

**Power, Courtly Love, and a Lack of Heirs:
Guinevere and Medieval Queens**

Thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in History

by

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December 2009

ABSTRACT

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Authors have given Queen Guinevere of the Arthurian stories a wide variety of personalities; she has been varyingly portrayed as seductive, faithful, “fallen,” powerful, powerless, weak-willed, strong-willed, even as an inheritor of a matriarchal tradition. These personalities span eight centuries and are the products of their respective times and authors much more so than of any historical Guinevere. Despite this, however, threads of similarity run throughout many of the portrayals: she had power in some areas and none in others; she was involved in a courtly romance; and she did not produce an heir to the throne. None of these were unique to her, either; either stereotypes or literary convention demanded them all. I examine Guinevere’s portrayals by three influential medieval writers, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Sir Thomas Malory, compare them to historical queens, and show that although their representations of her emphasized different aspects, together they add up to a portrait of a medieval literary queen both stereotypical and human.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my advisor, Dr. Laura Michele Diener, for providing lots of encouragement, enthusiasm, and exactly the type of hands-off direction that I needed.

Huge thanks to my family for their never-ending support and willingness to listen to me talk about random parts of my thesis. Special thanks to my sister, Anya, for her translation of Latin phrases; I owe her chocolate chip cookie dough.

Thanks to the Borders Café for providing caffeine, sugar, and a change of scenery while doing research.

Thanks to my fellow thesis-students for their support and feedback – even if we didn't always agree, it was still valuable!

Special thanks to my undergraduate mentor, Dr. Jane Woods, who taught me so much about history as an undergraduate and continued to support and encourage me after graduation.

Thanks to an academic community on LiveJournal for perspective and snark, neither of which were directed at me.

Finally, thanks to the EZ-Borrow system of which Marshall University is a member; without it, I would not have had easy access to a lot of important books for my research.

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Introduction: Guinevere as an Example

Authors have given Queen Guinevere of the Arthurian stories a wide variety of personalities; she has been varyingly portrayed as seductive, faithful, “fallen,” powerful, powerless, an inheritor of a matriarchal tradition, weak-willed, and strong-willed.¹ These personalities span eight centuries and are the products of their respective times and authors much more so than of any historical Guinevere. Despite this, however, threads of similarity run throughout many of the portrayals: she had power in some areas and none in others; she was involved in a courtly romance; and she did not produce an heir to the throne. None of these were unique to her, either; either stereotypes or literary convention demanded them all. I examine Guinevere’s portrayals by three influential medieval writers, Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Sir Thomas Malory, compare them to historical queens, and show that although their representations of her emphasized different aspects, together they add up to a portrait of a medieval literary queen both stereotypical and human.

Scholarship on Guinevere as a character was almost unknown until forty years ago, and much of what has been written has only come out within the last twenty-five years or so. This corresponds with the rise of feminist scholarship in both history and literature. Yet Guinevere has only been connected with historical queens in isolated discussions, and never, to the best of my knowledge, on a wider scale. Such comparisons

¹ For all but the last two descriptions, see Beverly Kennedy, “Guenevere,” in *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 262-3. The last two descriptions come from, respectively: Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); and Stephen R. Lawhead, *Arthur* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989). Genres include medieval romances, general fiction, fantasy, and historically-oriented fiction.

are important, however, in determining both her relationships with historical queens as well as her status as an example of queenly behavior for medieval readers.

Ulrike Bethlehem described Guinevere as one of the most important characters in the Arthurian mythos, noting, “No other Arthurian character has caused so many and so momentous additions – not least the introduction of Lancelot as a courtly lover – or given rise to as many different interpretations.”² In terms of time spent on her in the stories, she is a secondary character, used mainly to advance the plot and as a foil for knightly endeavors both good and bad. Yet Bethlehem’s assessment is valid, simply because, in spite of those seemingly indifferent portrayals, she has emerged as an iconic character central to the mythos. This is an outcome which surely was not intended or even, perhaps, imagined by medieval writers.

In her examination of medieval women, historian Judith Bennett observed, “At every turn, medieval culture struggled with the simultaneous humanity and otherness of women, and its gender ideologies were deeply inconsistent and contradictory.”³ This is evident in Chrétien’s and Malory’s portrayals of Guinevere. Chrétien was the first writer to place Guinevere in a courtly and adulterous relationship with Lancelot, yet Lancelot revered her almost as a saint, and she successfully used her diplomatic skills with both Sir Kay and King Bademagus. Similarly, Malory portrayed Guinevere as fickle and in a courtly relationship that helped lead to the kingdom’s eventual downfall, but she was also a spiritual advisor and became more sympathetic through her lack of children. As the

² Ulrike Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle: Images of Arthur’s Queen in the Medieval Literature of England and France* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2005), 3.

³ Judith M. Bennett, *Medieval Women in Modern Perspective* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2000), 36.

woman in a courtly relationship, she was placed on a pedestal and her whim became Lancelot's law, yet she also cuckolded her husband and king. She was a fictional queen of what became the most powerful country in the Western world, yet she had no direct political power and failed to produce an heir. Nor was she alone; a number of historical queens displayed the same societal contradictions in the Middle Ages.

Pauline Stafford, while discussing portrayals of early medieval queens, deftly described the dangers of taking chronicles and narratives at face value: "Yet through these writings we begin to understand how queens were *encouraged* to act, even if we do not get a rounded picture of how they actually behaved."⁴ This may also be applied to medieval romances as well as its corollary; they show how queens were encouraged not to act and the consequences that may occur if they did. Guinevere's courtly relationship with Lancelot is a prime example of this, particularly in Malory, as their adultery paved the way for the events that led to Arthur's death and Camelot's fall.

These scholars noted, directly or indirectly, that Guinevere was used as an example of what were seen as positive and negative attributes of women in the Middle Ages. As will be discussed in the following chapters, however, the writers also portrayed her in very human, down-to-earth terms. In combining these aspects of her portrayals, she emerges as a complex character and a representation of medieval views on queenship.

Chrétien de Troyes

Little is known of Chrétien de Troyes's life, including his birth and death dates;

⁴ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Leicester University Press, 1983, repr. 1998), 12.

however, scholars agree that between 1160 and 1172 CE he lived at the court of his patroness, Countess Marie de Champagne, whom he referenced by name more than once in his stories. W. W. Comfort, who translated Chrétien's works into English, suggested that he was "perhaps [a] herald-at-arms (according to Gaston Paris, based on 'Lancelot' 5591-94)" in the introduction to his translated works.⁵ Historian Michelle A. Freeman, however, claimed he was a poet at the countess's court, although the two careers were not necessarily mutually exclusive; whereas Jean Frappier argued that he was likely a cleric and not a herald.⁶ Regardless of his official occupation, Chretien was a learned and courtly man. Douglas Kelly described the background of Chrétien's world, noting that his "romances come from a world where public reception was quite different from what it is today . . . The aristocrat determined – dictated would probably be too strong – and the author interpreted."⁷ This is evident in the writer's own work, as Chrétien declared that the material and overall sense of his "Lancelot" story was given to him by Marie de Champagne.⁸

The four stories comprising the *Arthurian Romances*, "Erec and Enide," "Cliges,"

⁵ Gaston Paris, *Journal des Savants* (1902), 296. The introduction was not included in the book I used for "Lancelot" itself, with no reason given for the exclusion. The introduction, therefore, was taken from Project Gutenberg's e-text of the original translation. W. W. Comfort, "Introduction" in *Four Arthurian Romances* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1913), paragraph 4. <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/831> Accessed November 1, 2008.

⁶ Michelle A. Freeman, "Chrétien de Troyes" in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages* vol. 3, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 308; and Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, trans. Raymond J. Cormier, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), 4.

⁷ Douglas Kelly, "Chrétien de Troyes: The Narrator and His Art" in *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: A Symposium*, ed. Douglas Kelly (Lexington: French Forum, Publishers, Inc., 1985), 17.

⁸ Chrétien, "Lancelot" in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. W. Comfort (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1913, repr. 2006), 235.

“Yvain, the Knight of the Lion,” and “Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart,” were written in rhyming couplets of eight syllables in Old French.⁹ “Lancelot” was written between 1168 and 1171, during which time he also wrote “Yvain.” Although Chrétien completed the first three stories in the *Four Arthurian Romances*, he did not complete “Lancelot,” for reasons unknown; the last thousand lines were written by Godefroy de Lagny, with Chrétien’s blessing.¹⁰ One possibility for why Chrétien did not finish “Lancelot” is that, unlike his other stories, Marie de Champagne instructed him to emphasize courtly love, which went against his morals. This is partly borne out by recognizing that the romance elements in his other stories were more conventional, as was his portrayal of Guinevere.¹¹

Sir Thomas Malory

Despite Malory having written one of the most well-known Arthurian tales in medieval times, scholars have only recently approached a consensus on his real identity. Many claimed that Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell, Warwickshire, was the author.¹² H. Oskar Sommer and George L. Kittredge independently supported this idea

⁹ Comfort noted that Chrétien also worked on an immensely long poem titled “Perceval le Gallois,” which ran to approximately thirty-two thousand verses, of which Chrétien wrote only the first nine thousand. However, due to its length and Chrétien’s lesser involvement, it has not been included in some collections of his works. Comfort’s mention of Jessie L. Weston’s translation of Wolfram’s “Parzival” was intended to provide an alternative English version of the story; however, his claim that Wolfram’s version “tells substantially the same story, though in a different spirit” lessened his argument, for there is little use in substituting one story for another when their styles and interpretations are different. Comfort, “Introduction,” paragraph 4.

¹⁰ Freeman noted that these dates are approximate and controversial, though she did not elaborate on the controversy. Freeman, 308.

¹¹ Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 142 fn. 464.

¹² The information in these two paragraphs about Thomas Malory was taken from Robert W. Ackerman and R.M. Lumiansky, “Malory, Sir Thomas,” in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages* vol. 8, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987), 60-65.

in the 1890s. Officials arrested and imprisoned Malory of Newbold Revell several times between 1443-60 for many crimes, including cattle raids, robbery, extortion, rape, and attempted murder. Based on documents discovered later on, William Matthews claimed that this Malory would have been too old, and his living conditions too poor, for him to have written *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Matthews argued that the author was instead Thomas Malory of Hutton and Studley, Yorkshire, who might have been a prisoner of war in France. P. J. C. Field rejects this idea, in part because Malory of Hutton and Studley was not a knight.

Richard R. Griffith held that Thomas Malory of Papworth St. Agnes, Cambridgeshire, wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur*. This Malory wrote a will dated 1469, which would have been in the right time frame, and Griffith also uncovered a number of genealogical and geographic clues that point to this man being the author. He may have been under house arrest during the Earl of Warwickshire's brief ascendancy in late 1469; the "knight prisoner" reference that Malory made of himself may have been inserted into the tale then, and Anthony, Earl Rivers, may have knighted him for services rendered. Malory of Papworth St. Agnes had not been conclusively identified as the author, but Ackerman and Lumiansky claimed in their essay that he is the most likely candidate. While it is unlikely his true identity will ever be decisively known, many scholars today believe that Malory of Newbold Revell was the story's author; a few still hold out for Malory of Papworth St. Agnes.¹³ My arguments here are based on the belief that Malory of Newbold Revell was the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Malory's identity is important

¹³ The rejection of Malory of Hutton and Studley, Yorkshire, seems to have occurred by an undeclared consensus, as I have been unable to find any mention of him in works more recent than Ackerman and Lumiansky's essay.

to understanding his tale, as it reveals his political allegiance and his mindset; his actions in life may be contrasted with the chivalry and romance of the Arthurian saga.

Whatever his historical identity, Malory portrayed Guinevere in a variety of ways: by turns she is a figurehead; a spiritual queen to whom troubled men come with their ethical questions; a woman capable of looking after and protecting those with her; a fallible human seeking love outside of a loveless marriage; an adulteress acting in contradictory ways toward her lover; and, finally, a devoted nun who lives out the rest of her days in constant prayer, seeking divine forgiveness for her sins.¹⁴ Malory's Guinevere had no direct political power, such as might befit a late medieval queen; any power she had resulted indirectly from alliances between her and knights of the Round Table. This is not to say that Guinevere had no influence at all, of course – even ignoring her long-term affair with Lancelot and the direct influence it had on the downfall of the kingdom, she was portrayed as an unofficial spiritual leader to whom knights came in times of personal, spiritual, or moral trouble. Implicit in several chapters in the story, though not described as openly, was the fact that she must have had influence over the court, even if it was just over the members of her retinue: for instance, she was able to

¹⁴ It is necessary to distinguish between the two versions of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The first is the Caxton edition, after the editor and publisher who produced the first printed edition of the tale in 1485. The second is the Vinaver edition, named after Eugene Vinaver, who edited a formerly lost manuscript and published it in 1947. This is also known as the Winchester edition, after the manuscript Vinaver used. One of the main differences between the two versions, as described by literary scholar Takako Kato, is that of organization: Caxton's is comprised of numerous chapters in twenty-one books, whereas Vinaver's has eight books treated as separate romances. The "Roman War" episode in the Vinaver edition is also much longer than it is in the Caxton edition. There are numerous other discrepancies as well, but none of these materially alter the story. I chose to use the Caxton version for two reasons: first, it was more readily available to me; and second, I disagree with Vinaver's suggestion that the story should be read as separate and unconnected episodes. I believe that there are enough threads connecting the episodes to each other so that together they comprise a single, unified story. Takako Kato, "Corrected Mistakes in the Winchester Manuscript" in *Re-Viewing Le Morte d'Arthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 9.

banish Lancelot from the court more than once. Malory also portrayed her as complex when it came to her emotions, especially in her interactions with Lancelot. On the one hand, she was shown as decisive, as when her life and the lives of those in her company were threatened. On the other hand, she vacillated with Lancelot, alternately extolling his virtues and banishing him from her court. Yet these portrayals were consistent with stereotypes of queens and noblewomen; her decisive actions and spiritual leadership were overshadowed by the complete lack of political power she had, while her interactions with Lancelot filled the required part of a courtly romance. Malory's portrayal of Guinevere was indeed complex, with smaller instances of freedom from the overall stereotypes in power and love.

Marie de France

Marie de France was France's first female poet, and yet almost nothing is known about her.¹⁵ Scholars, in fact, know only her first name, and this just because she identified herself at the beginning of her *Lais*. Other than this, and the fact that she was from France, nothing is known for certain – not even when she wrote. Marie has been variously identified “[with] the illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey IV of Anjou (father of Henry II of England), abbess of Shaftesbury (1181-1216); with the abbess of Reading; with a daughter of Waleran de Beaumont; and with a daughter of King Stephen of England.” None of these, however, can be verified.¹⁶ Peter F. Dembowski has noted that

¹⁵ R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁶ Peter F. Dembowski, “Marie de France” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 8, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 136.

she was probably from the Île-de-France, and not the kingdom of France.¹⁷ Although scholars in the past have said that she lived and wrote in the thirteenth century, most scholars now agree that Marie wrote during the latter half of the twelfth century, likely a few years after Chrétien wrote his works.¹⁸

Despite this almost total lack of concrete facts about Marie, some information can be inferred. Perhaps the most obvious is that she was educated; not only could she write Middle French poetry, but she knew Latin and English, and possibly Welsh as well.¹⁹ She dedicated her *Lais* to a king, probably of England; between these two facts, it is evident she was familiar with courtly life and thus was likely a noblewoman, if not royal.²⁰ Marie would have had access to the stories she translated and retold, of course, although it is not even known if her sources were in written or oral form, or both.²¹ If at least some of the stories were in written form, then she would have been able to read at least one of her languages, and possibly more. (In contrast to modern education, medieval men and women who received an education could not always both read and write; often they could write but not read, or at least not fluently.) It is also likely that she was familiar with the works of Chrétien de Troyes, and may even have seen him at court.

Chrétien was the first person to write Arthurian romances; he was also the first to

¹⁷ Dembowski, "Marie de France," 136. The historical region Île-de-France, or the Isle of France, was in what is now Paris, its suburbs, and surrounding lands.

¹⁸ Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 6. See also Joan M. Ferrante, "The Education of Women in the Middle Ages in Theory, Fact, and Fantasy" in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 27.

¹⁹ Dembowski, "Marie de France," 136; and Ferrante, "The Education of Women in the Middle Ages," 27.

