

Rose Langley

Professor Meyer-Lee

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Feminine Obligation over Masculine Desire: A Gender-Based Analytical Critique of *First Knight* (1995) and *The Knight of the Cart*

Jerry Zucker's 1995 film *First Knight* and Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight of the Cart* address a complicated relationship between Sir Lancelot and Lady Guinevere. One of the most significant characterization differences between the film and the text is through the portrayal of Guinevere and her responsibility as a noble. In Zucker's *First Knight*, Guinevere is forced to choose her obligations to her country for political security against the invading army led by Maleagant. Meanwhile, in Chrétien's *The Knight of the Cart*, Guinevere is simply the driving force to keep Lancelot on the road in order to earn her love. This is a critical difference between the female obligation to matters outside herself and the masculine desire driving his own personal means of evolution. This obligation has interestingly not historically only been associated with women; in fact, many kings, just like King Arthur in the 1995 film, have gone in search of a prominent wife in order to secure political ties, create an heir to the throne, and to assure the people of their country that they are prosperous and well.

At the beginning of the film, after one of the Leonese villages has been pillaged, Guinevere must make the difficult decision to put her people and her country over her own heart and desires. After sending some of her councilmen away, she talks to Oswald, her favorite councilman. They then have this exchange in which Guinevere says, "I had hoped to have more time." "Don't you know your own heart?" "I know what I want. I want to marry. I want to live and

die in Leonesse. But I can't have everything I want, can I" (1995)? Guinevere desires her own life, one in which she can stay in her own country, marry whom she pleases, and rule peacefully without any outside intervention. She is not given this agency; instead, she is forced to either marry Arthur and secure her kingdom's protection or try and fight Maleagant off with her own meager army. This itself is not a choice, though Guinevere is required to make it and defend it and assure Arthur that he is one that she can love and does love. Her only other choice is certain death for her and her people.

Chrétien's Guinevere is completely different. Unlike the film, Chrétien's Guinevere has no real position in the text aside from leading Lancelot throughout the lands to prove his love. She is less of a person with her own agency and is instead a goal for Lancelot to achieve. Throughout the text, Lancelot keeps finding himself in the company of nameless damsels who are all attempting to lead him on the road to Guinevere, giving the only other women in the text the task of leading Lancelot to Guinevere: a woman so fair and beautiful that she must be paired with the best knight, and therefore the best man in the realm. Chrétien writes,

"The knight hesitated at the door, and thought: "God, what can I do? I am engaged in no less an affair than the quest of Queen Guinevere. I ought not to have the heart of a hare, when for her sake I have engaged in such a quest. If cowardice puts its heart in me, and if I follow its dictates, I shall never attain what I seek" (*The Knight of the Cart*).

Chrétien focuses his narrative on Lancelot's desire. He wishes to have Guinevere's heart and to do that, he must prove his love by abiding by her every wish. Nevertheless, focusing on Lancelot's masculine desire once again puts Guinevere in the position of obligation. Even if she wanted Lancelot, she is still married to King Arthur, and if she did not want Lancelot, his desire will eventually overpower her will and obligation.

Zucker and Chrétien's plots rely on the idea of love overpowering will and prevailing as an essential good. Though this love is mainly pursued by Lancelot in both tales, Guinevere has contradicting portrayals in the film and the text. In the text, Lancelot comes to Guinevere's room, and they engage in a passionate night of intimacy together, and it is initiated by Guinevere. The text states, "Now Lancelot possesses all he wants, when the Queen voluntarily seeks his company and love, and when he holds her in his arms, and she holds him in hers" (Chrétien). In the film, Guinevere is insistent on her will overpowering her own desires in love. Though she eventually admits at the end of the film her love for Lancelot and King Arthur, she is willing to sacrifice her desire for Lancelot for the more respectable choice of Arthur. There is even a strange dynamic between Lancelot and Guinevere that does not appear in the text, in which Lancelot continuously pursues Guinevere without her consent. Though Lancelot eventually realizes that trying to force her into something she does not want is wrong, they still come together in the end. Guinevere asks Lancelot for a kiss, finally giving in to her desires rather than focusing on her obligation as Queen.

Lancelot is the complete embodiment of masculine desire in both the film and the text, and he consistently gets what he wants in both tales. Guinevere does not have this freedom, and this disconnect is directly addressed in the film. After Lancelot has single-handedly saved Guinevere from Maleagant, he brings Guinevere back to Camelot when they stop in the forest to drink water from the trees. Lancelot tells Guinevere why he learned to fight and owns nothing. Through this conversation, the audience learns that Lancelot desires that he do Guinevere's every wish (something she willfully does in the text and something that Guinevere refuses in the film). Lancelot implores Guinevere, "'Tell me what to do.' 'Your life is your own.' 'I give it to you. [...] If you could freely do as you pleased, would you marry Arthur?' 'I'm as free as you are'" (1995).

Guinevere can never have as much freedom and agency as Lancelot has and would never be able to make the choices he does. He is allowed to pursue and obtain his masculine desires, the desire to roam around the lands with no family, no responsibility, and the ability to keep his station in life no matter what he does. Guinevere is burdened by her feminine obligation: The obligation to serve her community and to care for everything other than her own needs and wants to keep her station in life. Lancelot is, therefore, asking for the impossible. Her feminine obligations will keep her from obtaining her desires, and he will never be tied down with obligations he does not wish for.

Political burdens are something both men and women have experienced throughout history. In Zucker's *First Knight* (1995) and Chrétien de Troyes' *The Knight of the Cart*, both men explore ideas of love, masculine desire overcoming the odds, and female obligation. However, they contradict in Guinevere's portrayal in Lancelot's life and whether or not she could have an active role in her life or if she is simply an object to be attained.