Romance through the Ages

In our culture, marriage is a direct product of love, passion, and duty for another person, but this has not always been the case. In the past, women were used as little more than bargaining chips for their family’s wellbeing, such as in “Beowulf.” However, as society progressed and cultures continued to intermingle, women were courted by knights who braved many trials to win the hand of a fair lady, as Lancelot did for Guinevere. Over time, examples of true and pure love also came into being. An example of this pure love is the story surrounding Lanval and his fairy lover. This evolution of marriage and relationships coincide with great cultural shifts, and represent how our current idea of marriage came to be. In the great works of “Beowulf,” Marie de France’s “Lanval,” and Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte D’Arthur, the ideas concerning romance may not be as we view them today, but each work contains an aspect that has survived to the present day – be it duty, passion, or true love.

To understand the present, we must first examine the past. It was in the earliest days of England that the Germanic ideals dominated the land. It was an incredibly war-like and male dominated culture, and “Beowulf” is the work that best represents this period of time. Women of this time, just as Wealtheow was, would have been married off for their family’s gain. It was a young girl’s duty, if she came from a powerful family, to act as a peace offering from their fathers’ to a family they were at odds with.
Wealtheow is a queen who is steadfast in these duties given to her and would have been a model to women of the time as, “[She] went on her rounds,/ queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,/ offering the goblet to all ranks,/ treating the household and the assembled troop [...]” (“Beowulf” 620-623). She is a wonderful peace-weaver both between her warring families and also amongst her guests at Heorot. She is depicted as a friendly and devoted queen while she is alone, though alongside Hrothgar she seems to transform into an insignificant character. This becomes apparent as she gives the cup to Hrothgar so he can drink from it first “because he was dear to them” (“Beowulf” 618). By including Wealtheow within the pronoun “them” instead of using “her,” the author is diverting the reader’s attention to Hrothgar instead of the queen, and also dismissing any romantic feelings that the two might share.

Although there were few romantic feelings between the two, according to Carol Jamison, “[Women] could find ways to move well beyond the role of object, asserting their influence as mothers and diplomats by king-making, or king-breaking, in their new husbands’ homes” (Jamison 31). It is true that as a mother to future heirs and advisor to a king Wealtheow had significant power. However, it was duty, power, and family affairs that bound her to Hrothgar, not love. This sense of duty is still desirable to this day. It is the women that can provide for their families through work, or by staying at home and raising their children, who are regarded highly by society. Although duty is still important, the French introduced the revolutionary idea of romantic love during the Middle English period.

It was in the 11th century that this shift of ideals occurred. The idea of courtly love was introduced by the famous and powerful Eleanor of Aquitaine, who married two
kings, one of England and one of France, in her lifetime and had influence over much of Europe. She greatly enjoyed poetry, songs, and music, which are reasons why it was a common practice for a suitor to serenade his beloved and perform romantics for her (“Eleanor Of Aquitaine”). Tales of these romantics became a staple in Middle English literature such as in Sir Thomas Mallory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, and it also became a very prominent plot device. According to Patrick Adcock, Lancelot is participating in courtly love which “is [...] a medieval convention in which a knight chastely loves and honors a lady without regard to her marital status. This chaste love eventually becomes carnal, sowing the seeds of destruction for Arthur’s kingdom” (Adcock 1). Lancelot performed many great tasks in the name of the queen, and his love for her became far too apparent. He was even warned not to meet with Guinevere by his fellow knights, but the passion and lust he felt towards the queen was insatiable.

The love triangle between Lancelot “the best knight among [the Round Table],” the fair Queen, and King Arthur reminds modern readers of a soap opera which tells their story (Mallory 483). As Patrick Adcock observes, “Guinevere loves her husband’s lofty nature and nobility, but she loves Lancelot with passion. Lancelot loves the king he has come to serve, but he loves Guinevere with passion. Arthur loves them both but is finally forced to stand against them” (Adcock 1). The unbridled passion and lust between Lancelot and Guinevere eventually tear the entire kingdom apart, leaving the Queen and Lancelot to die and Arthur wounded and awaiting his return in Avalon. Although these ideas of passion and lust are the downfall of the great Round Table, this idea of romancing the one you loved was radical. No longer just for familial gain, romance began to evolve into a matter of choice and passion, just as has remained to this today.
These basic stories of King Arthur and the Round Table were spread orally through much of the 11th century; however, it wasn’t until the 15th century that the stories were penned by Sir Thomas Mallory. While these stories were still in their earliest forms, there were many spin-offs because of the great popularity and the lack of one proper text. The lais by Marie de France are some of the earliest written versions of the King Arthur myths dating back to the 1100’s. Because they are written through the eyes of a woman, we can see the idea of true romance through a feminist view. In one of her lais entitled “Lanval,” Marie de France writes of the themes of honesty, true love, and repentance. According to Judith Barban, another revolutionary theme is that “both members of a couple must possess the same courtly qualities as each other, and they must be completely loyal to each other” (Barban). This differs greatly from the courtly love that was widely accepted after this poem’s publication.

Marie de France’s ideal of true and pure love is represented in this poem. She stresses the importance of oaths of loyalty and secrecy as Lanval and his fairy mistress make these promises to one another. However, oaths are easier made than kept. When Queen Guinevere insults Lanval by calling him homosexual, he replies that he “is loved” and that “any one of those girls who serve[s] [his love], /the poorest girl of all, /is better than you, my lady queen, /in body, face, and beauty” (De France 160). It is in these words that Lanval betrays his oath of secrecy, and his beloved fairy princess disappears from his grasp. He remains honorable however, and faces his punishment where “they could have killed him, for all he cared” (De France 161). It is this honor and acceptance of his punishment that calls his fairy lover back to him. This idea of unshakeable trust,
honor, commitment, and love is highly appealing, both in the past and in modern day. This is the true and selfless love that humans should strive for.

The ideals of marriage, romance, and love have changed drastically since the penning of these poems. Marriage is no longer just a business transaction between two families. Love is no longer about a passionate knight completing heroic tasks for the affections of his mistress. Furthermore, romance will probably never be as fantastical and perfect as we could wish. However, all of these ideals from “Beowulf,” Marie de France’s “Lanval,” and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* combine to create the views on romance we have to this day. A sense of duty, passion, and pure love may just be the ingredients to a long, happy, and exciting marriage.
Works Cited


