

To what extent do you think that Chretien's 'Yvain' poses an ironic critique of the concept of chivalry and the genre of romance?

In many ways Chretien's *Yvain* does pose an ironic critique of the concept of chivalry and romance. The frequent change in the characters' opinions and mannerisms show this, for instance the fickle nature in which Yvain himself falls in love, and soon declares it to be more painful than death itself. The way that the situations unfold in the novel often present a somewhat critical viewpoint to be expressed in the reader. Similarly, the actions of many of the knights, particularly that of Kay, presents an idea that is entirely opposite of what we, as the modern reader, would consider to be chivalrous. Of course, there are substantial differences in what the modern and the contemporary audience would approve of, but it is somewhat difficult to believe that they did not find it to be critiquing in some way or other. The word chivalry can be defined as meaning a "medieval knightly system with its religious, moral, and social code...[with the] ideal characteristics, courage and courtesy"¹ however throughout this book the knights, who should clearly be conforming to this code, repeatedly criticise each other and people both above and below them in the social hierarchy.

One of the first ways that Chretien first appears to be posing an ironic critique of chivalry is through the character of Kay during the first scene set. The way that he reproves Calogrenant for showing basic decency and respect to the Queen, shows a jealous and vindictive personality. It could be stated that this is his personality alone, rather than representative of the whole group, but when he speaks he does it for the collective ("perhaps it was out of laziness that we neglected to rise, or because we didn't deign to do so?"). The way that he speaks, also, is in such a way that is abusive to not only Calogrenant, but also in many ways the Queen herself. In one instance, he even tries to manipulate her by the use of "the loyalty you owe the King". Since there is no explanation as to what exactly it is that she owes him for, it can only be determined that it is for marrying her and all that he has done thenceforth. This is a typical view of marriage, and women in general, during the middle ages, since women were always lower than men on the social hierarchy and as such were told to be thankful for whatever they got. It is somewhat unexpected that the character speaks to a Queen in such a way as this. Chretien does show the stark distinction between the characters of Kay and Calogrenant however, and as such it could be inferred that much like the art of romance and love (as he says in the first paragraph), in his opinion, the art of chivalry has died or been abandoned. If this view is to be believed, then it is not an ironic critique so much as a straightforward one. He is directly critiquing the societal practices shown by the knights and the way that they treat one another.

Alongside this idea, it could also be stated that he is also criticising the role of marriage, in that it can hardly be called romance when the Queen is told to be grateful. The idea of love is not particularly prevalent in the novel, since whenever a character claims to be in 'love', they soon recover at the sight of the next handsome man or woman who comes along. One of the largest examples of this is "the lady" whom Calogrenant later claims to be in love with, even though he has never actually spoken to her. She describes her husband as "the best of the good" and even rebukes God himself for letting him be killed, before later meeting

¹J. B. Sykes. 1976. *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English. Based on the Oxford English dictionary and its supplements*. 6.ed (Oxford: Clarendon), p. 174

Calogrenant and marrying him that same day. As such, the idea of love that's presented in the novel is more like infatuation. These infatuations also usually only come about because of the females beauty as well, note that the only women who actually appear in the novel are those that are beautiful "maidens" or the "damsel", who serve the men well, and therefore provide the perfect victim for the knights 'love'.

Furthermore, through the character of Calogrenant, Chretien also presents the idea that unrequited love is stronger and more painful than that caused by the death of a husband, which comes across somewhat dubiously and makes the reader question the protagonists sanity. When he yearns after her, he states that "I shall love my enemy for ever", despite the fact that he has only seen her outer appearance, rather than actually knowing anything about her personality and what she is like. This reinforces the idea that throughout the novel (and history) women are merely objects and possessions, rather than actually being seen to have the ability to be anything more - it is not thought about whether they are smart, just whether they are beautiful and can keep a house well. He later goes on to question about "would she not be a true wonder to look upon if she were happy, when now she is so beautiful in anguish?". The fact the he focuses on her beauty, rather than the fact that he has just killed her husband shows how he cares more for her appearance rather than her emotions or actual well being. This form of 'love' is indeed presented as being more of an infatuation, and it is clear that when the narrator says in the beginning that "love is greatly abased" he did in fact mean in the novel as well as in the general society of the era.

However, in many ways it could be said that Chretien is in fact ironically criticising the role of chivalry in the Knights, particularly in that they purposefully depart on these 'quests' in search of glory and honour, which can only come from fighting and death. In the case of Calogrenant, he departs to visit this magical place purely to kill the Knight and prove Kay wrong about his personality. To a modern reader, the act of adventuring purely for the sake of hurting people is not noble, and certainly not chivalrous. Alongside being a "religious, moral and social code" the idea of chivalry can also be defined as being a "body of horseman, knights, or gallant gentleman"². Assuming that "Body" means a collective group, not one sole person going on their own journey, it can be safely stated that Calogrenant is not conforming to the rules of chivalry even in going on this adventure. Add into this that he repeatedly pursues the Knight when he is clearly injured and in no place to fight, purely for the sake of gloating that he killed him, suggests that he is entirely defying the rules of the code. In modern terms, the best way that his quest can be described is for the sake of his own 'fragile masculinity' - he was hurt by Kay's remarks and embarrassed about whether or not it was true. He therefore went looking for someone to kill, and the narrator of the story makes it clear that he is not amused by this. The tone of writing is, whilst not always condemning, is certainly not admiring the work of Calogrenant. During the pursuit, the narrator says "if he fled he was not to be blamed, since he felt himself mortally wounded". Considering that it was usually shameful to run from a battle, Chretien makes sure that the reader does not feel this way, rather instead he creates a sympathetic tone, in which the reader feels sorry for the Knight, rather than the protagonist. This does indeed create a condemning tone towards the idea of 'chivalry'.

² J. B. Sykes. 1976. *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English. Based on the Oxford English dictionary and its supplements*. 6.ed (Oxford: Clarendon), p. 174

In conclusion, the way that Chretien de Troyes presents his idea in the novel *The Knight with the Lion (Yvain)* is developed in such a way that whilst it does not appear ironic, it is critical of not only the concept of chivalry, but also the genre of romance in general. The 'rules of chivalry' are rarely, if ever, abided by, as can be seen by the way that the characters often rebuke the queen and show no signs of respect. Similarly this can be seen in the way that the characters (mainly the knights) refuse to respect each other. He also frequently criticises the genre of romance, both directly and indirectly, in that at the start he directly states that love has been "abased" and throughout when he makes joke of the way that the knights so quickly fall in love with the beautiful maidens and queens.