Limb and Love: A Narrative Shaped By and Against its Protagonist in *Service of Ladies*

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Ulrich von Liechtenstein, the supposed chivalric hero of *Service of Ladies*, is a perversion of the traditional medieval romance elements of romance and Arthurian tales. His character is brash, stubborn. He would make a prime example of a patriarchal society, masculine to a fault, unwilling to back down from whom he becomes enamored. He is a knight, a jouster, and in tune with the romances of the court—titles he perverts entirely in that he was not born into the higher-class society to which the lords and ladies the knights serve belong. He takes on the role of the noble knight in pursuit of his love and undergoes visceral changes to his body to fit into this role. His heart and his head are at war:

> My heart and body then conspired // to win the prize which both desired. // I went to her with loving eyes. // I thought with joy, "Can this be she // to whom I give my loyalty…?"[1]

He is not who he says he is, but in his yearning for his lady and the noble life, he is unnatural, and his knightly identity is separate from him.

But how does this perversion of romance occur? Medieval romance is "characterized by: 1…idealize[d] chivalry [and] the hero-knight and his noble deeds…the knight's love for his lady (courtly love) ….settings of medieval romance tend to be imaginary and vague…[and] often uses concealed or disguised identity…,"[2] all of which occur in *Service of Ladies*. However, Ulrich is neither knight nor noble. His entire adventure begins in disguise. Instead of a knight's love, it is a provincial's love. His hidden identity is the foundation of the story, as, without it, there would be no romance (in a love sense) or adventure.

Further, the genre itself is often "more distinctly [an] aristocratic form of literature"[3] as it tells noble stories and was more available to those of the so-called higher class of society. *Service of Ladies* is almost a parody of the genre, then, as the extreme elements of aristocratic society are highly exaggerated. Ulrich's tale is compelling, though, as instead of love and romance being on the periphery of an otherwise adventurous story, it is brought front and center as the catalyst for Ulrich's narrative. This centerpiece is incongruent with other medieval romance texts: "In most Middle English chivalric narratives love is peripheral or decorative, rather than central."[4] He is not a knight first, lover second, but rather lover first and knight second.

Love brought in from the periphery separates the *Service of Ladies* from other medieval romance texts, and it begins with hands:

> Many times in summer hour // I would gather pretty flowers // in fields and meadows, everywhere, // and bring them to my lady fair. // If she should take them in her hand // my joy was all that I could stand. // I thought, "Your fingers hold each stem // just where I was holding them."[5]

Should the author have said "you hold each stem" or omitted the inner dialogue entirely, the juxtaposition between violence and hands would not fully connect. The acknowledgment of fingers with the hindsight of its future loss centers on the violence undergone by Ulrich in pursuit of love. Ulrich swears loyalty to his lady. He jousts and sends word to her of his health. The moment his lady states that it is not enough for her that he is injured but fine, Ulrich further subverts the courtly tradition.

> She heard the finger was all right, // and she believes the wound was slight; // what I have told of you is lies // and I've deceived her, she implies. // She's peeved at you and quite upset // but glad you have the finger yet. // She wouldn't have the wound be bad, // it's just the lie that makes her mad.[6]

There is a turning point here. The lady states that she does not fully believe in both Ulrich's disguise or his knightly display and affirms that while she is happy that he did not lose the finger entirely, she is upset by a supposed lie that he is not actually injured as severely as he makes it seem. Courtly tradition is once again weaponized against him as one of lower-class, and even in his masquerade, the court takes what is most important to him: his finger. To prove his loyalty and that he is not a deceiver, he removes once more the injured finger, and for added effect, sends it to his lady to prove both his love for her and his jousting (or aristocratic) prowess. The court takes his finger from him in the first joust, but he removes it himself upon the second instance. He is forced to succumb to the whims of the court to keep up appearances, and he does so willingly. It is an unconscious fight to remove an "outsider" from a strict tradition where he does not belong and despite the hostility towards his mind and body. He is willing to lose both life and limb as proof that he is worthy of courtly nostalgia. As a jouster, his hand is most important, and it is taken away from him twice. Loss of limb as a motif is not at all uncommon in medieval romance. After Chrétien's *Perceval*, in which "amputation loses its connection to battlefield glory…missing limbs [then begin to] indicate a path toward redemption rather than the prelude to perdition."[7]

Ulrich is chasing a life that was never made for him nor accessible to him sans his masquerading as a knight. Under

the spell of courtly romance, Ulrich reshapes its tradition to fit his own narrative while at the same time becoming ensnared by the strict and ruthless life of the medieval court. He complies with the loss of his body to experience even a smidgen of a nostalgic romance that he has never, and will never, truly experience.

Notes

[1] 1 J.W. Thomas, "Ulrich von Liechtenstein's Service of Ladies," (The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1969), ll. 41-46.
[2] "Characteristics of the Medieval Romance," StudyLib, https://studylib.net/doc/7660250/characteristics-of-the-medieval-romance----, p. 3.
[3] Nathaniel E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance," (Modern Language Association: Mar 1923), vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 50-70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/457359, pp. 54.
[4] John Finlayson, "Definitions of Middle English Romance," (Penn State University Press: 1980), vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 44-64, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25093739, pp. 59.
[5] Thomas, "Ulrich von Liechtenstein," ll. 57-64.
[6] Ibid., ll. 435-442.
[7] David S. King, "A Motif Transformed: The Meaning of Lost Limbs in Arthurian Romance," (Seriptorium Press: 2008), vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 31-41, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27870903, pp. 38.

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