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Behold Thy Doom is Mine:  
The Evolution of Guinevere in the Works of Chrétien de Troyes,  
Sir Thomas Malory, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson

by

Stephanie R. Comer

Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Language and Literature  
Eastern Michigan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Children's Literature

Thesis Committee:

Annette Wannamaker, PhD, Chair

Christine Neufeld, PhD

November 15, 2008

Ypsilanti, Michigan

## DEDICATION

To my wonderful family, whose magic combination of inspiration,  
love, encouragement, and even a little bit of fond  
exasperation got me through this process.  
You have my eternal gratitude.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee for all of their help, support, and hard work.  
Your guidance has seen me through to the end. Thank you.

## ABSTRACT

Guinevere has existed in literature for nearly a millennium, evolving to suit societal values and mores. She has metamorphosed from Arthur's noble queen to Lancelot's jealous lover, from a motherly sovereign to a vindictive adulteress as each author struggled to apply his own literary and societal conventions to a character that is both inherited and created.

In addressing the evolution of Guinevere, this thesis has followed her progression through three works: The Knight of the Cart by Chrétien de Troyes, Le Morte d'Arthur by Sir Thomas Malory, and The Idylls of the King by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In addition, this thesis has drawn upon literary criticism, including that of Maureen Fries and Norris J. Lacy, in proving how Guinevere's character marks the societal values and beliefs of each author's time period, as well as how she exemplifies the struggle to understand female characters in literature.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Contemporary culture recognizes Guinevere as the queen from Broadway's Camelot whose tragic love affair with Lancelot toppled a kingdom, but our notions of the character are far removed from her origins. Guinevere has undergone many evolutions since she first appeared in Welsh texts in the twelfth century, each change bringing her closer to the character readers recognize today. Along the way she has been a wife, a queen, a lover, a muse, a villain, and a traitor; often enough, she has been a compilation of all these things, with each author stressing the aspect he loved best or despised the most. Yet there are still several aspects of her character – core components – that do not change, only ebb and wane according to literary and societal conventions, as well as the authors' own preferences.

I have always found the Arthurian women fascinating, as they always seemed to be a little discordant with the nature of Camelot. They occupied the extreme spaces: either the helpless damsel or the wicked temptress. As I read more texts and criticism on the subject of the Arthurian women, I found that almost every author's perception and consequent portrayal of those women was disparate from their portrayals of the men. The men (particularly the knights) had clearly defined roles: they functioned as protectors, warriors, and lawgivers (Fries 59). They belonged almost exclusively in the public sphere as either the king's emissaries or combatants (and, in many cases, they were both because any warrior defeated by a member of the Round Table was sent back to Camelot to swear allegiance to Arthur). The king too was a public figure. Arthur is rarely seen interacting

one-on-one with anyone, including his wife. He is the face of the kingdom, and his dealings are all in public.

The boundaries of the Arthurian women's roles are not so well defined. Starting with the French tradition of courtly love, noble women occupied a space that was both public and private. As queen, Guinevere was expected to be a hostess, a confidant, and a mother to the knights. She was also to be something of an icon – a figure for the knights to swear fealty to and for their ladies to imitate. As a wife, she was expected to follow her husband's direction, and bear an heir, as well as perform that most courtly and impossible of tasks, bring her lover to perfection.

There has been some inconsistency in the way the writers of the Arthurian legends have portrayed women. In trying to depict the way in which women can “make and unmake men” (Fisher 161), the writers have presented women – Guinevere in particular – as erratic, duplicitous, and manipulative. In Chrétien de Troyes's The Knight of the Cart, Guinevere curses Lancelot and praises him in nearly the same breath. She sends him away in a fit of jealousy one moment and remorsefully calls him back the next. She is seen as mentally and morally inferior, yet she is called upon to inspire men to perfection (Burke 328).

Not only is the character of Guinevere inconsistent within a singular text but she is also inconsistent from one text to another. She might be controlling and manipulative in one and a “model consort and an inspiration to the young knights” in the other (Noble 203). She is not so pure and innocent as Enid (Tennyson's “embodiment of truth”) nor so vile as Vivien (Tennyson's ultimate scarlet woman), but something in between the two (Lacy 447). She ends up being a composition of the two female archetypes, and the



aspect that ends up being nurtured is entirely dependent on the literary and societal conventions of each Arthurian author's era.

There is speculation among scholars and historians over whether King Arthur's origins are based in fact or on folk tales. Several key characters in the legends, including Vortigern, Uther, and Aurelius Ambrosius either undeniably existed or were heavily based on real men. Most of the other characters, though, including Guinevere, are fictional. Guinevere first appears in the Arthurian legends Welsh text Culhwch and Olwen in the twelfth century. She is noted as Arthur's queen, but little other information is given about her. Geoffrey of Monmouth also references her in his Historia Regum Britanniae in ca. 1136. She is a Roman of noble birth whom Arthur marries for her beauty. It is Geoffrey of Monmouth's influence that first changed Guinevere's role from a "gentle, gold-torqued first lady of the island" to the destroyer of Camelot (Korrel 81). Geoffrey changed Guinevere's portrayal in order to explain away how a great man such as Arthur could fail as a leader (Walters xv). Mordred has Guinevere kidnapped and she is forced to marry him after he usurps Arthur's throne. Peter Korrel, author of An Arthurian Triangle, says, "Guinevere probably received her bad reputation during the twelfth century, both by her active involvement in courtly love affairs, described in lais and romances to cater for the taste of the Anglo-Norman and French courts, and by her collaboration in the foul acts of high treason and bigamy in Geoffrey's pseudo-historical chronicle, which was taken seriously enough" (126). The theme of Guinevere being kidnapped is one that follows her throughout the Arthurian legends. The kidnapers change but the motive – usurping Arthur's throne – is always the same. Occasionally, as

in the case of Historia Regum Britanniae, she is, if not complicit, then at least not adverse to her change of fortunes.

It is not until Chrétien de Troyes, though, that the story of Guinevere's affair becomes one that modern readers recognize. Chrétien de Troyes wrote five romances in the twelfth-century that took place at Arthur's court. Taking his inspiration from his patroness, Marie de Champagne, Chrétien introduces the character of Lancelot du Lac into the world of Arthur and his knights. Subsequently, he is also the first to make Guinevere's lover someone other than Mordred. Perhaps Chrétien's most notable tale, Le Chevalier de la Charrette, or The Knight of the Cart, revolves around Lancelot's quest to rescue the queen from her kidnapper, the knight Meleagant. Chrétien's introduction of Lancelot irrevocably changed Arthuriana. It quickly set up a pattern for Lancelot as Arthur's best and truest knight as well as making Lancelot and Guinevere inseparable as characters. Successive authors eschewed Mordred in favor of Lancelot as Guinevere's lover. (One has to wonder if and why authors saw Lancelot's betrayal as more painful than Mordred's.) For Chrétien, Arthur is a perfunctory character, one to whom Chrétien's main characters relate to only in a superficial way. The Welsh texts saw Arthur as a warrior first and foremost, but the French romantic tradition made him a king first and a warrior second. Norris J. Lacy points out that the romance authors trade the wars of the Welsh texts for "localized battles and tourneys" (17).

Guinevere features prominently again in the Alliterative Morte Arthure in the medieval British tradition, but she becomes once again a less recognizable figure than she is now. Following in Geoffrey's historical tradition rather than Chrétien's romantic tradition, her affair is with Mordred and not Lancelot. She also has children with Arthur,

a key change from almost every other Arthurian text. The Alliterative Morte Arthure is followed by the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and the Vulgate Mort Artu. The Stanzaic Morte Arthur follows the French romantic tradition (in which Lancelot is the focal point) while the Vulgate cycle follows the Latin historical tradition (in which Lancelot and all romantic aspects are downplayed). Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur was heavily influenced by both the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and the Vulgate cycle. This is evident from key scenes such as Arthur and Mordred's final battle, Guinevere's flight to the convent after learning of Arthur's death, and Lancelot's subsequent taking of religious vows.

Sir Thomas Malory was the first author to reference both the romantic tradition and the historic tradition in his Le Morte d'Arthur (The Death of Arthur). Writing sometime in the fifteenth century, his is arguably the most famous, the most comprehensive, and the most expansive of the legends. Le Morte d'Arthur is split into twenty-one books (edited as such by William Caxton in 1485) and covers the entire span of the legend - from the infidelity of Uther Pendragon, which resulted in Arthur's birth, to the deaths of Lancelot and Guinevere following the disappearance (or death) of Arthur. Lancelot is Malory's pride and joy. As a knight somewhat given to nostalgia, Malory emphasized chivalry in his work, and his stories are full of the knights' adventures and quests. In fleshing out Lancelot, Malory also managed to develop Guinevere's character. She is, as Norris Lacy says, "the epic Queen of history and chronicle, bounteous of her gifts to the knights of the Round Table, and she is also the tragic heroine of romance, deserving our pity for having been given in marriage to a man she must respect but cannot love, and fated to love a man she cannot marry" (215). Malory also gave Arthur a more significant role, making him a good and effective (if rather passive and traditional)

king. But though the work may be called “The Death of Arthur,” Le Morte d’Arthur belongs to the knights and their acts of chivalry.

The Arthurian tradition fell into some obscurity following the Middle Ages, not gaining significant recognition again until the nineteenth century. During the Victorian era, epic tales of chivalric knights, courtly love, and good versus evil appealed to the romantic writers as well as to a cynical audience who wanted to “escape the repressive atmosphere of nineteenth-century European middle-class society” (Walters, xxxix). Other authors wrote tales that took their cues from Malory’s work, but it was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who brought the Arthurian tradition to the forefront of literature and art in the form of his Idylls of the King. It is the most famous Victorian re-working of the text—a compilation of twelve poems all centering on Arthur and his court. They were written and published over a span of almost three decades, covering topics such as the first meeting of Arthur and Guinevere, the search for the Holy Grail, the enchantment of Merlin, and the death of Arthur. Rewriting the Arthurian legends was Tennyson’s lifelong project. As Lori J. Walters asserts in her introduction to Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook: “Tennyson’s poem achieved immense success in the Victorian era and was viewed for a long period as the definitive Arthurian epic” (xi). There is some debate among critics about whether the Idylls are meant to be read as an allegory on the struggle between the soul and the flesh, or whether Tennyson meant it to be a commentary on Victorian society. Tennyson saw Arthur as a fully functioning character in his own right and not just as a framework for the legends, so much so that he elevated Arthur from Malory’s traditional king to a blameless and Christ-like figure, removing Arthur’s most notable indiscretion: his incestuous affair with his half-sister, which results in the birth of

Mordred, Arthur's eventual betrayer. Tennyson also placed far more importance and gravity on Guinevere's indiscretion, so that he, like Geoffrey of Monmouth seven centuries before, cited the queen and not Mordred as the cause of Camelot's destruction.

Other Victorian writers were not so harsh towards Guinevere's character. Algernon Swinburne criticized Tennyson's vision of Guinevere as a "vulgar adulteress" as well as his near deification of Arthur, remarking that by whitewashing the king, Tennyson undermined his own story. Arthur is no longer a tragic figure in the tradition of the great Greek epics, but an "ignoble" and myopic king (190). He concludes:

Mr. Tennyson has lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story, by reducing Arthur to the level of a wittol, Guenevere to the level of a woman of intrigue, and Launcelot to the level of a 'co-respondent'. Treated as he has treated it, the story is rather a case for the divorce-court than for poetry. (190)

William Morris, too, had a very different vision of the queen. He devoted an entire poem, The Defence of Guinevere, to a scene where the queen defends herself and her actions in front of Arthur and his knights, making the affair with Lancelot an act of passion, not premeditation. Morris's Guinevere is "the social and psychological equal of the lords she confronts" (Hoberg 68). It is Tennyson's uncomplimentary vision of the queen, however, that became the source for many of the later portrayals.

The Arthurian legends in the twentieth and twenty-first century have become products of the fantasy genre. T. H. White's The Once and Future King and Marion Zimmer Bradley's Mists of Avalon both brought out the fantastical elements in the legends, although they each had very different points of interest. Following in the

tradition of modern fantasies, White fleshes out the legends by adding descriptive detail and by imagining a history for the characters. White creates an intricate and fascinating childhood for Arthur as the ward of Sir Ector and the pupil of Merlyn, makes Lancelot out to be an physically ugly man given to bouts of self-loathing, and has Merlyn as a bumbling wizard who is traveling backwards through time (getting younger as the other characters age). The Once and Future King (the inspiration for the musical Camelot) has “Guinevere as just plain ‘Jenny’ to her ‘Lance’ and [White imagines] that Arthur benevolently overlooks their affair until his kinsmen force him to take action” (Lacy 215). Feminist (most would argue) Marion Zimmer Bradley is the first author to tell the legends from a solely female perspective, examining the women in Arthur’s life – his allies and his enemies alike. Her Guinevere is a deeply unhappy woman who becomes increasingly fanatic about her Christianity.

In recent years Hollywood has tried to change the contemporary conception of Guinevere by returning to the legends’ Dark Ages roots. Director Antoine Fuqua’s King Arthur imagines Guinevere as a member of a Celtic tribe that resists Rome’s rule. She is a warrior queen in the style of Boadicea, a woman who is equal to Arthur’s knights on the battlefield. Although King Arthur presents a woman conflicted by her interest in both Lancelot and Arthur, the story starts with her introduction to both men at the same time and there is not indiscretion, as she is not committed to either. Even in our modern interpretations, Guinevere’s story must be changed to something hardly recognizable from its original in order to make her a heroine.

