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Female Homosociality and the Marriage Plot: Women and Marriage Negotiation in *Cligés* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*

Amy Brown

This article considers marriage negotiation as a point from which to examine women's access to and use of power in the romance narrative. In Cligés, the foregrounding of female friendship provides an alternative to male-centred marriage narratives and frequently serves to highlight the importance of both consent and loving intention in a harmonious marriage. In Le Chevalier au Lion, female homosociality provides an alternative to the exchange of women between men, but the text also exploits the possibility of manipulation between women. In these two texts, the Chrétien corpus shows a sustained engagement with the potential uses and misuses of friendship between women.

It is characteristic that the romances attributed to Chrétien de Troyes – with the exception of *Le Chevalier de la Charette* – associate marriage with harmonious society and with the hero's progress into adulthood and independent lordship.¹ Among the works attributed to Chrétien, however, *Cligés* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* [are notable for the extent to which both use processes of arranging and consenting to marriage to open up complex issues relating to gender, power, and social status. In this article, I argue that the Chrétien corpus indicates a textual community aware of, and experimenting with, the relationship between female friendship and the power structures of male-dominated narratives. This awareness is not used to elevate the moral status of female friendship or of women as negotiators, but rather to engage with the possibilities and limitations of female resistance to male hegemony, and to invite reflection on whether the influence of women upon one another might be abused in such contexts.

Cligés is the second earliest of the surviving works in the Chrétien corpus, and *Le Chevalier au Lion* either the third or fourth.. Both romances are two-part narratives. *Cligés* opens with a prologue detailing the voyage of the young Alexandre to England, and his service at King Arthur's court, where he meets and marries Soredamors, with the aid of Guinevere. The main narrative concerns Alexandre's son, Cligés, who has been disinherited by his uncle, Alis, and who falls in love with Alis's betrothed Fénice. The couple hide their love, but eventually make a secret escape, with the aid of Fénice's servant, Thessala. *Le*

¹Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 91–94. Some of the research for this article was completed with the aid of a travel grant from the Medieval and Early Modern Centre, The University of Sydney.

Chevalier au Lion opens with a recounted adventure in which one of Arthur's knights, Calogrenant, is defeated by a stranger knight at a mysterious fountain. The young Sir Yvain resolves to avenge Calogrenant's defeat, and, after killing the stranger knight, becomes trapped in this knight's castle. There, he falls in love with and marries the widow Laudine, with the aid of her servant Lunette. He is subsequently estranged from Laudine for failing to return to her when he had promised to do so, and undergoes a series of adventures as the anonymous 'Knight of the Lion' before Lunette succeeds in reconciling the married pair. Throughout the narrative, Yvain places considerable value on his friendship with Gauvain, whose influence had been instrumental in his departure from his wife in the first place.

In *Cligés*, the involvement of female friends in marriage negotiation or, in the case of Fénice, marriage evasion, serves to highlight the abuse of power inherent in the tropes of marriage as a male homosocial transaction. In *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the friendship between Lunette and Laudine functions similarly, but in a substantially expanded role, in the first half of the narrative. Moreover, the development of the romance and the structural parallels between various characters – most notably Lunette and Gauvain – add complexity to the depiction of female homosociality. The relationship between Lunette and Laudine does not function merely as a source of support or an alternative to male power; the relationship serves to refract the ethical questions concerning Laudine's consent to marriage, which are fully integrated into the narrative's concern with conflicts of loyalty and the uses and abuses of personal power. The audience is invited to 'think through' the ethical implications and power dynamics at play between characters at each turning point, and the text resists simple didactic interpretation even to the end of the narrative.

Throughout this article, I refer to the 'Chrétien corpus' rather than Chrétien's works or Chrétien as author; my choice is modelled on that of the authors of *Thinking through Chrétien de Troyes*.² I do not do this because I do not believe there was an author writing as Chrétien de Troyes, but because, despite the long tradition of reading the Chrétien corpus as evidence of a single author's political or moral opinions, we actually know very little about that author. Given the extent to which the Chrétien corpus uses structural irony, we can rarely take any of

²Zrinka Stahuljak, Virginie Green, Sarah Kay, Sharon Kinoshita, and Peggy McCracken, *Thinking through Chrétien de Troyes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) (hereafter *Thinking through Chrétien*).

the text's moral pronouncements at face value.³ I foreground the corpus instead of the author I am primarily concerned with the texts' function? as the focal point for a literary exchange in which both author and audience are engaged. Questions of conduct, character, and ethics emerge, through this process of exchange as certain patterns and tropes are repeated and varied in different situations.

It is very rare to find any substantial narrative space devoted to an examination of relationships between women in medieval texts. When it occurs, it is particularly interesting because of the sheer scarcity of female homosocial relationships in high medieval models of friendship, whether literary or philosophical. Most medieval philosophers of friendship agreed: women could not be 'true' friends, neither with men nor with one another.⁴ The handful of surviving historical records of actual women's friendships – particularly monastic women's participation in the culture of literary friendship – help make up for the lack of philosophical sources, but cannot entirely fill that gap.⁵ That two texts in the Chrétien corpus embrace female friendship is worthy of note, and the intersection of those relationships with the texts' handling of other relationships provides an interesting (though not conclusive) insight into the types of ideas about the place of female friendship within a wider network of relationships which were available to participants – audience and author alike – in the literary exchanges surrounding the texts of the Chrétien corpus.

The group of scholars who produced *Thinking through Chrétien* identify commonalities between the lyrics and the romances ascribed to Chrétien: both groups of texts, they suggest, circle around a given problem rather than seeking a way out of it, as contemporary? scholastic literature would do. They call this 'thinking on the spot', a process analogous with running on the spot: it does not go anywhere in particular, but engages the

³See, for instance, Peter Haidu, 'Au début du roman, l'ironie', *Poétique*, 36 (1978), 443–66. Haidu argues for a process of triangulation from contradictory points within the text to estimate the location of the authorial point of view.

