

Chrétien de Troyes: “Le Chevalier de la Charrette”

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Abstract – Scholarly studies thus far have failed to provide a satisfactory explanation of Chrétien de Troyes’ apparent celebration of adulterous behavior in his romance “Le Chevalier de la Charrette” (Lancelot). This brief communication is intended to propose a new approach of study that may be promising.

The controversy engulfing Chrétien de Troyes’ romance “Le Chevalier de la Charrette” continues unabated. After decades of erudite research, no critical scholarly consensus is in sight, and puzzling questions remain. How could Chrétien, who celebrated matrimonial love in his first Arthurian romance, “Erec et Enide”, advocate adulterous passion? Why would the adulterer worship the woman he sexually desires as though she were a saint? Why does the adulterer himself have a messianic destiny? For what reason is adulterous behavior intermingled with engrossing religiosity, and the anonymity of the protagonist maintained until verse 36,762? And finally, why does the cart of shame become an epithet for the hero: “Le Chevalier de la Charrette”?

I suggest that rather than following the traditional approach of considering Arthurian tales as adventures in Never-neverland, we focus through the lens of Jewish mysticism which swept from the Rhineland to the Provence in the beginning of the 12th century. The puzzling questions may then appear in a new light.

The anonymity of the protagonist, of the knight of the cart - Of the three human types that exemplify the traditional Jewish religiosity, the Tsaddik, the righteous man, is not connected with a personal name. Righteousness, or the striving to meet the demands of the Torah is accessible to all. Anonymity therefore characterizes the Tsaddik as well as the knight of the cart.

The Tsaddik in 12th-Century Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah - Although staying within the general framework of the ancient tradition, the Kabbalists changed the concept of the Tsaddik by absorbing impulses from the new mystical inspiration. Gershom Scholem, the renowned scholar and pioneer of the academic study of the Kabbalah, analyzed these changes and concluded that (1) sexual symbolism is inseparable from the image of the Tsaddik and (2) the Tsaddik brings peace and harmony to the world; he has a messianic role.

The underlying principles that effected these changes are attributable to the Kabbalists’ disaffection with the anthropomorphic tendencies of the established Jewish religion. Ein-Sof, the Infinite, dwells unknowable in the depth of his own being. The divine essence, however, flows out and manifests itself in the created world. As an emanation of the Godhead, the Tsaddik acquires messianic qualities and sexual energy.

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The Tsaddik and the Shekhinah - The Shekhinah, the personification of God's indwelling or presence in the world has intimately accompanied the Jewish people for thousands of years. The Shekhinah is always God himself insofar as he is present in a specific place or a specific time. Nowhere in the Talmud or the Midrashim is there any hint of a dualistic tendency, with the Shekhinah as the feminine aspect of God opposed to the masculine element in the divinity. The emergence of a female Shekhinah in the 12th century is considered the most important innovation of the Kabbalah. Gershom Scholem suggested that this 12th-Century change was a response to a deep-seated religious need and that the mystics were the true representatives of the living, popular religion of the masses.

In the symbolic world of the Zohar, the new conception of the Shekhinah appears in a great number of names and images, the most important one is that of the Queen. If we surmise that Queen Guenievre is synonymous with the Shekhinah, the strange utterance when she is abducted and is mounting her palfrey becomes meaningful.

“Ha! Ha! se vos ce seussiez
Ja, ce croi, ne me leissessiez
Sanz chalonge mener un pas!”

“Alas, alas, if you only knew it,
I am sure you would never allow me
Without interference to be led away a step.”

In some manuscripts, the plea is addressed to the king, in others it is not addressed to anyone in particular. Some scholars believe that the queen is addressing the absent Lancelot, although Chrétien provides no clue for this interpretation. I suggest that it is the hair episode that supports the hypothesis that the queen is synonymous with the Shekhinah, and therefore, that she regrets the removal of the divine essence. Finding the comb of the Queen, Lancelot removes the strands of hair. The following twenty verses describe his adoration of it.

Car an ces chevox tant se fie
Qu'il n'a mestier de lor aie,

For he has such confidence in
this hair that he requires no other aid.

The veneration of the queens's hair is either ludicrous or represents an ulterior level of inspiration.

The new concept of a female Shekhinah can already be found in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the oldest extant kabbalistic text. Significantly, the book *Bahir* also alludes to the sacred union of the Tsaddik and the Shekhinah, or, to stay within kabbalistic theosophy, of the Sefiroth of Yesod and Malkhuth. In the Zohar, the 13th-century, Spanish Kabbalah text in which the fragments of the book *Bahir* were developed

into an elaborate Schema, the sacred marriage of the Tsaddik and the Shekhinah lies at the center of the doctrine.

To connect Chrétien's romance of the knight of the cart with kabbalistic beliefs seems at first glance absurd. Even if we admit that the analysis of the Arthurian tale through the lens of Jewish mysticism would answer some of the puzzling questions enumerated at the beginning of this communication, and even if we realize that the basic concepts of Kabbalism are quite easily grasped, Chrétien, we would have to conclude, created, under the veneer of the established Arthurian romance, a testimony to his religious affiliation.

Were it not for the title of the romance, "Le Chevalier de la Charrette" or the knight of the cart, the stigma of absurdity could seem appropriate. The "charrette", when it is first mentioned on line 21 of the romance, is described from the perspective of a judicial court of inquiry, whereby Lancelot's mounting it appears incomprehensible. It is Lancelot's unquenchable desire to find the queen that transforms the cart of shame to a cart of passionate devotion. The hypothesis that Chrétien was conversant with 12th-Century Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah), gains in persuasiveness if we maintain that Chrétien's use of the charrette indicates his familiarity with the oldest layer of Jewish mysticism, the chariot mysticism or the Merkabah. The central theme of the ancient mystical doctrine was the visionary journey to heaven. The mystics of his group called themselves Yorde Merkabah, the riders in the chariot.

Chrétien did not finish the romance "Le Chevalier de la Charrette" but conveyed the task to another author, Godefroi de Leigni. Most critics believe that Chrétien lacked enthusiasm for a tale about adultery that his patroness, Marie de la Champagne, had asked him to celebrate. If, as I suggest, Chrétien was familiar with the basic tenets of Kabbalism, the reason for his lack of interest in finishing the romance would be surprisingly simple: he had nothing more to say after the Tsadick had achieved the hieros gamos, the sacred marriage with the Shekhinah, the female aspect of the divinity.

Au departir a soploie
A la chambre et fet tot autel
Con s'il fust devant un autel.

When he leaves the room,
he bows and acts precisely
as if he were before a shrine.

Literature Cited

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