²⁰ "Prologue: By Way of Dedication" in *Medieval Lays and Legends of Marie de France*, ed. and trans. Eugene Mason (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1911, repr. 2003), 1.

²¹ Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 6.

introduce Lancelot as a main character and Guinevere's lover. As the progenitor of medieval Arthurian romance, his work paved the way for many further such stories. These culminated in what became the most well-known medieval contribution to the Arthurian legend, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Together, they formed the alpha and omega of Arthurian romances in the Middle Ages. It is therefore logical that their portrayals of Guinevere be studied together.

Marie de France was the only female known to write Arthurian stories, thus lending a different viewpoint and portrayal of Guinevere. Although her characterization of the queen did not become a lasting part of the Arthurian mythos, her work was still influential and recognizable throughout the Middle Ages. Her writing is included in this study precisely because of that difference and influence.

Genres

When considering medieval literature, it is important to realize that people in the Middle Ages did not view history in the same way that we do now. Laura D. Barefield described the medieval view of history as what was perceived to have happened, based on prior accounts. "Or as some have put it, history was 'what was held to be true.'"²² Given this, the distinction between historical chronicles and literature in the Middle Ages is blurred. What seems to us as fanciful stories of people in a fictional kingdom seemed to medieval readers to be true stories of an earlier era; the sheer number of Arthurian stories, both original and attributed to previous sources, lent weight to the authoritative

²² Laura D. Barefield, *Gender and History in Medieval English Romance and Chronicle* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003), 1.

nature of its history.

Chrétien's Arthurian stories are assuredly romances in nature. Sally Conroy Fullman, in her doctoral dissertation, argued that "Lancelot" was a parody or satire of the courtly love convention, instead of a serious treatment.²³ David Shirt, on the other hand, disagreed with this concept, claiming that "from what little we know about contemporary medieval reaction to courtly romance . . . it would appear that allegory was not the most immediate thing which sprang to mind when a listener/reader was faced with a romance."²⁴ His argument is overly simplistic, however; just because allegory or satire may not have been the most obvious to a reader does not mean that it was not there. Given several sequences in the story, but especially the scene where Lancelot literally went into transports of ecstasy upon discovering Guinevere's discarded comb, I am inclined to agree with Fullman's assessment that "Lancelot" was, on one level, a satire of courtly romances.

Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* is more complicated. Dorsey Armstrong conceded that "[a]lthough Malory's text arguably deploys several other modes – including epic, chronicle, and tragedy – the *Morte d'Arthur*'s predominant mode is romance."²⁵ Most scholars agree with her assessment, although some do not. Thomas H. Crofts, in his discussion of Caxton's preface to the story, suggested that Caxton edited and published

²³ Sally Conroy Fullman, *The Imperilled Ideal: The Evolution of Woman and the Court in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (Rutgers University Ph.D diss., 1976: Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International, 1981), 137.

²⁴ David Shirt, "Chrétien's 'Charrette' and its Critics, 1964-74," *Modern Language Review* 73 (1978): 42.

²⁵ Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 9.

the work as a historical tale. He noted, however, that “unlike that of the twelfth century, fifteenth-century historiography did not strive to maintain the distinction between *veraces historiae* and *fallaces fabulae*.”²⁶ Crofts implied, though did not state outright, that Caxton and his readers (and, by extension, Malory himself) were either unable or unwilling to separate history from what we would now call historical fiction. Beverly Kennedy, on the other hand, argued, “It is now generally accepted that Malory perceived himself as an historian. Terence McCarthy notes that Malory handles his romance materials in an ‘historical mode’ and seems to assume the ‘role of court historian’ (149).”²⁷ This view is not one apparently held by many other scholars, however, which would contradict Kennedy’s claim that it is widespread. Suggestions that the story was meant as a political allegory have also been largely rejected.²⁸ The problem with labeling *le Morte d’Arthur* as one genre or another is that the story is more complex. There are certainly aspects of romance, especially with the Guinevere-Lancelot and Tristan-Isolde relationships; parts of it, however, especially the battles and jousts, read much more like a chronicle, and there is a sense of, if not specific political allegory, then at least general political commentary. This suggests that Armstrong’s analysis, acknowledging the influence of various genres, is the most accurate.

²⁶ Thomas H. Crofts, “‘thynges foresayd aledged’: *Historia* and *argumentum* in Caxton’s Preface to the *Morte Darthur*” in *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 55.

²⁷ Beverly Kennedy, “Adultery in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 7.4 (Winter 1997): 65, 85 en. 3. She cited her *Knighthood* and Felicity Riddy as further reading. Riddy, however, explicitly called Malory’s story a romance. Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1987), 82.

²⁸ See Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory’s *Morte Darthur*: A Politically Neutral English Adaptation of the Arthurian Story,” *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003); and Elizabeth T. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

The Question of Historicity

Although Guinevere's historicity, or even Arthur's, is not relevant to this study, it is still important to acknowledge what little is known on the matter. King Arthur, most scholars agree, lived in Britain during the end of the Roman Empire, with his adventures taking place roughly between 450 and 500 C.E., depending on the scholar. His existence as a historical person is not in much doubt, although Arthur's actual historical identity is fiercely debated.²⁹ The possible existence of a historical Guinevere has long since been lost to time, although one scholar argued strongly for her existence and even a particular identity.³⁰ Arthur, Guinevere, and the Knights of the Round Table (those who may have been historical people) lived at the far edge of the Roman Empire at a time when very few people of the area were literate, and those who were would have most likely been Roman officers, since the Celts did not have a written language.³¹ While it is likely that the historical Arthur would have appeared in records of the time, since most of the stories surrounding him described his attacking Roman forts, there was no reason for his queen to have appeared as well, perhaps unless she was also instrumental in the attacks.

Boudicca, the first-century queen of the Icenii who led her people in an attack on London

²⁹ Geoffrey Ashe made a convincing case for Arthur to have been Riothamus, a British leader who ruled approximately 454-470 CE. Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur* (London: Guild Publishing, 1985). Richard W. Barber, on the other hand, concluded that we cannot know Arthur's true history. Richard W. Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

³⁰ Norma Lorre Goodrich, *Guinevere* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992).

³¹ Although ogham, a set of runes adapted from the Roman alphabet for inscription into stone, existed in Ireland from the fourth to the seventh centuries CE, it was not used for record-keeping but for funerary and incantational purposes and to define land boundaries. H. Roe, "Celtic Languages" in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages* vol. 3, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 233; and Pádraig P. Ó Néill, "Ogham" in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages* vol. 9, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 222.

in revenge for her daughters' rape, was one of the few examples in Roman Britain of a female martial leader. As none of the stories described the queen as having martial capabilities, however, this possibility must be rejected. Given this lack of Roman records on her (or, indeed, on any prominent native woman of the time, possibly excluding early Christian saints), and given the impossibility of Celtic records, it is extremely unlikely that scholars will ever be able to positively identify Guinevere as a historical person.³²

The question of Guinevere's historicity is not important here, however. Chrétien and Malory wove her into their Arthurian stories, using her to advance the narratives and changing her portrayals in order to make her conform to their and society's expectations. In doing so, they created a character who was at once stereotypical and sympathetic. Such expectations included various forms of power: spiritual, personal, and political.

³² There is always the possibility, of course, that records of a historical Guinevere existed at one time and are no longer extant; this does not, however, change my conclusion regarding her identity.

Chapter 1

Power and Pawn, Intercessor and Advisor: Guinevere's Power in Chrétien and Malory

As a literary queen, Guinevere could have had access to the same types of power that historical queens and noblewomen held, even if rarely – political, spiritual, personal, even martial power, to a degree – or she could have publicly exercised no power at all, saving everything for her husband to do. Both Chrétien and Malory portrayed Guinevere as having spiritual and intercessory power, traditional for queens and aristocratic women. Her personal and political powers were limited, however; the latter in particular was an exclusively masculine privilege that women rarely exercised. Comparing how these two male writers portrayed Guinevere reveals that although she was an important, if secondary, character in the Arthurian corpus, she was not unusual by medieval standards in terms of queenly power.

Before any discussion of medieval queens' power can occur, however, I should define more closely the concept of power itself. Historian Helen E. Maurer made a clear distinction between authority and power: authority is "the socially recognized right to make certain decisions and to require obedience." Power, on the other hand, "is the more informal 'ability to gain compliance'. One form of power is influence, amounting to persuasion; another form could obviously be force."¹ In adopting these definitions for this thesis it is obvious, as will be discussed below, that neither Chrétien's nor Malory's Guinevere ever had authority; the writers did, however, portray her as having the power of influence over both her husband Arthur and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the knights

¹ Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), 5. No citation given.

of the Round Table. The types of power discussed here are political, spiritual/intercessory, and personal. I restrict political power to direct or explicit primary leadership over the court, the knights of the Round Table, and the kingdom as a whole. Spiritual or intercessory power refers to lay influence or leadership over spiritual matters, as well as interceding with the king on behalf of petitioners or the accused, which carried spiritual overtones in the Middle Ages. To this should be added the concept of personal power, which I define as the ability to control one's own body and movements – examples included marriage, abduction, and the ability to leave one's home on trips or excursions. This was not a strictly feminine power, as kings and noblemen were also often subjected to its lack in terms of arranged marriages. Men, however, had a greater chance of retaining personal power than did women.

Many recent authors have examined Guinevere; far fewer have discussed the aspects of her power. Literary scholar Ulrike Bethlehem, describing Guinevere's overall (negative) impact in Chrétien, claimed, "In Guinevere, Chrétien projects the flaws of the chivalric system. Because a woman is at its centre, it is doomed to fail."² Yet this observation is not quite correct; chivalry's flaws were apparent in Guinevere and her actions, but chivalry itself managed to stay afloat, though barely. While the system was indeed doomed to fail, as in Malory's tale, in Chrétien's story it still tottered along. In contrast with this, Dorsey Armstrong's analysis of Malory's Guinevere showed a different perspective: "While Guenevere is one of those feminine figures who later on destabilizes the social order, for much of the text she demonstrates a positive, explicit, and direct

² Ulrike Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle: Images of Arthur's Queen in the Medieval Literature of England and France* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2005), 154.

engagement with the shaping of knightly identity in her role as queen.”³ Malory barely mentioned this shaping of knightly identity, but it was nevertheless important – knights customarily reported to Guinevere upon returning from their quests and adventures to tell her of their actions. Both Bethlehem and Armstrong evaluated Guinevere’s power and influence in the chivalric order, but came to different conclusions; Chrétien, according to Bethlehem, focused on the negative aspect, while Armstrong argued that Malory emphasized the positive. Armstrong did not compare Guinevere’s different portrayals at all. Bethlehem did draw some comparisons, but they were necessarily brief, as he examined almost every medieval Arthurian story that mentioned Guinevere; and his comparisons were more abstract than personal in nature.⁴

Medieval-literature scholar Kenneth Hodges discussed Guinevere’s political role in Malory’s tale, showing her to be the leader of an affinity that overlapped Arthur’s and Lancelot’s affinities. Hodges defined affinities as “networks mixing official and unofficial connections in which superiors promoted and protected those underneath them, and men and women offered service in return for in hope of [*sic*] such ‘good lordship.’”⁵ The relationships in an affinity may therefore have been similar to a kind of Mafia, though without the latter’s negative connotations. Paul Strohm, in discussing affinity, described a positive attribute: “[It] was, of course, flexibility: by escaping the rigidities of strict hierarchy, in which both distinction and reward were based on an unwieldy

³ Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory’s Morte d’Arthur* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 57.

⁴ The *curriculum vitae* he created for Guinevere is a short but fascinating demonstration of just how different her portrayals were. Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 409-10.

⁵ Kenneth Hodges, “Guinevere’s Politics in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104.1 (January 2005): 56.

system of land tenure, the affinity permitted a more flexible vocabulary of social relations, a widened array of rewards for specialized or temporary services.”⁶

Guinevere’s political power took place for the most part in this affinity, and unlike some historical queens or her own portrayal in Chaucer, she did not have much of a political role outside her affinity – she did not, for instance, intercede with the king on behalf of petitioners in Malory’s tale, as she did in Chrétien’s.⁷ Hodges’s point was that although Guinevere’s political role was not one traditionally held by historical queens and was not directly tied to the political climate of the realm, she nevertheless had a good deal of power – which, he noted, may still have adversely affected the kingdom. Because of this, he recognized that “[a] falling out between Guinevere and Lancelot could dramatically affect the political balance of the kingdom.”⁸ He said that this was in relationship to the affinity, and noted that the adulterous relationship between the two later affected the entire Round Table, but did not otherwise elaborate on this claim – which was unfortunate, as Guinevere’s and Lancelot’s adultery eventually led to a series of anarchic battles heralding the kingdom’s collapse. Hodges’s claim that Guinevere did not hold any power outside of her political affinity was incorrect, however, as she acted as a spiritual intercessor more than once. Although these actions were not overtly political, they still had the potential to affect the kingdom through her treatment of Arthur’s wayward knights.

Examining the role of women in a medieval history and encyclopedia, Kristi

⁶ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 25.

⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Walter Skeat, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900). <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22120/22120-h/22120-h.htm#wife> Accessed September 12, 2009.

⁸ Hodges, “Guinevere’s Politics,” 62.

DiClemente concluded, “In general, medieval male authors were critical of female rulers, and if they appeared to be successful in their endeavors the authors ‘gave all credit to the exceptional presence of male capacities in their minds and bodies.’”⁹ While this cannot directly apply to Guinevere’s literary image, it is still an important explanation of how medieval queens were perceived by male authors. Rightly or wrongly, medieval English society viewed women as weaker and less intelligent than men; the populace therefore assumed that a female ruler was a sign of instability in the realm. Despite this view, however, Erin L. Jordan pointed out in her study of sisters Jeanne and Marguerite, two thirteenth-century rulers in Flanders, that female leaders in Europe were more common than many people today think.¹⁰

Examining these somewhat disparate ideas regarding medieval queens, one conclusion stands out: the concepts and realities of female power were vastly more complicated than commonly thought, then or now. By applying these concepts to two male portrayals of Guinevere, one can see two things: a different, less-emphasized side of this famous literary queen; and how historical queens and events influenced those portrayals.

A Conventional Pawn: Chrétien de Troyes

⁹ Kristi DiClemente, “The Women of Flanders and Their Husbands: The Role of Women in the *Liber Floridus*,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 23 (2006): 79. Quoted Thérèse de Hemptinne, “Women as Mediators Between the Powers of *Comitatus* and *Sacerdotium*: Two Countesses of Flanders in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries” in *The Propagation of Power in the Medieval West: Selected Proceedings of the International Conference, Groningen 20-23 November 1996*, ed. Martin Grosman, Arjo Vanderjagt, and Jan Veenstra (Groningen, 1997), 287.

¹⁰ Erin L. Jordan, *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 5.

As might be expected, Chrétien, in his story “Lancelot,” initially portrayed Guinevere as having no personal power – that is, he showed that she was a pawn, almost a disregarded player in the longstanding feud between Sir Maleagant and Guinevere’s husband Arthur. Indeed, her two primary functions were as a pawn and as a love interest for Lancelot. An unnamed knight (later identified as Maleagant) presented himself at Arthur’s feast and challenged any of his knights to a complicated duel: if Arthur would “dare entrust to him the Queen,” that knight and the Queen would follow the unnamed knight into the woods and the two knights would do battle. If Arthur’s knight won – “if he is able to defend the Queen and if he succeeds in bringing her back again” – then the other knight would free all the prisoners he held in his own country to return to Camelot.¹¹ The knights probably saw the challenge itself as an attempt to undermine the court; as Johns noted, “it was understood that eating at banquets was an event which reinforced the cohesion of the nobility.”¹² Interrupting the feast to issue a challenge to the king – one which affected his queen, no less – was a grave insult. Sir Kay tricked Arthur and Guinevere into allowing him to accept this challenge, however, by pretending to leave Arthur’s court in a rage; Guinevere, on Arthur’s encouragement, begged him to stay at court, even prostrating herself at his feet and vowing to not rise until he would remain. Kay then agreed to stay, provided that she and Arthur both consented in advance to his request, which was of course to go after the unnamed knight.

Chrétien again demonstrated that Guinevere was a pawn in the struggles of men

¹¹ Chrétien de Troyes, “Lancelot” in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. W. Comfort (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006), 236.