The tragedy of Guinevere as an enduring cultural icon is that each author had the potential to make Guinevere into something more, a strong and profound queen, and the

equal of her husband in terms of wisdom and leadership, even taking into account a woman's "proper" place according to social norms. Chrétien and Tennyson both lived in a time when powerful female leaders ruled (Eleanor of Aquitaine and Queen Victoria, respectively). But not one of them rises to the challenge. They prefer to relegate her to a set status, never allowing her to do anything more than pivot around the spot where she is placed.

In this thesis, I will track Guinevere's metamorphosis through three specific works – Chrétien de Troyes's The Knight of the Cart written in the late twelfth century, Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur written in the mid-fifteenth century, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King written in the mid-nineteenth century – in order to show how the societal values, beliefs, and literary conventions of each author's time period slowly evolved Guinevere's character from a nurturing queen to a wanton and jealous lover.

Each author provided something new and novel to the legends, which irrevocably changed how their successors viewed Guinevere. Chrétien was the creator of Lancelot and the affair between him and the queen; Malory brought chivalry into the legends, made Arthur a king in deed as well as name, and created a comprehensive tale out of what had been piece-meal legends; and Tennyson glorified Arthur and condemned Guinevere in the name of societal criticism. They each wrote the definitive Arthurian work for their time, and they each had very different visions of what Guinevere was and what she ought to be. There was some overlapping in their materials as each author modified what had come before, adding or subtracting scenes, personality traits, and

ancillary characters as he saw fit. Each change brought not only the legends, but the character of Guinevere as well, closer to what our modern culture recognizes today.

In Chapter 2, I will cover Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances, concentrating in particular on Erec and Enide and The Knight of the Cart. The Knight of the Cart is an important text because it begins the French romantic tradition in the Arthurian legends. I will show how the conventions of courtly love and the influence of Chrétien's patroness, Marie de Champagne, influence later retellings by introducing the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. The introduction of the affair causes Guinevere to be portrayed almost as two different characters: the nurturing queen in Erec and Enide and the jealous lover in The Knight of the Cart.

In Chapter 3, I will explore Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, one of the longest and most comprehensive of the Arthurian retellings, pulling in sources from both the French romantic tradition as well as the Latin historical tradition. I will show how Malory drew on the stories of the chivalric knights for his inspiration and, in doing so, marginalized Guinevere. It is Malory's retelling that portrays Guinevere as the "destroyer of good knights" because of her treasonous affair, which ends up hindering both the king and the best knight in Camelot (793; bk. xviii, ch. v).

In Chapter 4, I will look at Alfred, Lord Tennyson's The Idylls of the King. Tennyson had a great love of Arthur and elevated the character to, if not a god-like level, then at least one of an impeccable man and ruler. Consequently, Guinevere is vilified both for not loving the highest of men and for destroying his proverbial city on the hill.



It is Tennyson's interpretation of Guinevere that haunts our contemporary culture, but each interpretation brought her one step closer to the character we recognize: an intricate character condemned by the roles she is forced to enact.

## Chapter 2: Guinevere in the works of Chrétien de Troyes

Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances were the first to introduce many of the elements we recognize today and even taken for granted as an original part of the Arthurian legends. These elements include the search for the Holy Grail and the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. The latter was original to Chrétien's writings but not a consistent plot point throughout. He wrote four romances that take place at Camelot, but the affair is only mentioned in one—The Knight of the Cart – in which it is the central theme. There is also a certain inconsistency in Guinevere's character in this latter romance that does not exist in the other three. Chrétien acquiescing to his patroness's wishes and the influence of literary trends of the time can explain the incongruity. These forces as well as the theme of courtly love that pervades Chrétien's Knight of the Cart transform Guinevere from Arthur's good and faithful wife to Lancelot's jealous and fickle mistress.

Like many writers before the Renaissance, little is known about Chrétien. He was most assuredly attached to the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine's eldest daughter Marie, particularly after she married the Count of Champagne in 1159. The opening lines of The Knight of the Cart mark "my lady of Champagne" as the reason for the tale (Kibler 5). There are other speculations but, apart from rough estimates about when his works were written and when he might have died, little else is certain. What is certain is that he wrote four romances centering on Arthur's court – Erec and Enide, The Knight of the Cart, The Knight of the Lion, and The Story of the Grail. These became the basis for many of the

Arthurian stories to follow, or at least provided new elements that were readily used by later writers.

The four stories Chrétien wrote take place within the framework of Camelot. They are not the stories about Arthur but about his knights and their adventures – Erec, Lancelot, Yvain, and Perceval. Arthur’s story is not created in its entirety until Sir Thomas Malory a century later. For Chrétien, as well as many other Arthurian authors, the knights’ tales were more interesting than romantic tales of courtly love. They could write tales to fulfill all their boyish desires of daring swordfights, scheming villains, beautiful ladies, and long adventures all within the construct of a mythical king and his renowned kingdom. It is these knights who first brought Camelot to life, and these stories which made it the legend it has become. To their adventures, Chrétien added romance and a glossy, courtly veneer, making them stories that essentially belonged in two eras – the mythic time when the knights lived and the courtly, medieval era in which Chrétien was writing. His addition of romance to the tales gave women a significant role in the stories where they had not had one before (at least significant compared to their brief appearances in the Welsh and historical traditions).

Guinevere first appears in Erec and Enide where the hero, Erec, is one of Guinevere’s companions. In the scheme of the story, Guinevere and Arthur are there for context, as well as to provide wisdom and guidance to the court, and from all appearances they do their job well. After Erec has defeated the knight Yder, who treated Guinevere’s maiden unkindly, he sends him to Arthur’s court to show fealty to Guinevere. Guinevere says to Yder, “Friend, since you have surrendered yourself as my prisoner, your sentence will be very light; I have no wish that evil should befall you” (52). She shows him mercy

in spite of his crime, and Chrétien even prefaces her statement by calling her “the prudent and wise queen” (52). More than that, Guinevere is shown to be a kind and generous person. When Erec brings Enide to court, the lady is dressed in a dress that has holes at the elbows from being worn so often. Erec tells the queen, “My sweet lady, now consider this; for, as you can see, she has need of a fine and fitting dress” (57). The queen immediately commends Erec for his proper behavior and promises to give Enide a beautiful, brand-new dress. Peter Noble says, “The role of the Queen is that of a model consort and an inspiration to the young knights of the court” (203). He goes on to argue that, although a minor character, Guinevere is presented as more than a stereotype in Chrétien’s tales:

She emerges as a mature, active woman, full of sense and ingenuity whose advice is listened to and respected. She shows herself to be human with her inquisitiveness and her imperiousness and her tendency to say “I told you so.” She is kind and generous, admired by the knights and, together with her husband, provides a stable and glittering background against which one of the younger knights can reveal his true greatness. There is no hint of criticism and no breath of scandal, which could only detract from the importance of Erec by drawing attention to the Queen, nor does her relationship with her husband seem to be anything other than excellent. She is clearly meant to be an exemplary woman, morally as well as in every other way. (208-209)

Chrétien stresses the point that Guinevere is a good queen in that her behavior is noble and proper and her counsel is intelligent and respected. Even the king and his knights

listen to Guinevere's wisdom: "'My lord,' said the queen to the king, 'just listen to me! If these barons approve what I say, postpone this kiss until the day after tomorrow, so that Erec may return.' There was not one who disagreed with her, and the king himself granted it" (41).

Remnants of Guinevere's proper behavior remain in The Knight of the Cart, but it is not as consistent throughout as in Erec and Enide. Her role in The Knight of the Cart starts out in a similar fashion: the king asks Guinevere to talk to their seneschal, Kay, in order to figure out why Kay has decided to leave the court. Guinevere does as Arthur asks and entreats Kay to stay, which he agrees to on the condition that she grants his request no matter what it is. Guinevere is obedient to her husband's wishes in acting as an ambassador to the knights, and she also shows herself to be faithful to her promises even though she knows that following through with Kay's request will not end well (which it does not, as it leads to Guinevere being kidnapped by Meleagant). The first hint of impropriety comes when Guinevere is about to leave with Kay. Under her breath, she says, "'Ah! My beloved, if you knew, I don't believe you'd ever let Kay lead me even a single step away'" (210). Lancelot is not named, but it is clear that Arthur is not the one she refers to as "my beloved."

Guinevere's next appearance in The Knight of the Cart comes some time after Meleagant has kidnapped her. It is also the first time that her behavior is incongruent with her behavior in Erec and Enide. After Lancelot has come to rescue her, Meleagant's father takes Lancelot to see Guinevere. Guinevere turns Lancelot away and tells them that she has nothing to say to the knight and feels no gratitude towards him (256). Both Lancelot and Meleagant's father are confused by Guinevere's behavior; she gives no

reason for her displeasure and neither does Chrétien until several scenes later when it is revealed that she only meant it as a joke. It seems strange that a queen who has behaved so well and properly in the past should greet her rescuer with a cruel joke, especially considering the fact that he degraded himself by riding in a cart in order to reach her.

When Lancelot and Guinevere finally reconcile, he asks her about her motivations:

‘What?’ the queen replied. ‘Were you not shamed by the cart, and frightened of it? By delaying for two steps you showed your great unwillingness to climb into it. That, to tell the truth, is why I didn’t wish to see you or to speak to you.’ (262)

Here we can see that Guinevere’s repudiation of Lancelot has more to do with the rules that govern courtly love than it has to do with her feelings for him. It seems like her behavior is erratic but in reality she has shifted priorities. Where before, in Erec and Enide, Guinevere’s behavior is a model of queenly goodness and generosity, in The Knight of the Cart it has shifted to represent a courtly lover. Part of her duty is to correct any behavior in her lover that does not follow the rules of courtly love, which Guinevere does. Lancelot thanks her for this: “In the future, may God preserve me from such a sin...and may He have no mercy upon me if you are not completely right. My lady, for God’s sake, accept my penance at once; and if ever you could pardon me, for God’s sake tell me so!” (262).

The role Guinevere plays in The Knight of the Cart requires her to lose some of the nurturing persona that she cultivates as a good queen. The model of the good queen is in opposition to the model of the good lover, and so one must be sacrificed for the other.

The Mary/Eve dichotomy that this presents was a popular Victorian idea, but it is easily applied to almost any literature containing a female character. Mary Poovey observed that a woman is placed in one of two categories: that of Mary, the “sexless moralized angel,” or that of Eve, the “aggressive, carnal magdalen” (qtd. in Logan: 6). As applied to Guinevere, we can see that she is good when in the nurturing role and wanton when in the role of the lover.

Lori J. Walters’s introduction to Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook cites Chrétien’s addition of the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot as a response to the popular tales of Tristan, Iseult, and Mark: “Reacting to the theme of the illicit passion responsible for creating the breach between Tristan and his liege lord and uncle Mark, Chrétien incorporated a new story of adulterous love into the context of his own romance universe, in which conjugal harmony had been a favored topic” (xiii). It is well known that Chrétien wrote The Knight of the Cart in response to a request from his patroness, Marie de Champagne. Before the tale begins, he writes, “Since my lady of Champagne wishes me to begin a romance, I shall do so most willingly, like one who is entirely at her service in anything he can undertake in this world” (207). It is possible that she asked him to write it so she might have a tale of courtly love similar to that of Tristan and Iseult but directly within the scheme of the Arthurian legends. The disclaimer along with the fact that Chrétien did not even bother to finish the story, leaving that task to Godfrey de Lagny, has led many scholars to believe that Chrétien did not want to write it in the first place, did not approve of the over-the-top courtly sentiments, or some combination of the two. And given Guinevere’s consistently benign, nurturing character in the other stories, it is entirely possible that Chrétien preferred to see her in

that way rather than as the calculating adulteress she is in The Knight of the Cart (Noble 217).

The plot of The Knight of the Cart centers on the adventures of an unnamed knight (he is not named as Lancelot until nearly half-way through) who seeks to rescue Guinevere after she has been kidnapped by the knight Meleagant. Lancelot faces disgrace, hardships, and numerous obstacles along the way, but eventually he rescues the queen and defeats Meleagant in a dramatic fight in front of Arthur's whole court. The irony of the matter is that in any other romance, Lancelot would have won Guinevere's heart, married her, and lived happily ever after. But this is a courtly romance where marriage rarely has a place and certainly not as a reward. When everyone at the court rejoices over Lancelot's return to Camelot, Guinevere is unable to show her true feelings: "Was her joy not complete? Was it laced with anger or hatred? No indeed, not in the least; rather she hesitated because the others present – the king and his entourage, who could see everything – would immediately perceive her love if, in sight of all, she were to do everything her heart desired" (291). At any rate, a story of courtly love is more about the journey than the destination, and the destination rarely has anything to do with marriage. It is about longing for one's true love, striving to better oneself for her sake, being true to Love at all costs.