⁴Albrecht Classen, 'Introduction: Friendship – The Quest for a Human Ideal and Value: From Antiquity to the Early Modern Time', in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, eds Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandige (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1–183 (pp. 47–48, 81–91).

⁵See, for instance, Jennifer Constantine-Jackson, 'Sapienter amare poterimus: On Rhetoric and Friendship in the Letters of Heloise and Abelard', in *Friendship*, eds Classen and Sandidge, pp. 247–80.

same mental processes as does the real activity.⁶ By repetition, variation, intertextual references, and departures from chronological narrative time these texts do not prescribe solutions to recurring conundrums, but open up possible consequences both positive and negative. The patterns of ‘thinking on the spot’ and delayed signification highlighted in *Thinking through Chrétien* are also addressed by Constance Brittain Bouchard, although she uses a different set of terms. Bouchard suggests that Chrétien and his contemporaries drew on the patterns of dialectic reasoning in circulation among twelfth-century intellectual circles. However, the use of dialectic in romance does not tend toward the resolution of contradictions with clear answers: attempts on the part of any character to choose a single path or elevate on single value usually prove fruitless by the end of the narrative. Instead, the hero of romance moves toward balancing [must balance?] opposing principles in productive tension, through repetition and reflexivity in both the plot and discourse of the romance.⁷ It is therefore not productive scholarship to seek out a single didactic stance on the part of the author. The consistent entwining, in these texts, of marriage negotiation with female friendship suggests a creative willingness on the part of the literary community in Troyes and Champagne to experiment with the horizon of possibilities pertaining to the romance genre. In the case of these romances, this experimentation rests on the inversion and extension of tropes commonly associated with marriage, friendship, and interpersonal influence.

I set out these frameworks for reading the Chrétien romances because one of my four examples of marriage negotiation – the negotiation of Soredamors’s marriage to Alexandre – functions, within the *Cligés* romance, as a positive exemplar, in which the intervention of a female mentor allows all parties (characters and readers both) to be certain of Soredamors’s consent to the match.

Although the positive associations between female intercession and the successful establishment of a love match which appear in the Alexandre and Soredamors narrative are not sustained throughout the four episodes, the involvement of female intercessors is in each case linked with concerns about power and consent. By examining the variations in the narrative patterns by which the text ‘thinks through’ these problems, I will suggest that these texts show a particular, and nuanced, awareness of the intersection of political necessity and ecclesiastical law in negotiating noble marriages. The anxiety which these episodes within the

⁶*Thinking through Chrétien*, pp. 18–19.

⁷Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Every Valley Shall be Exalted: The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 60–69.

texts manifest, with variations in each instance, is not that women might be overtly forced into marriage – the Chrétien corpus as a whole reliably condemns forced marriages, such as, for instance, the invalid marriage of Enide to the Count of Limors⁸ – but that women in precarious positions might consent to marriage for reasons other than love or genuine compatibility. The marriage episodes think through, or around, the abuses of power which might lead to such outcomes..⁹ These texts offer no consistent warnings or prescriptions, but in each case the deliberations concerning consent to marriage serve as the platform for sustained literary engagement with the potential uses and misuses of power, and particularly, power between women.

I. Consent and Coercion: Fénice's Narrative

In the case of Fénice, the heroine of *Cligés*, her main source of support comes through close association with another woman who has resources unavailable to Fénice. This relationship allows her to counteract the misuse of male power by her father and her husband who attempt to enforce a marriage she does not desire. Critics of *Cligés*, notably Laine E. Dogget, have identified female homosocial solidarity as the chief source of support for Fénice. Her nurse, Thessala provides the only emotional support, shows the only real interest in Fénice's wishes within her family; moreover, Thessala provides practical means of resisting the unwanted marriage, a conduit of communication with Cligés, and finally a means of escape from Alis.¹⁰ I suggest that Fénice's evasion of marriage to Alis, through the intervention of Thessala, also

⁸ See Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. Jean-Marie Fritz (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992), 4745-4925.

⁹ Even the value of 'love' is slippery, especially in *Le Chevalier au Lion*. Frederick L. Cheyette and Howell Chickering ('Love, Anger and Peace: Social Practice and Poetic Play in the Ending of *Yvain*', *Speculum*, 80 (2005), 75–117) argue that the love Laudine promises to Yvain should not be understood as a private, romanticised emotion, but rather as the love, often referenced in historical documents, that is associated with the resolution of feuds: such love is a public performance of respect for one's ally. Yet Yvain, on first seeing Laudine, experiences love as an external force overwhelming his will. Indeed, the description of his experience is in accord with what we now call the 'hydraulic model' of emotions found in a variety of high medieval texts from romance to medical writing. For discussion of this model in the context of *Le Chevalier au Lion*, see Tracy Adams, *Violent Passions: Managing Love in the Old French Verse Romance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 13–15.

¹⁰ Laine E. Dogget, 'On Artifice and Realism: Thessala in Chretien de Troyes' *Cliges*', *Exemplaria*, 16.1 (2004), 42–72.

points to a contemporary anxiety concerning the possibility that *apparently* compliant brides might covertly resist their husbands, perhaps with the aid of other women. Such an anxiety would not necessarily be held by all members of the text's community, nor necessarily outweigh the other social and political factors which supported a system of arranged marriages, but the narrative's treatment of Fénice and Thessala's collusion might have appealed to such concerns where they existed.

The narrative does not shy away from depicting Fénice's distress at the match with Alis in her discussions with Thessala and private reflections. However, the text is also concerned with exploring and characterising the abuse of power and the neglect of customary process on the part of those who ought to protect Fénice's interests. In Fénice's own account of her situation, it is not her prospective spouse who is to blame for her predicament, but her father: 'When my father has given me to another (man), I cannot gainsay him.'¹¹ Here, the heroine responds to the necessity of her marriage to Alis. The emphasis on *speech* inherent in *contredire* (literally, speak against, which I have translated as 'gainsay') rather than, for instance, physical resistance or escape, invokes a particular model of marriage law, one which relied on the verbal exchange of consent as the determining factor in marriage, with consummation playing a secondary or supplementary role.

