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“Ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen”:

Female Autonomy and Authority

in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*

by

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Abstract

Popular medieval English romances were composed and received within the social consciousness of a distinctly patriarchal culture. This study examines the way in which the dynamic of these texts is significantly influenced by the consequences of female endeavour, in the context of an autonomous feminine presence in both the real and imagined worlds of medieval England, and the authority with which this is presented in various narratives, with a particular focus on Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Chapter One of this study establishes the social and economic positioning of the female in fifteenth-century England, and her capacity for literary engagement; I will then apply this model of female autonomy and authority to a wider discussion of texts contemporary with Malory in Chapters Two and Three, in anticipation of a more detailed study of *Le Morte Darthur* in Chapters Four and Five.

My research explores the female presence and influence in these texts according to certain types: namely the lover, the victim, the ruler, and the temptress. In the case of Malory, the crux of my observations centres on the paradox of the capacity for power in perceived vulnerability, incorporating the presentation of women in this patriarchal culture as being vulnerable and in need of protection, while simultaneously acting as a significant threat to chivalric society by manipulating this apparent fragility, to the detriment of the chivalric knight. In this sense, women can be perceived as being an architect of the romance world, while simultaneously acting as its saboteur.

In essence, this study offers an innovative interpretation of female autonomy and authority in medieval romance, presenting an exploration of the physical, intellectual, and emotional placement of women in both the historical and literary worlds of fifteenth-century England, while examining the implications of female conduct on Malory's Arthurian society.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree at University College Cork or elsewhere.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

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Introduction

"Mulier est hominis confusio" (line 3164)[1]; Chaucer's Nun's Priest's translation of this as "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis" (3166) effectively encapsulates the essential juxtaposition of the concept of the female in medieval English romance. From the Latin denunciation that "woman is the ruin of man", to Chaunticleer's misrepresentation of this in his declaration that woman is a man's joy and bliss, the paradoxical nature of the representation of the female in medieval English writing as both good and bad (like the Wife of Bath's husbands) is clear. In the context of this study, this is most prominently demonstrated in the romance tales, through the powerful influence of the female in both the composition of romance, and the workings of the world of the romance narrative.

Fifteenth-century English romance, whether Arthurian or devoted to the worthies of other matters, establishes the male presence as the primary focus of medieval romance. These narratives are often inflected by the consequences of female endeavour within chivalric society.[2] In her introduction to *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, Corinne Saunders observes:

> Romance, one might say, is situated in and speaks of timeless moments [...] the images of Tristan and Isolde drinking the fateful potion; of the Holy Grail appearing to the Knights of the Round Table; of Guinevere led out to the fire, clad only in her shift; of the hand clothed in white samite, "mystic, wonderful", taking back the sword Excalibur; of the black-robed queens who weep and shriek as they bear Arthur away in the barge.
>
> (1)

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[1] All quotations and translations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from Larry D. Benson's edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*.

[2] For a comprehensive summary of critical reception to the *Morte Darthur*, see Parins, Marylyn Jackson, ed. *Malory: The Critical Heritage*.

These images are familiar, well-established snapshots of pivotal moments in medieval romance. Notably, many involve the presence of the female, in a visual demonstration of the significance of the feminine influence in courtly society. This study aims to explore the way in which this feminine presence is presented and positioned within depicted chivalric culture, with particular emphasis on Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*. If inseparable from the narratives in which they are enmeshed, women are still an autonomous presence in the narrative world, imbued with authority[3] and agency, reflective of the social and historical contexts which romance can imitate.

Historically, from the courtly cultures of medieval France and England, women have played an integral part in the demand for romance literature, in those texts that originate "between the mid twelfth and mid thirteenth centuries, from the great period of courtly love writing [...] early enough to form a tradition of forms and ideas that the later medieval writers in English could draw on" (O'Donoghue vi). The courts of twelfth-century France saw "the fruitful meeting of representatives of different intellectual traditions", which "occurred most often at the courts of great lords, either because authors met personally in that varied and changing society or because they wrote for an audience which they knew had sophisticated and eclectic tastes" (Benton, *Culture, Power and Personality* 3). David Staines highlights one such circumstance, as he observes that "[t]he court of Champagne was a center of literary activity", a point of convergence for writers such as Andreas Capellanus, Gace Brulé, Gautier d'Arras, and Chrétien de Troyes (Introduction to *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* x).

[3] Here, the idea of authority refers to a sense of independent agency and a willed power individual to the active figure of the female.

This is but one instance of the manner in which the feminine presence in courtly society has inspired an artistic response in tales of male endeavour driven by female beauty, demonstrated, for example, by Chrétien de Troyes' "Knight of the Cart" (or "Lancelot"), which opens with Chrétien's praise of his Lady of Champagne, who "surpasses all living ladies as the south wind blowing in April or May surpasses all winds"; he concludes his dedication with the thought that "her command is more important in this undertaking than any thought or effort I may expend" (170).[4] "One of the greatest works of courtly and chivalric literature", Chrétien dedicates it solely to his lady, Marie de Champagne: "the *san* and *matiere* of his story" (O'Donoghue 167). This is a quintessential example of the "extended praise" (Staines, Introduction ix) of women in the courtly literature that they inspired; however, the desire that this feminine beauty elicits is, ironically, the force behind the fall of many a male in the romance narrative, and in the case of Malory's Arthurian court, the destruction of society as a whole. In this sense, women, and particularly Guinevere in Malory's case, are the instigators of courtly romance, but also the agents of the demise of the narrative worlds depicted within; woman can be perceived as being an architect of the romance world, while simultaneously acting as its saboteur.

This study of *Le Morte Darthur* is based on the concept of King Arthur and his Round Table Knights as being the definitive symbol of chivalric society and all it represents in terms of nobility, virtue, and courage. The Round Table court is essentially a vehicle for the portrayal of the ultimate embodiment of masculinity and chivalric integrity, yet it is the actions of these men and the consequences of their behaviours which indicate the beginning of the unravelling of this society, and its eventual destruction as it collapses under the weight of its own responsibility.

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[4] Quotations from Chrétien's "Lancelot", or "The Knight of the Cart", are taken from David Staines' translation.

This thesis focuses particularly on the role of the female within the primarily masculine character interest of these narratives, with specific regard to the culpability of women in the failure of masculinity, and of society, in the text. This study will address the paradox of the fragility of the female which endows her with power in chivalric society, where knights are sworn to serve. In essence, behind every hero is a heroine, or a woman of some significant influence, be that positive or negative; therefore, as is intended in this work, the most effective manner of exploring the influence of the female presence in medieval literature is by observing its impact on men.

Essentially, this study intends to present a contextual account of the role of women in their social, romantic, and political postures in Malory's *Morte Darthur* – the places from which they could exert emotional and narrative control in their roles of lover, ruler, victim, and temptress. This analysis must be placed in context; this work will begin with a discussion of fifteenth-century society and the place of the female in the intended audience for Malory's work, and will go on to examine the feminine presence, and power, in other medieval literary works in a readerly context for Malory and his audiences. Having established the models and expectations available to Malory in romance and related genres, I will then focus exclusively on his representation of the female in the *Morte Darthur*, based on his reworking of both French and English source materials, and invention.