The courtly love that Marie de Champagne's court was so fond of permeates most works of the time including Chrétien's own stories. Courtly love is often associated with the troubadours who sang songs of chivalry and courtly love. Yet there is still some discussion among scholars about the exact definition of courtly love. The earliest use of the term was by French scholar Gaston Paris in the nineteenth century. His definition was



heavily based on De Amore by Andreas Cappellanus, a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, who discusses what love is as well as outlines the rules of love. Cappellanus's work as well as Chrétien's Knight of the Cart provided the basis for Gaston Paris's work. Paris's definition held four characteristics:

1. Courtly love is illegitimate, *illegitime*, and therefore necessarily secretive. It includes total physical surrender.
2. Courtly love manifests itself in the submissiveness of the man, who considers himself the servant of his lady and seeks to fulfill her desires.
3. Courtly love demands that a man strive to become better and more perfect in order to be more worthy of his lady.
4. Courtly love is “an art, a science, a virtue” with its own rules and laws that the lovers must master. (Bumke 360)

As can be seen from the mere wording of the characteristics, courtly love may have a woman as the figurehead but it is *about* the man. It is about his discipline and resolve – how far he is willing to prostrate himself for the veneration of another as well as for his own honor, as though it is just another test to see whether he is worthy to be a knight. These characteristics can certainly be seen within The Knight of the Cart. The first of these rules – the prohibited love – is the most obvious. Guinevere is well known as Arthur's wife. In fact, she is known as little else. Lancelot and Guinevere both keep their relationship a secret although Guinevere seems to be the only one who understands the ramifications of the relationship. Then again, if caught, Guinevere would suffer a much stricter punishment (adultery by a noblewoman could be considered treason and therefore punishable by death); (Bumke 392). When Lancelot has returned to Camelot safely,

Guinevere struggles to hide her feelings for him in front of the court:

And if Reason had not subdued these foolish thoughts and this love-madness, everyone present would have understood her feelings. O, height of folly! In this way Reason encompassed and bound her foolish heart and thoughts and brought her to her senses, postponing the full display of her affections until she could find a better and more private place where they might reach a safe harbour than they would have now. (291)

Chrétien often speaks of this kind of love as a controlling, all-encompassing desire. Paired with “total physical surrender” is the idea that that same force now controls the faculties, which the person has given up for Love. Chrétien writes, “When [Lancelot] could no longer see [Guinevere], he wanted to throw himself from the window and shatter his body on the ground below; he was already half out the window when my lord Gawain saw him” (214). Love controls him so completely that it almost becomes a character unto itself. Chrétien often refers to it as though it is a sort of omniscient character, almost like a deity: “But Love, who guided [Lancelot], comforted and healed him at once and turned his suffering to pleasure” (246). And although it is clear that Guinevere loves Lancelot, she does not have the same sort of all-consuming relationship with the emotion. In fact, as was mentioned before, when Lancelot returns safely to Camelot, Guinevere longs to show him her true feelings but is stopped by reason. She is never consumed in the way that Lancelot appears to be.

The second characteristic speaks of the submissiveness of the man – he is, for all intents and purposes, the servant to his lady. For Lancelot and Guinevere, this characteristic is two-fold. First, she is his queen, his sovereign and his better. He is

supposed to obey the king's orders regardless of his feelings toward the king's wife. This is perhaps the reason that no one thinks it odd that he jumps at her every command. His loyalty to the king is a cover for the fact that he is really submissive because of his love for Guinevere. Lancelot does not kill Meleagant during their original duel, although he has the opportunity, because it is what Guinevere commands. About half way through the story, Guinevere snubs Lancelot because he does not show complete submissiveness when he hesitates to shame himself (riding in a cart) for her.

When Lancelot saw how well he was received, and that anything he said pleased the queen, he asked her in confidence: 'My lady, I wonder why you acted as you did when you saw me the other day and would not say a single word to me. You nearly caused my death, yet at that moment I did not have enough confidence to dare to question you, as I do now. My lady, if you will tell me what sin it was that caused me such distress, I am prepared to atone for it at once.'

'Why?' the queen replied. 'Were you not shamed by the cart, and frightened of it? By delaying for two steps you showed your great unwillingness to climb into it. That, to tell the truth, is why I didn't wish to see you or speak with you.' (262)

This sudden change of behavior in Guinevere illustrates the vindictive nature of courtly love. There is no mention of consequences for not following the rules explicitly, but it can be assumed by the rules of courtly love and the way that they are enacted that any man who falls short in his execution of the rules fails both himself and his lady and can therefore be the subject of derision. However, the vindictiveness of courtly love ends up

being translated as the vindictiveness of Guinevere. After all, Lancelot has just journeyed a long way and fought a number of enemies to rescue her, but when he actually arrives to rescue her she dismisses him for not being submissive enough. Guinevere is depicted as fickle and vindictive while Chrétien notes that Lancelot behaves “like a perfect lover” (256). The rules of courtly love suggest that in order to be a nurturing queen to her lover, she must be wanton and jealous. Guinevere is therefore vilified by the very rules of narrative that she is following.

The third criterion – the journey toward perfection – is not a hard one for Lancelot. Chrétien is the first of the three authors to make Lancelot out to be an exemplary knight and lover. While he is not perfect, all three seem to imply that it may well be within his ability to become so. He breaks down iron bars to be with the queen and defeats all those who oppose him in battle. After a tourney in which Lancelot alternately does his worst then his best (in accordance with Guinevere's wishes), the audience takes a moment to consider him: “Truly he is worth a thousand of the likes of those on this field, since he has so vanquished and surpassed all the knights in the world, that there now remains no one to oppose him” (281).

The fourth criterion is a companion to the idea of the chivalric code. Instead of rules of chivalry that a knight must follow, there are rules of courtly love that a couple must follow: “One who loves totally is ever obedient, and willingly and completely does whatever might please his sweetheart. And so Lancelot, who loved more than Pyramus (if ever a man could love more deeply), must do her bidding” (de Troyes 254). While Guinevere adheres to the rules of courtly love, they are not really intended for her. Just like the chivalric code, the rules of courtly love are aimed at the man in the relationship.

The rules require no action, no change, and no betterment on her part. The action centers around what the man (in this case Lancelot) does *because* of her; it is not about her as a character at all. As Maureen Fries says, “Chrétien’s narrative is obviously not *about* Guinevere, no matter how much she is its heroine: it is *about* Lancelot: the pivot around which the action turns” (62). In this role, Guinevere as a *character* is not important; Guinevere as a *symbol* is. Although the fact that she is the queen, and Arthur's queen at that, does add gravity and weight to the situation, it is not strictly necessary that it be she in the role as Lancelot’s lover. Any other married noblewoman could just as easily play the part. Many authors, including Malory and Tennyson, explore the guilt that Lancelot and Guinevere suffer over the internal conflict of love versus duty. Their affair is a matter of personal betrayal as well as treason, a point that comes to fruition in the latter part of both Le Morte d’Arthur and The Idylls of the King. The gravity of their affair plays a large part both in the characterization and the actions of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur. Chrétien, however, never delves into such matters. While the fact that Guinevere is the king’s wife does lend importance to the tale, the reason for Guinevere’s role in the affair seems to be tradition more than anything else. After all, Lancelot’s strong presence as the best knight and lover in Camelot makes him irreplaceable; Guinevere’s persona is ancillary and expendable.

Guinevere is essentially emblematic. Within the framework of the story (and courtly love itself) she exists to encourage male prowess (Fries 68). Joachim Bumke, in his chapter on the courtly ideal of society, talks about how women’s roles in stories of courtly love are largely ornamental: they watch from the windows during tournaments (much in the way Guinevere watches Lancelot during several of his fights), participate in

dances, or engage in “courtly conversation” (336). “Through their beauty, refined manner, and skills, ladies were to arouse in men the elated feeling of courtly joyousness or encourage them to minne service” (Bumke 336). A woman’s beauty, courtly manner, or virtues are what make her worthy of having a knight at her service. He would be her servant, and in exchange she would bring out the best in him, inciting him to do more challenging feats and become a better knight and lover.

Medieval society seems to be undecided about whether women are morally superior or inferior. Christianity imparted the notion that sexual relations tainted a woman, and only in a virginal state could women be considered virtuous (Bumke 327). There was certainly a love/hate relationship that was felt for women – in her virginal state she was the very soul of virtue – combining in one person everything that was good and lovely – but once a woman was considered to be tainted she was quite suddenly inferior. It is the epitome of the Mary/Eve dichotomy so often seen in women depicted in medieval literature:

That old binary ideology which cast women as virgin and whore, lifegiver and destroyer, crawled from the ancient world where it was born into the thoughts of medieval men and women. Women might make marriages, households, and babies, but that never made them saints in early medieval eyes. Only after they had given up wifhood and its implicit sexuality could they achieve sanctity. (Bitel 194)

With such virtues as chastity, silence, obedience, and beauty, women were called on to bring men to perfection (Walter xxxi). But when seen as sexual beings, women were condemned for being weaker and easily swayed in matters of the flesh. More than that,

women were thought to be “incomplete men” because of their weaker strength as well as “mental and moral inferiority” (Bumke 327-328). It ends up being an oddly reciprocal relationship (not to mention dysfunctional) in that a woman’s responsibility is to better a man but because of her shortfalls she must, at the same time, be guided by that same man.

Paradoxically, the rules of courtly love demand that she is neither silent nor obedient; it is Lancelot’s part to be obedient to her demands, to come when she bids him, and to be silent when she commands it. The rules allow her a limited amount of power, a power that she never has in her relationship with her husband, and then those same rules demean her for following them. And although the rules of courtly love are a little vague on whether the relationship is (or should be) consummated or not, some might say that the emotional/spiritual relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is enough to call into question her fidelity to Arthur.

While Chrétien does not openly condemn Guinevere, he has enough distaste for it to neither finish the story nor write another like it. He actually seems to have more contempt for Lancelot, making the knight’s actions over-the-top in the most foppish of ways. For example, he nearly swoons over a lock of Guinevere’s hair: “Never will the eye of man see anything receive such reverence, for he began to adore the hair, touching it a hundred thousand times to his eye, his mouth, his forehead and his cheeks” (225). Peter Noble also notes that Chrétien does not write any other male character in the same way as Lancelot in The Knight of the Cart: “In his other romances he portrays active men who are not subservient to their ladies in the way that Lancelot is to Guinevere” (217). Although Lancelot is portrayed as the best knight and the truest of lovers, he acts like a lovesick fool for the sake of a woman, and yet Chrétien does not write for him the same

happy ending of marriage that he grants the knights in his other tales. It is perhaps a sign that, while he acknowledged the trend of courtly love, he did not accept it as either plausible or interesting.

Like so many things in the Arthurian legends, the notion of courtly love is a struggle between the ideal and reality. The rules imply that the woman somehow governs the relationship; after all, it is the man who is submissive to his lady's desires and must better himself for her sake. But medieval society was far too patriarchal for such submissiveness. The view of women in the Middle Ages was often a troubling juxtaposition – caught somewhere between veneration and contempt. “For Christians, a woman was an object of veneration only in the state of untouched virginity, graced with the ornaments of chastity and purity. As a sexual being, however, she was accused of succumbing more easily than a man to the sinful desires of the flesh” (Bumke 327). For the authors of courtly love, a woman's virtues were based largely on her looks – beauty as an outer manifestation of inward morality. Joachim Bumke, author of Courtly Culture, notes that beauty took a “back seat” only to virtue when the question of whether courtly characteristics were revealed more in the outward or inward qualities was brought up (325). Maureen Fries says, “Her chief virtue, however, is always her beauty, the prime impelling force behind her hero's activity. In the case of Chrétien's Guinevere, it is more important than any real virtue and even supersedes the usually important one of chastity” (64-65).

Courtly love is a strange sort of social utopia, a strange world where men – and warriors at that – prostrate themselves for the sake of a woman with whom they will most likely never have a real relationship. It lends itself to being read as absurd. Shortly after



Lancelot has gone to rescue Guinevere he comes across a comb that belongs to her and still holds one of her hairs. He is so enamored of Guinevere that he treats the hair like a pilgrim treats a holy relic:

Never will the eye of man see anything receive such reverence, for he began to adore the hair, touching it a hundred thousand times to his eye, his mouth, his forehead and his cheeks. He expressed his joy in every way imaginable and felt himself most happy and rewarded. He placed the hair on his breast near his heart, between his shirt and his skin. He would not have traded it for a cart loaded with emeralds or carbuncles; nor did he fear that ulcers or any other disease could afflict him; he had no use for magic potions mixed with pearls, nor for drugs against pleurisy, nor for theriaca, nor even for prayers to Saint Martin and Saint James. He placed so much faith in these strands of hair that he felt no need for any other aid. (225)

Lancelot comes across to the modern reader who is not used to this extreme form of courtly love as a man possessed or at least crazy. Norris Lacy comments that Chrétien “seems to have had considerable fun at the expense of his hero, of his genre, of the tradition he was treating” (59). This manner of courtly love is so extreme that critics still do not know whether writers like Chrétien were treating the subject seriously or mockingly. William Kibler, in his introduction to the Arthurian Romances, breaks these critics into two groups: the realists and the idealists. The realists are those that believe courtly love did exist as an institution in the Middle Ages and that the literature of the time was written to reflect that. The idealists are those who believe that courtly love was to be treated as humorous irony.

Idealists agree that the subject matter of The Knight of the Cart did not appeal to Chrétien, but allege different reasons. Citing the fact that adultery was harshly condemned by the medieval Church, they argue that what we today call ‘courtly love’ would have been recognized as idolatrous and treasonable passion. Lancelot must be seen as a fool led on by his lust, rather than his reason, into ever more ridiculous and humiliating situations. The idea of Lancelot lost in thoughts of love and being unceremoniously unhorsed or dueling behind his back to keep Guinevere in view could only be seen as ludicrous. (Kibler 14)

It is something of an eternal argument that Chrétien might have made Lancelot look ridiculous for love, but the author never explicitly advocates nor denounces the over-the-top displays of love.

Regardless of how Chrétien really felt about courtly love and its hero, The Knight of the Cart provided literature with one of its great romantic heroes and permanently cemented his part as Guinevere’s lover through the rest of the legends.