¹² Susan M. Johns, “Poetry and Prayer: Women and Politics of Spiritual Relationships in the Early Twelfth Century,” *European Review of History* 8.1 (2001): 13.

after Maleagant took her to his castle, when Maleagant spoke to his father, King Bademagus of Gorre. “So help me God, I would rather become his [Lancelot’s] man than surrender to him the Queen! She shall never be given up by me, but rather contested and defended against all who are so foolish as to dare to come in quest of her.” Yet Lancelot himself was not much better, as Chrétien made clear in Bademagus’s response: “He [Lancelot] would doubtless rather win her in battle than as a gift, for it will thus enhance his fame. It is my opinion that he is seeking her, not to receive her peaceably, but because he wishes to win her by force of arms. So it would be wise on thy part to deprive him of the satisfaction of fighting thee.”¹³ Lancelot, therefore, was interested more in glory than in rescuing his queen; Chrétien implied here that freeing Guinevere was secondary to the knight’s desire for renown. Bademagus obviously strove to keep his son from fighting Lancelot, who was a better knight, but the king’s claim as to the latter’s motivation was borne out later in the story, as will be discussed below, when Lancelot had a chance to spirit Guinevere away but did not take advantage of the situation. One may even detect a certain amount of sympathy in Chrétien’s treatment of this part of the story for Guinevere’s helplessness. Regardless of her power and authority, Maleagant in a very real sense kidnapped and held her hostage to cause further instability in her own realm and force a battle between her captor and her savior. Even her diplomatic skills could not help her; the most she was able to do was convince Bademagus to grant her the opportunity to stand by a window to watch the battle.

The members of Arthur’s court respected Guinevere, with some knights (such as Kay) even looking up to her as someone to listen to. Chrétien portrayed her at Arthur’s

¹³ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 270.

court as not only a pawn, but also an intercessor between Arthur and Kay; one might even go so far as to say that she was a kind of internal diplomat, working in a situation that could have turned out to be politically messy.¹⁴ This was all from Arthur's point of view, of course – Chrétien made sure that his readers knew Kay's threat to leave the court was not serious, but just as clearly stated that Arthur thought he was about to lose one of his most trusted knights. Arthur in fact believed he was placing his future happiness in his wife's hands by asking her to deal with Kay: "Go to him now, my lady dear. Since he will not consent to stay for my sake, pray him to remain on your account . . . for I should never again be happy if I should lose his company."¹⁵ Yet Kay manipulated Guinevere and Arthur by playing off of her feelings for Kay in order to achieve his goal, which was to accept the challenge and fight the unnamed knight for Guinevere. Chrétien thus managed to demonstrate a fascinating dichotomy of her power in just a few sentences.

J.L. Laynesmith described historian Paul Strohm's findings on the use of intercession: "Using fourteenth-century instances, Paul Strohm has shown that in practice the notion of queen as intercessor could be used in male politics as a device to enable a king to change his mind or become reconciled with his subjects, her humble pleading allowing men to avoid losing face and instead appear gracious."¹⁶ Historian

¹⁴ Noblewomen acted as diplomats in historical matters as well: John of Worcester related the involvement of Countess Mabel and Queen Matilda (Stephen's wife) in diplomatic negotiations during The Anarchy (1135-1154 C.E.), describing them as communicating via messengers. R.R. Darlington and Pk. McGurk, eds., *The Chronicle of John Worcester* vol. 3 (Oxford, 1995), 392-395; cited in Johns, "Poetry and Prayer," 18. Johns commented that "[t]here is . . . a recognition of their actions as peace-makers who were involved in these negotiations." Ibid.

¹⁵ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 236.

¹⁶ J.L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7. Laynesmith did not cite Strohm in this instance; presumably his findings were worked out over several publications.

Holly S. Hurlburt described the same principle in an article on a female office in Venice: “[R]itual occasions... implied that consorts [used in this sense as kings’ wives] and royal women possessed potential influence, not just as wives and mothers but as intercessors and political actors in their own rights.”¹⁷ Although Arthur did not ask Guinevere to present a different side of the issue, his using her to plead with Kay on Arthur’s behalf clearly fell within this practice as an intercessor.

What was possibly Chrétien’s most important portrayal of Guinevere as an intercessor came after her capture, when things began to go badly for Maleagant during his battle with Lancelot. Maleagant’s father, understandably not wanting to see his son and heir die, went to Guinevere and begged her to stop Lancelot. Her response was gracious and telling: “Fair sire, I am willing to do so at your request . . . [even] had I mortal hatred for your son, whom it is true I do not love, yet you have served me so well that, to please you, I am quite willing that he should desist.”¹⁸ Guinevere’s conceding the point, and Maleagant’s life, calls to mind an image of a saint interceding on a petitioner’s behalf. While there were many instances of implicit religious allegory throughout the story, as historian Pamela Raabe claimed, this was perhaps the most easily recognizable.¹⁹ Guinevere’s power over Lancelot was such that he immediately stopped fighting because, as Chrétien noted, “[t]he man who is a perfect lover is always obedient

¹⁷ Holly S. Hurlburt, “Public Exposure? Consorts and Ritual in Late Medieval Europe: The Example of the Entrance of the Dogaresse of Venice,” in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 175.

¹⁸ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 276.

¹⁹ Pamela Raabe, “Chrétien’s *Lancelot* and the Sublimity of Adultery,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 57.2 (Winter 1987-1988).

and quickly and gladly does his mistress' pleasure."²⁰ While this may well have been true of a man besotted with earthly or "profane" love, it was also an apt description of the eagerness to obey which characterized a person's spiritual relationship with God, who granted prayers through the saints. This circular and mutual relationship was similar to that shared by Lancelot and Guinevere, who were, according to Raabe, allegorical representations of man and God or the saints, respectively. Although Raabe made an interesting argument, the story reads more like a subtle satire of courtly love and the chivalric tradition than as a religious allegory. This is also borne out by Chrétien's portrayal of Guinevere in his other three Arthurian tales, where the focus was not on courtly love and she was a more traditional queen.

Chrétien demonstrated an unusual and complete lack of power that Guinevere had over her own body and self in the terms laid out between Lancelot and Maleagant after the battle: she was to be surrendered to Lancelot, who was to fight Maleagant again in a year's time at Arthur's court. If Lancelot failed to win, or did not appear for the fight, the queen "shall come back with him [Maleagant] without the interference of any one."²¹ The parties involved, naturally, all agreed to these terms. This advanced the notion, which Chrétien portrayed throughout his version of the story, that Guinevere was primarily used as a pawn between warring kingdoms – particularly since Maleagant (then unnamed) put forward the similar challenge at the beginning of the story, which led to this whole episode.

There is a paradox here, in that Guinevere had almost no power over her own

²⁰ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 276.

²¹ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 277.

person, yet she could stop with a word two men fighting to the death. Although events were otherwise out of her control, in effect she had power over these knights' bodies and lives. The chivalric system, as embodied in Chrétien's Guinevere, had a strange balance of personal powerlessness and intercessory power. This certainly enhanced the idea that Guinevere's role, as a woman, was a political pawn; yet in another role, that of a chivalric lady, she became a powerful intercessor. Chrétien emphasized this dichotomy almost to the point of satire; in lamenting the downfall of an "age of chivalry" that never was, he showed why it could never have worked.²²

Powerful and Powerless: Thomas Malory

Malory, like Chrétien, also took the opportunity early on to demonstrate that Guinevere did not have any personal power. When Malory first introduced her in his story, he had King Arthur describe her as "the most valiant and fairest lady that I know living, or yet that ever I could find."²³ Even at this early stage in the tale Merlin knew or guessed at her eventual love affair with Lancelot and cautioned Arthur against her for this reason. Arthur was set on wedding Guinevere, however. Guinevere, perhaps predictably, had no say in this matter; Arthur and her father, King Leodegrance of Cameliard, arranged the wedding between themselves. Malory described the wedding itself only briefly, stating that it took place "in the church of Saint Stephen's"; in fact he made no

²² Constance Bouchard, "Chivalry, Christianity and Violence," Moffat Lecture (Marshall University: April 10, 2009).

²³ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 79.

mention of her reaction to the whole event at all.²⁴ As far as Malory was concerned, at this early stage Guinevere was just a figurehead to be taken out and put on display when needed and ignored when not. Her first described action was when she and Merlin both scolded a knight, Sir Pellinore, for failing to save a lady's life.²⁵

Malory set the stage for future conflict in Guinevere's first described interaction with Arthur's half sister, Morgan le Fay. Morgan asked Guinevere's leave to go riding into the country, and she responded that Morgan should wait until Arthur returned and ask his leave. Morgan replied that she had "such hasty tidings, that I may not tarry."²⁶ Guinevere said she may go when she will, then. Left unsaid, though perhaps implied anyway, was, "And on your head be it if he disagrees." This is significant because, although Guinevere was the queen of the realm and Morgan the king's sister and queen of her own land, apparently neither had the freedom to undertake what would today be considered a simple outing. Morgan asked permission like a maidservant and Guinevere could not give permission in her own right as head of the ladies' household. Malory likely used this scene as an early example of the conflict between Morgan and Arthur (with Guinevere standing in for Arthur during his absence), perhaps with Morgan exaggerating Arthur's control over the household or with Guinevere pettily refusing an otherwise simple request.

A similar occurrence took place somewhat later on, at a time when Arthur still trusted in his wife's fidelity. When Guinevere asked leave to attend a series of jousts and

²⁴ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 84.

²⁵ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 100.

²⁶ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 123.

desired Lancelot “and such knights as please me best” to go with her, he had no problem with this request and gave his consent freely. These two incidents did not, however, represent societal and power norms for noblewomen during Malory’s time. Although Malory may have portrayed Arthur as being overly restrictive of Guinevere’s movements to drive home the point that she was untrustworthy, this idea does not fit with the fact that Arthur had no reason to distrust her at that time. Guinevere had also not slept with Lancelot at this early stage, thus reinforcing her fidelity – at least in physical, if not emotional, terms. Malory included these scenes, therefore, for one of two reasons: he wanted to portray Arthur as being unreasonable toward his wife, or he wanted to emphasize Guinevere’s complete obedience to her husband at the time. Based on Malory’s otherwise positive portrayal of Arthur and Guinevere’s later disobedience (sleeping with Lancelot and its consequences), the latter is the more likely.

These examples demonstrated Malory’s portrayal of Guinevere as personally powerless, but he did not portray her as having political power, either. Even in one of the few areas where a queen could have expected to have some political power, in terms of a regency during the king’s absence or following his death, Guinevere did not have any such power. There was a legal precedent for allowing a woman to inherit property and political authority from her husband or father: Empress Matilda (b. 1101 CE, d. 1169) was the only English queen before Malory’s time to ascend the throne after the death of a father or husband. King Henry I proclaimed her his heir after his only legitimate son, William Adelin, died in a shipwreck in 1120; although she was never crowned queen, due to her cousin Stephen’s quick coronation after her father’s death, she was still recognized as a queen of England.

Queens were also made regents in England during their husbands' absences – Henry III named his wife, Eleanor of Provence, regent during his absence in 1253; she was assisted by a council, but otherwise ruled with his full authority.²⁷ During Malory's lifetime, Margaret of Anjou pushed to be named regent during her husband Henry VI's illness; while she did not formally become the regent, she still wielded power behind the scenes. As historian Helen E. Maurer noted, a main benefit to naming the queen, rather than a lord, regent was "the need for a 'center' that could stand above magnate rivalry and command the loyalty of all."²⁸ In France laws barred women from ruling of their own right; however, during the Middle Ages six queens acted as regents. Charity Cannon Willard described another instance of a noblewoman exercising power in her husband's absence: "[W]omen in the Burgundian ducal family were expected to play a significant part in the scheme of things. Such had been the case with the duke's mother, Margaret of Flanders, as well as with his wife, Margaret of Bavaria, who acted as his representative in the North and then in Burgundy while he pursued his political ambitions in Paris."²⁹ Historian Michael Burger, though referring to countesses rather than queens, noted that such occurrences had become "something of a textbook commonplace, and a true one."³⁰ These examples all serve to show that Malory would have had historical precedents on his side in writing Guinevere as Arthur's regent.

²⁷ Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), 100.

²⁸ Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou*, 108.

²⁹ Willard, "A Fifteenth-Century View of Women's Role in Medieval Society," 99.

³⁰ Michael Burger, "The date and authorship of Robert Grosseteste's *Rules for Household and Estate Management*," *Historical Research* 74.183 (February 2001): 108.

Malory did not write Guinevere as having this opportunity, however. When Arthur made ready to leave England to claim the Roman imperial throne, he “resigned the rule of the realm and Guenever his queen” to two governors, Sir Baudwin of Britain and Sir Constantine of Cornwall. Guinevere made no reaction to this announcement; instead, she was so upset at Arthur’s leaving that she “swooned in such wise that the ladies bare her into her chamber.”³¹ As he was leaving, Arthur said further that Sir Constantine was his heir and was to be crowned king if he died while on the journey, again pushing Guinevere out of the succession. Although one may argue that Malory therefore did not approve of female queens in positions of political power, a more likely explanation is that he did not approve of *Guinevere* in such a position. The distinction becomes clear when one realizes that Malory’s Guinevere had never demonstrated any aptitude for politics; nor was she, to his readers at least, particularly trustworthy in general – her courtly relationship with Lancelot was emphasized from early in the story, even if they did not technically commit adultery until later on. Historian Natasha Hodgson noted that “noble birth or tradition was not always enough to secure regency for wives or mothers, they had to demonstrate political skill and be trustworthy.”³² Malory’s Guinevere demonstrated neither of these attributes, and so he had Arthur assign the regency to someone else.

Elizabeth McCartney, in summing up a medieval Frenchman’s legal writings on the power of queens, said, “Grassaille . . . offered a thorough rebuttal to the arguments

³¹ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 154.

³² Natasha Hodgson, “Nobility, Women and Historical Narratives of the Crusades and the Latin East,” *Al-Masāq* 17 (March 2005): 73.

lamenting a woman's moral and biological inferiority, so that his assessment of the juristic basis of queenship ultimately supported a queen's right to assume full direction of the realm during a regency government."³³ Grassaille therefore examined the possibility of a female regency from a legal basis, rejecting common claims of the time that all women were biologically incapable of ruling. This is further evidence that Arthur would have been able to name Guinevere as the regent while he was away; that he did not do so helps to demonstrate Malory's true feelings on Guinevere. Historian Elizabeth T. Pochoda succinctly described Malory's view, stating, "We are left with Malory's view that because women are involved only with the private lives of men, they are potentially disruptive and destructive forces in the public sphere."³⁴ This is borne out by remembering that while Malory did include positive portrayals of women, every instance of a woman exerting (or attempting to exert) public or political power ended in failure or disaster, or both.³⁵

While Malory fairly consistently wrote Guinevere as having little to no power, this did not comprise the entirety of her portrayal; he did portray her as possessing a specifically feminine type of strength. One of the few such times she broke away from the traditional helpless-female role was when treasonous knights threatened the lives of Arthur, Guinevere, and their knights. Malory described her response to the threat: "It

³³ Elizabeth McCartney, "Ceremonies and Privileges of Office: Queenship in Late Medieval France" in *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*, ed. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 194.

³⁴ Elizabeth T. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 94.

³⁵ Aside from the obvious instance of Guinevere's adultery leading to the kingdom's downfall, Morgan le Fay attempted more than once to have Arthur killed or his knights defeated and discredited.

were me lieber, said the queen, to die in the water than to fall in your [Arthur's] enemies' hand and there be slain."³⁶ As the water she referenced was a raging river, this revealed something important about how Malory saw her as a woman. He portrayed Guinevere as a queen who would have rather faced death, in attempting the crossing of a dangerous river, than be captured by the enemy and risk torture or rape before being killed. He set her up in this instance as a woman willing to preserve her virtue over her life, which men viewed as the kind of strength women should have had.³⁷

Practically the only other time Malory wrote Guinevere as having a similarly feminine strength was near the end of his story, when Mordred, Arthur's son, announced his intention some time after Arthur's death to marry Guinevere. Hiding her true feelings on the matter, she asked Mordred's permission to go to London to buy things for the wedding, which he granted. When she got there, however, she took control of the Tower of London, "and suddenly in all haste possible she stuffed it with all manner of victual, and well garnished it with men, and so kept it."³⁸ Mordred laid siege to the Tower but failed to take it, and Malory noted that she never trusted him again. Although Malory did not spend much time on this event, it was a very significant act of independence for Guinevere. Not only did she refuse to remarry after her husband was killed, but she did so in an otherwise very masculine way, by escaping what could have been seen as enemy hands, fortifying a stronghold, and standing strong through a very real siege. Malory

³⁶ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 105.