Malory: Textual and Authorial Identities

From the outset, it is important to establish that Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel is, despite debate, assumed by this study to be the author of the text; widely "accepted by critics as the author of *Le Morte Darthur*", this man was "a knyght

presoner", who was incarcerated as a result of charges of rape and theft (Radulescu, *The Gentry Context* 1).[5]

In his composition of the *Morte Darthur*, Malory "reworked the substance of earlier Arthurian romances" (Radulescu, *Context* 1); he drew upon a number of established legends and romances, from which sources he presented a reconstruction of the traditional story of King Arthur and his Round Table knights.[6] William Matthews notes, "[f]rom time to time, Malory characterizes his work as being 'breffly drawyn' from what he calls 'the Frensshe booke'"; however, "Malory did considerably more than briefly translate, and he certainly drew from more than one book" (89). Malory's interpretation maintains a healthy respect for his source material, yet incorporates original additions that serve to alter the tone and presentation of the work as a whole. This is particularly relevant in regard to the presentation of the female in Malory's text, and how this differs in various ways from its source.

All writing is a product of its time, drawing from and reflecting on social, personal, political, and economic situations contemporary with the period of composition. The idea of this social consciousness must be taken into account in a reading of the narrative, with reference to authorial authority, social authority, and

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[5] For a discussion of the identity of Sir Thomas Malory, see William Matthews, *The Ill-Framed Knight: A sceptical enquiry into the identity of Sir Thomas Malory*, and P.J.C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, where Field aims "to identify the author of the *Morte Darthur*, outline his life, and gain such scattered insights into his personality as the evidence allows" (170).

[6] For a detailed list of Malory's sources, see Stephen H.A. Shepherd, *Sir Thomas Malory: Le Morte Darthur* (701-02); Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur*; Hilton Kelliher, "The Early History of the Malory Manuscript"; and Edward D. Kennedy, "Malory and his English Sources". Helen Cooper's Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur* notes that "Malory worked with four principal French sources, supplemented by at least two others, and two major English sources" (xix): namely the French *Suite du Merlin* (source of initial tales of Uther and Arthur), the English alliterative *Morte Arthure* (source of the tale of the war between Arthur and Lucius), the French prose *Lancelot* (source of the "Tale of Sir Lancelot"), the prose *Tristan* (source of the "Book of Sir Tristram"), the French prose *Queste del Saint Graal* (source of the "Tale of the Sangreal"), the French prose *La Mort le Roi Artu*, and the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (sources of the "Tale of Lancelot and Guinevere" and the "Death of Arthur"). Less prominent sources include the French *Perlesvaus* (particularly in the "Tale of Sir Lancelot") and John Hardyng's Verse Chronicle (in English, particularly in the "Tale of Arthur and Lucius"). Two significant episodes that do not have any known sources are the "Tale of Sir Gareth" and the healing of Sir Urry.

the positioning of authoritative characters, particularly in terms of the feminine persona, in the text.

Caxton's preface to Malory's *Morte Darthur* addresses the work "unto alle noble prynces, lordes and ladyes, gentylmen or gentlewymmen, that desyre to rede or here redde of the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur" (I.cxlvi.19-22)[7], a directive which incorporates many facets of medieval society, inclusive of the female demographic.[8] This is reminiscent of earlier romance prologues, as discussed at length in Carol Meale's "'gode men/ Wiues maydnes and alle men': Romance and Its Audiences" (and explored in the context of *Havelok* in Chapter Two of this study). This preface to the *Morte Darthur* establishes the work not only as one aimed at a wide audience, but also as one which served a positive purpose in the literary world, a text which encourages admirable behaviour and the celebration of chivalry. Caxton's involvement in the production of the text was specifically relevant in the promotion of such an ethos; Bert Dillon (18) writes, "Caxton edited the copy to move men to chivalrous and honorable conduct and to show how the vicious are punished: 'Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renommee'" (I.cxlvi.7-8). In addition to this substantiation of the moral integrity of the text, Caxton validates the entertainment value of the book, clarifying that it is "intended to be 'plesaunte to rede in' and can be read at leisure" (Dillon 18). Malory's *Morte Darthur*, therefore, is set up by the printer as a work of significance in terms of both moral substance and recreational value.

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[7] All quotations from Caxton's Preface are taken from P.J.C. Field's revision of the Vinaver edition of *Le Morte Darthur* and are formatted as (volume.page number.line number).

[8] See Ralcua Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* 13, and Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 200, for a summary of Caxton's intended audience.

Caxton's development of the historicity of the text and the Arthurian community further justifies the utility and worth of the work. The printer undertakes to outline the varying texts and artefacts that corroborate the reality of Arthur's reign, such as his seal at St. Edward's shrine in Westminster, the Round Table at Winchester, and remnants such as Gawain's skull and Lancelot's sword. The potential for historicity thus established by Caxton, Malory's text holds powerful resonances for the audience, in content and message, as realism reinforces fiction.

The Study of the Feminine in Malory and Other Romances of his Time

Having established its social context, this work approaches the study of women as both subject within the text and objective audience of the text, internal and external agents. Chapter One will examine the historical realities of women in fifteenth-century England, and how this is reflected in romance literature. This incorporates a number of issues: what did women choose to read? How did they observe themselves in texts? How and why did they write? This is considered with the acknowledgement that

> There is abundant evidence of an increasing, though generally more orthodox, participation of women in written culture in this period, whether in the many records of their ownership of books, their readiness to communicate by letter (as the many women of the Paston family abundantly demonstrate), the illiterate Margery's Kempe's desire that her dictated record of her life should be preserved in written form, or in activities such as Dame Eleanor Hull's devotional translations.
>
> (Cooper, *The Long Fifteenth Century* 9)

Here, I will discuss the value of literature in medieval English culture, alongside a more particularised study of the social and economic prominence of women in medieval England, and the reflection of this in a literary capacity.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath observes that the male perspective has established that "womman was the los of al mankynde" (line 720), with the caveat that, "By God, if wommen hadde writen stories" (693), there would exist a far more balanced report of such "wikkednesse" (695). Bearing in mind that "los" can be read, as a noun, as meaning both loss, and praise, women are simultaneously portrayed as figures to worship and associated with destruction. This thesis will go on to explore the literary presentation of the female in selected medieval writings (within the scope of this study), through the thematic development of women in their varying roles of lovers, victims, enchantresses, and temptresses, and as authoritative figures in a position of power. Taking these portrayals of women, as presented through a male gaze, this thesis will define and analyse the female figure in relation to these headings, in both the *Morte Darthur* (in Chapters Four and Five) and other romance texts of the time. Chapters Two and Three of this study will present a discussion of women in a wide variety of medieval writings, including *Floris and Blauncheflur*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *Guy of Warwick*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as these earlier stories provide romance models for women prior to and concurrent with Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

A number of these texts pre-date Malory's *Morte Darthur*, sometimes significantly so, yet their study establishes certain narrative tropes and motifs in regard to the feminine, which paved the way for audience expectation and the literary reception of the *Morte Darthur*. Exploring the sense that "many of the women in these narratives are defined in relation to men or as objects of exchange between men" (Charbonneau and Cromwell 100) in the romance literature that

preceded and co-existed with Malory permits us to see how he, as an author, adheres to the expectations of romance and of its women.

Such a study must be preceded by an awareness of the main precepts of chivalry, which binds men and women both ethically and socially, and is the governing theme of Malory. Chivalric culture, as established in the *Morte Darthur*, is based on the Round Table, created by Merlin, in "tokenyng of rowndnes of the worlde, for men sholde by the Rounde Table undirstonde the rowndenes signified by right" (II.906.15-17).[9] The knights of the company are placed on the path of the Grail quest at its conception, as "[w]han Merlyon had ordayned the Rounde Table he seyde, 'By them whych sholde be felowys of the Rounde Table the trouth of the Sankgreall sholde be well knowyn'" (II.906.27-29). One of the of the most significant elements of the conception of the Round Table knights, however, is the fact that they swear to the Pentecostal Oath, a chivalric code by which each knight is sworn to live, and which "tend[s] to equalise the rights of the sexes" (P.J.C. Field, Introduction to *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur* 6). In the context of this study, the oath's condition of the protection of women is crucial:

> than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir [...] and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe.
>
> (I.120.15-17; 20-23)

Mark Lambert observes, "[i]n the world of *Le Morte Darthur* virtue consists essentially of living up to a code, behaving in the manner characteristic of (or, [...]