Lancelot may often come across as ridiculous (as do some of the other courtly love notions, e.g. a wound can magically heal if one is true to Love), but he does not suffer for it. He is still the hero of his own story, still the greatest knight and lover in Logres. He is the one who gains a following in the Arthurian legends by later medieval and Victorian writers, whereas Guinevere’s character declines into infamy.

Perhaps it is not so strange that in The Knight of the Cart Guinevere cares more for Lancelot than her own husband. After all, Marie de Champagne herself said, “We declare and firmly establish that love cannot unfold its powers between married people”

(Bumke 377). Many medieval marriages, especially those of the noble class, were considerably closer to business arrangements than love matches. Marriage was a way to ally families, merge kingdoms, and increase one's holdings. Love and even compatibility rarely made it into the equation. Tales of courtly love might very well have been a form of fantasy – a way to escape a business-like marriage by dreaming of a relationship that was so passionate that one's lover would do practically anything to curry favor. It must have been much more romantic than reality, where men married women for land and heirs.

Gaining heirs to carry on the lineage and to ensure that one's land and property stayed within the family was always the most important reason for marriage (Bumke 380). In a time when life was short and power fleeting, begetting a legitimate male heir was a top priority for noblemen, and therefore also noblewomen. A legal case in the twelfth century noted, "Childbirth is the sole purpose of marriage for women" (Amt 82). Therefore, adultery by a woman was seen as putting that potential lineage in jeopardy and was therefore a serious crime, one punishable by death (although admittedly there had to be concrete evidence).

Escapism, though, cannot legitimately be a claim for the character of Guinevere in The Knight of the Cart. According to the other four stories Chrétien wrote, Arthur and Guinevere had a perfectly compatible relationship. There is a mutual respect, and, although their relationship is not addressed in any length, there is no evidence that she is seeking escape from a bad or abusive relationship. Peter Noble says that the relationship between the royal couple never "seem[s] to be anything other than excellent" and that in at least one of Chrétien's poems, "she seems to be in more awe of Arthur" (209, 211).

But considering that Chrétien was given the material by Marie de Champagne and *she* felt that there could be no love in a marriage, it is reasonable that Guinevere's story might have been Marie's means of escape.

Marie de Champagne did not have the best of role models when it came to relationships or marriage. Her mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, had two notoriously rocky marriages. Eleanor was easily one of the most powerful people in the medieval world, the sort of woman whose maneuvering and marriages often meant drastic changes in the political landscape. Born in the early twelfth century, she became heir to the powerful and very wealthy duchy of Aquitaine at the age of six (as she was fortunate enough to live in the south of France where women could inherit property; Swabey 30). As an heiress, Eleanor was considered a good marriage prospect, and her guardian, King Louis VI of France, betrothed her to his son and heir. Eleanor was married at the tender age of thirteen and became Queen of France (consort to Louis VII, her elder by four years) soon after. "Whatever romantic notions Eleanor may have entertained about marriage, she would also have been aware of practical considerations: marriage was a relationship based on dynastic, economic, and political ambitions. Such partnerships were never equal and seldom concerned with personal fulfillment" (Swabey 33). Louis and Eleanor were very different and did not get along. Louis was naive and often caught up in his own religious instruction while Eleanor was savvy and shrewd, interested in political ambition and gain. Their marriage was annulled in 1152. Eleanor immediately sought out another husband – Henry Plantagenet (later King Henry II of England) – whom she married barely two months later. He was eleven years her junior but as politically ambitious as herself. Unfortunately, this made for another rocky relationship whose highlights include

Eleanor conspiring with her sons to overthrow Henry, and Henry imprisoning Eleanor when he could no longer control her. Eleanor was smart, shrewd, and ambitious, if lousy at marital relationships.

In Eleanor of Aquitaine, Courtly Love, and the Troubadours, Ffiona Swabey writes, “By portraying powerful, independent and assertive wives who threatened male dominance and supremacy, courtly love contradicted contemporary ideas about women, sexuality, and marriage” (85). As I mentioned before, if Marie de Champagne felt that love had no place in marriage, it is possible that she felt that Arthur and Guinevere’s marriage is something of a sham in the other three romances; only in The Knight of the Cart, where the relationship is not between a husband and wife, is there allowed to be love, skewed though it may be. It is possible, then, that a figure such as Eleanor of Aquitaine could have influenced Chrétien’s retelling in The Knight of the Cart but not in the other romances. As a queen, Guinevere has no agenda and no desire to plot for more power. She does not think in terms of political or monetary gain, but only in terms of what is best for those around her. It is only in the role of the lover that Guinevere’s actions are more self-serving and she holds a modicum of power (if only over her lover).

While there is no concrete evidence that Chrétien approved or disapproved of his patroness’s views on love and marriage, the subsequent portrayal of Guinevere, Lancelot, and courtly love set off a chain reaction in terms of Arthurian retellings. Guinevere retains more qualities from The Knight of the Cart than she does from any of Chrétien’s other romances: she remains jealous and emotional in her dealings with Lancelot while outwardly appearing as a good if powerless wife to her husband. Just as Guinevere became a barometer for Marie’s opinions on love and marriage, so she would continue to

mirror societal assumptions on women, love, and marriages. Sir Thomas Malory picks up the prescribed characteristics of Chrétien's Guinevere several centuries later, and she never quite loses the qualities learned in The Knight of the Cart.

### Chapter 3: Guinevere in the works of Sir Thomas Malory

Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, written in the mid-fifteenth century, is arguably the most famous and comprehensive compilation of the Arthurian legends. It creates an entire span of the legend – from the infidelity of Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, to the deaths of Guinevere and Lancelot following the disappearance (or death of Arthur) and the subsequent fall of Camelot. The version that was edited by William Caxton in 1485 is probably the most recognizable by readers today. Caxton reorganized it into twenty-one books and entitled it Le Morte d'Arthur. Until the twentieth century it was thought to be the earliest known edition of Malory's work. In 1934, a previously unknown manuscript copy was discovered containing Malory's text. The Winchester Manuscript, as it is known, was dated to 1469 and is thought by many scholars to be closer to the original text than Caxton's publication (Bryan vii). The discovery also brought to light the possibility that Malory meant his stories to be independent tales within an interrelated series rather than a unified whole (Bryan vii-viii).

Like many medieval writers, Sir Thomas Malory's life is largely a mystery. It has been determined that there were at least six Thomas Malorys living when Le Morte d'Arthur was written. Scholars agree that the likeliest author is Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, born sometime in the first quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He was a member of the gentry, a landowner, something of a politician, and, by 1441, a knight (Field 115). He is sometimes referred to as the "knight prisoner" due to the amount of time he spend in jail on one charge or another – including extortion, theft,

rape, and murder (Bryan v). It is thought that Le Morte d'Arthur was written during his long periods of incarceration.

Malory lived in a time of great unrest, during an age when, in England, two families fought for the throne. The fact that his world was full of political upheaval may very well have contributed just as much to his retelling, which is characterized by a longing for the days of chivalry. Many of the twenty-one books in Le Morte d'Arthur concentrate on Arthur's struggle to hold on to his kingdom. There are three instances of other kings or knights trying to take Arthur's crown by force in the first four books alone. Arthur is, in fact, most vulnerable to those he should be able to trust: his family. Although in Malory the fall of Camelot can be traced back to Arthur's infidelity and not Guinevere's, many readers nevertheless see her as the cause of Arthur's trouble.

Malory drew his material from a number of sources including the Vulgate, the Prose Tristan, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure and the Stanzaic Morte Arthur. Yet he was selective in the elements he chose to include. Alan Lupack, author of The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend, says, "[Malory] reshaped his originals, omitted much that was not relevant to his purpose, and even created new sections to advance his themes" (134). The number of sources and their often-contradictory information can be seen as the reason for inconsistencies found in Guinevere's character. In his analysis of Lancelot's character, Derek Brewer states as much:

Malory's imagination, and his information, were nourished on romance, but his cast of mind was that of the historian of England (and historian, we may note, rather than mere chronicler, though chronicles were the only historical sources available to him). These generalizations need



qualification in so far as Malory occasionally failed to master and sort out his bewildering variety of sources, containing many stories incompatible with each other; and in so far as Malory himself developed in artistry, being sometimes more clumsy, or less sympathetic to his material, than at his best and greatest. (12)

The sources that Malory used varied widely in their opinion (and therefore in their characterization) of the queen. In the previous chapter I have shown how Chrétien presented her in a positive light except for her characterization in The Knight of the Cart. In the few Welsh tales in which she appears, she has a “harmonious relationship with her husband,” while Geoffrey of Monmouth has her, in league with Mordred, betray her husband in order to “explain the downfall of a ruler as eminent as Arthur” (Walters xv). The widely varied sources and Malory’s inexperience as an author (or historian, as he saw his role) mean that Guinevere suffers from a bi-polarity within her characterization. She blows hot and cold in her dealings with Lancelot, so much so that her instability becomes part of her character in later Arthurian retellings (Tennyson in particular uses this to his advantage). Malory was not as interested as Chrétien in the relationships between men and women. He preferred stories of chivalry to those of courtly love, and his retelling shows that. In this chapter, I will show how Guinevere’s lack of character consistency and marginalization within the tale can be attributed to Malory’s inattentiveness when it came to a topic outside of his realm of interest: Arthur and his knights. In this way many of the earlier themes of courtly love were abandoned for those Malory found more interesting, particularly that of the chivalric knight.

This can be demonstrated in the fact that Guinevere appears at her wedding near the beginning of the story and then is hardly heard from for five books. Between her appearances, the knight's stories take precedence, and even when Guinevere does appear it is only to further the story along or provide context. For example, after Kay has fought well in defense of Arthur, Guinevere "praised Sir Kay for his deeds, and said, What lady that ye love, and she love you not again she were greatly to blame; and among ladies, said the queen, I shall bear your noble fame, for ye spake a great word, and fulfilled it worshipfully" (106; bk. iv, ch. iv). During such scenes, even when Guinevere is present, it is only to further the stories of the knights or praise their good deeds. It is this emphasis on chivalry that stands out more than any other retelling. For Malory, Camelot was a golden age when knights followed a code of virtues and standards to live by and the king was strong and true. The world that Malory creates for Arthur and his knights to inhabit is one where they are venerated for their brave deeds and for the strict code of honor that they follow. Sarah J. Hill, in her essay "Recovering Malory's Guenevere" quotes critic Jerome Mandel as saying that the two principles that govern the Arthurian court are war and love, which comprise the primary motivations for knights in medieval romance: "They are not of detached and equal importance; the desire for success in war is based on the assumption that military success will ensure success in love" (267). A woman could be that motivation because to win at war could also mean winning at love.

But at the same time, if a knight did not achieve military success it could also be blamed on his relationship with the same woman who was supposed to bring him to perfection. Only Galahad, whose devotion to God is unflinching, succeeds in finding the Holy Grail. Norris Lacy says, "For Galahad, amorous satisfaction would interfere with

his higher calling” (88). This can be seen in the case of Lancelot, who does not achieve the Grail because his attention cannot be fully pulled away from Guinevere. In Malory and the Grail Legend, Jill Mann states that, “Galahad’s wholeness is expressed in his virginity; Lancelot’s fragmentation resides in his relationship with Guinevere” (216).

The Arthurian world that Malory creates is very much a boys’ club. He is more interested in the adventures of the heroic king and all his gallant knights than he is in the romantic aspects. It is one of the reasons that Malory reworked his source: to bring the knights and Lancelot, in particular, into prominence. John Steinbeck once commented, “It is nearly always true that the novelist, perhaps unconsciously, identifies himself with one chief or central character in his novel. Into this character he puts not only what he thinks he is but what he hopes to be. We can call this spokesman the self-character.” Steinbeck thought that Lancelot was Malory’s “self-character”: “All of the perfections he knew went into this character, all of the things of which he thought himself capable. But being an honest man he found faults in himself, faults of vanity, faults of violence, faults even of disloyalty and these would naturally find their way into his dream character” (518-519).

Lancelot is an intriguing character because of his faults as much as for his strengths, and Malory was certainly concerned with both. Alan Lupack notes that Lancelot is a significant character because of his mission to “live up to his reputation as the best of knights” (135). Malory’s obsession with chivalry and the chivalric code is brought to life in Lancelot, the most courtly and chivalric of all the knights.

The chivalric code is similar to courtly love in that they are both largely inventions of poets – a romantic notion about what could or should be. There was never

actually a “systematic courtly doctrine of ethics” as much as a list of virtues that knights were called on to follow (Bumke 301). That is not to say that there were not unwritten rules that knights held themselves to, but the chivalric code took morality to an extreme in the same way that courtly love took romance to an extreme. The courtly virtues cited were a mixture of moral concepts and religious ethics, including magnanimity, purity, humility, kindness, wisdom, grace, and bravery. The code was supposed to serve as a reader of morality, with many of the lessons stemming from Christian commandments: love God, fear Hell, honor your father and mother, protect the poor, and so on (Bumke 302). Mixed in with these virtues were worldly ideals such as beauty, strength, agility, nobility, and wealth (Bumke 304).