³⁷ Chapter 2 of this thesis discusses a later event where Guinevere, confronted with much the same choice, consented to become her attacker's prisoner in order to spare the lives of her knights.

³⁸ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 912.

implied, though did not state outright, that she led her men in a military sense; while relatively rare for medieval noblewomen, this was not unheard-of. A number of queens, while acting as regents, were also military leaders by necessity.³⁹

Malory was not the only man to encourage a woman to remain celibate after her husband's death, either – Sir William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, admonished his wife in his will to not remarry. “And wyfe, ye remember your promise to me to take the orders of wydowhood, as ye may be the better mastre of your owne to performe my wylle.”⁴⁰ Eileen Power, who included this quote in her book *Medieval People*, implied that Pembroke was greedy or controlling in not wanting his wife to remarry after his death; Malory, however, used the same choice as an act of independence and piety for Guinevere. Christianity taught that virginity, especially in women, was more virtuous and Godly than fornication or even marriage; widows were encouraged to abstain from remarrying in order to preserve a sort of second virginity. Malory, in having Guinevere retire to a convent upon Arthur's death, demonstrated her loyalty, another feminine strength, to the Church's teachings. This also enhanced her loyalty to her husband, as she refused to marry his enemy and son.

This was not Guinevere's only instance of piety; Malory often portrayed her as a

³⁹ Christine de Pizan instructed baronesses to “know both assault and defense tactics to ensure that her fortresses are well defended, if she has any expectation of attack or believes she must initiate military action.” Christine de Pizan, *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor: The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, Charity Cannon Willard, trans., Madeleine Pelner Cosman, ed. (Tenaflly, NJ: Bard Hall Press, 1989), 169. Maurer noted, “She [Christine's baroness] could do this because she was not perceived to the extent that the queen was as an exemplar of female behavior.” Maurer, 12.

⁴⁰ Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1963), 99. Power did not cite the original source, nor list it in her notes and sources. Although I have identified Pembroke as being Sir Herbert William, Earl of Pembroke, who died in 1469, I have been unable to find a copy of his will.

good Christian. In rebuking a Sir Pedivere, who accidentally killed a lady by striking off her head, Guinevere said, “but this shall I give you in penance, make ye as good shift as ye can, ye shall bear this lady with you on horseback unto the Pope of Rome, and of him receive your penance for your foul deeds.”⁴¹ Significantly, the knight came to the queen instead of a priest to seek advice. Malory used this instance to emphasize Guinevere’s spiritual strength and influence, portraying her as an informal confessor instructing the guilty knight on what to do to repent of his crime and receive forgiveness.

Near the end of Malory’s tale, after Arthur’s death and the death of many knights of the Round Table during a prolonged battle, Guinevere felt a tremendous burden of grief and guilt and entered the convent at Almesbury, “liv[ing] in fasting, prayers, and alms-deeds.”⁴² She did so in order to rid herself of her guilt and sin and thus be worthy to enter Heaven at her death. Lancelot traveled to see her, and she was so surprised at his proximity that she fainted three times. In the presence of several ladies she told him that the war that brought about the deaths of her husband and “of the most noblest knights of the world” was caused by her and Lancelot’s great love for each other, and as she was full of guilt and sin and wished to enter Heaven when she died, begged him never to see her again and to return to his realm and keep it safe.⁴³ She instructed him to marry and be happy; the implication is clear that she wanted him to forget about her and live the rest of his life fully and in happiness. He refused to do this and told her that he “will ever take

⁴¹ The Pope, upon receiving Sir Pedivere, told him to return to Queen Guinevere. Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 206.

⁴² Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 926.

⁴³ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 929.

me to penance, and pray while my life lasteth, if I may find any hermit, either gray or white, that will receive me.”⁴⁴ He then took leave of her and did not see her again until after her death, whereupon her ladies told him that he was to bury her beside Arthur, at her request, and that before she died, she “beseech[ed] Almighty God that I may never have power to see Sir Lancelot with my worldly eyen.”⁴⁵ Although this statement of Guinevere’s may seem cold and unfeeling, it shows the depth of her feelings of guilt and sorrow at all the troubles that she felt she and Lancelot caused through their mutual love. She fought these feelings in the only ways she knew: by depriving herself in her last years of sight of her love, and in performing penance in anticipation of her death, that her soul may be deemed worthy to enter Heaven.

This was perhaps Malory’s most positive portrayal of Guinevere; she was humble and spiritual, living in perpetual prayer and other devotional activities meant to demonstrate repentance of her sins. Christine de Pizan, a female writer in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, instructed women as to the two traditional ways they may enter Heaven – the contemplative and the active ways of life. In describing the contemplative or monastic way, she noted, “Along with pleasing themselves, such contemplatives greatly please God when they are faithful to their duty.”⁴⁶ By having Guinevere take vows after becoming a widow, Malory not only showed her as pious and dutiful to God, he also aligned her with the many historical noble and royal women prior to and during his time who faced the same choice as widows. Georges Duby described Eleanor of

⁴⁴ The two colors referred to different monastic sects. Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 930.

⁴⁵ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 933.

⁴⁶ Christine de Pizan, *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 80.

Aquitaine as taking the same course after her husband's death: "Like all widows of her rank, she eventually withdrew to devote herself to a third husband, this one celestial . . . she had done so herself during her lifetime, in order to purge her faults, for example after her divorce."⁴⁷ The similarities are striking, although the circumstances Eleanor and Guinevere faced were not unusual.

Chrétien wrote his tale during the late twelfth century for his patroness Marie de Champagne, a countess and daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was likely read by ladies of Marie's French court, although scholars do not know whether aristocratic women specifically were his intended audience. Malory compiled his tale from the earlier French sources probably during one or more imprisonments between 1450 and 1470; his intended audience was the "noble prynces, lordes, and laydyes, gentylnen or gentylwymmen" of his caste.⁴⁸ Given these vast differences in the circumstances of the stories' creations, the similarity of Guinevere's power between the two is notably strong. Granted, one of Malory's sources was Chrétien's work, but with the writers separated by the English Channel and three centuries, it is still worth emphasizing that their backgrounds were more different than alike. That they both wrote Guinevere to have spiritual power underscored the roles queens and noblewomen had in the High and Late Middle Ages as spiritual leaders and intercessors, and connected historical and literary women's power. That they portrayed her as being used as a pawn among warring

⁴⁷ Georges Duby, *Women of the Twelfth Century, Volume One: Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others*, trans. Jean Birrell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17.

⁴⁸ "Caxton's Preface [of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*]," cxlvi.19-20. Cited in Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 3. Cherewatuk also noted that "Malorians now commonly accept the characterization of Malory as a member of the gentry writing for an upwardly mobile audience of peers whose values and tastes are reflected in the *Morte Darthur*." Cherewatuk, xiv.

factions illustrated a probable reality among medieval noble and royal women; even these women, who may have had spiritual or intercessory power, could not necessarily expect to have power over their own persons.

Chrétien and Malory undoubtedly viewed Guinevere as a minor character in their Arthurian stories, and so she might have been – both writers gave her little description, and the bulk of the narratives in which she appeared were taken up with her adulterous affair with Lancelot and its effects on the kingdom. Yet in spite of this, they managed to include a fair amount of commentary on female power and its limitations in medieval aristocratic society, disguised as the failings and accomplishments of fictional queens. The literary Guinevere did not wield political power, nor always personal power; her power instead was distinctly feminine, lying in spiritual matters, diplomatic skill, and determining the immediate fate of her person in more than one threatening situation. Although some historical queens held more traditionally masculine power, both writers portrayed Guinevere's power in stereotypical fashion. She was a literary embodiment of one of medieval society's more conventional expectations.

Chapter 2

Marriage, Courtly Love, and Adultery: Guinevere and Lancelot

Courtly love, a romantically inclined but almost never physically consummated relationship between a knight and a lady that existed almost wholly in the Middle Ages, was a widespread feature of the Arthurian stories. It appeared again and again in almost every version and was not confined to Guinevere and Lancelot alone, although their relationship remains the most well-known Arthurian example.¹ Yet even this feature varied widely between tales: Malory was definitely more critical of the practice, and of Guinevere herself, while Chrétien's portrayal of courtly love and the queen was for the most part very positive, even during the adulterous scenes. Marie de France, on the other hand, wrote Guinevere as a barrier to true love between Lanval and a fairy maiden, portraying her as an obstacle to be overcome.

Diana Bornstein called courtly love "a mode of thought expressed in literary conventions that can be traced through a great deal of medieval literature from the twelfth century onward."² C.S. Lewis defined it more concisely, citing its characteristics as "Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love."³ Aristocratic men and women in medieval literature sometimes formed what may be termed extramarital attachments, except that these relationships were more or less sanctioned by everyone but the Church. Young men did not always have the opportunity to marry, so they sometimes grew

¹ Other courtly relationships in the Arthurian mythos included Tristan and Isolde, and Cligés and Fenice.

² Diane Bornstein, "Courtly Love," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 3, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 669.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 2.

enamored of a married woman, who might have been trapped in a loveless marriage made for political or economic reasons. He then, in effect, wooed her with self-composed poems, flowers, and other gifts, by wearing her token during battles or jousts, and with other such courtship rituals. She, in turn, often encouraged him with no more than a glance or a nod; both were discreet, and the relationship almost never progressed to the physical. The man was thus able to focus his love and attentions on a safely unattainable woman, while the woman herself received the warm feelings lacking in her marriage. Guinevere and Lancelot conducted such a relationship, although they went a step beyond literary convention by actually physically consummating their relationship.

Like Guinevere, many medieval women were trapped in marriages not of their liking, but some took control of their lives by deserting their husbands. Historian Sara Butler examined 121 cases of husband desertion in three judicial systems in England. In many instances she discovered that male accomplices of the women had been charged with “rape,” for assisting the women in leaving their husbands. Using the qualifying terms in the charges (‘taken and abducted her against the peace’; ‘having led away John’s wife’) and the fact that the juries acquitted most of the men so charged, Butler concluded that “it should come as no surprise that they were unwilling to convict any of the ‘rapists’ in situations where the crime was clearly a case of ravishment [the woman went willingly]. Quite simply, death did not seem a fitting punishment for a man whose guilt lay in helping or seducing a consenting woman.”⁴ This concept may be fairly applied to Lancelot’s motives in taking Guinevere to Joyous Gard near the end of Malory’s story,

⁴ Sara Butler, “Runaway Wives: Husband Desertion in Medieval England,” *Journal of Social History* 40.2 (Winter 2006): 343.

though he was also trying to save her from execution.

Scholars have written more on the topic of Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot than on her power, perhaps because courtly love was a more popular literary concept than queenly power. Dorsey Armstrong argued that Malory's Guinevere, a "distant and unattainable" woman, "will not distract him [Lancelot] from his knightly endeavors; yet, as the highest ranking lady of the land, it is only fitting that the greatest knight should seek out adventures in order to win her favor."⁵ Armstrong was incorrect about Guinevere not providing a distraction for Lancelot, however. As discussed below, not only did Guinevere banish Lancelot from the court for periods totaling at least twenty years (prompting Lancelot's period of madness, certainly a distraction), but Malory stated outright that Lancelot's constant thoughts of Guinevere prevented him from succeeding in his quest for the Holy Grail.

Karen Cherewatuk examined Malory's portrayal of both Guinevere's adultery and her relationship with Arthur. She concluded that "Arthur's marriage to Guenevere ultimately fails because it is neither companionate [loving] nor blessed with children; her relationship with Launcelot fails because it can never exist openly and its revelation leads to political ruin."⁶ Unfortunately, she did not explain how Arthur and Guinevere's marriage failed, but it is reasonable to assume that she referred to the fact that Guinevere committed adultery. Given this, their marriage could have succeeded had either of Cherewatuk's conditions of love or children been present. In fact, it is entirely possible

⁵ Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 102.

⁶ Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), xxv.

the marriage could still have succeeded, with neither condition being met, if it were not for Lancelot.

Charles Moorman and Elizabeth Pochoda both agreed that Malory's portrayal of courtly love throughout his story was a condemnation of the practice, "emphasizing its tragic consequences."⁷ Indeed, courtly love brought pleasure only to the two lovers, and then only fleetingly; no other Arthurian characters benefited from their relationship, and one girl, Elaine, was ruined socially (due to becoming pregnant by Lancelot, who then refused to marry her). This was in addition to the more obvious tragic consequence of the kingdom's downfall that came about from the public revelation of Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship.

Eminent historian Eileen Power described the development of chivalry and its almost religious devotion to the lady, equating the cult of chivalry with the cult of the Virgin Mary, both of which were especially visible in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁸ As she noted, "[I]t was these very classes [the upper classes], who developed, with no apparent sense of incongruity, the counter-doctrine of superiority and adoration which gathered round the persons of the Virgin in heaven and the lady on earth and which handed on to the modern world the powerful ideal of chivalry."⁹ While our understanding of the Middle Ages has advanced since Power's time, her comparison of chivalric and religious adoration of women was insightful. Pamela Raabe took this

⁷ Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur: The Unity of Malory's Morte Darthur* (University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 27; and Elizabeth T. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 26.

⁸ Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 19.

⁹ Power, *Medieval Women*, 10.

concept to the next level, claiming that Chrétien intended his audience to view Lancelot “as a saint, a martyr, the perfect Christian pilgrim, even Christ himself.”¹⁰ She compared Lancelot’s love for Guinevere to a person’s love for God; the presumed correlation, that Guinevere’s love for Lancelot was thus that of God’s (or the Virgin Mary’s) love for mankind, was the next logical step from Power’s argument.¹¹

Continuing the comparison of courtly love to religious devotion, Anne Clark Bartlett examined devotional literature and its prime audience, medieval upper-class women, including nuns, who likewise had mainly come from wealthy families. She discussed how several of these texts, particularly in the thirteenth century onwards, thematically portrayed Christ and a female (representing the text’s readers) as characters from a romantic or chivalric story.¹² These portrayals were often explicitly sensual, as Bartlett noted:

‘Stretch out your [female readers’] love to Jesus Christ. You have won him! Touch him with as much love as you sometimes feel for a man. He is yours to do with all that you will.... So exceedingly does he love that he makes her His equal. I dare to say even more – He makes her His sovereign and does all she commands, as if from necessity.’ Christ becomes the acquiescent partner, submitting to the requests of the female lover, who is elevated to the status of queen.¹³

In addition to the sexual imagery, the concept of the “power” in the described relationship belonging wholly to the female reader was another indication of the influence courtly

¹⁰ Pamela Raabe, “Chrétien’s *Lancelot* and the Sublimity of Adultery,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 57.2 (Winter 1987-1988): 259.

¹¹ Raabe, “Chrétien’s *Lancelot*”, 260.

¹² Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 3.

¹³ Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, 69. Quoted M. B. Salu, trans., *The Ancrene Riwe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 180.

love had on these devotional texts.

The idea of courtly love was a powerful influence on English aristocratic society in the Middle Ages, whether or not people actually practiced it.¹⁴ It shaped and was shaped by romantic and chivalric literature, as it in turn influenced and was influenced by religious and devotional imagery. The woman's role in a courtly relationship was twofold: traditionally, she held all the power in such a relationship, deigning to give approving glances and soft words to a knight or nobleman who gave her gifts and performed feats of prowess for her. On the other hand, medieval romance writers often portrayed her as fickle or greedy, abusing her emotional hold over her lover, or in other such misogynistic fashions.¹⁵ Courtly love was a major part of Malory's and Chrétien's stories, played out through Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship. Although the basics of the relationship remained the same in both stories, the writers chose two very different ways of portraying Guinevere's part.

The Negative Aspects of Courtly Love: Thomas Malory

In Malory's tale, despite Guinevere and Lancelot's affair existing probably for decades, King Arthur seemed blind to his wife's actions for some time.¹⁶ For instance,

¹⁴ Bornstein, in describing the scholarly controversy over whether or not courtly love was historically practiced, noted that "[h]istorical records provide little help." More recent works discuss courtly love in a purely literary fashion, so the question seems to have been settled against the historical practice. Bornstein, "Courtly Love," 672.