Following the circulation of Gratian's *Decretum* in the 1140s (an attempt to harmonise and codify existing canon law on various subjects, including laws pertaining to marriage and sexual behaviour), the twelfth century saw a flurry of writing on the canon law of marriage. Gratian's attempt to harmonise Church rulings on both consent and consummation prioritised consummation, but not all of his successors followed in that line. The canon law school that formed in Paris in the mid-twelfth century rejected Gratian's logic in favour of the primacy of consent.¹² The consent-based theory – summed up by Peter Lombard in 1164 – that the verbal

¹¹Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, eds Stewart Gregory and Claude Luttrell (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), lines 3148–49: 'Quant mes peres autrui me done | Ne je ne li os contredire.' Subsequent line references to *Cligés* are to this edition. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.

¹²For a comparison of the approaches taken in Bologna (Gratian, and modifications by successors), Paris (chiefly Peter Lombard) and the Rhineland (where canon lawyers endeavoured to harmonise the two approaches), see James Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 237–39, 260–68.

exchange of consent constituted the ‘efficient cause’ of marriage,¹³ assigned only secondary importance to consummation, making a distinction between present and future vows. Vows in the present tense were sufficient to constitute marriage, while vows in the future tense were confirmed by subsequent vows or coitus and thereby constituted binding marriage.¹⁴

In theory, Fénice ought, under the marriage laws of Chrétien’s period and indeed for some time before this, to have the right to reject marriage to Alis. In the late eleventh century, for instance, a niece [do we know her name?] of the King of Aragon and Navarre successfully won the support of Pope Urban II against her uncle’s attempt to marry her to one of his followers.¹⁵ Roughly a century later, Pope Alexander issued a ruling saying that a boy of fifteen was not obliged to follow through on a betrothal which his father had pledged him to as a child unless the marriage had already been consummated.¹⁶

In practice, it was far from easy for members of the nobility to escape marriage on the grounds of coercion. The text does not suggest that Fénice is subject to overt threats or sanctions: rather, she feels herself unable to voice her objection to the marriage. Even in private, her servant Thessala needs to exercise considerable insight and encouragement to extract from Fénice the information that she is in love with Cligés. The Church’s ruling on coercion in relation to marriage was that the pressure had to be sufficient to move a ‘constant man’, but to publicly demonstrate and prove such a thing would have been extremely difficult for many young people.¹⁷ Moreover, although Fénice’s marriage remains unconsummated, this fact too would be difficult to prove or to use in her own defence: not

¹³The definition of the ‘efficient’ cause of marriage is set out in Peter Lombard’s *Sententia in IV Libris Distinctae* (c. 1150). For a short translation, see Conor MacCarthy, *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 63.

¹⁴For a survey of the development of legal distinctions between betrothal and marriage, see Jean Baptiste Molin and Protais Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage en France du XII^e au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974), pp. 49–50. The distinction between consent given in future tense and present tense does not originate with Lombard, having been developed by various canonists and theologians throughout the twelfth century.

¹⁵For discussion of this case, see Martin Aurell, *La noblesse en Occident V^e–XV^e siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1996), p. 87.

¹⁶This case is cited in Georges Duby, *Le chevalier, la femme et le prêtre* (Paris: Hachette, 1986), p. 218.

¹⁷R. J. Helmholz, *Marriage and Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 91.

until the fifteenth century was there any papal decree granting an annulment solely on the grounds of non-consummation.¹⁸

Fénice has then good grounds to believe that, once solemnised, her marriage will be treated as legally binding. However, the absence of the marriage rite from the narrative points to the key problem in Fénice's social environment: it seems that no one around her is motivated to investigate her consent. The surviving record is incomplete – and we possess no liturgies from the county of Champagne – but evidence suggests that throughout the twelfth century specific clauses requiring priests to ascertain mutual consent were increasingly incorporated into marriage rites across France. Several Anglo-Norman explicitly oblige the priest to confirm the genuine consent of each party.¹⁹ Evidence is sparser for the Midi, but Jean Baptiste Molin and Protais Mutembe have identified two *ordos* (documents setting out the order of a particular type of service) which oblige the priest to investigate for either consent or 'whether there is love between them' ('si est amor inter illos').²⁰ Accompanying these changes, the relative prominence of the bride's father gave way – or ought to have given way – to the priest as officiator in the marriage between two equal parties. The absences and unknowns in Fénice's marriage point to the failures of the society around her. She feels herself unable to 'contredire' where her father has spoken, and no one – not her family, her spouse, or the absent clergy – is motivated to enquire as to whether she truly desires the marriage.

It is in this context that the inclusion of Thessala as confidante and provider of resources is significant and unusual: not all of the heroines in the Chrétien corpus have access to a female friend for support and practical assistance. Guinevere, in *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, has ladies-in-waiting, but they are members of a hostile court, not personal friends. Thessala's role with respect to Fénice is similar to that of Brangien in the narrative of Tristan and Isolde. Both Alis and Mark take false brides to bed: Mark sleeps with Brangien in

¹⁸Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 59–67.

¹⁹The *ordos* in question come from Rennes, Avranches, Évreux, and an English missal used in Laon. For summaries of their contents, see Molin and Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage*, p. 64.

²⁰See Molin and Mutembe, *Le rituel du mariage*, p. 65. The quotation given is from the missal of Mathew of Braga; there is, in addition, further evidence from an *ordo* from Albi.

Isolde's place; and, as a result of Thessala's potion, Alis dreams a simulacrum of Fénice.²¹ In each case, the heroine's only means of manipulating her situation is through the agency of her female friend. Each enables her mistress to pursue a more desired, and more legitimate, match; but they do so covertly, using physical and magical deceptions and substitutions.