The reason for this chivalry was complex: by following such rules a knight would bring honor to himself, his household, and his king. It was a knight’s duty to follow Christian virtues, but he could also gain a reputation, which could bring him money, fame, and the best prize of all, a lady. Margrave Willehalm backed up this promise when he told his troops this:

Let each knight take thought for his honor, as if guided by the blessing that was pronounced when he received the sword; whoever seeks to practice true knighthood must protect widows and orphans from the dangers that threaten them, and this will win him everlasting reward. Yet he may also direct his heart to serve for the rewards of women: that way he will learn the sounds of lances as they burst through shields, how ladies rejoice at the sight, and how a lady comforts her friend’s distress. A two-fold reward awaits us: heaven and the favor of noble ladies. (Bumke 301)

Throughout Malory's text there is an odd juxtaposition concerning the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. Although they are sinful in their relationship, it is still acknowledged that they are true lovers, something that seems to hold a lot of merit. Sir Ector, Lancelot's brother, says, "And thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman" (936; bk. xxi, ch. xiii). Lancelot, at least, is praised for being true to Guinevere, even though she is the wife of his king and master, the man to whom he owes fealty. There is a sort of honor in his illicit love, in that, at least, he is constant.

Sarah J. Hill mentions that in Arthur's court there is a gap between the two standards that the knights are supposed to follow: honor and Christian principles: "When Christian principles of truth, sexual fidelity to one's spouse, and forgiveness come into conflict with the Arthurian principles of truth determined by force, sexual reward for physical brutality, and revenge, it is the Christian code which is rejected" (268). She goes on to note that this leaves the court split by "divided loyalties" (268). But it is not just the knights who must face divided loyalties but the sovereigns as well. Arthur is divided between his knights and his queen; Lancelot is divided between loyalty to the king (to whom he legally should show allegiance to as his sovereign but also through respect as the man who knighted him) and his love for the queen; and Guinevere is divided between her duty to Arthur and his knights and her love for Lancelot. She has been "given in marriage to a man she must respect but cannot love, and fated to love a man she cannot marry" (Lacy 215). If their loyalties are stripped down their most basic principles, we see that their loyalties are ultimately divided between love and responsibility.

For Arthur, responsibility comes before everything else. He is a king first, a knight second, and a husband last. He has his priorities, which may be deemed erroneous by readers, but Malory's characters (and jointly Malory himself) never voice any objections. Indeed, Lancelot and Guinevere are chastised when they lose sight of their responsibilities, but the same cannot be said of Arthur. Guinevere could easily blame her infidelity on Arthur's inattentiveness as a husband, but she never does. It is possible that Malory does not see the polite and rather formal relationship between Arthur and Guinevere as a problem. Malory notes that Guinevere has a good end because "while she lived she was a true lover" (837; bk. xviii, ch. xxv). Malory praises Guinevere's fidelity to Lancelot and not Arthur as there are few times when Guinevere and Arthur are in a romantic setting.

There is also an undercurrent that makes the reader think that Arthur just might know about the affair between his wife and Lancelot but turns a blind eye to it. Malory does not linger over chronology in the way that Geoffrey of Monmouth does, but if one examines the text closely, one realizes that Lancelot and Guinevere must have been having an affair for at least several decades by the time Camelot falls. Lancelot gains prominence in Book VI around the same time that Malory first mentions the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere: "Wherefore Queen Guenever had [Lancelot] in great favour above all other knights, and in certain he loved the queen again above all other ladies and damosels of his life" (175; bk. vi, ch. i). Their relationship is well established by the time Lancelot's son Galahad is born. Logically, therefore, by the time Galahad is made a knight at Arthur's court, they would have been participating in the affair for at least twenty years. It would be hard to imagine that Arthur would not have noticed

something in all that time. If that were not enough, Merlin predicts the relationship between Lancelot and the queen when Arthur announces her as his marriage choice: “But Merlin warned the king covertly that Guinevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Lancelot should love her, and she him again” (80; bk. iii, ch. i). Arthur ignores Merlin’s advice at his own peril and justly suffers the consequences.

In some ways, Arthur relies on Lancelot’s love for Guinevere and his nature as being a true chivalric knight. There are two instances in Le Morte d’Arthur when Arthur hopes that Lancelot will come and save Guinevere when he cannot. The first is when Guinevere is accused of murdering a knight at court with a poisoned apple. The knight’s cousin accuses Guinevere of treason, a charge whose outcome, according to tradition, is decided in trial by combat (in which, according to the rules, the winner is found “innocent”; 790; bk. xviii, ch. iv). Arthur is upset that he must serve as judge and cannot champion his wife: “And therefore I suppose she shall not be all distained, but that some good knight shall put his body in jeopardy for my queen rather than she shall be brent in a wrong quarrel” (790; bk. xviii, ch. iv). Later, when Arthur asks his wife in private what actually happened, they both express regret that Lancelot is not at court because they both know he would immediately agree to champion her. Arthur even goes on to chastise Guinevere about the volatile relationship between her and his best knight.

Alas, said the queen, and I may not do withal, but now I miss Sir Lancelot, for an he were here he would put me soon to my heart’s ease. What aileth you, said the king, ye cannot keep Sir Lancelot upon your side? For wit ye well, said the king, who that hath Sir Lancelot upon his part hath the most man of worship in the world upon his side. Now go your way, said the

king unto the queen, and require Sir Bors to do battle for you for Sir Lancelot's sake. (791; bk. xviii, ch. iv)

Arthur's statement to her – "What aileth you ye cannot keep Sir Lancelot upon your side" – could be as simple as correcting her behavior as queen that she cannot ensure the loyalty of the best knight as she ought to. But in light of the affair and the fact that Arthur seems to know about it when he later confronts Lancelot, his words seem to have a double meaning. In addition to her failure as queen, Guinevere has also failed to keep her lover close at hand, an action that would have been failure by the standards of courtly love. In the course of time, Sir Agravaine and Mordred come to King Arthur with proof of Guinevere's affair, and Arthur has no choice but to sentence his wife to be executed. Lancelot hears of the execution and saves her, but kills a number of Arthur's knights in the process. Arthur declares war against Lancelot and goes to meet him at Joyous Gard (Lancelot's castle). During the conversation between the two men, Arthur declares, "Fie upon they fair language, for wit you well and trust it, I am thy mortal foe, and ever will to my death day; for thou hast slain many good knights, and full noble men of my blood, that I shall never recover again. Also thou hast lain by my queen, and holden her many winters, and sithen like a traitor taken her from me by force" (885; bk. xx, ch. xi).

This passage illustrates two things: first, Arthur mentions the queen almost as an afterthought. The death of his knights is foremost in his mind – he views that as more of a betrayal than the loss of his wife. Second, as Lori J. Walters says, "Adultery as such is much less a problem for Malory than maintaining chivalric bonds between men. Arthur would even have been willing to overlook the couple's transgressions in order to enjoy Launcelot's company, which he recognizes as the binding force of the Round Table"



(“Introduction” xxx). Arthur says as much to Mordred: “Alas, me sore repenteth, said the king, that ever Sir Launcelot should be against me. Now I am sure the noble fellowship of the Round Table is broken for ever, for with him will many a noble knight hold” (877; bk. xx, ch. vii). He knows that Lancelot and the other knights make the Round Table, Camelot, and, by extension, Arthur the epitome of feudal chivalry. Arthur also says that Lancelot has “holden [Guinevere] many winters,” which leads one to believe that Arthur knows about the affair and has for some time, and is pushed into action only because he is forced to by Agravaine and Mordred’s accusation and because of the death of his knights. He is willing to turn a blind eye to anything that does not actively disrupt his kingdom. This can also be seen in the prior book in which Guinevere is kidnapped by Sir Meliagrance, roughly the same crime as Lancelot (both would be considered treason under the law regardless of the motive). Arthur does not even seem to be aware of it until some of his knights report that Meliagrance and Lancelot are set to fight over the matter outside of Camelot. And even then Arthur is more concerned that Lancelot has seemingly disappeared than about the safety of his queen.

Guinevere makes her first appearance in Book III when Arthur announces to Merlin that he loves her over all others. This might be taken as a romantic notion if not for the fact that this is prefaced by Arthur saying that his barons are demanding that he get married and Merlin seconding the notion: “It is well done that ye take a wife, for a man of your bounty and noblesse should not be without a wife” (79; bk. iii, ch. i).

Directly after he says he loves Guinevere, Arthur also mentions the Round Table, which is her dowry. Ironically, Guinevere comes into the marriage with the Round Table, and the end of the marriage marks the actual destruction of the symbolic Round Table.

Examined in the context of divided loyalties – love versus responsibility – Malory presents Arthur as a man who marries because he has to and not because he wants to. Guinevere, as was traditional in aristocratic matches, has little say in the matter. Chapter Five in Book III contains the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere, yet the chapter is actually dedicated to the “strange and marvelous adventure” that directly follows (84; bk. iii, ch. v). Arthur’s priorities seem to directly parallel Malory’s own. Korrel says, “But mostly Arthur is represented as a cool and indifferent, though faithful husband, who allows his queen to do as she pleases as long as she does not interfere with his affairs” (264).

When this is compared with what Malory expects of Arthur and Guinevere as a couple, there is an obvious separation between the ideal and the reality, and neither Malory nor his counterparts seem to know how to unify the two concepts. Arthur is never unfaithful to Guinevere (the incestuous relationship between Arthur and his half-sister Morgause takes place some time before his marriage) but neither is he a good, attentive husband. Peter Korrel, in his book, An Arthurian Triangle, points out that Malory does not spend much time discussing the marriage of the king and queen: “[Guinevere’s] relationship with her husband is good throughout the work. If Arthur tends to become rather indifferent after the first tales, there is no evidence that the same applies to Guinevere. But probably Malory was not very interested in their marital relationship, since, on the whole, he devotes little attention to it” (269).

In the testosterone-infused world of the knights, it is surprising that Guinevere has a place at all, but Malory did as much for her character as against it. Ironically, by emphasizing Lancelot’s role, Malory also emphasizes Guinevere as well (although only

in those scenes that involve Lancelot). There is evidence of Chrétien's influence as Guinevere does her demanding and jealous nature from The Knight of the Cart. For instance, after Elaine of Astolat (the mother of Lancelot's son, Galahad) comes to Camelot, Guinevere makes certain to keep an eye on both Lancelot and Elaine by putting Elaine in a room near Guinevere's own and demanding that Lancelot come to her chambers. Guinevere says, "Or else I am sure that ye will go to your lady's bed, Dame Elaine, by whom ye gat Galahad.... Then look that ye come to me when I send for you" (620; bk. xi, ch. viii). She is still angry with him over his inadvertent betrayal and rebukes him several more times before the scene is out.

But Malory also points out her loyalty when he says, "While she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end" (837; bk. xviii, ch. xxv). He also makes her a clever and brave woman. When Sir Meliagrance kidnaps her and disarms her knights while they are Maying, Guinevere agrees to go with him on the condition that he does not slay her knights:

So when the queen saw her knights thus dolefully wounded, and needs must be slain at the last, then for pity and sorrow she cried Sir Meliagrance: Slay not my noble knights, and I will go with thee upon this covenant, that thou save them, and suffer them not to be no more hurt, with this, that they be led with me whersomever thou leadest me, for I will rather slay myself than I will go with thee, unless that these my noble knight may be in my presence. (841; bk. xix, ch. iii)

Her knights are foremost in her concerns—a proper and noble response, much in the tradition of Chrétien's Guinevere in Erec and Enide. Guinevere also manages to keep the

knights close to her when they are brought to Meliagrance's castle for both her protection and their own.

Chrétien first gave the illicit couple prominence in his Knight of the Cart, but Malory made them human in their guilt and conflicted emotions over the affair (something Chrétien has no cause to contemplate). Lancelot and Guinevere are, at different times, troubled by the morality of their actions or by warring allegiances but they are never villains; they are merely conflicted. They have their moments of triumph and those of weakness. Lupack says of Lancelot, "The attempt to adhere to the conflicting codes is what gives [him] his grandeur; and the very fact of those conflicts is what makes him the sort of character with whom readers for centuries have been able to identify, even as they recognize his failings—or perhaps because they recognize his failings—in the great enterprise he has undertaken" (135). The same can be said of Guinevere. It is in her infidelity and her moments of weakness that she is more identifiable and approachable.

Despite Malory's overwhelming preoccupation with the knights and the code of chivalry, he still manages to flesh out Guinevere far more than any previous authors. She's a strong character who knows her own mind and embraces the little independence that is granted to her. In her introduction to Lancelot and Guinevere: a Casebook, Lori J. Walters says, "Malory's Gwenhyver fits into the patriarchal mentality underlying the religious or courtly veneration of female figures in the Middle Ages: woman exists to bring man to perfection" (xxxix). One of Guinevere's main responsibilities as Arthur's queen is to "welcome knights and to comment upon their behavior" (Korrel 269). She acts as moral teacher to the knights – praising or berating them as she sees fit. It is a task

she takes on unflinchingly and performs well. On an occasion when Sir Kay saves the king and queen, Guinevere tells him, “What lady that we love, and she love you not again she were greatly to blame; and among ladies, I shall bear your noble fame, for ye spake a great word, and fulfilled it worshipfully” (106; bk. iv, ch. iv). One of the most striking examples is in chapter seventeen of Book VI when a knight, Sir Pedivere, decapitates a lady, and Lancelot sends him to the queen so that she might pass judgment.

So Pedivere departed with the dead lady and the head and found the queen with King Arthur at Winchester, and there he told all the truth. Sir knight, said the queen, this is an horrible deed and a shameful, and a great rebuke onto sir Lancelot; but not withstanding his worship is not known in many divers countries; 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; and ye shall never rest one night whereas ye do another; and ye go to any bed the dead body shall lie with you. (206; bk. vi, ch. xvii)

His sentence may seem harsh (and more than a little macabre) but it has the desired effect: “And after this Sir Pedivere fell to great goodness, and was an holy man and an hermit” (207; bk. vi, ch. xviii). While she does not act as a moral teacher to either her husband or her lover, one might argue that neither seems to require her guidance.

