Staunchly instilled by Pope Gregory VII, the Gregorian Reforms constituted the predominant school of thought responsible for disseminating a distinct repulsion to the notion of sexual desire throughout the latter half of the 11th century. Championed as Canon Law of the Catholic Church, the ideals belonging to the Gregorian Reforms stressed the importance of celibacy amongst members of the clergy, whilst rebuking the common people for the disgrace and inferiority innate to romantic relationships fueled by love and the fulfillment of the flesh or body. As exhibited, however, in Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot: Knight of the Cart and Abelard and Heloise, the shunning of physical desires and neglect of the flesh through the suffering of the body by the “heart” is utilized as an outlet to illuminate the purity and power of true love, contrasting the Gregorian Reforms’ denunciation of romantic love as deleterious to the soul.

Throughout the entirety of Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot: Knight of the Cart, Lancelot is seen confidently embarking on innumerable perilous journeys and endeavors in an effort to complete his quest for the woman whom he solely loves, Guinevere. Upon such endeavors, Lancelot encounters a woman who offers him shelter and other amenities upon the condition that he sleeps with her. Though accepting the offer, Lancelot nevertheless remained “so cautious as he stretched out on his back that no part of his body was touching hers” (Chrétien 1220-1222). In contrast to the Gregorian Reforms’ principle of romantic love and the actions that arise from such as a divine pollutant, Lancelot’s love and heart for Guinevere serves as an effective constraining mechanism rendering his body as well as his sexual desires of the flesh, suppressed. Irrespective of the enticements offered by the woman towards his sexual desires, Lancelot’s body remains physically isolated from hers and, through such, effectively reflects his innate
willingness to permit suffering through chastity. Thereby, expressing and illustrating the notable magnitude of influence love possesses over his bodily desires, to an extent in which his love for Guinevere can sequester an intrinsic urge to sleep with another woman. Thus, Lancelot’s body, through neglecting that which it inherently craves most, magnifies his heart’s greater power in subduing the desires of the flesh to pursue a pure, romantic love for another. As encapsulated by Chrétien de Troyes, “nor did [Lancelot] say a word - as if he had been a monk” (Chrétien 1223-1224). Through such a juxtaposing analogy, the reader gains further insight into the depth of Lancelot’s determination to forsake the desires of his body and pursue the path of celibacy through his romantic love for Guinevere. In comparing Lancelot to a monk, Chrétien de Troyes effectively elucidates Lancelot’s strength in remaining celibate, whilst also contrasting the origin of such strength to be derived from romantic love, rather than an infatuation with proclaimed divine purity through chastity. Ultimately, it is Lancelot’s romantic love for Guinevere, rather than an adherence to Gregorian Reform principles, that empowers him to silence the inner conflict between his heart’s desire for love and the desires of the flesh kindled by the woman, a conflict in which his love remains triumphant as evoked through his physical bodily restraint.

Lancelot’s physical expression of an unfaltering love is additionally seen present throughout his journey across the treacherous Sword Bridge. Lancelot, “accepting the immense pain and suffering, he crossed, hands and knees and feet bleeding. But Love, who had led him there, helped him as he went, and turned his pain into pleasure” (Chrétien 3115-3120). In detailing Lancelot’s distressing trek across the bridge, Chrétien de Troyes further highlights the extent to which Lancelot’s heart and love for Guinevere overshadows any wariness he may possess towards pursuing such perilous journeys. Additionally, the personification of Love as a distinct entity, rather than a simple emotion, further exemplifies the magnitude of affection
Lancelot possesses towards Guinevere and how such a principle of romantic love as a concrete driving force, strengthens his efforts rather than pollute them. Moreover, Lancelot’s willingness to self-inflict suffering upon his body in such a scene, serves to portray his body as a vessel in which his love for Guinevere is reflected through a determination to forsake the health of his own physical body in an effort to be reunited with her. Thus, it is in this regard that Chrétien de Troyes employs the suffering inflicted upon Lancelot’s body as an instrument to sound both the empowerment Lancelot derives through his love for Guinevere, as well as Lancelot’s prioritization of Guinevere over the physical state of his body. Though such a scene does not touch upon the suppression of sexual desire and sustenance of purity, it nevertheless evokes a contrasting image in which Lancelot’s outward bodily suffering, fueled by romantic reverence towards Guinevere solidifies his spirit and his mind, rather than tarnishing them as posited by the Gregorian Reforms’ perception of the implications stemming from romantic love as destructive to the spirit.

Alongside the strengthening of Lancelot’s will through the suffering he chooses to inflict upon his body in proclamation of his love for Guinevere, the interplay seen in *Abelard and Heloise*, further reinforces the notion of accepting the suffering accompanied by denying the desires of the flesh by virtue of the power of romantic love. As presented in Letter 1, Heloise writes to Abelard exclaiming “I have denied myself all pleasure to follow your will: I have kept nothing for myself but to become yours” (Levitan 61). The denial of Heloise’s desires through her pursuit of becoming a nun, distinctly illustrates her purposeful neglect of her own bodily pleasures in an effort to appease the demands of her one true love: Abelard. Thus, the suffering Heloise welcomes due to her renunciation of the desires of the flesh, vividly illustrates the manner in which her body becomes a physical manifestation of her transcendental love for
Abelard; as it is through her underlying adoration for him, does she find both a sense of self and strength in maintaining celibacy as a nun. Opposing Gregorian Reform doctrine, Heloise finds success in denying her pleasures not through an infatuation with attaining divine purity in chastity, but rather through an undetering romantic love that empowers her to do so - as reflected by her continued devotion towards Abelard. Additionally, it is through Heloise’s sacrifice of all that pleases her to “to become [Abelard’s]” (Levitan 61), that the strength of her devotion towards him, is amplified as showcased by her sense of identity solely revolving around her love for him. Moreover, the extent to which Heloise longs for what she has lost - the autonomy of a sexual relationship with Abelard - highlights the internal suffering she gladly experiences as she, nevertheless, remains adherent to the commands of her lover. Ultimately, analogous to how Lancelot willingly permits the physical degradation of his body through an insatiable love for Guinevere, Heloise, similarly, remains steadfast to subduing her sexual desires and the pleasures of the flesh - in doing so, demonstrating the virtue, rather than vice, derived through a romantic love for Abelard in controlling the body.

Overarchingly, though the Gregorian Reforms elucidate the nature of love derived through sexual partnerships as besmirching the soul, Chrétien de Troyes and the letters of Abelard and Heloise, eloquently depict the essence of romantic love as a driving force capable of strengthening the mind as well as the spirit as demonstrated through the self-inflicted subjugation of one’s body and desires of the flesh to suppression. Thereby, reinforcing the great magnitude of influence the “heart” possesses over the physical urges of the body.
Works Cited