In Fénice's narrative, female friendship is constructed as a protective relationship for the heroine, but a dangerous one for those around her.. Thessala's intervention enables Fénice to articulate her objections to Alis and her desire for Cligés, and Thessala's use of her own resources on Fénice's behalf allows the heroine to enforce her choice of sexual partner. Nevertheless, Thessala is unable to bring about a socially acceptable marriage for Fénice or prevent the marriage that is undesirable to her. The two are only able to act covertly, and only able to be honest between themselves and – eventually – with Cligés. Thus *Cligés* offers a model of resistance through feminine solidarity, through which, as Roberta Krueger has suggested in relation to other texts, an engaged audience was given the opportunity to critique the prevailing power structures within the narrative and without.²² This model is limited and, as I suggested above, raises anxieties about secrecy among women at the same time as it offers a potentially empowering narrative of female solidarity. However, Fénice is not the only maiden to marry in *Cligés*. The romance opens with a short, discrete adventure concerning Cligés's father, Alexandre, his adventures at Arthur's court, and his courtship of Soredamors.

II. Female Homosociality as a Safeguard: Soredamors's Exemplar

The opening portion of *Cligés* constitutes a separate embedded narrative which also incorporates a bond of female friendship into marriage negotiations [the negotiation of a marriage?]. The two love narratives are closely connected by parallels in their plots and key themes, facilitating a comparison between them, giving the reader an opportunity to critique either or both in the light of the other. Typically, in *Cligés* scholarship, one of the narratives is seen to offer a positive exemplar (of love, or heroic conduct, or any of the various themes addressed in the romance overall) and the other a negative. Tracy Adams, for instance, is

²¹For editions of both Béroul's and Thomas d'Angleterre's versions of *Tristan*, see *Tristan et Iseut: Les poèmes français, la saga norroise*, eds Daniel LaCroix and Phillipe Walter (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1989).

²²Roberta Krueger (*Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 33–67) posits a practice of 'resistant reading' which she applies to *Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Le Chevalier de la Charette*.

primarily interested in how various characters manage the experience of love and passion: in her reading, *Soredamors* serves as the negative exemplar, because, unlike Fénice, she ‘tumbles into emotional disarray’ upon first experiencing love.²³ For the purposes of this article, however, the significant difference between the two narratives lies not in the choices made by their respective heroines, but in the societies in which they are located. *Soredamors*’s narrative is much simpler than Fénice’s, and resolves into a more emphatically positive conclusion, in which no aspersions can be cast on the heroine’s conduct. *Soredamors* and Alexanders’ courtship [what specifically?; grammatically ‘it’ here seems to refer back to ‘S’*s* narrative’, but this doesn’t quite make sense; one wouldn’t usually describe a narrative as ‘idyllic’ and ‘narrative ... doesn’t sustain narrative tension’ makes for awkward phrasing] is idyllic, but does not sustain the same degree of narrative tension as the adventures of Cligés and Fénice. Instead, the early embedded narrative adds to the tension of the latter narrative by establishing awareness in the audience of the social protections that Fénice lacks. Chief among these is that *Soredamors*’s marriage is negotiated not by male guardians but by Guinevere, who demonstrates empathy and concern in establishing the mutual consent of the prospective spouses.

Consent is established early on as a significant concern in *Soredamors*’s narrative arc. Her beloved, Alexandre is determined not to force marriage upon her. Shortly after falling in love with her, he captures a castle for Arthur, and is rewarded with? a decorated cup and the promise of anything for which he cared to ask. He could have asked Arthur for *Soredamors*’s hand, but, we are told:

He did not dare to speak his desire
...
He would prefer to despair without her,
rather than possess her against her will.²⁴

The irony here is that *Soredamors* has already fallen in love with Alexandre and would dearly love to marry him, but nevertheless, Chrétien makes a point of Alexandre’s refusal to approach Arthur for assistance. Masculine authority, here associated with martial prowess and a reward system, makes no room for *Soredamors*’s desires or consent. Guinevere, meanwhile, bases her decision on the emotions she observes in the young couple; she engages them in

²³Adams, *Violent Passions*, pp. 210–14.

²⁴*Cligés*, lines 2204, 2209–10: ‘Son desirrier dire n’en ose, | ... | Que mialz se velt sanz li doloir, | Que il l’eust sanz son voloir.’

discussion, and negotiates a mutually desirable outcome. She addresses them as a couple, urging them ‘by marriage and by honour to enter into companionship together’.²⁵ Guinevere’s speech here is notable in that it addresses the spouses *ensemble* (together) without any apparent hierarchical structure: with the exception of *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, the Chrétien romances present marital love in a favourable light, but they do not typically rely on the discourse of companionate marriage to advocate love matches.²⁶

Soredamors’s consent to her marriage is explicitly stated:

she consented to him, trembling, and said that neither her will nor her heart nor her body rejected it, that she would be entirely under the commandment of the Queen, and all her pleasure she would do.²⁷

Guinevere is effectively taking the place of Arthur or Gauvain (Soredamors’s brother), as Soredamors’s legal guardian, in this version of the narrative: *her* authorisation of the match determines whether or not Soredamors consents to the marriage, in much the same way as the preferences of the bride’s family might determine her consent to a typical noble marriage. [

In this scene, Guinevere’s actions are similar to those which the liturgical manuals recommended to contemporary priests. It is the harmony of desire and spoken consent, and the commitment of her superiors to protect both, that enables Soredamors to establish a happy marriage. Other evidence from the Chrétien corpus suggests that marriage negotiations were seen by the texts’ reading community as an important exercise of power for women: in *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, no matches are made at all when Guinevere is absent from court, and eventually her ladies take matters into their own hands by organising a tournament where they can meet men.²⁸ In *Le Conte du Graal*, Gauvain’s female relatives are shown to be

²⁵*Cligés*, lines 2287–88: ‘par mariage et par enor vos antre-acompeigniez ensemble.’

²⁶Cf. on the marriage of Mary and Joseph, Hugh of St Victor, *De beatae Mariae virginitate*, PL, 176. 0857–0876C. The discourse of companionate marriage was fairly new at this time, and found often in the works of authors defending the validity of unconsummated, chaste marriages.

²⁷*Cligés*, lines 2293–97: ‘a lui s’otroie an tremblant, | et dit qu ja n’an metra fors | ne volenté , ne cuer ne cors, | Que tote ne soit anterine | Au commandement la reïne, | Et que tout son plesir n’an face.’