Lancelot often acts as his own moral compass (perhaps a side effect of both the virtues and flaws which Malory instills in him), righting himself when he feels he has gone astray. Arthur’s only failings during their marriage are in areas where Guinevere is not able to offer guidance or condemnation; he is an inattentive husband and a poor judge of

character particularly when it comes to those closest to him. He puts his faith in Mordred even when the knight proves that such faith is unwise. Mordred's older brothers (Gawaine, Gaheris, and Gareth) do not trust Mordred and advise King Arthur not to either. But Arthur ignores their warning, which inevitably leads to the downfall of Camelot.

Guinevere, on the other hand, is far more perceptive. When Sir Meliagrance overtakes her and her ten-knight escort while they are a-Maying (with the intent of kidnapping her), Guinevere makes a bargain: if he spares her knights and allows them to accompany her, she will quietly go with him to his castle. She also tells him in no uncertain terms that she will kill herself if he does not agree. She knows that he will do anything to have her alive. Moreover, she also knows that Lancelot is the one knight whom Meliagrance fears and the one knight who will rescue her. Almost as soon as he agrees, she manages to sneak out one of her pages to get a message to Lancelot (840-842; bk. xix, ch. ii). Guinevere demonstrates that she is clever, brave, and calm even in a tight situation. She shows this same strength several books later when she is kidnapped again, this time by Mordred with the intent to make her his queen. She deceives him into letting her travel to London under the ruse of buying a wedding trousseau. As soon as she arrives, though, she locks herself up in the Tower of London with a number of ladies and knights to help and protect her (912-913; bk. xxi, ch. i).

Guinevere is as much of a hero as custom and circumstances allow. Lancelot has a habit of periodically saving her in the grand tradition of chivalry. However, at the end of their story Guinevere is able to return the favor in the only way available to her. Maureen Fries, in her article on female heroes, heroines, and counter-heroes in the

Arthurian legends, makes the point that only women who are unmarried are allowed to be heroes. After Camelot has effectively fallen, Guinevere takes her vows at Almesbury, becoming a nun and later an Abbess. Lancelot seeks her out there and begs her to marry him, but she refuses:

For through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain. Therefore, Sir Lancelot, wit thou well I am set in such a plight to get my soul-heal; and yet I trust through God's grace that after my death to have a sight of the blessed face of Christ, and at domesday [sic] to sit on his right side, for as sinful as ever I was are saints in heaven. Therefore, Sir Lancelot, I require thee and beseech thee heartily, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, that thou never see me more in the visage; and I command thee, on God's behalf, that thou forsake my company, and to thy kingdom thou turn again, and keep well thy realm from war and wrack... and I pray thee heartily, pray for me to our Lord that I may amend my misliving. (929-930; bk. xxi, ch. ix)

From Guinevere's speech, it seems like she regrets the consequences of the affair more than the affair itself. She never mentions that she regrets loving Lancelot; she only laments that it leads to the death of her "most noble lord." It seems like it is the consequence and not the action that requires God's grace to forgive. Lancelot determines to take his vows as well but asks Guinevere for one final kiss. She refuses once again. Fries surmises that Guinevere's refusal is her attempt to ensure salvation for them both (66). It is the one and only heroic act that is allowed to her. By playing by the rules of the society Malory has laid out, her life is not her own. She does her duty to her husband and

to the court as hostess, giver of moral support, and teacher. Her affair with Lancelot offers her some independence (albeit covertly). But in a society of almost constant competition, where battle determines rank, wealth, and even guilt, Guinevere's refusal of Lancelot and a worldly outlook is her effort to ensure salvation for both her and her lover. Yet Malory makes the claim that it is the fact that she was faithful to Lancelot that ensured her salvation: "Therefore all ye that be lovers call unto your remembrance the month of May, like as did Queen Guinevere, for whom I make here a little mention, that while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end" (837; bk. xviii, ch. xxv). That is the great irony of Malory's work and more importantly of Guinevere's role: she is simultaneously condemned and praised by all those around her.

Guinevere both benefits from and is hurt by Malory's preoccupation with chivalry. She benefits by being the lover of Malory's favorite character. Whither he will go, she will go, and in doing so she develops into a dynamic character. She is allowed a modicum of freedom and power and shows herself to be shrewd and resourceful. But she is hurt by chivalry too. Malory cannot do away with her character entirely so he settles for schoolboy rant about how her love for Lancelot ruins everyone's fun: "And therefore, said the king, wit you well my heart was never so heavy as it is now, and 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" (882; bk. xx, ch. ix). The characters once again mirror Malory's own feelings of how to deal with a problematic female character in a masculine world.



## Chapter 4: Guinevere in the works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century, the Arthurian legends fell into some obscurity, in part due to the post-Reformation opinion of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. The Victorians, however, picked up this material again in the mid-1800s with an unrivaled fervor. Lori J. Walters, in her introduction to Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook, attributes it to the Victorian writers' annoyance with the "excesses of the Industrial Revolution" and their nostalgia for the medieval era, a time they saw as simpler and idyllic (xxxix). The themes, particularly those of illicit love, also appealed to them. It "afforded them the opportunity either to satirize contemporary mores or escape the repressive atmosphere of nineteenth-century European middle-class society" (Walters xxxix). Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King was arguably the most famous re-working of the text to come out of the nineteenth century—a compilation of twelve poems all centering on Arthur and his court. They were written and published over a span of almost three decades, covering topics such as the first meeting of Arthur and Guinevere, the search for the Holy Grail, the enchantment of Merlin, and the death of Arthur. Guinevere either appears in or is mentioned in almost all of the poems, although she plays a significant role only in "The Coming of Arthur" (in which she and Arthur meet and marry), "Lancelot and Elaine" (which tells the story of Elaine, the maid of Astolat, who died for love of Lancelot), and "Guinevere" (which tells of Guinevere and Arthur's last meeting at the Almesbury convent).

As the name implies, Idylls of the King centers on King Arthur. This may seem like an obvious statement as all of the Arthurian legends are technically about him, but Idylls is different from its predecessors and those that succeeded it. Chrétien focuses on the court as a whole, making a composite of Camelot by presenting small glimpses of various knights and aspects of the court. Malory paints a more complete picture of Camelot, although he pays particular attention to the knights and their chivalric deeds. His work features Arthur, but Lancelot is his pride and joy. Tennyson may have used Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur as his inspiration, but he significantly pares down his retelling. He illustrates the larger functionality and overarching themes of Camelot by focusing on specific incidences and particular characters. He also concentrates much of his authorial effort on Arthur.

For many of Tennyson's predecessors, Arthur as Camelot's king provided a framework within which authors could tell their stories. In such a setting, Arthur was more of a figurehead – a context for the legends – than a fully functioning character. Even Malory preferred to tell stories about Arthur's knights rather than about Arthur himself. But Tennyson makes Arthur the hero of the legends with the rest of the characters acting as the supporting cast. These supporting characters are pawns, both for Tennyson and Arthur: for Tennyson, they are placed in the same way that mirrors are placed in a room to maximize light and to focus the eye, and for Arthur, they are used to achieve his goals and his dreams. Guinevere, in particular, is used in this way. She is an ancillary figure, berated for her failure to live up to her husband's impossible expectations and blamed for the destruction of Camelot and Arthur's dreams.

In this chapter, I will show how Tennyson's eagerness to bring Victorian ideas and ideals to Camelot made Guinevere into a tragic character, condemned by the very conventions she is forced to enact. Tennyson's Guinevere is a different creature from both Chrétien and Malory's portrayals. In Chrétien, the Guinevere the reader sees is largely a product of courtly love but is otherwise a good queen and a good wife. In Malory, Guinevere is a shrewd woman and makes the most of the little freedom and power she is allowed. She is a good queen, but the affair between her and Lancelot occupies more of the story. It is the latter aspect – Guinevere as the lover – that Tennyson picks up, and not the nurturing persona that Chrétien seemed to prefer. Tennyson may have consulted previous texts for the basis of Guinevere, but as David Staines says, she is a “creation, not a re-creation” (42).

Like his predecessors before him, Tennyson molds his starting material, weeding out the plots that do not fit in terms of theme or space, adding scenes to expand upon characters' interactions or storyline. The changes he makes to the plot stem mainly from the changes he makes to the characters, for the main trio (Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot) change quite a bit, both in their respective roles and in their personalities. Guinevere is more consistent than in Malory but she is also a more pitiable character, continually chastised for living her life in a way antagonistic to Arthur's idealistic plans for Camelot.

Guinevere's core personality stays fairly constant from Chrétien to Tennyson. There are slight changes here and there, but the two ideas that form her character – that of the nurturing queen and the wanton lover – always remain. In Chrétien, the wanton lover persona only emerges in The Knight of the Cart and she remains the nurturing queen in

the other tales; in Malory, the two ideas are always there although they don't mingle. It isn't until Tennyson that the ideas combine to form a more cohesive character. Yet at the same time this is only done by showing Guinevere as a woman whose jealous nature is always just under the surface.

The affair between Lancelot and Guinevere so heavily permeates the Idylls that it appears even in the stories that are not strictly about it. Tennyson adjusts Malory's timeline in order to have Guinevere and Lancelot meet before she marries Arthur: "Then Arthur charged his warrior whom he loved / And honour'd most, Sir Lancelot, to ride forth and bring the Queen" (33. 446-448). By the third idyll, The Marriage of Geraint, there are already rumors about Lancelot and Guinevere, something that begins to affect the way the knights and their ladies view the queen:

But when a rumour rose about the Queen,  
Touching her guilty love for Lancelot,  
Tho' yet there lived no proof, nor yet was heard  
The world's loud whisper breaking into storm,  
Not less Geraint believed it; and there fell  
A horror on him, lest his gentle wife,  
Thro' that great tenderness for Guinevere,  
Had suffer'd, or should suffer any taint  
In nature. (76. 24-32)

The queen has negative connotations attached to her before she has appeared on the scene in any significant role, even though the above paragraph is prefaced in Tennyson's work by the statement that Geraint's saintly wife, Enid, "loved the Queen, and with true heart /

Adored her, as the stateliest and the best / And loveliest of all women upon earth” (76.19-21). Even in light of such a glowing statement from a pure character like Enid, Guinevere’s goodness is still overshadowed by rumors of her affair.

Tennyson’s Guinevere is a character torn between her duties to a man she does not love and the love she feels for a man she cannot be with. Malory hints at this internal conflict, but it comes to fruition in Tennyson. In Lancelot and Elaine, Guinevere decides not to attend a joust being held at Camelot on account of a recent illness. Lancelot, standing with the king, hears her say this. Tennyson writes:

[Lancelot] thinking that he read [Guinevere’s] meaning there,  
‘Stay with me, I am sick; my love is more  
Than many diamonds,’ yielded. (170. 86-88)

Lancelot begs out of the tournament in order to stay with the queen, but as soon as Arthur has left, Guinevere berates Lancelot:

To blame, my lord Sir Lancelot, much to blame!  
Why go ye not to these fair jousts? the knights  
Are half of them our enemies, and the crowd  
Will murmur, “Lo the shameless ones, who take  
Their pastime now the trustful King is gone!” (170. 97-101)

She wants to be with Lancelot, but is worried to the point of paranoia that someone – the knights especially – will find out about their relationship. More than that, the use of “the shameless one” seems to show that Guinevere is thinking the same thing about herself that she suspects the knights are thinking of her. Her words also hold a hint of bitterness over what obviously cannot be. She seems very much like a woman who feels trapped in

a game she knows she cannot win. This is evident a paragraph later when she vents her frustration to Lancelot.

She broke into a little scornful laugh:  
‘Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King,  
That passionate perfection, my good lord –  
But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?  
He never spake word of reproach to me,  
He never had a glimpse of mine untruth,  
He cares not for me. (171. 120-126)

She is unhappy in her relationship with Arthur, but she cannot do anything about the situation or her unhappiness. And the fact that Arthur does not know about the affair or her unhappiness seems to make it worse:

...only here to-day  
There gleam'd a vague suspicion in his eyes:  
Some meddling rogue has tamper'd with him – else  
Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round,  
And swearing men to vows impossible,  
To make them like himself; but friend, to me  
He is all fault who hath no fault at all:  
For who love me must have a touch of earth;  
The low sun makes the colour: I am yours,  
Not Arthur's, as ye know, save by the bond. (171.126-135)

Guinevere is not clueless; she knows that Arthur cares more for his knights than for her, but even Lancelot's love does not seem to ease the pain. It is almost as if her affair with Lancelot is a way to offset her relationship with Arthur, like a fire built to warm cold hands. But that does not mean that Guinevere finds joy in the affair (particularly when it causes such guilt). Tennyson's Guinevere is never as exuberant or expressive in her love for Lancelot as either in Malory or Chrétien. Tennyson's Guinevere mostly shows her love in fits of jealousy over his relationship with Elaine, the Maid of Astolat – similar to the behavior Guinevere shows in a similar scene in Malory. At the end of Lancelot and Elaine, Guinevere apologizes for her behavior, saying, “Lancelot, / Forgive me; mine was jealousy in love” (203.1339-1340). Guinevere's love for Lancelot is not pure but always tempered by another emotion—generally guilt or jealousy.