[9] All quotations from *Le Morte Darthur* are taken from Vinaver's *Works*, and are cited in the format (volume.page number.line number).

being the best individual according to the defining standard of) one's category" (31). The significance of this, and its effect on the chivalric knight, is discussed in detail in Chapter Four, with particular focus on the aspect of duality in feminine influence.

Here, women are established as being weak and vulnerable, and in need of the protection of men, in keeping with the social perception of the passive, submissive female in a patriarchal culture. As established by Joan Cadden in *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture*, femininity generally indicated "moral and physical weakness", in contrast to the "moral and physical strength" denoted by masculinity (208). Felicity Riddy also notes the way in which "[i]t was held that women's physical make-up made them frailer than men, morally and physically" ("Abject odious" 237); however, by defining the female in such a way, the oath affords her an element of power, as the chivalric knight must adjust his desires and behaviours in accordance with this fact. While women may accept the advantages of this, this precept leaves space for manipulation and an inversion of power. Knights may be controlled by their obligations to those women they are bound to protect. Here, physical strength yields to mental and emotional power, as demonstrated, for example, by Lancelot's temporary insanity; it is in this way that the Pentecostal Oath, which defines the chivalric ideal and puts in place those conditions by which it must be lived, creates an arena for a converse claim to authority, inadvertently transposed onto those which it defines as the weaker sex.

"Betwyxt you [...] ye have destroyed a good knyght"[10]: The Destructive Feminine Influence on the Chivalric Knight

A text that is distinctly patriarchal in tone, in the climate of a chivalric culture, Malory's *Morte Darthur* focuses on the promotion of the male, most specifically Sir Lancelot. Sandra Ness Ihle explores Lancelot's journey in the narrative in the context of three distinct stages: "his realization of his past sinful life and its consequences; his attempt to purify and transform himself through confessions and penance, through hardships and the aid of hermits and other religious men and women; and his partial vision of the Grail secrets" (84). Malory's tale follows the physical and spiritual journey of Lancelot as a chivalric knight; for the purposes of this study, I will emphasise how Lancelot's path is shaped by female authority within the narrative.

Lancelot's failings are undeniable, yet "Malory shows us his sin as arising from weakness rather than from evil instincts" (Hynes-Berry 99): a weakness that stems from love and desire for a woman. As a knight of integrity, strength, honour, and courage, Lancelot is held above all others; Mary E. Dichmann notes, "[i]n naming Sir Lancelot second only to the king among the members of the Round Table, Malory sets the pattern that he uses throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, the pattern of Lancelot's supremacy" (75), as "he never lets the reader forget that it is Lancelot who makes the decisions, Lancelot who gives the commands, and Lancelot who is always first to be addressed" (78). It is all the more significant, then, that such a figure of authority and integrity, who garners such respect within the Round Table court, can be driven to insanity by the influence of a woman. For all of his male posturing, Lancelot is under the emotional control of Guinevere, and as such,

[10] *Le Morte Darthur* (II.807.10-11).

his decisions and abilities are dictated by feminine caprices and the often irrational jealousy that prompts the queen's judgements and behaviours.

Chapters Four and Five of this study will address this, arguing that the way in which Lancelot falls from grace, prompted by feminine influence, bears greater significance in the wider context of the narrative world as a whole. If Lancelot, the greatest of all knights, can suffer as a result of female influence, so can the chivalric society which he embodies. Lancelot's failure, and as such, the symbolic failure of masculinity, may herald the impossibility of the survival of the chivalric ideal in a fallen world that is ultimately tainted by the condition of its humanity (and original sin). Not even the greatest of all knights can avoid desire or pain, in what is, in essence, an idealised society. In an ideal world, these knights should be able to avoid such earthly suffering, yet this idealised world shows itself to be a fallen one, subject to the caprices of the earthly. Here, both men and world appear to be inadequate, as reinforced by one of Lancelot's last declarations: he "threwe hys armes abrode, and sayd 'Alas! Who may truste thys world?'" (III.1254.11-12). It appears that suffering is an inevitability of life, both in an individual and social sense in Lancelot's case, and here it is prompted by a woman – a circumstance which resonates deeply with the fall of the Arthurian court.

In addition to Lancelot, as the personification of the chivalric ideal, is Arthur, representative of England as a nation and the society of the Round Table. Arthur's strength and authority as a king are evidenced in the initial success of society and his temporarily triumphant rule, yet once more it is through female influence that the king, the most powerful of all men in a patriarchal society that celebrates the male, meets his doom, cuckolded by his wife and killed by a son conceived in base desire and born of incest.

Objectively speaking, it appears that the chivalric court of Arthur's Round Table should have been invincible in its collection of the best of all knights, who catalogue strength of both character and body, while celebrating nobility, respect, and above all, loyalty. The presence of Merlin adds a further sense of fortification in the element of the otherworldly – a power beyond that of this earth, the protection of enchantment, and the foresight afforded by magical ability. In addition to this are Arthur's own capabilities, as the celebrated king and the sole man with the ability to claim Excalibur as his own. From this objective perspective, the Arthurian kingdom appears to be a mighty force, capable of withstanding any form of attack. However, in this case, the external threats which could have been so efficiently withstood are not the defining issue; instead, the destructive force comes from within, often disguised by varying forms of beauty and desire. Through the examination of prominent male characters such as Arthur and Lancelot, those men who are not only in a prominent position of authority within chivalric society, but often appear to be the physical manifestation of all that chivalry ought to represent, the influential nature of the female within the narrative culture becomes evident.

Disregarded as fragile beings in need of protection, it is the female influence which sows the seeds that ultimately bring about the fall of the kingdom, as explored in detail in Chapters Four and Five. Initially, Merlin warns Arthur of the dangers of marrying Guinevere; Arthur, blinded by desire, chooses to ignore these portents and instead satisfy his romantic needs. Merlin is equally overpowered by the intensity of desire, and meets his end at the hand of Nenyve, whom he provided with the very weapons used for his destruction during her magical education. Lancelot, "the floure of knyghtes" (I.258.26), is essentially the catalyst for the dissolution of Arthur and Guinevere's marriage, and the consequent fall of the court. He cannot be wholly condemned; he "loved the quene agayne aboven all

other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys, and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry" (I.253.17-19). His love is pure, but is nevertheless misdirected, and so the integrity of their love is negated by the fact that its very existence was born of sin and adultery, with the consequences leading Lancelot to insanity, and both Arthur and Guinevere to death, in a tale of masculine adventure tempered by feminine influence.[11]

The presence of women in the *Morte Darthur* is thus often presented as being a negative or destructive one, as it appears that femininity as a whole, rather than one specific individual, is often condemned for male suffering: "betwyxt you [...] ye have destroyed a good knyght" (II.807.10-11). A conversation between Gawain and Marhalt clarifies this element of the extremes of femininity; Marhalt has been accused of animosity towards women, and Gawain questions how it is that "so valyaunte a man as ye be of prouesse, that ye love no ladyes and damesels" (I.161.27-28). Marhalt's reply follows that he hates only those "sorsserers and inchaunters" (I.161.32) who will make a knight "a starke cowerde to have the bettir of hym" (I.161.34-35). However, he equally asserts "all good ladyes and jantyllwomen, I owghe them my servyse as a knyght ought to do" (I.161.36; 162.1-2). The inference here is that feminine power stems from sexuality and desire, coupled with potential enchantment, all centering on temptation. Marhalt is proud in his devotion to those "good" ladies, who pose no such threat to knightly integrity, but "feels no compunction about hating those who would keep a man from his knightly duty" (B. Kennedy 73). This conversation underlines the paradoxical nature of the feminine presence in courtly society.