²⁸Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, ed. Charles Méla (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992), lines 5361–5407.— [we need a finite page range please].

irresponsible rulers by their efforts to force Gauvain and his (unrecognised) sister into a marriage neither party desires.²⁹

Having considered Fénice's and Soredamors's twin narratives, I suggest that the narrative of *Cligés* is one which invites critique of the common trope that marriage functions as an exchange of women between men. This critique goes beyond presenting male-centred marriage practices as inevitably negative for women: through the parallel friendships of the heroines with Thessala and Guinevere respectively, *Cligés* offers models of response and resistance by which female homosocial loyalty might act as a counter-balance or alternative to the abuse of male power. In so doing, the narrative also turns attention to the use of power between women, and the possible implications of strong female homosocial loyalties for the society around them. Thessala and Fénice's secrecy invites the audience to consider the risks of feminine collusion for men in general and for husbands and fathers in particular.

V. Women-Centred Marriage Negotiations in Constrained Circumstances: *Le Chevalier au Lion*

The Chrétien corpus expands on its interest in women's friendships with the complex relationship between Lunette and Laudine in *Le Chevalier au Lion*. While it is tempting to read Guinevere's role in relation to Soredamors and Alexandre in *Cligés* as a didactic model for society in general, as well as a positive contrast against which Fénice's experience reads as particularly unpleasant, in *Le Chevalier au Lion* there is no positive alternative narrative. Rather, the romance turns to investigate the use and potential abuse of power between women, which it does by focusing on the negotiation of Laudine's marriage and reconciliation with Yvain. The narrative does not make any claim to have a didactic purpose, or guide the audience to such an interpretation: rather, *Le Chevalier au Lion* exploits the power play between Lunette and Laudine as an opportunity for narrative tension. In addition, the narrative ties together two strong homosocial bonds – that of Yvain and his friend, Gauvain, and Laudine and her lady, Lunette – with a series of parallels between Gauvain and Lunette. It is through these parallels that the text interrogates possible uses and abuses of personal influence. This is a rare occurrence in medieval literature (indeed, in most subsequent periods as well): a text which devotes to female friendship similar attention and complexity to that which it invests in male homosociality.

²⁹Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*, ed. Charles Méla (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1990), lines 8884-8913, –[we need a finite page range please].

With the marriage of Yvain and Laudine, the narrative makes an interesting departure from the tropes of women as tokens of male exchange that are present in much of Chrétien's work and which are invoked throughout *Le Chevalier au Lion* in the various marriage offers received by the Knight of the Lion as either a reward or an incentive for his aid. Instead of a woman passed between men, we have a man as object of exchange between women. Although Laudine's position is certainly precarious, and her choices limited, she is also the powerful liege-lady, accepting advice and gifts from her dependant, Lunette. Such an arrangement is rarely seen in medieval literature, which tends to valorise male-dominated relationships and transactions.³⁰ *Le Chevalier au Lion* plays with consent under constrained circumstances, and does so by elevating the female negotiator, Lunette, to a position of power over both Yvain and Laudine. In fact, at this point in the narrative Yvain is filling a position traditionally coded feminine in romance narrative tropes: he is enclosed in a castle, under military threat, and dependant on Lunette for food, shelter, and rescue.³¹

It is from this position of relative powerlessness that Yvain enters into the marriage negotiations: not as a hero claiming his reward, but as Lunette's prisoner. Laudine, meanwhile, accepts Yvain only on the basis of Lunette's reasoning and recommendations. Lunette's actions in convincing Laudine to accept a suitor she had previously rejected have been roundly criticised by feminist commentators, most notably Roberta Krueger.³² However, I concur with Renée Allen's defence of Lunette: the marriage is a politically sound one, and Lunette fulfils her duty as a conscientious advisor, defying [risking?] her lady's anger to present sound political advice.³³ The narrative clearly marks out the point when Laudine

³⁰Simon Gaunt's work on romance in *Gender and Genre*, for instance, demonstrates that even in texts that are structured around a heterosexual relationship and an idealised differentiation between men and women, male homosociality in the form of competition, aggression, or the author/reader relationship tends to be the ultimate dominating force in the narrative. For an analysis of *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, see Gaunt, pp. 91–103.

³¹See Grace Armstrong, 'Women of Power: Chrétien de Troyes's Female Clerks', in *Women in French Literature*, ed. Michel Guggenheim (Saratoga: ANMA Libri & Co, 1988), pp. 29–46 (p. 39). [unless mentioned later, this can be omitted from here; we'd need the full page range for the scene and the full ref for *Le Chevalier au Lion* would need to be shifted here.]

³²See n. 22.

³³Renée Allen, 'The Roles of Women and their Homosocial Context in the *Chevalier au Lion*', *Romance Quarterly*, 46 (1999), 141–54. See also Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), pp. 29–64. Barnes deals with the ME redaction *Yvain and Gawain* alongside other ME texts.

decides that political priorities take precedence over her bereavement: ‘behold the changed lady!’³⁴ This is no surrender, unlike Soredamors’s internal conversion when confronted with the power of love; Laudine sees herself as retaining control. Notably, when speaking of Yvain, she speaks not of his arrival, nor of seeing him, but of their *possession* of him – ‘how soon can we have him [here]?’ (‘quant le pourrons nous avoir’) – putting herself and Lunette in the position of power.

There is no question that Lunette argues Laudine into accepting a marriage she initially opposed, but after the match is arranged, it becomes evident that such coercion would have been exerted by other parties, even if Lunette had not. The seneschal’s speech to the court about the necessity of Laudine’s remarriage presents the same arguments which Lunette has already spoken:

“Gentlemen,” he said, “war is upon us: there is no day on which the king does not equip himself as fast as he can, in order to come and lay waste to our lands. When my lady married, not even fully six years ago, she did it by your advice. Her lord is dead, which grieves her. Now he has only six feet of earth, he who held all this land and who governed it very well. It is a great sorrow that he lived so little [a time]: a woman does not know how to carry a shield, nor strike with a lance; she can better and enrich herself if she is able to take a good husband”.³⁵

Compare the seneschal’s words to those Lunette says to Laudine in private:

But now tell me, if it does not grieve you, who will defend your lands when King Arthur comes? ... You must immediately take advice concerning the defence of your fountain, and [yet] you do not cease to weep!³⁶

Both the seneschal and Lunette are aware of the immediate threat of Arthur’s arrival, and both understand the importance of a husband’s military prowess. Lunette, by first confronting Laudine privately, saves her lady from conflict with her court; from showing weakness in the

³⁴Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion*, ed. David Hult (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1994), line 1742: ‘Estes vous la dame changiee.’