¹⁵ As historian Howard Bloch noted, "It has been argued that the adoration of women, whether the Holy Virgin, the courtly lady, or the prophetess, is but another form of misogynistic investment." Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations* 20, Special Issue: Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy (Autumn 1987): 8. He did not note who made this argument.

¹⁶ Guinevere banished Lancelot from her court once for ten years, and another for an unspecified time that nevertheless cannot have been short.

the first time Arthur received word of Guinevere's and Lancelot's relationship, other than Merlin's warning at the very beginning, was in a letter from Morgan le Fay. Arthur realized that his sister hated both him and Guinevere, and so, despite the fact that "the letter spake shame by her [Guinevere] and Lancelot," he put it aside and did not allow himself to entertain further thoughts of Guinevere's possible infidelity, emotional or physical.¹⁷ One possibility for this incident is that Malory subtly mocked Arthur, because of course Guinevere and Lancelot did have a relationship by that time, though they had not yet slept together. Given that Guinevere and Lancelot had similar reactions when reading their own letters, which contained the same accusations, however, this motivation seems unlikely. Rather, Malory likely made a point that the source was just as important as the accusation itself – here, because the letter came from one who hated Arthur and was female, Arthur rejected its implications. Later, when several of his knights accused Guinevere of the same unfaithfulness, he listened to them and was convinced of her treachery.

A neighboring king, Pelles, wanted Lancelot to sleep with his daughter, Elaine. The king knew that his daughter was to bear Lancelot's son, Galahad, who would achieve the Grail Quest. A lady convinced Pelles to let her enchant the knight so that he would think he was lying with Guinevere, instead of with the king's daughter.¹⁸ Then, when word got out that not only had Lancelot slept with the girl (Elaine), but had gotten her with child, Guinevere was furious with him. He pleaded innocence, claiming that "he

¹⁷ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 482.

¹⁸ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 611.

was made to lie by her by enchantment in likeness of the queen.”¹⁹ Because of this excuse, Guinevere forgave him that one time – though, when the same thing happened again, she scolded him passionately, calling him a “false traitor knight,” and banished him from her chamber.²⁰

This unusual series of events – Lancelot sleeping with a maiden while under the impression she was the queen, Guinevere vacillating between anger and forgiveness, and her finally banishing him from her sight – becomes more understandable when viewed in terms of courtly love. Lancelot betrayed their relationship by sleeping with another woman; Guinevere, in reaction, denied him her approval and sent him away, so that he could not even have the comfort of gazing upon her face. She was willing to forgive him his indiscretion once, when he told her he was enchanted and deceived, but a second failing (although Lancelot was similarly enchanted then) was not to be tolerated.²¹

Malory used these conflicting acts and emotions to demonstrate that Guinevere, like many ladies in courtly relationships, was fickle: she could not make up her mind, she wanted the good without the bad parts of a relationship, and what she showed outwardly may not have been what she felt on the inside. That Malory did not approve of these stereotypically feminine traits is further shown by the “punishment” he gave Guinevere, when Lancelot went mad after her rejection of him and left the court to go wandering the land. Knowledge of his madness must surely have added to her feelings of guilt and

¹⁹ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 618.

²⁰ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 621.

²¹ See chapter 3 for a discussion on an alternate viewpoint on Guinevere's reaction.

helplessness.²² Malory continued to emphasize Guinevere's capricious nature after Lancelot's return from his crazed wanderings. For instance, when Lancelot went to her chamber, she accused him of betraying "me and put me to the death, for to leave thus my lord."²³ She thus disguised her strong and conflicted emotions over his absence, and indeed her feelings for him in general, by admonishing him for leaving his king – not her. He apologized, of course, saying that he will come again to her as soon as possible to continue their love affair.

Guinevere, however, was not the only person Malory mocked like this; Lancelot himself was next. He confided in a hermit that he "had loved a queen unmeasurably and out of measure long . . . and never did I battle all only for God's sake, but for to win worship and to cause me to be the better beloved [of her]."²⁴ The hermit instructed him to avoid Guinevere as much as possible, to which Lancelot agreed. Eventually, perhaps inevitably, he "began to resort unto Queen Guenever again, and forgat the promise and the perfection that he made in the quest [of the Sangreal, or the Holy Grail]."²⁵ Malory said outright that Lancelot had failed in the quest because he thought much more often of Guinevere than of the holy object he was seeking, when his mind should have been solely on the quest and on God. As Armstrong noted, "[I]n Malory's text, devotion to God is not merely *replaced* by devotion to ladies, but rather, *the compulsion to serve ladies*

²² Despite all this, Guinevere freely acknowledged that Lancelot was of "the best knights of the world," because "Sir Lancelot is come but of the eighth degree from our Lord Jesu Christ." Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 664. This demonstrated Lancelot's purity and strength of character, as befitted a man descended from Jesus.

²³ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 667.

²⁴ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 687.

²⁵ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 785.

precludes devotion to God.”²⁶ Although Lancelot did indeed seek the Grail, one of the holiest of relics, his main reason for doing so was to win glory for himself, not for God. Malory also mentioned that the lovers’ relationship was more passionate than before, and less discreet.

Despite the growing intensity of Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship, however, Lancelot began to spend time with other ladies, who wanted him to be their champion and, most likely, to marry them. Guinevere cast this in his face, saying that he spent far more time with these young ladies than with her. While Malory showed both of their fickle natures in this passage, his portrayal of Lancelot was the more damning of the two. Lancelot claimed that his actions were due to his having lately returned from the quest of the Sangreal; that he wished both of them to avoid the gossip of the court; that if she were harmed, “then there is none other remedy or help but by me and my blood;” and finally that he would have been “loath” to see her dishonored by said gossip and “slander” over “the boldness of you and me.”²⁷ Guinevere, after listening to him, broke out in sobs and called him “a false recreant knight and a common lecher, [who] lovest and holdest other ladies, and by me thou hast disdain and scorn.”²⁸ She banished him from the court again and declared that their relationship was over. As during his last banishment, she was outwardly calm among others, in keeping with the general dictates of courtly love.²⁹

²⁶ Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 81. Italics original.

²⁷ The statement that no one else could help Guinevere makes one wonder about Arthur’s role in all this as well, although it was also a veiled reference to Guinevere’s barrenness. Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 786.

²⁸ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 787.

²⁹ Though these were perhaps the only times this particular dictate of courtly love was followed, as seen by Lancelot’s continued worries over court gossip and “slander” – they were not generally discreet when spending time with each other.

While to modern readers Guinevere's actions might seem incomprehensible, one must remember that Malory's story was intended for an audience made up primarily of aristocratic or at least wealthy men and, to a lesser extent, women. They would have been well versed in the idea of courtly love through other stories. One must also remember that marriages, especially among the wealthy and noble families, were most often made for political or economic reasons rather than for love. The couple concerned may not have even met before, let alone formed any kind of relationship, and while it may have been expected of them to eventually feel affection for, or even just a comfortable tolerance of, their spouse, this did not always happen. Malory, in fact, implicitly suggested that this was the case with Arthur and Guinevere – Arthur wanted to marry Guinevere because she was beautiful and would bring a high dowry (the Round Table and one hundred fifty knights), and throughout the rest of the story showed no particular affection, let alone love, for his wife.³⁰ Given this, it is entirely logical to assume that Guinevere's marriage was mostly loveless; even if Arthur did love her, his duties as king would have prevented him from spending prolonged amounts of time with her, leaving her to a large extent on her own.³¹ Enter Lancelot, a handsome and highly skilled knight who traced his ancestry back to Jesus (thus furthering his status as an exceptional man). Unmarried, he gained the attentions of the queen and a relationship

³⁰ It cannot be argued that this was due simply to Malory's writing style and/or the style of the times, as Lancelot's and Guinevere's love for each other was discussed many times over in the story, and declarations of love and lust were made by other characters as well.

³¹ Richard Griffith advanced the idea that "Malory may also have chosen to minimize Arthur's love for Guinevere after the first few years of their marriage in order to make less personal . . . Arthur's later betrayal by Lancelot (the author's favorite) through his affair with the queen." While this plausibly explains Malory's motives, it is not borne out by the text itself. Richard R. Griffith, "The Political Bias of Malory's *Morte D'arthur*," *Viator* 5 (1974): 385.

began which was, in the beginning at least, chaste and discreet. This kept his emotional needs satisfied without getting married, which might have diminished his knightly status or at least the amount of his adventuring, and provided Guinevere with the love and attention she desired.

As his fame increased, however, Lancelot began to get more and more admiring attention from unmarried young ladies. For a time he politely brushed them off, being content to remain loyal to Guinevere and not wishing to be tied down with a wife. After one of her anger-filled dismissals, however, he began paying more attention to the young ladies, perhaps out of revenge or in response to increased societal pressure to marry. This left the queen out, and she started to demand his attentions more often, at the same time chastising him severely for slights and faults. Running throughout these accusations and feelings of betrayal was an undercurrent of deep love, however, one that was shown again when Guinevere was accused of murdering a knight and Lancelot was her champion against the charge.³² Malory censured Guinevere at the end of the battle, saying that she wept “for sorrow that he [Lancelot] had done to her so great goodness where she shewed him great unkindness.”³³ Malory used this situation, and especially this quotation, to again demonstrate that she was fickle by nature.

Maleagant’s capture of Guinevere led to her greatest trouble personally, as well as to the downfall of Camelot. She was taken during an innocent Maying trip into the country outside Westminster. Although she was attended by a total of fifty people, all on

³² He fought Sir Mador de la Porte, the knight who accused Guinevere, and beat him; as was the custom with trials by ordeal, the charge was said to be false and was dismissed. See Charles M. Radding, “Ordeals,” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 9, Joseph R. Strayer, ed. in chief (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987), 259-60.

³³ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 798.

horseback, she and her company were attacked by Sir Maleagant, who had with him “twenty men of arms and an hundred archers.”³⁴ Maleagant had long been in love with the queen but forbore from declaring his feelings and taking her because of his fear of Lancelot; he attacked at this time because the knight was not among Guinevere’s attendants. Maleagant surrounded her and her company and told her to give herself over, to spare their lives. She refused, saying, “[A]nd me, I let thee wit, shalt thou never shame, for I had liefer cut mine own throat in twain than thou shouldest dishonour me.”³⁵ This strongly suggests that Guinevere feared rape, which was justifiable given his feelings for her, although Maleagant told her he loved her in response to this angry speech, and not before. His men attacked and wounded her knights, and to prevent them dying she agreed to go with him, on condition that they not be killed and were allowed to be led with her.

Although Maleagant did not explicitly state what his plans were for Guinevere, one can easily determine that he could have raped her, forcing Arthur to attack his stronghold to rescue her. Were he to defeat and kill Arthur, then Maleagant could easily have induced her to marry him to preserve her honor. Marriage by rape or abduction, while not the preferred method of obtaining a wife, did occur in the Middle Ages. A noblewoman may have been even more susceptible to this practice, as she and her family potentially had more to lose if she were dishonored in such a way. If such was his intention, Maleagant based his actions on the rather large assumption that Lancelot was

³⁴ “[A]nd I shall bring with me ten ladies, and every knight shall have a lady behind him, and every knight shall have a squire and two yeomen.” Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 838.

³⁵ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 840.

not going to come to rescue Guinevere, though he may have been under the belief that the other knight was again banished from the court for displeasing the queen. Malory placed Guinevere in realistic situations for women in the Middle Ages, more so than Chrétien; this made her more human, facing dangers that were real in the Middle Ages.

Guinevere regularly, so it seems, criticized Lancelot for going against his king, flirting with other ladies, not serving her, and so on. Yet if someone else spoke ill of him in her hearing, she lambasted the person; shortly after their capture, one of her ladies saw an unknown knight riding in a cart and commented that he was probably riding to his hanging. The queen, recognizing Lancelot, told the girl, “It was foul mouthed . . . and evil likened, so for to liken the most noble knight of the world unto such a shameful death.”³⁶ Guinevere’s attitude was apparently that she could criticize Lancelot whenever she felt he deserved it, but woe to anyone else who made an unflattering remark about him. This kind of flighty behavior was typical in a courtly relationship; Malory merely emphasized it.

Maleagant, upon discovering that Lancelot was coming to rescue Guinevere, quite literally threw himself upon her mercy, and so the queen dissuaded Lancelot from attacking her captor. That evening she insisted on having her wounded knights laid to rest by her chamber, “that she herself might see to them, that they wanted nothing.”³⁷ This was not the first time that Guinevere showed concern for knights in her charge and insisted that they receive the best of care and accommodations, even though she may

³⁶ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 845.

³⁷ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 848.

have had to provide that care herself.³⁸

Lancelot came to visit Guinevere outside her barred window at night, and both longed to be together so much that he pulled the bars out of the stone walls, deeply cutting his hand in the process. They were together the rest of the night and when Maleagant came to see why she was still in bed after nine in the morning, he saw her alone but with Lancelot's blood on the sheet and pillow.³⁹ He accused her of betraying her husband by sleeping with one or more of her wounded knights; everyone present denied this accusation, but Maleagant persisted as he saw the opportunity to hide his own treason.

The next night Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred set a trap for the lovers, believing that Lancelot was sleeping with Guinevere. Lancelot again visited her chamber at night and walked straight into the trap. Guinevere recognized that even if he were to fight his way through the fourteen knights (Agravaine and Mordred, plus twelve other knights of the Round Table), he would "rescue me in what danger that ever I stood in."⁴⁰ Lancelot did fight his way out and escape, but Guinevere was taken and accused of treason in cuckolding her husband and king, and Arthur himself sentenced her to death by burning.

³⁸ Although Maleagant's household was not described, it is quite possible that there were no women in the castle apart from Guinevere and her ladies; in this case Guinevere likely would have taken charge of her wounded knights for no other reason than to provide their care. Madeleine Pelner Cosman noted that a medieval noblewoman "was also the quasi-official health officer responsible for the care of her staff in illness." Madeleine Pelner Cosman, "Christine de Pizan's Well-Tempered Feminism," in Christine de Pizan, *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor: The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, trans. Charity Cannon Willard, ed. Madeleine Pelner Cosman (New York: Persea Books, Inc., 1989), 18.

³⁹ "Sir Lancelot went unto bed with the queen, and he took no force of his hurt hand, but took his pleasaunce and his liking." Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 848. The implication is clear that they slept together, as during the next night, "[a]nd whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list not hereof make no mention, for love that time was not as is now-a-days." Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 869.

⁴⁰ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 869.

Malory made a point of noting that many of the knights who lay in wait for Lancelot were killed in the ensuing battle, and that Mordred was wounded. “And right so was it ordained for Queen Guenever, because Sir Mordred was escaped sore wounded, and the death of thirteen knights of the Round Table. These proofs and experiences caused King Arthur to command the queen to the fire.”⁴¹ The wording is such that Malory, through Arthur, seems to have condemned Guinevere for causing the deaths of the knights, as officers of the law, at least on an equal basis as for her adultery. Sir Gawaine pleaded her cause to Arthur, describing all the times that Lancelot saved the queen, how grateful she was to Lancelot, and that she bade him come to her secretly, “in eschewing and dreading of slander; for oftentimes we do many things that we ween it be for the best, and yet peradventure it turneth to the worst.”⁴² Arthur agreed that Gawaine had a point but still refused to spare Guinevere, and said that Lancelot, if captured, may suffer a similar fate.

Armstrong claimed that the reason for Guinevere’s condemnation lay “in what is a belated recognition of the power and influence of the feminine within the masculine chivalric enterprise: Lancelot’s behavior and knightly activities have their source in *Guenevere’s* wants and desires.”⁴³ The implication is that Guinevere wanted to sleep with Lancelot; the deaths of the knights and her subsequent capture and sentencing were a direct result of her desire. This is arguably true to a degree, but Malory’s own wording indicated that the more immediate reason for Guinevere’s death sentence was the deaths

⁴¹ Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 878.

⁴² Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 878.

⁴³ Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 191. Italics original.

of the thirteen knights. Helen E. Maurer, in discussing historical queens' sexuality, argued that "since her [a medieval queen's] misbehavior, particularly in sexual matters, could be construed as an indicator of more widespread disorder in the realm, there was also more incentive for her – or her husband's – enemies to accuse her of transgression."⁴⁴ This may easily be applied to Guinevere's situation, especially considering both Maleagant's and Mordred's involvement in trapping the couple. Peggy McCracken also advanced this idea, claiming, "Sexual transgression [by a queen] not only put into question the legitimacy of any heirs to the throne; it also demonstrated the king's lack of authority in his own household and, by extension, in his kingdom."⁴⁵ She, too, had in mind a historical queen – Eleanor of Aquitaine, in her case – but the similarities with Malory's portrayal of Guinevere are striking, especially as he may well have used Eleanor as a model for some of Guinevere's actions.