Similarly, Geraldine Heng's description of this chivalric society highlights

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[11] Peter Waldron explores this further in "'Vertuouse Love' and Adulterous Lovers: Coming to Terms with Malory" 54-62.

the juxtaposition between the secondary nature of the female character in a patriarchal culture and their importance in terms of defining the values of the chivalric code itself, as she describes chivalric society as "the image of knightly culture on which that civilisation must assume feminine presence and assistance for its completion, yet also constitute the feminine in essentially subsidiary relation to masculinity" (836). Often, women are employed simply as narrative tools in the text, superficial characters who are acknowledged only in terms of their use in the promotion of male endeavour in the narrative; however, even these apparently unremarkable women contribute to the development of the world of the text in subtle ways and with certain exertions of authority that disprove their apparent unimportance or irrelevance. In medieval society, "[m]en were clearly central, primary, and standard. [...] In that respect, the woman is marginal, but she is certainly not invisible", despite the enforced concept of "a social dependence on a man" which gives rise to "a conceptual dependence on the masculine standard" (Cadden 280).

In essence, by pledging their allegiance to the Round Table, Arthur's knights swear to both protect and respect women, "highlight[ing] the fact of a woman's social definition in the *Morte Darthur* as physically and sexually vulnerable, even as they proclaim her rights" (Batt, "Malory and Rape" 805). Fundamentally, this endorses female rights, while simultaneously emphasising a perceived lack of autonomy that prevents women from doing so themselves, in an action which both promotes and undermines the female in its duality. No matter how one chooses to interpret this, however, it remains that "knightly obedience to and cooperation with the feminine supply effective means for actualisations of feminine will, creating an agency by which women may be active in the world" (Heng 842); whether the Pentecostal Oath is appreciated as a respectful acknowledgement of female worth,

or a masculine gesture which is patronising in its indication of female passivity and weakness, it nevertheless affords women a definitive presence in the text.

Raluca Radulescu's "Genre and Classification" observes that "[t]he initiative taken by [...] women is typically related to their ancillary function in the romances, as they help the hero succeed"; however, "[f]emale agency in achieving these goals should not be underestimated", as women in medieval romance often "manifest independence and yield unexpected levels of power, despite frequent obstacles in their path" (44). Essentially, this study will explore the fundamental failure of masculinity in a narrative premise which promotes the ideal of chivalry as the perfect way of life for those knights who are in themselves the representatives of this masculinity – and the way in which the female contributes to the destruction of both the chivalric ideal and its male champions. This concept in itself incorporates the juxtaposition of the presentation of the feminine in context, as being both an asset and a threat to chivalric society. Fundamentally, the principles of chivalry are largely based on the emphasis of the fragile female, in need of protection and preservation, as outlined in the Pentecostal Oath, yet that which knights strive to protect is often that which can be utilised to their detriment, as women exploit their sexuality for the purposes of physical gratification, the fulfilment of the romantic ideal, or social advancement.

Aside from the actively conspiring woman is the danger posed simply by a feminine presence; even if that woman is, in herself, utterly unassuming towards men, both her physicality and sexuality can act as a stimulus to sexual desire, a threat to the virtuous knight and his spiritual integrity. Women are portrayed as both objectified victims and hostile aggressors in the varying aspects of their influence on Arthurian society and the chivalric knight in Malory's *Morte Darthur* and its contemporaries in medieval literature (such as *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight); nonetheless, no matter how positively or negatively she is portrayed, it remains that the female is a far more autonomous and influential presence in medieval English romance than she may initially appear, contravening the archetype of the submissive, passive woman that is pervasive in in these patriarchal, and often misogynistic, cultures. From women being "mannes joye and al his blis" ("The Nun's Priest's Tale" 3166), to instigators of destruction for whom "al mankynde" was "broght to wrecchednesse" ("The Wife of Bath's Prologue" 716), this study will establish that feminine presence and acknowledge its efficacy, both positive and negative, in an exploration of the medieval literary female in her varying capacities for autonomy and authority in the romance world.

Chapter One

Fifteenth-Century Audiences: Reception and Reaction

An exploration of any text must be approached with a view to the reality of the narrative's time. This chapter will contextualise the social, historical and literary circumstances of Malory's time, gauging the historical expectations of feminine representation and bearing in mind that "[h]istorically, women have been defined in terms of their relationships to men in the domestic sphere and have found their self-definition by fulfilling traditional societal roles" (Charbonneau and Cromwell 100). In order to establish the literary culture in which Malory wrote, and the presence of the female in context, this chapter will explore the social reception and recognition of medieval literature and its value, alongside a contextual overview of the social and economic presence of the female in medieval England, fifteenth-century female audiences, and the production and patronage of texts.

This chapter seeks to establish the manner in which his contemporary society approached and engaged with Malory's work. While this chapter will not focus entirely on *Le Morte Darthur* itself, it will provide the necessary context for the study of the text, and other romances of the time, based on the concept that the social reception of a text is a fundamental aspect in the definition of the narrative, and considering that romance acted as the "principal secular literature of entertainment" (Pearsall, "Middle English romance and its audiences" 42) for "an enormously diverse audience" (McDonald, "A polemical introduction" 1).

Audience reception and reaction help to identify a text's character and place a text within the society in which it is disseminated; in this context, acknowledging the necessity of social response, Carol Meale, in her text *Women and Literature in*

Britain, 1150-1500, states that "the attempt to recover a sense of audience is a crucial one":

> Literary texts neither originate, nor are read, in a vacuum; cultural factors influence their formation [...] The question of audience is, for example, vital to an understanding of the origins of Middle English romance.
>
> (210)

New and ongoing scholarship has demonstrated the manner in which texts are inextricable from their contemporary contexts; a text cannot be divorced from its historical and social context.[12] The contemporary social and political environment shapes the audience a particular text is received by, moulding its perception and interpretation. Malory, writing in the decidedly masculine climate of fifteenth-century England, against the backdrop of the Wars of the Roses, composed a work on political instability in Arthurian society, whereby women were most influential in their subordinate position. Here, I will concentrate on this social climate of "the ix yere of the reygne of kynge Edward the fourth', [which sets] the completion of [Malory's] own part in the work at some time between 4 March 1469 and 3 March 1470" (Kelliher 143), and the way in which his contemporary audiences may have read and received his content and characters, particularly in terms of the feminine presence.