Tennyson's Arthur is a difficult character to understand, at once both complex and dangerously static in his dealings with his wife, his knights, and the kingdom at large. He is a man driven by an obsession: the need to perfect everyone and everything around him. Arthur is obsessed with ridding the world (or at the very least, Camelot) of the “beasts” and “wolf-like men” that devour it (Tennyson 21, 22). His zealotry extends to his wife as well, but only so far as she fits into his plans. In the first idyll, “The Coming of Arthur,” Arthur sees Guinevere for the first time and immediately falls in love with her. However, his motives in this are a little strange, at least by modern standards. He says:

Shall I not lift [Guinevere] from this land of beasts

Up to my throne, and side by side with me?

What happiness to reign a lonely king,

Vext – O ye stars that shudder over me,  
O earth that soundest hollow under me,  
Vext with waste dreams? for saving I be join'd  
To her that is the fairest under heaven,  
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,  
And cannot will my will, nor work my work  
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm  
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,  
Then might we live together as one life,  
And reigning with one will in everything  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live. (23. 79-93).

Arthur is under the impression that if he marries Guinevere he will somehow be complete – two halves to make a whole – and in that completion, he can achieve his life's mission of bringing back life to a morally dead world. Stephen Ahern pinpoints the belief of marriage as a unifying force: "Victorian discourse constructs the union of a man and woman as the integration of complementary aspects of human nature, and celebrates the power of wholeness such an integration will afford the man" (93). This passage speaks to the relationship between Guinevere and Arthur by noting that it is about what that "power of wholeness" will bring to the *man*, not what it will bring to the *woman*. The woman is the catalyst by which change is wrought, but she is not the changed, nor is there a pressing need for any further action (if it can be called that) on her part. In fact, after such a union, a woman's duty becomes the important task of maintaining stability. The



Victorians placed a heavy emphasis on stability, particularly within the domestic sphere, and marriage was the agent by which equilibrium could be found. Tennyson prescribes views on marriage for his Camelot that are not like those of Chrétien's. As I discussed in the first chapter, Chrétien's patroness, Marie de Champagne, felt that there was no place for love in marriage, a realistic view for an aristocracy that felt that marriage and business were synonymous. But Tennyson did not base his tales in true medievalism: "Instead the author creates what has been called 'ethical medievalism,' conceptions of legendary characters who could be emulated in everyday life, rather than presenting lovers as a subsidiary interest whose fate was shaped by issues of war, governance or the chivalric code" (Lambdin and Lambdin 15). The characters may dress like medieval aristocracy, but Tennyson has them thinking and acting like Victorians. Critic Rebecca Umland says, "Modern critics agree that the *Idylls* embody not medieval but rather Victorian values, at least those of the middle-class, conservative readership that place a high premium on stability and maintaining the status quo in the domestic and public realms" (274). Like any author who has followed the advice "write what you know," Tennyson took the legends and gave them a distinctly Victorian spin, applying Victorian values to a medieval world. Tennyson was not so unusual in applying this method. Chrétien de Troyes added aspects of courtly love to the legends to appeal to his readers; likewise, Malory emphasized chivalry. Tennyson applied Victorian values to his epic. The criteria by which characters judge one another are the standards by which the Victorians lived. In the *Idylls*, Arthur's vision is the "status quo" or what he feels should be the status quo, at the very least. But Guinevere's affair with Lancelot disrupts the very stability she is charged to protect, making her the villain in the eyes of Arthur, Tennyson, and, very

probably, the Victorian readership. Umland echoes this idea: “As presiders over hearth and home, women who violated their duties or disrupted the domestic order by sexual indulgence were perceived as the worst possible threat” (276).

The Victorian world was still one in which a husband exerted a substantial amount of control over his wife. A woman’s life revolved around her place in the domestic sphere. Domestic duty was what her life amounted to: obeying her husband, bearing children, managing the household according to her husband’s station and social standing, and visiting friends (Johnson 25-26). Wendell Stacy Johnson in his book Sex and Marriage in Victorian Poetry notes that a woman’s life was expected to be “a life of selflessness.” He goes on to say that the overarching idea of the time was that “women should wield power and have an impact on the world, not directly through the vote or social action, but indirectly through their ennobling influence upon men. This is not so much their right as their social obligation” (27). In this way Guinevere ends up being the Victorian version of a trophy wife: useful only in so far as she can fulfill a prescribed role, that of the “angel in the house.” The term “angel in the house,” from a poem by Coventry Patmore, sets up the immensely popular concept of an ideal woman: one who conveyed a “chaste morality” (Logan 6). Or, as Virginia Woolf intoned: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed daily.... Above all, she was pure” (2, 285). From a modern standpoint, this view of women is laughably idealistic: to think that one’s sex is imbued with certain aspects that cancel out the baser characteristics inherent in human nature. But in an age when a great many people were “preoccupied with sexuality,” such ideas were well-known if not applauded (Johnson 18).

When Arthur scolds Guinevere for her part in the destruction of Camelot, he says:

Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.  
I hold that man the worst of public foes  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house;  
For being thro' his cowardice allow'd  
Her station, taken everywhere for pure,  
She like a new disease, unknown to men,  
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd. (282. 508-515)

Here Arthur brings up his wife's duty of "ruling the house." He remarks that leaving a false woman in such a position ends up rotting the household (or in their case, a whole kingdom). Arthur gives Guinevere more credit than is due. If we look at the relationship between the couple, we will see that Guinevere is by no means innocent, but she is aware, unlike Arthur, of the circumstances surrounding and reasons for her sin.

Tennyson often points out Arthur's God-like nature or indicates that he is at least, as Guinevere points out, "[God's] highest creature here" (286. 651). Guinevere's idyll contains the most instances of the comparison between Arthur and Christ, particularly in his dealings with Guinevere. While Guinevere grovels at his feet, she "perceived the waving of his hands that blest" as though he is absolving her of her sins. Afterwards, Guinevere debates the wisdom of loving Lancelot over Arthur when she says:

I thought I could not breathe in that fine air  
That pure severity of perfect light –  
I yearn'd for warmth and colour which I found

In Lancelot – now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,  
Not Lancelot, not another. (286. 640-645)

It is as though she is comparing Arthur to Christ (who most Christians believe to be, as the incarnation of God on Earth, wholly human and wholly divine). Or, perhaps he has his own sub-category – just below the angels but above the rest of mankind. Looking at Arthur in this way, it is no surprise when he says to her, “And all is past, the sin is sinn’d, and I, / Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God / Forgives” (283, 540-542) He does not go so far as to actually absolve her of her sins (he in fact tells her that as far as her soul is concerned, she must do the rest), but acts as though he is capable of doing so.

There is a reason Tennyson’s Arthur is often referred to as the “blameless king” for he rises above Chretien and Malory’s expectations for him to become as much of a figurehead as an actual king. Tennyson erases many of the blemishes on Arthur’s record, including the incident in Malory when Arthur kills off all male children under the age of two in an attempt to kill his own son Mordred and stop his eventual destruction. Tennyson also changes Arthur’s family tree to make Mordred a nephew instead of his bastard child, born of an incestuous relationship. In this he does away with Arthur’s indirect self-destruction as Malory did by making Arthur the father of his own betrayer. According to Tennyson, Arthur starts his reign with a clean slate and a clear conscience, making him unique in his role. In the Idylls, it is no longer Camelot that is the light in an otherwise dark world, but its leader, Arthur, who is the light. He is what makes Camelot the proverbial city on the hill. The irony of the situation becomes then that the fall of Camelot can be attributed as much to its king as to its queen.

Critic Stanley J. Solomon points out Arthur's paradoxical nature:

An examination of Idylls of the King reveals that paradox, ambiguity, and irony abound in the poem. In fact, so often are entire situations built on paradoxical qualities inherent in personalities or in the society of Camelot that we must assume that Tennyson was thoroughly conscious of what he was doing. Very likely, a main source of interest to the poet was the deliberate structuring of all events of Camelot around certain major paradoxes, most, but not all, of which are involved with his depiction of the "blameless king," who is paradoxically to blame for the destruction of his own kingdom. (259-260)

Yet other critics have discarded the notion that Tennyson might not have been literal in his presentation of Arthur. W. David Shaw seconds this idea in his book Tennyson's Style: "Tennyson rejects the idea that Arthur's aloofness and purity are responsible for his tragedy" (212). But in a work like The Idylls of the King, intention and interpretation can be very different things. Tennyson might have meant to keep the fault with Guinevere, but he seems to imply that Arthur is as much to blame as anyone for the fall of Camelot due to Arthur's inability to be human. The same godliness that makes him the "blameless king" also makes him a rather poor human being.

Turning Arthur into a blameless man affects not just his story but also the stories of all those around him, and Guinevere's in particular. In Malory, the story of Camelot was a tragedy in a similar vein as the epic Greek tragedies (Swinburne 191). Just as Oedipus's fate is set out for him early on, so too is Arthur's. Merlin warns him about what the future holds on two separate occasions. First, after Arthur unknowingly commits

incest, Merlin tells him that the child whom his half-sister bears will destroy Arthur and all of his knights (Malory 37); and again when Arthur decides to take Guinevere as his wife, Merlin tells Arthur, “that Guenevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again” (80). Arthur listens to both prophecies, but he cannot escape his fate, and so he marches onward toward his downfall. Even Merlin quotes him as the author of Camelot’s doom. Despite her affair, Guinevere is not a tragic figure in Malory. Like the rest of Camelot’s court, she gets swept up in the tragedy that is Camelot, but she is allowed a little power at the end of her story. She accepts it and has the freedom to decide to go to a nunnery – one of the few decisions medieval women could make for themselves. Malory’s Guinevere is not a tragic figure; the same cannot be said of Tennyson’s portrayal.

Algernon Swinburne, one of Tennyson’s contemporaries, argued that by white-washing Arthur he also removed the tragic element, consequently removing its depth and degrading Guinevere to something less than she is.

From the sin of Arthur’s youth proceed the ruin of his reign and realm through the falsehood of his wife, a wife unloving and unloved. Remove in either case the plea which leaves the heroine less sinned against indeed than sinning, but yet not too base for tragic compassion and interest, and there remains merely the presentation of a vulgar adulteress.... Mr. Tennyson has lowered the note and deformed the outline of the Arthurian story, by reducing Arthur to the level of a wittol, Guenevere to the level of a woman of intrigue, and Launcelot to the level of a ‘co-respondent’. Treated as he has treated it, the story is rather a case for the divorce-court than for poetry. (190)

As Swinburne points out, removing Arthur's sin turns the story from a tragedy to a melodrama, and turns Guinevere from a good and shrewd queen to a pitiful and pitiable woman. This can be illustrated by comparing Guinevere's last scene in Malory and Tennyson. In both tales, after Lancelot and Guinevere's affair has been brought to light, Arthur leaves Camelot to go to war with Lancelot. Knowing that Guinevere is unprotected, Mordred tries to kidnap the queen and force her to marry him in an effort to gain the throne. In Malory's retelling, Guinevere pretends to go along with the scheme in order to go to London. Once there, she shuts herself up in the Tower of London with a well-armored guard, knowing that it is her only hope to hold him off long enough for a rescue by either Arthur or Lancelot. After the final battle between Mordred and Arthur where both are mortally wounded, Guinevere travels to a nunnery, where she takes her vows. In Tennyson's retelling, Guinevere is not as shrewd in her plan. Tennyson omits her successful ruse and instead has her flee to the nunnery directly after her affair is discovered. Her flight to Almesbury, the nunnery, is partly to escape Mordred's schemes and partly to avoid the repercussions of her sin. The scene between Guinevere and Arthur at the nunnery is original to the Idylls. The scene shows Guinevere trying to deal with her guilt over her affair with Lancelot. For the first section, she logically justifies her feelings and actions. She acknowledges her sin—"And weep for her who drew him to his doom"—and is remorseful, but does not feel overwhelming guilt until Arthur arrives to see her (278.346). The king, in essence, berates her for destroying Camelot and his dreams, telling her, "For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life" (281. 450). Arthur's grandstanding shows his lack of humility as well as his lack of sympathy. Tennyson, perhaps inadvertently, proves that Guinevere is not wrong when she says the king is

“cold / High, self-contain’d, and passionless” (279). Arthur has no feelings beside anger and pity for the woman he seems to ignore throughout their marriage. He recognizes her sin, but not the reasons for it (Staines 49). Guinevere knows the complexity of human nature. After Arthur leaves, she realizes that it would have been better if she had loved Arthur, but also knows that she could not:

I thought I could not breathe in that fine air  
That pure severity of perfect light –  
I yearn’d for warmth and colour which I found  
In Lancelot – now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,  
Not Lancelot, not another. (286. 640-645)

David Staines says, “Her sensuality asserted itself to the degree that she failed to see her proper mode of existence; the ‘warmth and colour’ offered by Lancelot blinded her to the higher calling” (49). Even though Tennyson means Arthur to be a God-like figure, it is Guinevere who understands the nature of man and the nature of sin. Laura Cooner Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin note in their book Camelot in the Nineteenth Century that Arthur is not wrong in his goals but in his thinking “that he can mold normal individuals around him into something greater than they are in actuality” (18). Arthur expects Guinevere to be everything he is and more, and then condemns her when she, rightly so, cannot live up to his impossible expectations.