Lancelot rescued Guinevere at the last minute, killing his fellow knights who stood in his way, and they escaped to the castle Joyous Gard in open defiance of Arthur. Here Arthur made what was undoubtedly his coldest remark in regards to Guinevere: "[A]nd much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company."⁴⁶ From this it is easy to conclude that Arthur did not have

⁴⁴ Helen E. Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), 13.

⁴⁵ Peggy McCracken, "Scandalizing Desire: Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Chroniclers," in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 250.

⁴⁶ Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 882.

strong feelings for his wife; as discussed earlier, that Guinevere's marriage was apparently loveless makes it easier to understand her strong and conflicting feelings for Lancelot. Malory might have used this scene as a commentary on how a man's relationship with his comrades, such as that seen between Arthur and his knights, was or should have been far more important than a man's relationship with his wife: a wife might betray him but his comrades never would. Armstrong argued for this interpretation in terms of the "courtly ideal," and given Malory's picture of Arthur and Guinevere's marriage as primarily loveless, she is likely correct.⁴⁷

Arthur then laid siege to Joyous Gard, although whether to regain his wife or punish Lancelot for the deaths of his knights is not clear. The siege resulted in a standoff as many knights came to help Lancelot. The Pope himself interceded, requiring Arthur to take Guinevere back and to make peace with Lancelot in order to avoid a civil war. Lancelot escorted Guinevere back to Arthur and delivered her over, saying that she was and had always been true to Arthur. He explained his own actions as in response to lies and attacks by malicious knights.

Guinevere's reaction to all of this was not mentioned; as Malory sometimes described her actions and thoughts in great detail, and other times treated her as a bystander without feelings, this was not unusual. He also did not discuss how Arthur treated her after these events, although it is possible that Arthur's handing over rule of England and Guinevere to his son, Sir Mordred, in order for Arthur to leave the country, was meant to convey his true feelings for his wife. As Arthur also did much the same

⁴⁷ Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*, 175.

early in the story, however, this position cannot be argued one way or the other. Pochoda noted, “[Guinevere’s] adulterous relationship with Lancelot . . . is unstable; but by virtue of its best aspects, her admiration of Lancelot’s finest qualities and her faithfulness to him, she will be capable of spiritual stability and understanding in the end.”⁴⁸ This supported Malory’s implication that Guinevere did not find contentment until after Arthur’s death, when she entered a convent.

The Positive Aspects of Courtly Love: Chrétien de Troyes

Chrétien’s first description of Lancelot was during the initial chase after Maleagant had captured Guinevere and was taking her to his own land. Lancelot was “all alone on foot, completely armed,” and had just overtaken a cart driven by a dwarf, who, in answer to his demand for information on Guinevere, replied, “If thou wilt get up into the cart I am driving thou shalt hear to-morrow what has happened to the Queen.”⁴⁹ In the Middle Ages, typically the only people (especially in the upper classes) who rode in carts were condemned criminals on their way to execution. Chrétien made this clear himself shortly thereafter, as three young ladies met the procession in a hall: “As soon as they saw my lord Gawain, they received him joyously and saluted him, and then asked news about the other knight: ‘Dwarf, of what crime is this knight guilty, whom thou dost drive like a lame man?’”⁵⁰ It is entirely logical that a knight would then have avoided

⁴⁸ Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda*, 128.

⁴⁹ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 238-239.

⁵⁰ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 239-240.

riding on a cart, with its implication of criminality, at all costs. That Chrétien therefore portrayed Lancelot, the most honored and revered of all King Arthur's knights, as accepting the cart ride after hesitating "only for a couple of steps," shows the emphasis that the writer placed on the knight's overwhelming love for Guinevere.

The implication is clear that Guinevere, as Chrétien wrote her, was a woman worthy of Lancelot's love and of the sacrifice of his reputation to get word of her location and state of physical well-being. This is in direct contrast to Malory's portrayal of Guinevere, which was decidedly less positive. Chrétien also contrasted Lancelot's and Gawain's feelings for Guinevere, as Gawain was also offered a cart ride in order to learn of the queen's whereabouts; his reaction, however, was different: "[H]e considered it great foolishness, and said that he would not get in, for it would be dishonourable to exchange a horse for a cart."⁵¹ Although Gawain followed Lancelot and the cart, and thus did not need the ride, the key was that accepting such a ride would have been dishonorable, and he was not willing to risk his reputation on such an action, even for Guinevere.

The only time Chrétien negatively portrayed Guinevere was when, as a "jest," she pretended to be angry at Lancelot after his battle with Maleagant because he had hesitated "for two whole steps" before mounting the cart to find her.⁵² She castigated herself mercilessly afterwards upon hearing rumors of his death, and Chrétien left no doubt as to his opinion of such actions: "She is so distressed at the thought of her cruelty, that her beauty is seriously impaired. Her cruelty and meanness affected her and marred her

⁵¹ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 239.

⁵² Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 281, 284.

beauty more than all the vigils and fastings with which she had afflicted herself. When all her sins rise up before her . . . she reviews them.”⁵³ Bethlehem described the various motives Guinevere gave for treating Lancelot poorly, noting that “[n]one of these is a chivalric or even rational aim.”⁵⁴ This kind of extreme thoughtlessness may be seen as an example of what William of Malmesbury described as “a sort of pattern for their [kings’ and queens’] own lives, from which they could learn to follow some men’s successes, while avoiding the misfortunes of others, to imitate the wisdom of some and look down on the foolishness of others.”⁵⁵ In this passage Chrétien clearly showed how women should not treat their lovers (which may easily be expanded to include anyone they deeply cared about), demonstrating the emotional agony that resulted when such mistreatment inevitably backfired.

Guinevere forgave Lancelot, however, and they immediately planned a secret meeting, which turned out to be the infamous overnight assignation. Separated by iron bars in a window from physical contact, Lancelot pulled out the bars, deeply cutting his fingers in the process. He slipped through, however, and they spent the night together: “Their sport is so agreeable and sweet, as they kiss and fondle each other, that in truth such a marvellous joy comes over them as was never heard or known . . . Yet, the most choice and delightful satisfaction was precisely that of which our story must not speak.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 281.

⁵⁴ Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 154.

⁵⁵ “Another letter, to the Empress,” in William of Malmesbury, 7, 9. Quotation and original citation in Natasha Hodgson, “Nobility, Women and Historical Narratives of the Crusades and the Latin East,” *Al-Masāq* 17.1 (March 2005): 68.

⁵⁶ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 286.

Although Chrétien was coy and did not explicitly describe the lovers' actions, he left his audience in no doubt as to the physical nature of their relationship, nor indeed what happened. He did not condemn the two for their adultery, however; in fact, he even seemed to have approved of their actions, as when he described Lancelot as adoring and kneeling before the queen, "holding her more dear than the relic of any saint."⁵⁷ Despite this, their relationship was almost their undoing, as Lancelot's cut hand left blood behind on Guinevere's sheets. Maleagant, when he saw the stains, thought they belonged to Kay, who had been wounded and was sleeping near the queen, and accused her of cuckolding her husband with the innocent knight. She indignantly denied the accusation, saying she was not a whore, but to no avail. She secretly summoned Lancelot (Chrétien did not mention how, but sending a lady assigned to serve her to Lancelot with a message seems the most likely), and he and Maleagant agreed to duel to decide the matter. This agreement carried overtones of trial by combat – in this case, with a second or replacement for Guinevere, since as a woman she could not fight herself – as well as of a knight defending his lady's honor at sword-point.

The duel itself was anti-climactic, as Guinevere quickly pleaded with King Bademagus to end the fight; he did so, practically ordering his son to cease fighting, as Lancelot had already stopped upon overhearing her request. Lancelot left to find word of Gawain, who had gone missing, and the queen soon received a message from Lancelot saying he was back in Arthur's court and asking her to return as well. She did so with Bademagus's full blessing, which is unusual because she was unable to leave before; this

⁵⁷ Chrétien, *Arthurian Romances*, 286. For a more thorough examination of the spiritual overtones of their adultery, see Raabe, "Chrétien's *Lancelot* and the Sublimity of Adultery."

discrepancy cannot easily be explained. Although by this point Maleagant was apparently powerless under his father, he contrived to capture Lancelot (Chrétien did not describe how) and keep him locked in a tower until nearly the end of the story, forging Lancelot's letter to Guinevere in order to ensure she left. This was not the action of a powerless man. The only reasonable explanation for her ease in leaving the kingdom was that Maleagant did not want her to accidentally stumble across Lancelot in captivity and contrive at his rescue.

Bethlehem discussed an unusual passage in the Guiot manuscript of Chrétien's "Lancelot" which may, he argued, have been an almost contemporary addition to the story (he noted that differing styles and contents made it extremely unlikely to have originated with Chrétien). It was added immediately after Kay manipulated Arthur and Guinevere into allowing him to accept Maleagant's challenge involving the queen near the beginning of the story:

[A]s for all she had hoped, she believed that the king would never send her on such a journey and under the given conditions, alone and without help, she saw clearly that he did not love her a bit, for indeed she thought that if he loved her, he would never allow her to be led so much as an arm's length away from him. Thus she moaned and was sorry for she was convinced that he hated her.⁵⁸

This passage added a humanizing element to Chrétien's Guinevere, making her part of a loveless marriage and at the same time explaining Arthur's passivity regarding the goings-on. It cannot be considered part of Chrétien's original story, of course, but it is thought-provoking nonetheless.

⁵⁸ Bethlehem, trans., MS Paris, B.N. fr. 12560, fols. 7 f., ll. 15-24. Quoted in Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 158.

A Woman's Perspective on Courtly Love: Marie de France

One female writer stood out in the High Middle Ages: Marie de France, who translated and wrote a number of older and contemporary stories into poetry, called *lais*. They are collectively known as *The Lais of Marie de France*, and while some scholars believe she wrote or translated other stories as well, these are by far her most well-known works. These *lais*, while having fairy-tale elements, are nevertheless important in understanding a medieval noblewoman's views on noblewomen and courtly love.

One of the main differences between Marie's "The Lay of Sir Launfal" and the other Arthurian tales discussed in this thesis (and, indeed, in most medieval Arthurian stories) is Marie's unusual portrayal of Guinevere as a jealous, vengeful queen bent on the destruction of a knight who rejected her advances.⁵⁹ Sir Lanval fell in love with a fairy queen in the guise of a maiden; she gave him her favor on the sole condition that he not speak of her to anyone else, as he would then never see her again. A short time later Guinevere, during what was probably a time of leisure outside, revealed to Lanval her love for him; implicit in her revelation was the expectation that he would willingly return her love.⁶⁰ Lanval, of course, graciously refused her love, though without at first revealing his true reasoning. Rather, he claimed that his loyalty to the king, Guinevere's husband, prevented him from taking any lover: "[G]rant me leave to go, for this grace is not for me. I am the King's man, and dare not break my troth. Not for the highest lady in

⁵⁹ Marie de France, "The Lay of Sir Launfal" in *Medieval Lays and Legends of Marie de France*, ed. and trans. Eugene Mason (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1911, repr. 2003). Interestingly, Guinevere was not named in this story; that she was this queen may be inferred from the use of Arthur's name and referring to her as his queen.

⁶⁰ Marie noted that this occurred "about the feast of St. John"; however, as the Catholic St. John's feast is in early January, it is likely that the event took place in late spring or summer. Marie, "Launfal," 66-67.

the world, not even for her love, will I set this reproach upon my lord.”⁶¹ Guinevere flew into a rage at his words and accused him of not appreciating a woman’s love. It was in response to this accusation, as much as to her rage in general, that Lanval made the mistake of mentioning his “friend,” as he called the maiden – and that, moreover, even her maidens were more beautiful and good in every way than the queen.⁶² He knew immediately after doing so that his friend was lost to him forever; although he had not named her, he had described their love and thus had broken the terms of their relationship.

Already the discrepancies between this and other versions of Guinevere and Lancelot should be clear. As Marie depicted them, they did not have a relationship based on courtly love. On the contrary, Lanval’s original reason for his refusal to enter a more traditional courtly relationship with the queen was that he did not wish to dishonor his loyalty to his king, her husband. This was in direct contrast to the clear adultery that took place in Chrétien’s story, which was written at least somewhat earlier. Marie continued the changes by having Guinevere accuse Lanval of “requir[ing] her love. When she had put him by, very foully had he reviled her, boasting that his love was already set on a lady, so proud and noble, that her meanest wench went more richly, and smiled more sweetly, than the Queen.”⁶³ This accusation, made in private to King Arthur, contained lies and twisted truth bound up together; Marie clearly portrayed Guinevere as manipulative so that Lanval and the Maiden’s love would be even more sympathetic.

⁶¹ Marie, “Launfal”, 67.

⁶² Marie, “Launfal”, 68.

⁶³ Marie, “Launfal”, 68.

Arthur believed Guinevere's tale immediately and sent three lords to bring Lanval to answer for his supposed insult, making clear his belief that the knight shamed Arthur and besmirched Guinevere's honor. The significance of this is not that Lanval was thought to have committed a crime, but that he was thought to have dishonored the queen, who was also – perhaps more importantly – his lord's wife. In chivalric terms such an action was considered a huge mistake, as knights were expected to protect and uphold a lady's honor. Guinevere, by claiming that Lanval insulted her, also implicitly claimed that he insulted his lord. It would not have been much of a stretch, furthermore, to accuse or at least suspect Lanval of treason, the idea being that a knight who insulted his lord and king would not be loyal to the same king. In a similar vein, literary scholar R. Howard Bloch argued that "Arthur's suspicion of Lanval reveals not so much the knight's desire for Guinevere as his unconscious perception of the queen's desire for the knight, a desire grounded, moreover, in her unarticulated perception that Lanval has a secret love of his own that makes him appear fuller, more desirable, than he really is."⁶⁴ It is hard to tell exactly what Arthur's unconscious feelings may have been on this matter; however, that Arthur's knights held Lanval in high esteem (even during the trial, as evidenced by several of the knights offering sureties for his appearance and good-conduct) adds credence to this idea.

The matter was handed over to several lords to determine Lanval's guilt and punishment, if necessary. One, the Duke of Cornwall, eventually declared that as Lanval's mysterious friend had come between the knight and his king and queen, so she

⁶⁴ R. Howard Bloch, *The Anomymous Marie de France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 317.

should appear before the court for that body as a whole to determine who was the more beautiful.⁶⁵ The fairy queen's maidens came to the court in pairs, with each one shown to Lanval in hopes that she was his friend. None of them were, of course, thus building the anticipation until the lover herself arrived, "the flower of all the ladies of the world."⁶⁶ All of the lords at court naturally agreed that she was fairer than Guinevere, and thus proved Lanval's innocence. The story ended with Lanval and the maiden leaving court together; Marie noted that many said the fairy queen "ravished" him to Avalon, but his fate was not known for certain.⁶⁷

Guinevere played a very small part in all these events; although Marie explicitly noted her presence at the court (which, in its description, seems to have combined the functions of a royal court and a judicial court), because she had encouraged Arthur against Lanval, she was not otherwise described and the writer did not portray her reactions, if any, to the outcome of the trial. Although this seems unusual, one must remember that "Launfal" was not first and foremost a story about Guinevere and Lanval/Lancelot; it was instead a story about Lanval and a mysterious, beautiful woman – a fairy queen. Guinevere was nothing more than the temporary barrier to their happiness together.

Bethlehem presented a different viewpoint of Guinevere's actions:

The fact that she [Guinevere] is ready to have Lanval burned or hanged adds further proof to an unprecedented, unfavourable image of the queen; an image, however, that is dominated not by innate evil-mindedness or shameless

⁶⁵ Marie, "Launfal," 71.

⁶⁶ Marie, "Launfal," 74.

⁶⁷ Marie, "Launfal," 76.

promiscuity, as in the English adaptations, or even by conceit or overmuch pride. Her primary characteristic is an impulsiveness too human for a queen.⁶⁸

Although this may have been an overly charitable description, it is not without merit.

