place to step into the text here, and acts as a naïve third party to the young couple’s infatuation. Although the audience already knows what Soredamor and Alexander are going through, she seems too close to the situation to see the larger picture.

Although this complicated love story may seem like a lot of trouble for two characters who are not even the main characters, one must consider the time period at hand. In medieval times, your origin is just as important— if not more so— than the way you live your own life. Such as the case with King Arthur, whose extraordinary beginnings lead to an equally extraordinary life. Establishing this sort of fated meeting for Cliges’ parents lays the foundation for an extraordinary origin, and, therefore, a life worth writing about.

With all this being said, there is still the question of whether the idea of courtly love is merely a parody of itself. In his article, Peter Haidu argues, however begrudgingly, that courtly love does not exceed the limitations of parody. According to Haidu, Chrétien understood the comedic power of a young, tortured, and clueless couple in love. Soredamor’s internal struggle with her feelings towards Alexander is a very modern attitude on the topic of love, particularly for the time in which Chrétien lived. Examining the topic of love through the struggle faced by those who are afflicted by it, and comparing it to a sickness, are parodies of the romance genre in and of themselves. Although Chrétien is credited with the creation of the genre as we know it today, it seems that he understood both the relativity and comedic value of complicated, ambiguous, and even painful unrequited love.

This passage is crucial to the text in that it establishes the context for an extraordinary romance, and the subsequent origin of the title character, Cligès. However, it is important and interesting to note Chrétien’s understanding of the literary impact of love, and how it can prove relatable in a way that transcends class and time. This model of romance is one which exists to this day as a popular formula in movies and literature, and one which is likely to continue for centuries to come. Despite the comedic aspects of Chrétien’s text, it must be said that this story was the first of its kind, and, for the time, would establish a solid foundation for Cligès’ extraordinary beginning and the life that followed. The fact that this story has existed to this day, albeit through modernizations, proves enough of a background for an extraordinary character such as Cligès and does great justice to the genre of romances as a whole.