



## Chastity, Christ, and Camelot

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Through reference to Arthurian legend and latter-day literature and pop-culture, Tia McCarley traces a parallel between the Madonna and Messiah Archetypes, arguing that male chastity remains upheld and enforced as a symbol of purity in Western culture. This essay was written for Writing II with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

**T**HERE HAS BEEN MUCH WRITTEN about the theory of the Madonna Archetype and the punishment and suppression of women's sexuality throughout traditional literature, in Eastern and Western culture alike. Marital and sexual fidelity is considered something of the highest importance in the most celebrated tales of classical literature, especially those found in the Western canon. However, there is a running theme throughout the archetypes that have come time and time again: the theme of holy chastity and punishment of the Messiah figure for engaging in natural human sexuality with partners, especially if he conceives children with them. This perspective is sorely lacking in the studies of sexual restriction of the archetypal figures, and it is one I seek to study and explore in this paper. In this paper, I will discuss the theory of the Madonna Archetype, how it compares to the Messiah Archetype in the specific example of the Arthurian Mythos, and how new theories

must be developed and used in order to study it, as well as my findings on the Messiah Archetype.

The Madonna Archetype, in its most basic form, is the idea that virginal women are the most pure and ideal women, and that chastity is what a woman should uphold to in order not to be sinful in her life. As Shirley Foster says, “to be truly feminine, a woman must fulfill the beneficent functions assigned to her” (5). In her article “The Articulation of Virginity in Medieval *Chanson de none*,” Lisa Coulton elaborates further: “The sexuality of women was considered a natural, yet potentially dangerous, element of their physicality; as descendants of Eve, women's bodies carried the memory of original sin via their childbearing and menstruation, but were also measured against the unattainable standard of the Virgin Mary's intactness” (159). As Katherine Clark explains, chastity is not only a state or virginity, but a state of being pure and faithful to a partner, and resisting the advancements of others in the pursuit of holy chastity: “Patristic authors ascribed to the widow a specific place in salvation: whereas married women received a thirtyfold blessing in heaven, widows received a sixtyfold blessing, and virgins, representing the highest calling for women, reaped a hundredfold of the blessings of heaven” (170).

This message of chastity and reward for the purity of the virgin Madonna does not only stay in medieval literature but is noted to have carried into the modern-day Evangelical abstinence-only sex education movement, having “traded the power of transcendence for the power of persuasion” (Gardner 187). The repression of female sexuality has long been a point of contention for the women's rights and liberation movement, as the sexuality and modesty of women is linked directly to not only the very principle of femininity in and of itself, but the degradation of society by more radical and religious abstinence-only advocates:

If the class is taught by a woman who is filled with belief in God and faithfulness to her husband, if she is morally clean and if childbirth

to her is not a curse but a blessing, then her words, like a magnet, attract even the most dissolute children to her, children who have not acquired what they should have acquired at home. (Vladimirov 59)

This oxymoronic expectation and treatment of women in classical literature, as explored by notable second-wave feminist writers, does not only repress women in society, but also dehumanizes them, and treats them as ideals and virtues rather than human beings. This dehumanization by idolization and repression is the entire basis for the sexual liberation of women, as started by the creation of the birth control pill and continuing to this very day in the advent of third-wave, sex-positive, pro-choice feminism. Women in classical literature seem to also fall under the Madonna/Whore dichotomy proposed by Sigmund Freud, wherein a woman will either be sexually liberated and demonized for it, or “properly” chaste and praised for it. This phenomenon is discussed under the idea of “slut shaming,” and does not only occur in literature written by men, but is very popular in young adult literature written for and by young women, or even married women, such as in the case of *Twilight*, and its spiritual successor *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The idea of the Madonna Archetype, as a whole, can be summed up thusly: a woman who is chaste, virginal, motherly, and faithful is seen as the ultimate state of virtue, especially in the case of religious text, and a woman can and will be punished for falling outside of these boundaries, ultimately, in many cases, resulting in death and being sentenced to damnation for her actions.

In the Western canon of British literature, there stand two bodies of work that dominate the entirety of conversation more than any other. Standing far above even the works of the *Canterbury Tales* or the world of *Harry Potter*, there are, first, the works of William Shakespeare, and second, the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and their Kingdom of Camelot. Often seen as one of the greatest legends of Great Britain, and the codifier of the