Taking this into account, it is not difficult to view Marie's portrayal of Guinevere as very impulsive, a woman who reacted poorly to rejection and slight (even if courteously given) and soon found herself in over her head in regards to her actions. Even though this gave her a more human demeanor, her actions toward Lanval had too high a potential consequence for one to feel much sympathy for her.

The vast differences between "Launfal" and other medieval Arthurian stories have led scholars to argue that Marie simply took a contemporary tale and placed it within the larger framework of King Arthur and his knights, which were just becoming popular at the time. As Bethlehem noted, "[T]here is no reliable or even recognizable literary profile of Guinevere by this early date . . . the story may well have been taken from its predecessor *Graelent*."⁶⁹ This claim makes sense, as the events in "Launfal" did not correlate with any other Arthurian tales; the story did, however, fit in with Marie's other *lais* in terms of themes, primarily true love that must be kept secret and an interfering woman who caused trouble. Bethlehem also attributed the former theme to a variation on the idea of courtly love as described by Andrew the Chaplain: "'*Amor raro consuevit durare vulgatus*'. As a rule, love rarely endures once it is divulged."⁷⁰ Love that must be kept secret was a standard part of a courtly relationship, one to which Guinevere and

⁶⁸ Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 125.

⁶⁹ Also spelled *Gralent*. Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 126.

⁷⁰ 13th among the *regulae amoris* (Trojal, *De Amore*, 310). Translated by Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 123 fn. 416.

Lancelot in particular did not adhere.

Thus far “Launfal” has been examined only in terms of Guinevere herself, and it is evident that Marie portrayed her in a far different manner than in other Arthurian stories. Looking at the relationship between Lanval and the Maiden, however, reveals a much more conventional tale of courtly love that would itself have fitted well into the Arthurian mythos. Setting aside the unknown identity of the Maiden (she was never named, only referred to as the Maiden or Lanval’s friend), what is intriguing is that she was the one who initiated the relationship, not Lanval. As the knight was then down on his luck, poor and unrecognized by Arthur, that she came to him and not the other way around may be seen as an allusion to the accepted courtly love relationship between a queen or noblewoman and a knight. Although the Maiden’s actions could have been viewed as going outside the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior, the fact that she invited Lanval to declare his love for her before she could give him her love also implied the more traditional method of the man taking charge in initiating the courtly relationship.⁷¹ Too, although each had sworn to never stop loving the other, he had the power to actually end the relationship by breaking its terms, whereas she had the ability to forgive his ill-judged admission. This kind of mercy was similar to the traditionally feminine act of intercession between wrongdoers and justice (usually in the person of the king), as the Maiden interceded with the king on Lanval’s behalf.

Marie de France wrote at least sixteen *lais*, only one of which is discussed here; yet the concepts and portrayals in “Launfal” were indicative of the rest of her *lais*, and indeed of medieval chivalric romances in general. Both women and men were, according

⁷¹ Marie, “Launfal,” 63-4.

to Marie, entitled to have loving relationships – but only if they remained loyal, and they sometimes had to suffer greatly in order to attain that lasting relationship. While this *lai* that supposedly took place in King Arthur's court did not adhere to the greater Arthurian framework, it contained a number of similarities that enabled it to be placed within the mythos. She did not use her *lais* to critique the idea of courtly love, but instead to show what happened when true love and its requirements were denied or broken. Lanval was imprisoned because he had broken the maiden's condition of silence about their love; his gentle rejection of Guinevere's advances was merely the excuse needed by those not in the know. Equally important, Marie gave a woman's view of courtly love, and of the positive and negative roles literary women played in such relationships.

Conclusion

Courtly love embodied a dichotomy of how medieval society viewed women; they were worthy of a devotion approaching religious heights, yet they were also capricious and showed themselves unworthy of that very devotion. Eileen Power, describing one aspect of courtly love, noted that a knight "must not only bear himself with the utmost humility towards her [his love], showing infinite patience in the trials to which her caprices and disdains must (by all the rules) submit him, but must strive unceasingly to make himself worthy of her by the cultivation of all the knightly virtues."⁷² Although she was not specifically referring to Malory's portrayal of Guinevere, her description could easily be applied to the queen's relationship with Lancelot. Chrétien, on the other hand, did not portray the queen as displaying such

⁷² Power, *Medieval Women*, 24.

caprices. One part remained true in both portrayals, however; Lancelot always displayed the utmost patience with Guinevere's actions, and he did indeed reach for those knightly virtues of honor, glory, and champion of his king. The couple in Marie's courtly relationship also embodied this convention, though with the gender roles reversed – Lanval was the more thoughtless of the two, with the fairy maiden patiently forgiving him at the end. All three writers portrayed Guinevere as being stereotypically female according to literary convention, though they focused on different aspects – Malory emphasized her flighty, fickle nature; Chrétien made her out to be the admirable heroine of a romance; and Marie portrayed her as a threat to love. In the first two stories, she was a standard courtly love heroine, while in the third she was a standard villain; this suggests that Chrétien, Malory, and Marie were not interested in challenging literary conventions of courtly love or its implied gender roles.

Chapter 3

A Queen's Duty: Guinevere's Lack of Heirs

In terms of both power and love, Guinevere was a stereotypical medieval literary queen. Chrétien and Malory chose to portray her as a queen with limited power who became involved in a courtly romance, which eventually became one of the causes of the kingdom's downfall. In one aspect, however, she was not at all stereotypical: both writers depicted her as being childless. In a time when bearing one or more heirs was a wife's primary duty, this was a significant departure from both societal and literary norms in England.¹ By portraying Guinevere as unable to have children, the writers chose to humanize her otherwise one-dimensional character.

Scholarly discussion of Guinevere's childlessness in Chrétien or Malory is still in its infancy, and is rarely the main focus of a work. Why this is so is uncertain. It may be that the very lack of explicit acknowledgment of Guinevere's barrenness, and its importance, by the two medieval writers discouraged modern scholars from examining the topic. Despite this, one may pull from various secondary writings a thread of debate concerning her lack of heirs. This chapter brings together those discussions in one place and connects Guinevere with both historical and literary queens between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries who faced the same problem.

Donald Hoffman, in discussing the functions of Malory's Guinevere and Morgan le Fay, claimed, "[A]s the daughter of Gorlois and Igraine, she [Morgan], technically (in a

¹ J. L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25. Old French literature included treatments of barren queens, as discussed below.

world prior to primogeniture, at any rate), should occupy precisely that sovereign position from which she has been displaced by Arthur and his consort.” He also noted that medieval texts, which presumably would have made much of this disinheritance, instead made very little mention of it.² He did not posit a reason why this was so, but a likely explanation is that medieval writers, including Malory, were well aware of England’s history. No woman was crowned queen and leader of England, even if, barring gender, she was the eldest child of the king – not until Queen Mary I in the sixteenth century. Therefore a precedent such as what Hoffman suggested simply did not exist. In an era when noblewomen inherited property or title only if there were no sons, writers would not have commented on Arthur inheriting the throne instead of his half sister. Regardless, even allowing for such a system as he suggested, his argument has another fatal flaw: Morgan had no right to the throne at all. Arthur inherited the throne from his father, Uther, who married Igraine well after she bore her three daughters. Morgan’s father was Gorlois, who was in fact one of Uther’s knights.

Karen Cherewatuk discussed a potential reason for Guinevere’s childlessness, arguing that this allowed her to “enter an adulterous relationship with the court’s most powerful knight and thus provide her husband with Launcelot’s service and that of his affinity, that is, the men who loosely gather around their good lord Launcelot for their mutual benefit.”³ What she did not take into account, however, was that Lancelot was sworn to Arthur’s service long before Lancelot and Guinevere consummated their love.

² Donald Hoffman, “Guinevere the Enchantress,” *Arthuriana* 9.2 (1999): 32.

³ Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory’s Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 26.

Indeed, the knight became part of Arthur's court before he and the queen even began their courtly relationship, according to Malory's tale. While it is certainly possible that their sleeping together acted to strengthen Lancelot's, and through him his affinity's, adherence to Arthur, that very devotion ultimately led to Camelot's and Arthur's downfall. Because many knights did follow Lancelot, their decision to stay with him when he rescued Guinevere, and Arthur's decision to take her back, practically guaranteed battles between the two groups of adherents. Her assertion, therefore, was contradicted by the story itself, and she did not explain why Guinevere had to be childless in order for the queen's relationship with Lancelot to occur.

Cherewatuk also suggested an alternate explanation for Guinevere's reaction to Lancelot sleeping with and impregnating Elaine of Corbin. She called the common interpretation, that Guinevere was jealous of the sexual act, "shrewish" and demeaning. Instead, "[t]o read it as a projection of the failure and pain of infertility – the queen's inability to conceive and the need to welcome her lover's illegitimate son to court – recognizes a sympathy like that Malory had earlier accorded Igraine when pained by the mysterious identity of her child's father."⁴ Although Guinevere's actions were, on the surface, wholly understandable for someone who just learned her lover had cheated on her, Cherewatuk's interpretation is a valid one. Malory showed Guinevere to be a woman confronted with proof that not only was Lancelot unfaithful to her, but he had begotten a child upon the young lady. This proof would also have thrown in her face, however unintentionally, that she herself had failed in her duty, and perhaps her desire, to bear a son. When she welcomed Lancelot and Elaine's son, Galahad, to court and saw him rise

⁴ Cherewatuk, *Marriage*, 37.

to glory, it is entirely possible she wished he were her own son. That Malory did not explicitly portray Guinevere as regretting her lack of an heir, or even entertaining such a thought, is unfortunate but not unusual. He rarely discussed her thoughts or feelings, although to have done so in this instance would have emphasized her grief for the situation.

Bethlehem criticized Beverly Kennedy's claim that "all the English [literary] chronicles comment on the misfortune of her barrenness as Arthur's wife." He instead argued that "Wace, Mannyng, and the author of the *Large Brut* are the only chroniclers ever to remark on the circumstance."⁵ Although they both referred to Arthurian chronicles and not romances, the distinction is still important. Regardless of how the romantic writers viewed Guinevere's "misfortune," three writers of influential poetic histories deemed the topic important enough to include, however typical the queen's portrayals may have been otherwise.

Peggy McCracken examined instances of adulterous queens in Old French romances, including Chrétien's Guinevere, and argued that "romance representations of adulterous queens are part of a debate about queenship in medieval culture." She described several instances when historical queens were accused of adultery, noting that these were usually connected with a succession crisis.⁶ While Guinevere was not the sole

⁵ Ulrike Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle: Images of Arthur's Queen in the Medieval Literature of England and France* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2005), 55. Quoted Beverly Kennedy, "Guenevere," in *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: 1986), 262. The other Arthurian chroniclers were Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Historia Regum Britanniae*), Roger of Wendover (*Flores Historiarum*), Robert of Gloucester (*Chronicle of England*), Pierre de Langtoft (*Chronicle*), the anonymous authors of the *Short Metrical Chronicle* and *Arthur: A Late Short Chronicle*, Thomas Castleford (*Chronicum Brittanicum*), and John Hardyng (*Chronicle of the firste begynnyng of Englande*).

⁶ Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 20, 11.

focus of her study, she linked the fictional queen with historical and fictional queens in the same situation, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Judith (wife of Emperor Louis the Pious), Isolde, and Fenice, demonstrating that there was a precedent for adultery and infertility.

These scholars demonstrated that a lack of discussion on the original writers' parts did not mean there was nothing to discuss. Each argued for a different facet or interpretation of Guinevere's childlessness. Unfortunately, their arguments on the whole should not be accepted, as they appear to have been poorly thought out, and only one scholar related Guinevere to historical queens in similar situations, even though such occurrences were not exactly rare. This chapter, therefore, seeks to fill this gap in the research.

Childless Queens in History

During the centuries between the Norman invasion in 1066 and Malory's completion of *Le Morte d'Arthur* around 1469, there were four English queens who bore no royal children at all: Adelicia, Henry I's second wife (she later bore seven surviving children to her second husband, the son of one of William the Conqueror's supporters); Berengaria of Navarre, who was Richard the Lionheart's wife, and who did not remarry after his death; Anne of Bohemia, Richard II's wife; and Isabella of Valois, whom Richard II took as his second wife when she was just 8 or 9 years old (after his deposition and later murder, she remarried to the Duke of Orleans and died in childbirth). A further three queens produced sons who died before becoming king: Queen Matilda (or Maud) of Scotland, Henry I's first wife, whose only son, William, died in a shipwreck; Margaret

of Anjou, Henry VI's wife, whose one son died at or shortly after the battle of Tewkesbury during the Hundred Years' War; and Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV's wife, whose two young sons were imprisoned by their uncle Richard III and disappeared from history.⁷ It is worth noting that all led to succession issues; most of these queens lived during the Hundred Years' War and/or the Wars of the Roses, during which the crown passed between two or three families after the often-violent deaths of the previous kings. The death of Matilda of Scotland's son William, and Adelicia's failure to produce a son for Henry I, eventually paved the way for the Anarchy, when the throne was fought over by the cousins Empress Matilda and King Stephen. Berengaria's lack of an heir meant the crown passed to Richard I's youngest brother John, who was perhaps the most notorious of all English kings. Guinevere, therefore, was in good company – out of nineteen queens of England between the years 1066 and 1479, more than a third did not produce surviving heirs, and slightly more than a fifth did not bear any children at all.

Eleanor of Aquitaine was first married to the future King Louis VII of France; she bore him two daughters in fifteen years of marriage.⁸ As renowned historian Georges Duby noted, "Like all wives, Eleanor lived in a state of constant anxiety at her continued childlessness. Like many others, she was dispensed with because she was too long in producing a male child."⁹ Louis had the marriage dissolved in 1152, officially for consanguinity, but really because Eleanor had failed to produce an heir to the French

⁷ The preceding information was taken from Norah Lofts, *Queens of England* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1977).

⁸ Incidentally, one of Eleanor's daughters became Marie de Champagne, Chrétien's patron.

⁹ Georges Duby, *Women of the Twelfth Century, Volume One: Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others*, Jean Birrell, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 16.

throne. Just a few weeks later she married Henry II of England. This time she fulfilled her childbearing duties, bearing a total of eight sons and daughters to Henry. Despite this, one should not overlook the significance of her first marriage being dissolved because she did not produce a son. Although Eleanor gave birth to two daughters, women were legally barred from inheriting the throne or otherwise ruling France; because of this, the girls did not “count” in terms of the succession. Women were usually blamed for not bearing sons, so it made sense for a man, especially a king or noble, to repudiate a wife who was apparently unable to produce a male heir.¹⁰ This freed him to marry another woman who would, it was hoped, be able to bear sons.

In the decades preceding the Norman invasion, there was another English queen who did not have any children. Queen Edith was married to Edward the Confessor, who was the last Anglo-Saxon king but one before William the Conqueror. Their marriage was the first for both of them, and as Pauline Stafford described, “its failure to produce children resulted in an attempt at her repudiation.”¹¹ The attempt was not successful, however, and their continued childlessness supposedly prompted Edward to promise the crown to William Duke of Normandy. On his deathbed, however, he named Harold Godwinsson, his brother-in-law, as his heir and successor. Harold was crowned king after Edward’s death, but William came up with enough Norman support to invade England in September, 1066; he was crowned on Christmas Day. Historian Monica Otter argued that Edith not bearing any sons (or, indeed, any children at all) certainly paved the

¹⁰ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 249.

¹¹ Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women’s Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 65.

way for the succession crisis and subsequent invasion, thus changing England's course for the future.¹²

Many people have argued, then and now, that Edward and Edith did not consummate their marriage due to his religious beliefs, which would, naturally, explain their lack of children. Historian Frank Barlow noted that "it was largely on this supposition that the case for his sanctity was to rest."¹³ He rejected the idea that Edward did not consummate his marriage, however, arguing that it was extremely unlikely that a couple married for twenty one years did not have sex at least once. According to one contemporary source, the *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, Edward, on his deathbed, said that Edith was like a beloved daughter to him.¹⁴ Contemporaries assumed this referred to a chaste marriage, according to Barlow. He suggested that, instead, "it is more likely that the author [of the *Vita*] had in mind the important rule of Roman law that a will was automatically revoked by marriage and that a wife acquired the status of a daughter and became her husband's self-successor."¹⁵ This interpretation meant that the claim of a chaste marriage was incorrect; therefore, Edward and Edith did not have children probably because one or both of them was infertile.