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[12] For an overview of manuscript culture in medieval England, see N.F. Blake, *William Caxton and English Literary Culture;* A.S.G. Edwards and Carol M. Meale, eds., "The Marketing of Printed Books in Late Medieval England"; John B. Friedman, *Northern English Books: Owners and Makers in the Late Middle Ages;* Derek Pearsall, ed., *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study*; Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England*; Louis Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History"; and John J. Thompson, "Collecting Middle English romances and some related book-production activities in the later Middle Ages".
For an exploration of the feminine presence in the literary arena at the time, see Alexandra Barratt, *Women's Writing in Middle English*; Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*; D.H. Green, *Women Readers in the Middle Ages*; and Carol M. Meale, *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500.*
For analysis of the medieval romance in context, see Stephen H.A. Shepherd, *Middle English Romances: Authoritative Texts, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*; Carol M. Meale, "Caxton, de Worde, and the Publication of Romance in Late Medieval England"; Raluca L. Radulescu, *Romance and Its Contexts in Fifteenth-century England: Politics, Piety and Penitence*; and Jocelyn Wogan-Brown, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280 – 1520.*

Social Reception and Recognition

The word audience literally means those who "hear", and so is not limited solely to a readership. Brian Stock's "model of the diffusion of literacy through social performance" is outlined by Ruth Evans in Part Two of *The Idea of the Vernacular* (109), establishing the fact that a defined aural tradition allowed for the dissemination of a narrative through processes which precluded any great need for more than a minimal number of manuscripts.[13] The word "audience" is perhaps a more suitable term than the word "reader" when addressing medieval romance, as, in accordance with Brian Stock's exemplar, minimal literacy was required for the story and the message of a text to be absorbed and passed on throughout a community. Gisela Guddat-Figge, however, observes that "the public interest in Middle English romances, which was once a purely listening audience, is at least partly a fiction in the 14th and 15th centuries – a fiction supported by the poems themselves with their ever recurring addresses to their "listeners" and kept alive when the reading public had begun to increase" (506). Taking into account the various ways through which an audience may have received a text, it remains that the society into which a manuscript was disseminated, incorporating elements such as patronage and illiteracy, proved significant in the context of production, reception, and recognition in fifteenth-century England (Evans 110).

How is this aural culture relevant to the *Morte Darthur*? The reception of a text by its audience is obviously crucial, while being completely subjective, and never more so than during the Middle Ages, when a text was likely to have been performed to a community through differing methods, from individual readings to group experiences. Lisa Perfetti remarks, "[i]t is not always easy to know whether

[13] Further to this, Evans observes that: "whether individuals were literate or not, the imagined societies and actual social systems of late medieval England and Scotland were dependent on reading communities and on public forms of textual transmission at all levels" (*The Idea of the Vernacular* 109).

women were readers, listeners, or spectators of a given medieval text", as "the actual or even intended audience is often difficult to demonstrate" (49). While it is not difficult to research the manner in which the female was portrayed in the *Morte Darthur*; the challenge lies in examining how this portrayal was received by a medieval audience, and how it stood in comparison with other contemporary literary works alongside the social and cultural practices of the time.[14]

P.J.C. Field writes that *Le Morte Darthur* "is very much the product of its time" ("Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" 225); in addition to the element of the subjective interpretation of audience reception introduced by a literary environment incorporating a verbal culture, the language and style in which a manuscript was written is crucial when examining the social reception of a text. This is especially relevant in terms of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, bearing in mind the fact that "[t]he English think of Arthur as their own" (Barron, Introduction to *The Arthur of the English* xiii), yet many of Malory's source materials were French in origin, and most often translated into English in verse, alliterative, or stanzaic form. Cooper observes, "[t]o us, Malory's decision to write in prose looks inevitable; at the time he was writing, in the 1460s, it was by no means such an obvious choice" (Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur* viii-ix). Similarly, Andrew Taylor, in Part One of *The Idea of the Vernacular*, examines the significance of the language that a text was written in in fifteenth-century England, acknowledging that "[w]riting in English was not an inevitable choice" for writers in England in the Middle Ages (3). Writers at the end of the fourteenth century (c. 1370) regarded "the unequal relationship of English and French primarily as a social issue rather than a stylistic one"; they wrote in accordance with the social view of the status of the different

[14] Roberta Davidson's "Prison and Knightly Identity in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*", for example, considers the *Morte Darthur* as a prison text, highlighting the way in which Malory's work is effectively placed to be received by a diverse audience and actively incorporating the female demographic which is the concern of this work.

languages, also incorporating Latin (4). Dialectal diversity in medieval England proved somewhat of an obstacle to authors attempting to write in the vernacular. Taylor quotes William Caxton's comment on this, stating that "certaynly it is harde to playse every man bycause of dyversite and chaunge of langage" (*The Idea of the Vernacular* 12); while not an essential factor to the success of the *Morte Darthur*, this is certainly worth mentioning in terms of potential social accessibility and reception, particularly for women, whose social capacity for education was limited (as will be discussed later).

This is interesting the case of *Le Morte Darthur*; although lent a French title consonant with its sources, the text itself is written in English. It was Caxton who titled Malory's work, "no doubt influenced by his sense of what buyers liked", despite the focus on Arthur's death being "inaccurate" and "at cross purposes with that the author intended", as "in his closing words Malory calls what he had written 'the hole book of Kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table'" (P.J.C. Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" 227). The result may have served to make the work accessible to a wider audience, with the French title lending itself to the language of chivalry, while the primarily English composition of the narrative allows it to be accessed by those who understand English. In keeping with this idea of social accessibility, Hopkins writes, "[r]omance writers do not, as a rule, gender their audience" (121). Caxton's prologue to the Malory's romance, addressing "alle noble prynces, lordes and ladyes, gentylmen or gentlewymmen, that desyre to rede or here redde of the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur" (I.cxlvi.19-22) substantiates the theory that the *Morte Darthur* was intended to reach a large and varied audience (Blake 176). In addition, as noted above in the Introduction to this study, Caxton "places the *Morte* as 'ystorye' rather than stories that are 'fayned and fables' (cxliv),

and claims historical and physical evidence for Arthur" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 234). This historical validation of the narrative presents a prospect for audience identification on both a national and historical basis, further reinforcing literary appeal and value.

The Value of Literature in Medieval England

Malory, then, wrote for a receptive audience, but what position did women hold in this medieval literary culture? The existence of patrons and their demands for texts significantly influenced the production of manuscripts in fifteenth-century England. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, in "'Clerc u lai, muïne u dame'", writes of the way in which women, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, began to attain a more prominent position in the literary world as both readers and writers, albeit somewhat restricted to the productions by noblewomen of works in religious genres, predominantly those of saints' lives: "among the dozen or so Lives which identify patrons and/or dedicatees, there are three dedicated to royal or noblewomen" (65). Although still subservient to men, women in this period had begun to acquire their own personal status and position of power, however precarious, in the male-dominated literary landscape. Hopkins substantiates this with the claim that "women were fond of and inclined to read, own, lend and bequeath romances" (122).[15]

Female engagement with the written word in medieval England is well-documented throughout existing research and is specifically detailed through the testaments and bequests of female book-owners. These wills offer a somewhat limited source of information regarding the contemporary perception of the worth

[15] See John B. Friedman's work on bequeathed books in *Northern English Books: Owners and Makers in the Late Middle Ages* for evidence of female engagement with literary activity.

of the literary manuscript.[16] Bequeathed books were largely those which were deemed valuable in terms of both the physical text and its content, particularly those with strong religious connotations. However, the contents of these wills may not have encompassed every text owned by these women; although "[a] considerable number of wills made by widows survive; those of married women are sparser and generally shorter since [...] the law did not clearly endorse their freedom to make wills and bequests" (Goodman 57).[17]

It addition to the limitations established by the legalities associated with a testament, the elements of gender, marital status, and class in the composition of a will posed their own restrictions in the accurate portrayal of female relationships with the written word in medieval England. Judith Weiss' work on "The Power and the Weakness of Women in Anglo-Norman Romance" analyses the rigorous nature of male-dominated society, whereby a woman was denied any true autonomy and was governed by a father or a husband; ownership of the household, and of a woman's possessions would lie with the husband of a married woman, or the father of an unmarried female.[18] Therefore, wills were generally made by widowed women of independent means, or, as discussed by both Meale in *Women and Literature in Britain,* and Barron, in *English Medieval Romance*, in exceptional cases, a woman's last testament may have been approved by a living husband. This further diminishes the demographic available for literary mapping and interpretation; while fifteenth-century wills and testaments are of great consequence in the investigation into

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[16] As noted by Meale, "the nature of the document, and the solemnity and formality which characterises it, undoubtedly had some influence on the kind of books which were specified by a testator, in terms of both their content and their value"; therefore, wills and testaments can only provide a limited representation of those texts that were deemed worthy of bequeathing for their value or their content ("'...alle the bokes'" 130).