³⁵*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 2083–86, 2090–100: “‘Segnors,” fet il, “guere nous sort: | N’est jour que li rois s’atourt | De quanquë il se peut haster, | Pour venir nos teres gaster. | ... | Quant ma dame se maria, | N’a mie encor sis anz parclos, | Si le fist elle par vo loz. | Mors est ses sires, si li poise. | N’a or de terre que une toise | Cil qui tout cest païz tenoit | Et qui molt bien y avenoit. | C’est grant duel que poy a vescu: | Fame ne set porter escu | Ne ne set de lance ferir; | Molt amender et enchierir | Se puet de prendre .i. bon segnour”.’

³⁶*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 1614–16, 1623–25: ‘Mais or dites, si ne vous griet, | Vostre tere qui deffendra | Quant li rois Artus y venra | ... | Vous deüssiés or conseil prendre | De vostre fontaine deffendre, | Et vous ne finés de plourer!’

form of a lack of preparation; and, perhaps above all, from a publicly forced marriage. She is constrained by circumstances to marry Yvain, certainly, but because of Lunette's intervention, Laudine is able to present the match not only to her court but to Yvain himself as a political bargain in which she retains the upper hand.

IV. Men, Women, and Personal Power: Abuse of Confidential Influence in *Le Chevalier au Lion*

Unlike Soredamors's, Laudine's marriage narrative does not function as a positive exemplar against which to read another episode. Rather, the ethics of Lunette's actions are deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, in the absence of reliable male protectors, Laudine's right-hand woman is her strongest supporter, while on the other, the possibility of exploitation and manipulation between women – particularly evident in the final reunion scene (which will be discussed later) – undermines the narrative's didactic possibilities. *Le Chevalier au Lion*, like *Cligés*, centres women's exercise of power on the negotiation of marriages, and therein gives female friendship a high place. However, in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the involvement of female friends does not function as an alternative to exploitation or manipulation: this text displays a keen awareness of the potential for exploitation between women (particularly personal exploitation for social good), and interweaves it with the narrative's other explorations of power and manipulation between men and women and between men and men.

As discussed above, in Lunette's initial matchmaking activities, she was able to exert her influence as advisor over Laudine, and as captor–rescuer over Yvain, to arrange the marriage and bring all parties to a stable (albeit briefly so) agreement. After Yvain's departure, though, she is punished for giving poor advice. As she later recounts to Yvain, Laudine's seneschal, jealous of her influence, blames her for Yvain's defection:

But when it happened that you trespassed [the limit of] the year after which you ought to have returned to my lady, my lady grew angry with me. ... And when the seneschal learned of it ... thus he saw well that he could make great discord between her and me.³⁷

The seneschal is not entirely unjustified in his accusations, though his motives are suspect: Laudine would not have accepted Yvain as husband without Lunette's matchmaking; although other advisors would have pressured her into marriage, they did not have Yvain in

³⁷*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 3657–60, 3663, 3668–69: 'Mais quant che vint que vous eüstes | L'an trespasé que vous deüests | Revenir a ma dame cha, | Ma dame a moi se couroucha | ... | *Et quant che seut li seneschaus* | ... | Si vit bien quë il pooit faire | Entre moi et lui grant courous.'

mind. The proper use of confidential advice is a point of anxiety in a variety of medieval genres. Geraldine Barnes's work on counsel in the ME redaction of *Le Chevalier au Lion*, *Yvain and Gawain*, suggests that the reduced role of the seneschal and his fellows in the ME text serves to highlight Lunette's position as chief counsellor (and in that text, their grounds for condemning her are presented as having less connection to the specific advice given and more to her position).³⁸ Reversing this comparison highlights the fact that *Le Chevalier au Lion* presents a complex network of relationships and loyalties, in which not only the hero but also his wife and their respective friends are entwined.

Le Chevalier au Lion does not present female counsel as more dangerous than male, nor as remarkably trustworthy (a factor the ME redactor altered when writing *Yvain and Gawain*: there, as Joanne Findon has argued, Lunette's service to Laudine stands out as an unquestioned example of the *trawth* which the ME preface extolls).³⁹ Lunette is strikingly effective, but she is not the only character possessed of rhetorical skill or an ability to influence others. Gauvain's counsel to Yvain concerning proper knightly conduct should be considered alongside Lunette's counsel to Laudine. These two friends and advisors, Gauvain and Lunette, are positioned in parallel: the narrator describes them as 'sun and moon' and describes a flirtation between them, which though never followed up on, serves to underline their parallel positions.⁴⁰ Gauvain's advice is the catalyst for Yvain's desertion, for which Lunette is then blamed, but it is not immediately obvious that it is necessarily bad advice:

What, will you now be [one] of those – this Sir Gauvain said – who are less valorous because of their women? ... Certainly, in the future you will be angry about her love, if you make yourself worse, because a woman soon rescinds her love; she is not wrong to despise him who becomes lord of an empire, who becomes worse for her love.⁴¹

Gauvain's diatribe here against 'those ... who are less valorous because of their women' is reminiscent of the gossip Enide is said to have heard concerning Erec, in another

³⁸Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy*, pp. 36–39.

³⁹Joanne Findon, 'The Other Story: Female Friendship in the Middle English *Yvain and Gawain*', *Parergon*, 22.1 (2005), 71–94.