This historical memory may well have been on medieval readers' minds, especially as its resulting succession crisis led to the Norman invasion. They certainly

¹² Monica Otter, "1066: The Moment of Transition in Two Narratives of the Norman Conquest," *Speculum* 74.3 (July 1999): 569.

¹³ Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 81-82.

¹⁴ Frank Barlow, ed. and trans., *Vita Ædwardi Regis (The Life of King Edward)* (Nelson's Medieval Texts, 1962), 79. Quoted in Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, 299.

¹⁵ Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, 299.

could have identified similarities between the invasion and the events leading to Camelot's collapse. While they may then have wondered if Arthur and Guinevere's marriage was chaste, the idea was very unlikely. Perhaps the easiest refutation is to simply point out that Arthur certainly did not find sex abhorrent – Malory did portray him as having two premarital affairs, after all, both of which resulted in offspring. He wanted to marry Guinevere because she was the most beautiful young woman in the lands, and they were both young and healthy when they married. Neither Chrétien nor Malory portrayed the couple as having any animosity toward each other, at least in the first years of their marriage. Given all of this, it is difficult to accept, from a modern viewpoint, even a remote possibility of Arthur and Guinevere having a chaste marriage. It is likely that medieval readers would have come to the same conclusion.

A Childless Guinevere

That a queen did not have any children was, if not common in medieval Britain, at least not very unusual. Despite this, why did Chrétien and Malory both choose to make Guinevere childless? The answer is, naturally, complex. Chrétien, in three of his four Arthurian romances, wrote other ladies as the main “heroine” or love-interest according to which knight he featured. Guinevere acted mainly as a foil, judging defeated knights and guiding the star-struck lovers to each other and marriage. In “Lancelot” she was featured as the leading lady, but her position was still dependent on others, mainly Lancelot and Maleagant. There was no need for her and Arthur to have a son; a son would have intruded upon the main relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, and may have confused scenes by seeking to be her champion instead of Lancelot. Arthur's

son Loholt was mentioned once, in a list of knights, but it is impossible to know whether Guinevere or another woman was his mother.¹⁶ Bethlehem argued for Guinevere as the mother, noting, “It may be understandable to conclude childlessness where children are not expressly mentioned, but even when they are vouched for, Arthur’s sons are passed over in silence or assumed to be bastards.”¹⁷ While his argument is certainly plausible, it is also possible that Loholt was only mentioned the one time because he was illegitimate, to which Chrétien may not have wanted to draw attention. Joseph J. Duggan provided an alternative explanation: “[T]he *Lancelot* of the Vulgate cycle says his [Loholt’s] mother was Lisanor of Quinper, to whom, it claims, Arthur was wed before he married Guinevere.”¹⁸ Granted, this referred to another, later Arthurian story. Yet, because Chrétien did not explicitly identify Loholt’s mother as Guinevere or another woman, he left the way open for future writers to interpret the story as they saw fit.

Malory, on the other hand, did not leave any doubt that Guinevere was not a mother. He did not write Loholt into the story, and Arthur’s two sons, Borre and Mordred, were the products of his affair with Lionors and his incestuous union with his half-sister, Morgan le Fay, respectively. This simplified the question of whether Guinevere was barren; that both her husband and her lover sired illegitimate sons made clear that she was infertile.¹⁹ It does not, however, answer the question of *why* Malory

¹⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, “Erec et Enide,” in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. W. Comfort (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 20.

¹⁷ Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 12.

¹⁸ Joseph J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: York University Press, 2001), 208.

¹⁹ By the time Guinevere and Lancelot consummated their relationship, she would likely have been or approaching middle-aged, which may account for why she did not become pregnant by Lancelot. Malory

portrayed her thus. While one could argue that leaving Arthur and Guinevere without an heir paved the way for Mordred's attempt to gain the throne, this idea is shaky at best. Mordred showed ill-will to Arthur, and a desire for power, throughout enough of the book so that it is possible he would have tried to usurp the crown from the legitimate heir, his half brother, had one existed. Therefore, Malory probably did not make Guinevere childless to improve Mordred's motivation. His real reason, I believe, lay in bringing a sense of immediacy and sympathy to the story. His audience was well aware of the succession crises that arose whenever an English king died without an heir; most were seeing it firsthand in the Wars of the Roses. By bringing that political reality into his tale, he made the story more current and its characters more relatable.

Along the same vein, Guinevere's continued childlessness was something with which many noblewomen could have sympathized. A court case in the diocese of Lincoln in 1518-19, just a few decades after *Le Morte d'Arthur*, poignantly illustrated a childless couple's anguish: "John Phipes and Alice his wife are suspected of idolatry. They have a cradle near their bed every night and it is used as if there were an infant in it."²⁰ R. C. Finucane, in his study of medieval children and miracles, described how many couples, and especially wives, begged individual saints and holy persons for children. He noted that this occurred in all classes.²¹ A lack of children was perhaps one

was nonspecific regarding the passing of time, however, so it is possible she was still in the child-bearing years.

²⁰ A. Hamilton Thomson, ed., *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln 1517-1531*, I-II, Lincoln Record Society, XXXIII, XXXV, 1940-4. Translated and quoted in P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women in England c. 1275-1525: Documentary Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 133.

²¹ R. C. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 20-22.

of the few problems that equally affected people in every class; one could easily see Guinevere or a peasant woman tending an empty cradle in mingled despair and hope. Malory thus made Guinevere more sympathetic through her plight.

A medieval reader familiar with Old French romances, including Chrétien's works, would have identified a different reason for why Guinevere was barren – literary convention. McCracken argued that adulterous queens in Old French romances were always barren, partly out of fear of illegitimacy.²² This may be applied to Chrétien's "Lancelot" as a reason for Guinevere's infertility, more so if one accepts the concept that Marie de Champagne influenced the story's emphasis on courtly love. Chrétien, as has been suggested, did not approve of the implicit adultery and so portrayed Guinevere as childless to emphasize its negative consequences. Malory, while not writing an Old French romance himself, took his source material in part from a number of such stories. Therefore, his portrayal of Guinevere as childless was at least somewhat based on the tradition of earlier Arthurian works.

An interesting look into medieval beliefs on fertility and inception may be found in early fourteenth century court records regarding an accusation of rape. "The woman was asked [by the court] whose the child was and she said it was E.'s [her rapist's], and it was said that this was a wonder because a child could not be engendered without the will of both, and it was returned that [E. is] not guilty."²³ The concept behind this ruling may have owed its existence to Galen, a Roman physician in the second and third centuries

²² McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery*, 11, 27.

²³ F. W. Maitland, L. W. V. Harcourt, and W. C. Bolland, eds., *Year Books of Edward II*, V, Selden Society, XXIV, 1910. Translated and quoted in Goldberg, *Women in England c. 1275-1525*, 256.

CE, who “had proposed that both women and men possessed testicles productive of sperm, thus attributing both anatomical and physiological equivalence to the two sexes. Reproduction therefore required sexual desire from both women and men.”²⁴ Joan Cadden elaborated on this concept, noting that Hildegard of Bingen “may even have been suggesting indirectly that a woman must have an orgasm to conceive, for she asserts that even after *delectatio* (that ambiguous expression), the woman may not release seed because the veins of her womb are clogged.”²⁵ Given that this was a common belief in the Middle Ages, what does it say about Guinevere and Arthur – and, yes, Lancelot? That Guinevere did not have any children by Lancelot is difficult to explain according to this concept, especially since both Chrétien and Malory implied that the couple gave each other pleasure. Guinevere and Arthur, on the other hand, presumably would have wanted to have children (preferably sons) who would inherit the throne. Except for Arthur’s lament, near the end of Malory’s story, that he would rather lose his queen than his knights’ fellowship, there is no indication of animosity between the couple. There is also no indication of real affection or sexual desire, either; perhaps they were simply not sexually compatible. This is all speculative, of course, but it is nonetheless an intriguing insight into medieval thought.

Not every Arthurian writer chose to portray Guinevere as barren, however.

Bethlehem noted that in the anonymous *Perlesvaus* Guinevere had a son, Loholt, who

²⁴ John W. Baldwin, “Five Discourses on Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Northern France Around 1200,” *Speculum* 66.4 (October 1991): 817. Cited Brian Lawn, ed., *The Prose Salernitan Questions*, *Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi* 5 (London, 1979), 6, 93.

²⁵ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, 86. Cited Hildegard, *Causae et curae*, Paul Kaiser, ed., *Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1903), bk. II, 76-7.

was killed and beheaded. A letter accompanying Loholt's head back to Arthur's court blamed Kay for the death; Guinevere "dies of grief for her son." As Bethlehem described, this story called Loholt "'fu fil lo roi Artu e la reïne Guenievre' (6343) – that he was their *common* offspring."²⁶ This would have removed any doubt that Loholt was Lancelot's son, and thus illegitimate. Guinevere also had a child in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, though this time with Mordred, who "has wroghte hire with childe" while Arthur was away.²⁷ These examples show that although Guinevere was not universally portrayed as barren, circumstances in both stories did not allow her child to inherit the throne. She thus remained essentially childless in terms of providing a legitimate heir.

Despite her overall importance to the Arthurian story, Guinevere was often portrayed as a secondary character, not as important because she was female and largely unexceptional. In one aspect alone did Chrétien and Malory have her buck the image of an ideal queen, and that was her childlessness. Their likely reasons for doing so were complex, necessarily so for all that one must infer the reasons from what they did not say. Although this status made her unique among medieval English literary queens, there were numerous queens in French romances who shared this trait. In addition, there were many historical queens who had faced the same problem; Guinevere was hardly alone in that regard.

²⁶ Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 204, 205. Quoted William A. Nitze and T. Atkinson Jenkins, eds., *Perlesvaus* vol. 1 (New York: Phaeton, 1972).

²⁷ Valerie Krishna, ed., *The Alliterative Morte Arthure* (New York: 1976), l. 3552. Quoted in Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle*, 370.

Conclusion

Guinevere, as portrayed by Chrétien and Malory, was ultimately a conventional literary queen. This does not prevent her from also being sympathetic, particularly once one looks beneath the surface of her representations. Few readers, then or now, would have been able to relate to everything about her, but many would have found something familiar in her situation. Many could also have recognized parts of her portrayals that were similar to individual historical queens. Ulrike Bethlehem argued that she was “too perfect a wife, a queen, and a nun for any stain to rub off onto her reputation, but also too impregnable to harbour an individual human character.”¹ In terms of Malory’s portrayal of her, however, he was almost completely wrong. She was far from perfect, except perhaps as a nun; her reputation as an adulteress spread throughout the court long before she was caught with Lancelot. Her continued childlessness certainly made her individually human, as did the sense that she had gotten in over her head with Lancelot. When looking at her as a whole, she was both stereotypical and sympathetic.

Guinevere’s Different Roles

Guinevere, like her fellow historical and literary queens, held some forms of power, but not others. She had no direct political power, though in a time when women leaders were distrusted and viewed as weak, this was not surprising. She did, however, indirectly hold political power in the form of an affinity with Lancelot and his knights.

¹ Ulrike Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle: Images of Arthur’s Queen in the Medieval Literature of England and France* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2005), 392.

She had power over her own person to a small degree; although she could not choose her husband, for instance, she made up for that lack by taking a lover of her own choice.

Guinevere was strongest in the area of spiritual and intercessory power; Malory portrayed her as receiving and judging defeated knights, and in both Chrétien and Malory she acted as a diplomat to diffuse tense situations among the knights.

Guinevere was also conventional, for the most part, in her courtly relationship with Lancelot. She acted capriciously toward him, ignoring him or banishing him from court in punishment for even the smallest fault. At the same time, however, she refused to let anyone else speak poorly of him, and lauded his noble background and great deeds. Later on in Malory's story, though, she went beyond courtly tradition by acting more indiscreetly with Lancelot, so that many members of the court knew of their relationship. Eventually this culminated in Guinevere and Lancelot consummating their love, a further departure from convention, with the result that the next night they were caught and she sentenced to death. The end of Malory's story also went against traditional courtly love, as she repented of her relationship and spent her remaining years after her husband's death as a nun. Chrétien's story stopped well before this point, though his portrayal of their relationship was more of a satire than a serious exposure of courtly love's shortcomings; Malory's was the latter. Both writers, however, portrayed her as being a typical literary woman in a courtly relationship.

Guinevere was both conventional and unconventional as a barren queen. Conventional in that a number of historical English queens, as well as many adulterous queens in Old French romances, were also childless; unconventional in that English literary queens were not usually portrayed as barren. Because medieval queens were

expected to produce at least one heir, Guinevere's failure to do so weakened her position at court, especially when combined with her adultery. These circumstances developed along with the Arthurian mythos itself, as did her sympathy as a character. In Chrétien's tale the queen was aloof, untouchable by anyone except Lancelot, who worshiped her in an exaggerated and almost religious fashion. Medieval women readers would not have found it easy to relate to her experiences, though there was certainly potential for wish-fulfillment as well as satire. In Malory's story, on the other hand, Guinevere was portrayed as a more complex character; because the story lasted until her death, her inability to bear children became more noticeable and poignant. Medieval readers would, therefore, have found her more sympathetic as a character.

Areas of Further Research

Although there is plenty of research on Guinevere as a literary character, little has been written comparing Guinevere to historical medieval queens, whether individually or as a whole. In none of her portrayals was she completely modeled on one historical queen, but it is highly unlikely that the various writers created her personalities out of thin air; one may see characteristics similar to various historical queens in her representations. Although a few scholars have discussed how Malory's portrayal may be likened to contemporary English queens, they did so only in the process of determining whether there were any political allegories in his tale.² It would be worthwhile to

² See Richard R. Griffith, "The Political Bias of Malory's *Morte D'arthur*" in *Viator* 5 (1974); Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory's *Morte Darthur*: A Politically Neutral English Adaptation of the Arthurian Story" in *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003); and Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2003).

examine more closely the relationship between Guinevere and historical queens.

In a related vein, there has not been much of an effort to compare different portrayals of Guinevere with each other. Ulrike Bethlehem's invaluable work on Guinevere in medieval stories did compare her various portrayals, but primarily in terms of earlier sources' influences on later stories – on her evolution as a character, in a sense. Scholars have not yet compared Guinevere as a fully formed and individual character in different tales, which this thesis has begun to do. Continuing this study, with different medieval as well as with medieval and modern representations, would contribute much to our understanding of Guinevere's differing impressions.

One area that seems especially ignored is that of medieval infertility on a social and political level. The legal aspects of infertility and a related condition, impotence, have been covered in more than one scholarly work on medieval English law, but the socio-political implications have been relatively ignored.³ Even studies on historical queens who did not bear children did not examine this topic very closely, focusing instead on other aspects of their lives. Yet the larger consequences, social, political, and even emotional, were very real, as shown in the previous chapter. Examining the implications of medieval infertility, as well as its inclusion in literature, more fully should prove to be very fruitful.

Finally, a topic which has already seen some scholarship, but not enough, is examining Guinevere's portrayals with those of other literary women in courtly

³ The one exception I have discovered is Peggy McCracken's examination of adulterous medieval queens in history and French literature, part of which dealt with such queens' lack of children; see Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

relationships. This has already been done to some degree, in comparing Guinevere to other Arthurian ladies, especially in Chrétien's stories.⁴ Far more work may yet be accomplished here, not only with other women in the Arthurian saga, but also with women in other literature on courtly love – the *Roman de la Rose*, Andreas Capellanus's *De amore*, or any number of medieval romances, for instance.

Guinevere was not a main character in the Arthurian stories, but this was no barrier to her importance regarding the events taking place. She was a wife, a queen, an adulterous lover, and a nun, and was influential in all these roles to the overall storyline. She was a warning, an image of how medieval society expected women to act and not act. She was also human, and although neither Chrétien nor Malory described her thoughts and emotions very much, a sense of personality still managed to come through the tales. In examining this literary queen's portrayals, one catches a glimpse of historical queens and medieval society alike. As small, imperfect, and stereotypical as she may have been, Guinevere was nevertheless a representation of the Middle Ages.

⁴ See, for instance, Sally Conroy Fullman, *The Imperilled Ideal: The Evolution of Woman and the Court in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (Rutgers University Ph.D diss., 1976; Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International, 1981); McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery*; and Peter S. Noble, *Love and Marriage in Chrétien de Troyes* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982).

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