[17] See Ann Kettle's "'My wife shall have it': marriage and property in the wills and testaments of later medieval England", which notes that "[i]t seems that in general the testamentary capacity of the married woman was dependent on the permission and the co-operation of the husband" (94-96).

[18] See Rowena E. Archer, "Administration of Estates", 7-8.

female ownership of texts in the medieval England, they are certainly only partial evidence.

The bequest of books in a testament establishes the value placed on texts simply by the process of association. Meale quotes Lady Margaret la Zouche, who, in 1449, bestowed her "best Primer" on her granddaughter Elizabeth. This service book was but one bequest in a substantial list of cherished valuables, including "a Franssh boke" (calling to mind Malory's own "French book") and items of worth, such as "a girdill of purpull silk harnest with golde" ("'...alle the bokes'" 130). The French book may here be speculatively linked with French romance, in keeping with Malory's own "French book"; however, the genre of this text is unspecified. The very nature of this list, naming items of significant material value in addition to their personal importance to the individual, places the books in the realm of considerable worth; this list is but one such example of the primacy placed on books by a female readership, although these books might not necessarily be specified as romance.

Of the existing wills available for analysis, the majority are comprised of testaments made by "wealthy women, drawn from the upper levels of the gentry and from the nobility" (Meale, "'...alle the bokes'" 132). Examples of these, as considered in detail by Carol Meale, include Beatrice Milreth, who bequeathed individual books to her son and son-in-law, whilst leaving the remainder of her collection to her sister, comprising of "a book of 'merce and gramerce' with illuminated lettering, a roll of Christ's Passion, a copy of the gospel of Nicodemus in French, another book of unspecified contents in Latin and French, a French primer, and a roll of the fifteen Joys of the Virgin" ("'...alle the bokes'" 132). Joan Buckland, in 1462, willed four texts of religious content to her church and a sum of money to her scribe, in London. These are but two examples of a woman of significant means and

capabilities who exhibited literary interests, and who used their financial position to engage in activities of a literary nature.[19]

An additional indication of female ownership of texts can be found in inscriptions on manuscripts and seals, sources of information which once again bear their own complications, as textual inscriptions assume a certain level of literacy in the owner. As previously noted, fifteenth-century literacy incorporated a diverse audience; Ad Putter affirms that "romances were read out aloud by ladies and household servants" (*Spirit* 8). Accordingly, it is entirely possible that women who were not literate owned books, and so the evidence is once again partial.

Dynastic seals were not simply influential with regard to the identification of the owner of a text; the images represented on a seal embodied the priorities and distinguishing characteristics of the family or the individual in question. This is most relevant here in the promotion of the female as a figure of authority. The seal of Margaret, Lady Hungerford and Botreaux, is an impressive illustration of this:

> on her seal a woman kneels, surrounded by flowers and foliage. To her right a lion rampant holds a standard bearing the arms of her late husband, while to her left a griffin displays those of her father. A now indistinct scroll encircling the kneeling figure seems to have borne Margaret's motto, "Myne trouth assured"; and her head is bowed, as she looks down at the pages of a book open upon her lap.
>
> (Meale, "'...alle the bokes'" 128)

This image celebrates literary allusions with regard to the female, denoting a woman actively engaged in the act of reading, in a context formatted to assert the authority of Margaret with each use of the seal. This active female interest in literary

[19] For further discussion of wills, with particular focus on the wills of Lynn, see Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World* 59-61.

matters is further demonstrated in romance itself; for example, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* depicts a lady reading the Siege of Thebes. Here, "a mayden redden hem the geste/of the Sege of Thebes" to Criseyde and her company of ladies, without any men being present (II.83-84).[20] The literate female, historically and textually is an active presence; it is with this in mind that we approach the role of the female in Malory's Arthurian kingdom as it treads toward its collapse.

Valuing Female Readership

As established above, this chapter questions the integrity of the portrayal of the female in medieval romance, particularly in the *Morte Darthur*, in relation to the historical and documentary evidence of women and reading in England in the Middle Ages. This analysis is based on the concept that, as stated in Judith Weiss' "The Power and the Weakness of Women", "assumptions about the role of women in medieval romance have often sprung from a supposition that their general lack of power and influence in medieval society must necessarily be reflected by powerlessness in that society's fiction" (7). Any particular text is not only "socially produced" as a product of its time, but is also "socially productive", in that each text performs its own function in being both written and read, and having its own effect in the interpretation of the individual reader (Montrose 9).

The dynamics of the relationship between an audience and a text require active participation on the part of the reader. Even though the concepts of audience or reader are identical, "[t]he writer clearly works in relationship to an assumed range of literary experience in his audience" (Finlayson 428). The reading material deemed suitable for a female audience, coupled with any significant associations

[20] Quotations from *Troilus and Crisyede* are taken from the Project Gutenberg text, produced by Killings, Brendan and Widger, and are presented in the format of (book.line number).

pertaining to the gender of the author, contributed to the shaping of the literary culture of women in the Middle Ages.

Judith Weiss' assertion, outlined above, calls into question the actuality of female autonomy in a society which produced manifold depictions of the female ("Power and Weakness" 7). The presence of the female in a literary context is varied in its presentation, in both narrative portrayal and historical reality. This incorporates women's depicted function as autonomous readers of a text (using "reading" in the sense of engaging with the text, be it in written or aural form), female interpretation of and response to popular texts, and the recognition of women as authors, patrons and audiences in their own right.[21] In a nod to the acknowledgement of autonomous female literacy in the Middle Ages, Meale (*Women and Literature in Britain* 1) quotes Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*:

> I saye to the agayne and doubte neuer the contrary that yf it were the custome to put the lytel maydens to the scole and sewyngly were made to lerne the scyences as they do to the man chyldren, that they sholde lerne as parfytely, and they sholde be as wel entred in to the subtyltes of al the artes and scyences as they be, and peraduenture there sholde be mo of them, for I haue touched here tofore by howe moche that women haue the body more softe than the man haue, and lesse habyle to do dyuers thynges, by so moche they haue the vnderstandynge more sharpe there as they apply it.[22]

Here, the concept of literary and scholarly equality between the male and female demographic arises in the idea of female potential, and by association, lack of opportunity. With a sharp assertion, "doubte neuer to the contrary", de Pizan

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[21] See also Isobel Armstrong, *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*.

[22] Carol Meale quotes *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405), tr. Bryan Anslay (London: Henry Pepwell, 1521).

demonstrates the lack of prospects of the "lytel maydens" in comparison to the "man chyldren", despite the fact that young woman are said to "haue the vnderstandynge more sharpe there as they apply it". Feminine ability is, doubtless, as "parfyt" as that of the male, yet this notion is undercut by the perceived physical inferiority that often defines the female: while "sharpe" ability and understanding are accredited, nevertheless, women "haue the body more softe than the man haue, and lesse habyle to do dyuers thynges". In essence, the mental faculty of the female is recognised here, but only in respect of her weakened physical capabilities. The principle of this concept may be interpreted once again in terms of the promotion of governing patriarchy; the male, prevalent in physical terms, exploits the relative physical weakness of the female in order to sustain the repressive lack of educational opportunity, thus further propagating masculine rule. Alexandra Barratt argues:

> [a] medieval literary education [...] could actually perpetuate their subordination, as Christine de Pisan discovered. The opening of her *Book of the City of Ladies* neatly captures the dilemma of the literate, educated medieval woman who might want to write as well as read, and demonstrates how education was not in itself enough to empower women but could be a positive disadvantage.
>
> (*Women's Writing in Middle English* 8-9)

This idea of disadvantage takes into account the social reality of women in a patriarchal, and at times misogynistic, culture. Despite their acknowledged intellectual ability, women are forced into subservience as a result of perceived deficiency in terms of physical strength, as such maintaining the superior status of

the male.[23] This conceptualisation prefigures the social perception of women, particularly in economic terms and in relation to their acknowledgement in the literary world; essentially, "medieval women were socialised [and taught] to see themselves as subordinate to all forms of male authority", resulting in them becoming "inevitably resistant" to enforcing any literary authority (Barratt 6).