⁴⁰See Rosemary Deist, 'Sun and Moon: Constellations of Character in Gottfried's *Tristan* and Chrétien's *Yvain*', in *Arthurian Romance and Gender*, ed. Friedrich Wolfzettel (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 50–65.

⁴¹*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 2484–86, 2493–97: 'Comment? Seroiz vos or de chiz, | Che disoit mesire Gauvains, | Qui pour lor femmes valent mains? | ... | Chertes, encor serois iriés | De s'amor, se vous empiriés | Que femme a tost s'amor reprise; | Ne n'a pas tort s'ele desprise | Chelui qui devient de l'empire | Sire, qui pour s'amour empire.'

of Chrétien's romances, *Erec et Enide*. There, Enide bemoans her situation in terms similar to those used by Gauvain: 'the best knight of all, the most hardy and most brave, the most handsome and most courtly, who was ever count or king, has entirely relinquished all chivalry for me.'⁴² The exchange between Yvain and Gauvain reads as an inversion of the crisis point in Erec's story: Yvain heeds Gauvain's warning, and negotiates with Laudine for a year's leave to go tourneying. No malicious gossip is spread about his reputation, and at this point, he has no reason to fear that he might lose the affection of his wife. If the Chrétien corpus had a consistent audience, such narrative parallels must surely have been noticeable.

Yet, Gauvain's advice is not tailored to Yvain's particular circumstances: Yvain has obligations to Laudine's dependants, much as Erec has obligations to his father's knights. Nevertheless, Gauvain continues to use his influence over Yvain to advance his own interests, at the expense of Laudine's:

And nevertheless the year passed. Sir Yvain did so well all year that Sir Gauvain applied himself to honouring him; and he made him delay so much that the whole year passed and also quite a bit of the next.⁴³

Yvain's abandonment of his promise to Laudine might have been treated as a critical turning point in the plot, but instead the narrative presents it opaquely. Yvain's own thoughts are not detailed in the text, and Gauvain is presented as the agent of Yvain's desertion. J. M. Sullivan, comparing the text with a Middle High German redaction of it, suggests that Lunette's ethically dubious actions constitute a narrative critique of private counsel and the influence of private counsellors, an aspect which is expanded upon in the German version.⁴⁴ But Lunette's actions do not stand alone, and can be usefully compared to Gauvain's private advice to Yvain.

In the final adventure before Yvain returns to Laudine's castle, Yvain's personal loyalty to Gauvain overrides his obligations to justice and the promise he has made to a woman. The two friends oppose one another in combat as representatives of two sisters in an

⁴²Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. Jean-Marie Fritz (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992), lines 2495–500: 'toz li meudres chevaliers, | Li plus hardiz et li plus fiers, | Li plus beax et le plus cortois, | Qui onques fust ne cuens ne rois, | A de tout en tout relinque | Pour moi tote chevalerie.'

⁴³*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 2672–78: 'Et li ans passa toutes voie. | Sel fist si bien Mesire Yvains | Tout l'an que Mesire Gavains | Se penoit de lui honnerer; | Et si le fist tant demourer | Que tous li ans fu trespasés | Et de l'autre an partie assés.'

⁴⁴J. M. Sullivan, 'The Lady Lunete: Literary Conventions of Counsel and the Criticism of Counsel in Chrétien's *Yvain* and Hartmann's *Iwein*', *Neophilologus*, 85 (2001), 335–54.

inheritance dispute, and while it is clear that the sister Yvain whom Yvain champions has the more just claim, Yvain is the first to volunteer to surrender. Without Gauvain needing to place any pressure on him, Yvain willingly gives up his claim out of deference to his friend:

“I am Yvain, who loves you more than any man in the world as far as it extends in all directions, because you have loved me always and honoured me in every court. But I wish to do you such honour and make such amends in this affair that you have utterly overcome me.”

“This you would do for me?” said Gauvain the gentle.⁴⁵

Yvain has absolutely no hesitation in abandoning the joust, and thereby abandoning both the lady to whom he has sworn service, and the cause of justice. Gauvain counters with a similar offer of surrender, neutralising the risk to which Yvain has put the disinherited sister, but likewise abandoning the sister whose cause he had championed. Arthur’s fortuitous intervention means justice is served, but neither knight is ever reproached for his choice to prioritise friendship over obligation.

Thus the relationship between Gauvain and Yvain, at the end of the poem, is complex, and the doubts it raises about the hero remain unresolved. In fact, Laudine’s speech to Lunette confirms that Yvain’s trustworthiness is not to be taken for granted:

At these words the lady trembled, and said, “May God save me, your words have truly taken me in; you will make me love him who prizes me as nothing, despite myself. Now you have really succeeded. ... And, save that to perjure oneself is too ugly and too low-born a thing, never, for any pain, would he find peace or accord with me.”⁴⁶

The same arguments of utility used here, can also be used to defend Lunette’s actions in arranging the marriage in the first place. The crucial difference lies in Laudine’s reluctance: this time she offers Yvain love⁴⁷ and peace *mal gré mien* (despite herself). She has not accepted reasoning, or fallen in love; this time, she is reluctant and, moreover, she blames

⁴⁵*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 6274–83: “Je sui Yvains, | Qui plus vous aim com hom du monde, | Tant com il dure a la reonde, | Que vous m’avés amé toz jourz | Et honneré en toutes corz. | Mais je vous veul de cest affaire | Tel amende et tel honnour faire | Que outretement outré m’otroi. | “Iche ferïes vous pour moy?” | Fait mesire Gavains li dols.”

⁴⁶*Le Chevalier au Lion*, lines 6749–54, 6758–61: ‘A chest mot le dame tressaut, | Et dist: “Se Damedix me saut, | Bien m’as a tes paroles prise; Que chelui qui riens ne me prise | Me fera amer mal gré mien. | Or as tu exploitié mout bien. | ... | Et se ne fust de parjurer | Trop laide chose et trop vilaine | Jammais a moi pour nule paine | Pais nē acorde ne trouvast.’

⁴⁷Cheyette and Chickering (‘Love, Anger and Peace’, pp. 96–104) argue this should be read, not as romantic love, but rather as love as it is often cited in records of feud resolutions.