ideal of the knight and of the concepts of chivalry and courtly love, King Arthur was conceived at the height of the religious and patriarchal society of the Dark Ages of Europe, whose literature would later be defied and parodied by the Bard and his legacy. As such, the works of King Arthur are a perfect example of the standards of the time, and how male sexuality and virginity was treated not only in real society, but in the most famous and popularized literature of the time, in the form of the archetype of the Messiah. To begin with, we must establish how the ideal of male sexuality was perceived in regard to the church, as much of the control of women's sexuality was based in the idea of the female body being inherently sinful and her connection to original sin being linked to her body. Pat Cullen has written much about male chastity in the Middle Ages, stating, "Indeed, it has been suggested that there was an increasing emphasis on celibacy as an aspect of the sacerdotal role in the years before the Reformation, and hence the importance of accusations of the failure to observe it in critiques of both regular and secular clergy at the Reformation" (623). This shows us that male chastity was considered an important part of holy life—something that we can see in knighthood, as demonstrated by Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Sir Galahad in his quest for the Holy Grail, both of whom were chaste and faithful to courtly love, and who were greatly rewarded for it in their quests. Consequently, Sir Lancelot, who was not chaste, became the renowned traitor to King Arthur, and King Arthur himself, in failing to be chaste with Morgana, was killed for his sin in *The Death of King Arthur*. One may argue, as Barbara Baines does, that "in a patriarchal society, men are privileged with authority, yet, somewhat paradoxically, that authority depends upon the chastity of women" (286). However, male chastity, just like its sister, is still enforced in the Christian church today, and is still propagandized in the abstinence-only movement, as seen here: "The first safeguard in life and ministry for a priest—as for any Christian—is his intimacy with our Lord and lived fidelity to the teaching of the church" (McGavin, 36). This propaganda, however,

is treated uncritically, with the premise that it is something completely unprecedented, even when that cannot be further from the truth. Sir Galahad was quite literally only able to find the Holy Grail because of his purity, represented by his virginity, and one of the hallmarks of courtly love that Sir Lancelot failed to show was the fact that courtly love was love only of the spirit, and not the body. Sir Lancelot was encouraged to love Queen Guinevere in the courtly manner, as courtly love was pure and without sin, and it was only when he broke his bond of chastity outside of his marriage that he had to flee. One of the ways in which it was comical to see Sir Percival behave like a feral child, not at all like a knight, was the fact that he failed to understand courtly and chaste love, as his behavior was entirely improper for a knight who upheld the code and honor of chivalry—and chastity. To see Sir Percival slip into a woman's bed to try and kiss her upon seeing her was akin to seeing King Arthur hopping around with coconuts and arguing about the velocity of an unladen swallow—it simply was not right, and was humorous to see. This demonization is easy to see and logically follows: A man who does not follow the norms of chastity will die, in the case of King Arthur; be dishonored, in the case of Sir Lancelot; or will be mocked and laughed at, in the case of Sir Percival. In the case of modern media, an eternal bachelor is seen as a child, behaving forever like a teenager and one day will settle down and have children, like Barney in *How I Met Your Mother*, or is seen as a downright egocentric annoyance, in the case of Iron Man. A good man is a chaste man, and any woman will tell you that.

Where does this leave the archetype of the Messiah, then, in the framework of modern storytelling? The Messiah, much like his sister, is a man who is pure in his detachment from humanity and closeness to God, or virtue in general, as demonstrated by his lack of sexuality whatsoever. The Messiah Archetype is displayed most prominently in King Arthur, but also shows his face in modern-day symbols of goodness, such as the character of Superman or Optimus

Prime or the Doctor from *Doctor Who*. In all cases, the Messiah Archetype must not be wed, nor have children, or else he will be punished by having his family taken from him, so that he will have no attachments to the material world, in the same way that the above examples of male chastity in the church require closeness to God and distance from the material world. One can easily observe this phenomenon in the way that the family of the Messiah is always killed, or is the one to kill, in punishment for the Messiah to fail to live up to his expectations. How, then, does this fit, when control of female sexuality is symptomatic of patriarchy, as gender theory suggests? One may go back to Sigmund Freud's theory of the Madonna and the Whore. Rather than seeing the chaste woman in fiction as a partner to sexually control, one may argue that the character is seen as a mother figure to the reader, and consequently does not want to see her sexually in any way. This would naturally carry to the Messiah, who would also be seen as a father figure to the reader, and thus would not be seen sexually. The Madonna as the Holy Mother and the Messiah as the Holy Father are, thus, both valued for their chastity and punished for breaking it, as we see in Arthurian legend.

In conclusion, the Messiah and the Madonna Archetypes are both a result of the church equating virginity with purity, and are a reflection of reality onto fiction. Both archetypes are defined by being symbols of goodness and holiness and are not allowed to have children or wed. Male sexuality is demonized, male chastity is valued, and old and new fiction alike display this in their treatment of the sexuality of their characters. The Madonna Archetype is wrongfully assumed to be the only archetype that controls sexuality, and further study into male chastity and the demonization of sexuality is required. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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