Meale's introduction to *Women and Literature in Britain* (1) references *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* in relation to fourteenth-century opinion of the literary aspirations of the contemporary woman:

> yong women, maydenes, shulde be putte vnto scole to lerne vertous thinges of the scripture, wherethorughe thei may the beter see and knowe thaire sauuement, and to duelle and for to eschewe al that is euel in manere [...] How be it there be suche men that haue opynion that thei wolde not that her wyues nor her doughtres shulde knowe no thinge of the scripture; as touchinge vnto the holy scripture it is no force, thoughe women medille not nor knowe but litelle therof but forto rede, eueri woman it is the beter that canne rede and haue knowinge of the lawe of God, and forto haue be lerned to haue vertu and science to withstonde the perilles of the sowle, and forto use and excerse the werkys of thaire sauement, for that is thinge aproued and necessarie to alle women.
>
> (117; 118-19)[24]

While this passage marks the importance of the engagement of women with literature, from a young age, the type of material deemed suitable for feminine consumption is somewhat limited. Female engagement with literature is motivated here by the express purpose of education, and the benefits that this bears for men in

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[23] For further exploration of the perspective of the female on education and literacy in medieval England, see Alexandra Barratt 2-4.

[24] Quotations from *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* are taken from the Thomas Wright edition.

society, in addition to the autonomous advantages for women. While the significance of female education is emphasised in this extract, the way in which women are referred to, in relation to the masculine social demographic, indicates the fact that females remain the subservient social grouping (a concept also reflected in Christine de Pizan's observations, noted earlier).

In both the intention to educate women, rather than simply entertain them as readers, as well as the opposing desire to keep them ignorant, this passage reveals a deep male concern about the potential of an empowered woman. In acknowledging the potentially negative consequence of female education, this passage simultaneously advocates female knowledge in terms of its benefits to men: "How be it there be suche men that haue opynion that thei wolde not that her wyues nor her doughtres shulde knowe no thinge of the scripture". In addition, the focus here remains almost exclusively on the essential nature of religious knowledge in the female domain; while it is true that feminine education is defended here, it is solely in terms of religious piety. Women should have the ability to read in order to "be lerned to haue vertu and science to withstonde the perilles of the sowle, and forto use and excerse the werkys of thaire sauement, for that is thinge aproued and necessarie to alle women". Literary understanding is considered appropriate for the female in terms of its reflection on her actions in society and the necessity of virtuous behaviour.[25] While acknowledging the importance of the participation of women in the literary world, the dictation of what is deemed to be suitable reading material is a demonstration of the enduring control of a dominant patriarchal society.

In spite of the context and the reality of the social positioning of women, the fact that this literary observation by de Pizan is penned by a female does indicate

[25] See also Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240-1570* 3-26.

the gradual cultivation of female acceptance in the literary domain. While female literary agency may have been regarded with judgement, this in itself reinforces its presence. From the production of manuscripts to the patronage of authors and printers, the introduction of female participation in the literary world marked the gradual increase of feminine autonomy in medieval society.[26]

Female Audiences in the Fifteenth Century

Women and Literature in Britain sees Meale broach the subject of "women's access to a written culture, and their ability, or lack of it, to use that culture for their own ends, independent of the male authority by which it was sanctioned" (1). A woman's ability to access the written word was variable. Without doubt, "[w]omen were certainly consumers of the products of others' literacy, or there would not be so many books, such as the *Ancrene Wisse* and the associated texts of the Katherine group, specifically directed at women" (Barratt 4); however, social constraints defined acceptable reading for females to be primarily religious works, specifically saints' lives.

While romance literature was not necessarily promoted as apposite reading material for women, it did entertain a large female readership; according to D.H. Green, "it is noticeable how frequently romances occur amongst the books known to have been possessed by women" (124). Very few known works written in the Middle Ages are known to have come from the hand of a woman, however, while those that have are most often portrayals of the lives of saints. Alexandra Barratt acknowledges that "[o]ne apparent reason for the dearth of medieval women's

[26] For further discussion of the female engagement with the literary arena, see Nicholas Watson, "The Politics of Middle English Writing" 331-52.

writing is the restricted access that medieval women had to literacy" (2), in addition to the fact that

> the written text both carried and created "authority" and it was a tacit assumption that "authority", and therefore authorship, were incompatible with femininity. It is probably this attitude – an attitude with which medieval women tacitly collaborated – that is responsible for both the lack of educational opportunities and for the relative paucity of women's texts. (4)

Barratt's work lists the five women who are recognised as having written in Middle English: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Juliana Berners, Dame Eleanor Hull, and Lady Margaret Beaufort (10); however, of these women, Margaret Beaufort and Eleanor Hull were "less explicit" about their authorship, given their elevated social positioning (12).

The idea of authorship thus raises questions in itself, specifically in terms of those texts which were authored by women being more accessible to a female audience; it is possible that female readers were more receptive and amenable to works written by a woman, with a view to to the text's applicability to the details of their own lives. Meale, in *Women and Literature in Britain*, maintains that "it was possible for women to extract meaning relevant to their own lives and experiences from male-authored texts, as well as from those which they wrote themselves" (2). She affirms that there is scope for examination concerning "the freedom and choice open to women to act as their own interpreters of literary authority; to their activities as the writers and consumers of literature; to their status as the subjects of literary representation" (4).[27]

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[27] Cooper, in her introduction to *The Long Fifteenth Century*, notes that "although the gender of the authors of anonymous works must be speculative, it would be irrational to assume that they must always be male". Here, she references Sarah McNamer, "Female Authors, Provincial Setting: The Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern

In "'gode men/Wiues maydnes and alle men': Romance and Its Audiences", Meale points out that "the problems inherent in discussing and defining the audiences for romance are complex", as

> the evidence is scattered and fragmentary, ranging from internal references in literary texts, including the romances themselves, to inscriptions made in surviving manuscripts, and (on rare occasions) citations within probate records and inventories.
>
> (209)

She also refers to the fact that, "the call to women is especially rare in English romances [...] It is not until the advent of printed editions that women are regularly included in addresses to the audience; see [...] Caxtons's preface to Malory [1485], where he invokes an audience of 'alle noble prynces, lordes and ladyes, gentylmen or gentylwomen'" ("'gode men'" 209). This address in Caxton's preface to *Le Morte Darthur*, as previously mentioned, provides the reader with a basic indication that the text was directed at a female audience in addition to the male demographic of society.