Lunette, saying ‘now you have really succeeded’.⁴⁸ If the seneschal was previously a mouthpiece for a broader social anxiety about the use of personal influence to the detriment of others, here Laudine’s words suggest a more sinister possibility: the use of personal influence to the detriment of the influenced party.

An attentive reader, particularly one attuned to the interplay of personal influence and public power, might note that Lunette’s influence over Laudine has become more like that of Gauvain over Yvain, while, for her part, Laudine shows a commitment to keeping her word that Yvain has repeatedly lacked. The eventual reunion of Yvain and Laudine is structured in several respects to mirror the original marriage sequence. Again, Yvain approaches the fountain as aggressor; again, he is appealed to as protector; and for a second time, Lunette extracts Laudine’s permission to arrange the meeting with Yvain, without fully informing her. Yet, where the marriage was followed by an artistic description on the narrator’s part of Gauvain and Lunette as a matched pair in parallel to the married couple, Yvain is now separated from his friend once more and Lunette no longer in good standing with her lady. Gauvain’s exercise of his influence over Yvain throughout the narrative relied less on reasoned persuasion than on Yvain’s desire for honour in his friend’s eyes. Conversely, in the original marriage negotiations, Lunette was persuasive and forceful, but Laudine’s objections were heard. In order to effect a reunion between Yvain and Laudine, Lunette must rely ultimately on Laudine’s sense of honour, specifically her desire not to perjure herself before Lunette. The move is effective, but Lunette’s reliability as an advisor is in jeopardy, just as Yvain’s as husband is in doubt.

In *Le Chevalier au Lion*, women-centred marriage negotiations are not posited as an alternative to the coercive potential associated with male homosociality and patriarchal marriage dynamics [perhaps alliances, to eliminate repetition/tautology?]. The narrative uses Lunette’s position of influence over both Yvain and Laudine to neutralise the imbalance between them. At the same time, structural parallels are set up between Lunette and the seneschal, emphasising the dangers and benefits of private counsel; and between Lunette and Gauvain, both of whom exploit the loyalty of their friends and use personal influence to manipulate their choices. Unlike Gauvain, Lunette uses her influence over Laudine to reconcile conflicts and secure the interests of Laudine’s dependants. Yet, Laudine’s angry speech at the conclusion of the narrative leaves open the possibility that this influence has been misused and, just as it is not clear that Gauvain will not cause further trouble for Yvain’s

⁴⁸*Le Chevalier au Lion*, line 6753: ‘or as tu exploité mout bien.’

obligations, it seems that the rift in the relationship between the two women is not mended. Thus, *Le Chevalier au Lion* comes to a profoundly unsettling, multi-layered conclusion. At the same time that the marriage narrative is resolved by Laudine and Yvain's reunion, the friendship relationship that has been a source of stability and cohesion, and the primary enabler of the marriage, is itself destabilised, and at the end of the romance is in a state of unresolved conflict.

It would be pleasing, on one level, if we could read *Le Chevalier au Lion* in the same manner as we might take Guinevere's role in *Cligés*: as evidence that this particular author or audience for these works were willing to believe that female powerbrokers had specific moral qualities or skills well-suited to negotiating marriages without violating the ideals of consent and marital harmony. Laudine's final speech makes that impossible. In later works by Chrétien, marriage negotiation continues to feature as a site of power for women, but it is presented as isolationist, subversive, and threatening to the wider social order. In the *Conte du Graal*, Gauvain's mother and grandmother rule their territory without input from a man, but their attempts to marry their young daughter (or granddaughter, as the case may be) [young daughter/niece? daughter/granddaughter is inconsistent with mother/aunt] to a visiting knight not only threaten the principles of consensual marriage (neither the prospective bride nor groom desires to marry) but would entangle Gauvain, whom they have not recognised, in an incestuous union with his sister. Perhaps the *Conte du Graal*'s connection to the court of Phillip of Flanders rather than that of Champagne explains this markedly more negative portrayal [of what?].⁴⁹ It has certainly been noted before that the level of misogyny in the Chrétien corpus increases over time.⁵⁰

⁴⁹See Joan Hall McCash, 'Chrétien's Patrons', in *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, eds Noris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbert (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 15–25; and Constance Bullock Davies, 'Chrétien de Troyes and England', *Arthurian Literature*, 1 (1981), 1–61. Of Chrétien's works, only *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* and the *Conte du Graal* mention a patron. The *Charrette* credits Marie de Champagne with its commissioning, while the *Conte du Graal* is dedicated to Phillip of Flanders. The *Charrette* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* share enough commonalities that they were probably written together or in quick succession. It is usually assumed that both were circulated at the Court of Champagne, and, in the absence of any other evidence, it is likely that so also were Chrétien's earlier works. The substantial differences between the *Conte du Graal* and the earlier romances have been explained in terms of this change in patrons, although other theories exist that connect *Cligés* with the court of Henry II rather than Champagne.

⁵⁰Marie-Noëlle Lefay-Toury, 'Roman breton et mythes courtois: L'évolution du personnage féminin dans les romans de Chrétien de Troyes (suite et fin)', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 15 (1972), 283–93.

Disappointing as it is to find so little evidence of female friendship in the later Chrétien corpus, we should not underestimate the significance of the portrayal in *Cligés* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* of strong, positive friendships between women. These friendships are integral to the progression of their respective romance plots, and suggest that, at least in respect of these two romances, the Chrétien corpus placed a far higher value on female friendship than was typical of High Medieval society. These two texts point to an understanding of, and interest in, the role of female friendship as a support system; one, moreover, that was especially useful in the negotiation of marriages. *Le Chevalier au Lion*, in particular, engages with female friendship not as a constrained form of resistance but as an integrated part of the system of alliances that operated between noble powerbrokers. It is impossible to determine if the original audience saw this portrayal as directly reflective of any particular historical situation, but we do know that later Middle English and Middle High German redactors of these romances found that the intersection of female friendship with such issues as loyalty, consent, and advice-giving provided ample material to rework for their particular audiences.

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