Critic Stephen Ahern, author of Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson’s Idylls, argues, “The *Idylls* candidly depicts the problems that result from subscribing to a model of feminine nature that pervaded



Victorian thinking” (89). He goes on to say, “Throughout the poem cycle there is a pattern of implicit, and at times, explicit, criticism of the ways Arthur and his knights exploit the women of Camelot for their own ends” (90). Arthur is seen as using Guinevere as a means to an end. She is his muse, meant to lift him up, inspire him, and push him toward attaining his goals, but the danger lies in portraying her as such. Muses inspired many poets in the Greek epics, but those poets also had brilliant but short and often tragic lives. Thus it is with Camelot, that many of the men who rely on their women for muse-like fulfillment end up having tragic lives. Wendell Stacy Johnson points out Tennyson’s suggestion in the Idylls that “when true marriage fails, civilization fails” (151):

The whole situation [of the Grail quest] is a mirror image and commentary on the treatment of marriage throughout the Idylls: the joining of man and woman is seen at the beginning as a necessary first step toward the revival of the dead dark world, and yet Arthur’s own quest is increasingly described in language that transcends, denies, is divorced from, the sexual, even the physical. The divorce is not apparently caused by Guinevere.

(169)

Stephen Ahern says, “It is Arthur who has made the fatal mistake by investing a mortal woman with the powers of transcendent emotional strength, by assuming she could act to anchor his struggle to change the world for good” (111). Arthur is remarkably faulty for a blameless king. It is hard to imagine that Tennyson would see Arthur as an ideal anything, which leads me to believe that Arthur is an allegorical concept than an actual model for sovereignty.

In the dedication to Queen Victoria, Tennyson writes, “Accept this old imperfect tale, / New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul” (392. 36-37). That is Tennyson’s thesis for his own work: the story of Camelot, of Arthur and Guinevere, is that it is the story of Sense (Guinevere) at war with the Soul (Arthur). The queen’s actions are entirely ruled by feeling and passion. In one scene during the idyll “Lancelot and Elaine,” Guinevere flies into a jealous rage over the relationship between the idyll’s title characters. She proceeds to rip an arbor to shreds before throwing the diamonds Lancelot gives her out the window and into the river. She only appears reserved in her dealings with the king, and Tennyson makes certain that the reader is alert to the fact that it is only a façade. Arthur, on the other hand, is cool and aloof. When Guinevere first sees him, she thinks him “Cold / High, self-contain’d, and passionless” (279, 402-403). Even in his last scene with Guinevere, Arthur’s passionate words have a “tone of condescending self-righteousness” and they “ring hollow in light of his past neglect of his wife” (Ahern 107). Guinevere and Arthur may or may not be allegorical personifications, but the battle they reenact is one far older than themselves, that of the soul at war with the flesh (Sense), man’s earthly nature competing with his heavenly one for dominance over the self.

Critic Wendell Stacy Johnson agrees when he says:

There is virtually no close and sweet marriage in the Idylls; and of course the bond between the Queen and Lancelot – “not the bond of man and wife,” as they both say – is marred by her jealousy and his guilt. The issues of legal marriage and free love are involved here. But even more significant is the question whether any sexual relation can be imagined in Arthur’s realms as consummated and not guilty. If the soul is at war with

the flesh, Guinevere may illustrate the problem, but she does not create it.

(164-165)

If Arthur and Guinevere's marriage is soul at war with flesh, then their marriage will be a failure from the start.

The Guinevere of the Idylls of the King is similar in form to her incarnation in Le Morte d'Arthur and Chrétien's Arthurian Romances, but she is also a creation of Tennyson's own making. Looking at Tennyson's work, it is easy to blame the destruction of Camelot on Guinevere, and many critics have agreed, seeing her as selfish, scornful, and unfaithful. But that answer is too simple for such an obviously complex situation. Guinevere has not completely lost her nurturing persona that Chrétien presents in Erec and Enide, but it has been suppressed in order to make more room for the persona of the wanton lover. The problem is not that Tennyson and the Victorians could not identify with the nurturing persona (the "angel in the house" concept was too well known and too popular for that to be so), but that they so fully picked up on the wanton side of her character. Tennyson cannot be faulted for applying Victorian values to a medieval world; many authors have done so with their own society's values before and after Tennyson's time. Like the two authors I have presented in the previous chapters, Tennyson tries with limited success to fit a multi-dimensional character into a one-dimensional space, like trying to get a square peg through a round hole. Instead of categorically turning Guinevere into a traitor for her sin, Tennyson presents a tragic character who cannot possibly succeed by the rules she is given, and turns Arthur from an admirable king into a flawed man who essentially throws a fit (albeit an eloquent one) when his game is ruined. Perhaps Tennyson thought that the wanton lover was a more interesting character

dynamic than the good, nurturing queen. Or perhaps, like Geoffrey of Monmouth so many centuries before, Tennyson was just trying to understand why a good, legendary king could be defeated. Whatever the reason, it is certain that Tennyson's vision of Guinevere is one that has survived and been embraced by contemporary culture.

## Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

When I set out to analyze Guinevere, I wanted to do so in a forum where I could separate her from the men who overshadow her. But once I got deeper into the legends, studying them and their criticism, it became apparent that it would be a demanding task. Guinevere's story has become so entangled with those of Arthur, Lancelot, and even Mordred that her character has become, for better or for worse, inseparable from theirs. As the texts changed and evolved, the strands became more enmeshed as each author built on the ideas that preceded him.

In Chrétien the stories are not so well connected. Guinevere is almost two different characters – one with Arthur and one with Lancelot. When seen with Arthur, she is a good queen and a supportive wife; when seen with Lancelot, she is a demanding and jealous lover. As we have seen in the first chapter, Marie de Champagne's patronage and the rules of courtly love heavily influenced Guinevere's portrayal The Knight of the Cart, especially considering that her capricious nature does not show itself before or after that stand-alone tale.

Malory's Guinevere shows many signs of that same nature, an influential remnant from the French romantic tradition. As I mentioned in my chapter on Malory, Guinevere is stable in her relationship with Arthur but fickle in her relationship with Lancelot. The odd thing is that Lancelot and Guinevere seem to love each other but they do not always like each other. Theirs is a relationship built on passion, and passion, like any other strong emotion, is not stagnant, often making for volatile relationships, but Malory tells us that they are true lovers, and their devotion is apparently rewarded in the afterlife.

Despite their sins, they are granted salvation for being good and true lovers to one another. Arthur and Guinevere have the opposite relationship – they like each other, but there is little love between them. Arthur is so concerned with his knights that he would have happily gone on ignoring his wife’s affair if it hadn’t interfered with his royal boys’ club. This could very well be evidence that by this time in the growth and evolution of the legends, the idea of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere had become as much of a literary convention for Malory as the convention of courtly love was for Chrétien. By Malory’s time, the affair had become so engrained into the very structure of the legend that it also became something of a necessary evil, and it has not left the scheme of the legends since.

Tennyson, most of all, makes Guinevere’s story inseparable from those of the men in her life. Guinevere’s relationship with Lancelot is in direct opposition to her relationship with Arthur, and if the former did not predate the latter, one might assume that she started the affair as an act of self-preservation against a husband who thought more highly of himself and his mission in life than anyone else. Tennyson’s portrayal of Guinevere has her acting like a foil, a pitiable sinner, to the near perfect king.

Even in this modern age, many women do not define themselves by who they are as individuals or by what they have done; they define themselves by their husbands or their children: “I’m so-and-so’s wife,” or “I’m so-and-so’s mother.” Being a wife and a mother is by no means a petty or insignificant role, but Guinevere is less defined by her part as Arthur’s queen than she is as Lancelot’s lover. Arthur made her known, but Lancelot made her famous.

I always thought that this was a sad state of affairs, that Guinevere's most famous act is treasonous love. We remember Guinevere's betrayal before we remember Mordred's. But it is Mordred who actively conspires against the king, while Guinevere's treason is born only out of love for another.

Many critics have noted the strange occurrence that much of Arthurian literature is not actually about Arthur. He provides a format for stories to be told, but they are more often about things that happen at his court or in his name than about him. Only Tennyson views him as some sort of demi-god, perfect in his own existence. The image of Arthur and Guinevere – king and queen – sitting side-by-side on their thrones provides grounding for the tangle of tales and legends. It is the knights who are sent out on adventures through the kingdom; but after any skirmish is won they either return to Camelot or send the loser back to present himself before Arthur and his queen. Moreover, the affair made Lancelot and Guinevere equally famous. Granted, Lancelot gains a reputation on his own as the greatest knight, but would his story have been as poignant without Guinevere as his companion? According to Chrétien, Lancelot would not be the great knight that he is if it weren't for the way his love for Guinevere drove him to great deeds. Arthur may have been Lancelot's liege lord, but Guinevere was his lady.

Among the many characters that grace the Arthurian legends, only a few female characters stand out as memorable, Guinevere chief among them. An anonymous essay written in the late nineteenth century states, "There is no more tragic or majestic queen in fiction than Guinevere when she appears at the last; there is no page in literature more

palpitating with high-wrought passion than Sir Thomas Malory's recital of the parting and death of Lancelot and his royal lady" (318).

One of my early irritations with Arthurian literature was the way that each author imprinted his own society's mores and values onto an early medieval world. Tennyson is the most obvious example:

The charge that [Tennyson] clothed Victorian characters in medieval costumes is correct; Tennyson brings the subject to the Victorian public and does not expect readers to be historians or scholars able to easily understand an earlier time. Instead the author creates what has been called 'ethical medievalism,' conceptions of legendary characters who could be emulated in everyday life, rather than presenting lovers as a subsidiary interest whose fate was shaped by issues of war, governance or the chivalric code. (Lambdin and Lambdin 15)

His Arthuriana is a mix of medieval and Victorian – taking elements of both but never properly fitting in either. But Chrétien and Malory did the same, albeit in subtler ways. They appealed to their audiences by following the literary fashion of the time: Chrétien added courtly love and Malory his beloved chivalry. I had so associated Arthur with a stereotypical medieval court that it did not occur to me that his reign was something that belonged more in the fifth or sixth century than in the high Middle Ages when it is generally placed. So little is known about Britain in the early middle ages that we would have a harder time imagining Arthur as a Hrothgar-like ruler than as Charlemagne or Richard the Lionheart.



Any beginning fiction writer is told the old adage of “write what you know.” Before comparing Arthurian literature and other criticism, it did not occur to me that maybe that is what Chrétien, Malory, Tennyson, and their counterparts were doing. They each retold a basic story in terms that they and their readers would understand and relate to. The knights might have been stuck in the quasi-medieval age in which they had been conceived, but Guinevere had the ability to be formed and reformed according to societal standards. She is a barometer, reflecting attitudes and ideas on how society views love, marriage, the battle of the sexes, and, most importantly, women.

Studying the texts and their criticism made me realize that even I am guilty of that: by my viewing Arthuriana through a lens that has been shaped by society’s notions of women. In today’s society, we recognize Guinevere as the wanton lover, not as the nurturing queen. Looking at modern retellings, like the 2004 movie King Arthur, we see that her character has been so stained that it is only through another evolution (editing almost past the point of recognition) that Guinevere can be redeemed. The affair and most of the romantic tension must be completely removed from the story in order for Guinevere to start fresh.

The “fallen” woman in literature has long been a topic of discussion, curiosity, and analysis. Deborah Ann Logan, in her article on fallen women in Victorian texts, notes that male writers write *about* fallen women, and not from the perspective of fallen women, the result being that the characters “remain one-dimensional, talked about but not developed, objectified in euphemistic terms that fail to establish the social contexts leading to fallenness” (11). Although Guinevere’s villainy ironically led her to be a well-known character, she has still been objectified and vilified without taking into account

anything but her affair with Lancelot. Guinevere is given a set of rules, and then she is condemned for following them.

In the end, it seems to come down to labels. The knights of Arthur's court are never bogged down with taxonomy. They are men and knights, and whatever else they might be does not need to be labeled. For the men, being is enough. But that same leniency is not afforded to the women. They are Mary or Eve; virgin or whore; good or evil; wife or traitor. Guinevere is the only female character who is not in one category or the other, but is instead a participant in both. In her first appearance in the Welsh tales, she has the capacity for both good and bad, and she never loses that attribute. As time progressed, each author took the model of Guinevere that had been passed to him by his predecessors, and molded her into something new that still retained traces of her previous self. Each author – Chrétien, Malory, and Tennyson – retained both sides of Guinevere's persona, but gradually, as we move from Chrétien to Tennyson, we find that the wanton side has gained more prominence. It has come to the point that the cultural icon we recognize is not the noble queen of Camelot, but the willful destroyer of Camelot. We, like the knights in Le Morte d'Arthur, see her as “the destroyer of good knights,” and so “we love her not” (793; bk. xviii, ch. v).

Why is it that we easily recognize one Guinevere but not the other? Why is it that Lancelot's jealous lover has become a cultural icon and not Arthur's good queen? After all, Arthur had a similar transformation to Guinevere – he slowly evolves from a one-dimensional king, there to give context and act as a proper king in Chrétien, to Tennyson's blameless ruler, a man only slightly lower than the angels. In contemporary culture, we recognize Malory's incarnation, a character whom Nietzsche would call “all

too human”: complex, flawed, a good ruler who makes occasional bad decisions. We have accepted a moderate Arthur as our cultural icon, yet have abandoned a moderate Guinevere in favor of a fallen woman. It would be too simplistic to blame the outcome on just one author, or to point to one literary convention or another as boxing her into a negative stereotype. It may be that we can identify with Guinevere – a character who possesses good and bad features – in a legend inhabited by one-dimensional archetypes. Or perhaps our modern culture has not evolved as far as we would like to imagine, and we think the worst of a woman so near the auspices of power. One thing is certain: Guinevere is a complex, conflicted character who may never be understood, but will always be a source of fascination and wonderment.

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