Ruth Evans, in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, also asserts the significance of such an address:

> By their very nature, prologues tend to call upon their audiences directly. [...] there is an important sense in which "audiences" do not preexist the texts that are addressed to them but are called into being by them.
>
> (110-11)

Caxton's prologue to *Le Morte Darthur* refers to an extensive audience, with distinct feminine relevance (Blake 176). Evans also observes that "'[a]udiences' are born (and reborn) somewhere between authorial desire, the desires of actual

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Manuscript", "for an especially shrewd discussion of the possibility of female authorship of poems customarily ascribed to men" (9).

historical audiences, and the cultural and linguistic possibilities that shape acts of reading" (111), a statement which bears some significance in relation to Caxton's preface and the corresponding audience (intended or otherwise) of the *Morte Darthur*. While this address is a sweeping one, it remains that the invitation issued in Caxton's prologue is very much inclusive in encompassing an expansive proportion of the general population, with equal emphasis on both men and women. As such, "it is reasonable to conclude that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries an increasing number of lay women could and did read" (Hopkins 122-23), while Malory's *Morte Darthur* was printed and disseminated in full consciousness of this reality.

The Medieval Manuscript: Production and Patronage

In keeping with the concept of reaching an intended audience, the production and popularity of various texts bear testament to their worth.[28] This was the case for the first printers of English books also, where the focus essentially concentrated on existing texts which were relatively certain to sell in lucrative quantities. Caxton typified this impulse, printing texts which were well-recognised and boasting wide appeal, but also advocating new material which he was confident would appeal to his specific readership. That a narrative was deemed worthy of a print run was in itself an indication of its value, asserting a perceived audience demand. Caxton's conviction in the commercial viability of the *Morte Darthur* presupposed its success.[29]

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[28] "[I]n the usual course of trade a book will never be printed until someone thinks that it can be sold" (Edwards and Meale 93).

[29] The details of the text's reception are comprehensively described by Marylyn Jackson Parins in *Malory: The Critical Heritage*.

The concept of printing patronage is especially relevant in the consideration of female activity in the literary arena.[30] Patronage was an essential element of the literary community in the early printing industry. One may assume the prevalence of male patrons in the domain of medieval literature, taking into consideration the societal limitations which constricted the female in terms of autonomous economic administration. Indeed, a number of Caxton's prefaces and dedications are directed wholly and exclusively to male figures, such as the Prince of Wales (then aged six, to whom he dedicated *Jason*), "dyuerce gentilmen" (at whose "requeste" he printed the *Chronicles of England*), Hugh Bryce (at whose "request, desire, coste and dispense" the first edition of *The Mirror of the World* was translated), and Lord Wyllyam Erle of Arondale (referenced in Caxton's prologue to the *Golden Legend*) (Edwards and Meale 96-97).

Nevertheless, female titles emerge quite regularly in records of patronage and other economic activity.[31] Gilbert Fitzbaderon, lord of Monmouth, acted as patron to Hue de Rotelande, yet the Fitzbaderon women, most notably his mother and sister, appear to have been equally involved in terms of donations and legal activities regarding financial and material transactions in both Britain and France. Acting as "witnesses, confirmers and donors", the Fitzbaderon women are conspicuously documented as exercising high levels of activity in the Abbey of St Florent in Saumur, Thorney Abbey, and Monmouth Priory (Weiss, "Power and Weakness" 17).

Established as donors of extravagant gifts and witnesses to a variety of charters, the influence of the Fitzbaderon women is recorded as being rich and

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[30] William B. Todd notes Caroline Clive's commissioning of *Guy of Warwick* in 1821; she "demanded nothing less than Guy's constant presence and, to secure that forever, completed a translation then huddled away, from daughter to daughter, through succeeding generations" (ix).

[31] For a discussion of the presence of the female gentry in recorded letters, see Raluca Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* 15-38.

plentiful throughout a number of generations. While these donations are often recorded as being joint efforts, in union with a husband or father, the fact that the female names were chronicled here indicates a significant level of contribution and recognition. Even after the death of Rohese of Monmouth, her sons continued to contribute to the Abbey of St Thomas, her burial place, in the hope that their offerings would benefit her soul. Gilbert Fitzbaderon's own wife, Bertha, has also been documented as a joint donor, alongside her husband, with a particular reference to a shared literary interest. While their religious donations are detailed as being used to purchase wine for the sacraments, it is suggested that the excess be contributed to the maintenance of the Abbey library and the conservation of the books there (Weiss, "Power and Weakness" 18). This implies an active interest in academic and literary expansion, substantiated by Fitzbaderon's patronage of de Routlande's *Protheselaus*.[32]

Comparably, *Bevis of Hampton*, widely circulated as a medieval romance, is thought to have been patronised by the Albini family, which included a selection of commanding women who were highly influential in their authority. Before her marriage to William II d'Albini, Adeliza was wife of Henry I of England and was active in her royal duties, witnessing charters and legalities with her husband and acting as ruling monarch during any absence the king was required to take. She patronised writers, including Benediet and Phillippe de Thaon, and continued to bequeath both lands and wealth until her death. Adeliza's daughter-in-law, Maud, was equally autonomous, managing the majority of her funds independently of both of her two husbands. In addition to preserving and administrating her own lands and finances, Maud was also in possession of her own exclusive seal, an

[32] For a more in-depth examination of the Fitzbaderon women and their social and economic contributions, see Judith Weiss' "The Power and Weakness of Women in Anglo-Norman Romance".

unambiguous assertion of her individual authority as a female in a position of social and financial power. While absolute autonomy is seldom represented in the life of the medieval female, many joint endeavours demonstrate the dynamics of women in the politics of literature, and their vested interest in contributing to production of manuscripts and the stimulation of literary development.[33]

The Reflection of Medieval Society in Literature

A woman's place in medieval society was essentially dictated by her male relatives, and a suitable husband. Flora Alexander observes, "an upper-class woman's choice of a sexual partner 'was subordinated to questions of land, money, and rank', and it is not surprising that the idea of a woman as an object of exchange between men is reflected the literature of the thirteenth century" and following centuries (28; Cecily Clark 152). In this patriarchal society, women were often objectified as a result of such social constriction. Anne Clark Bartlett adds, "women [...] were not always directly involved in the choice of a marriage partner. Although a prospective bride's consent was required by canon law, marriages often involved intense negotiations among family members, advisers, and associates" (71-72). As evidenced in the romances of *Floris and Blauncheflur, Havelok the Dane,* and *Bevis of Hampton*, for example, marriage was often regarded as a business venture, particularly in the dealings of the upper classes; a marital union's perceived success often rested on its economic advantages and an appropriate elevation of status. Women were expected to have little to no autonomous agency or sexual independence, such as they might in romance texts; this restriction is reflected even in the literary world, where the

[33] For comprehensive exploration, see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Bella Millet, and Carol Meale's essays in *Women and Literature in Britain*.

romance texts were often decried for their frivolous nature and lack of moral sustenance.

In this distinctly patriarchal society, the placement and movement of men and women are palpably divergent in romance narratives. In medieval society, the female occupied certain spaces, as ascribed by social expectation and a sense of propriety; "[t]he outside world is masculine space, where few women venture willingly" (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 53).[34] The male/female divide was not simply a biological or emotional one, but took root in a sense of physicality and assigned spaces: "[m]edieval people divided space by gender [...] Women occupied rooms, houses, quarters in the cities and villages, while men's activities took them farther abroad to streets, highways, fields, cities, oceans, battles and council tables" (Hanawalt and Kobialka x). In essence, the female space was relegated principally to the realm of the domestic, as addressed earlier in relation to female education and expectation. Those women committed to a life of religious devotion occupied a certain space of their own.

While these two distinct groups were the norm, there did exist a capacity for social interaction and contribution beyond their own home, as one may have engaged in trade alongside, or on occasion independently of, a husband. Such women inhabited "the grey area which lay between the domestic and the religious locations" (Herbert McAvoy 4). While it does happen that the women occupy perilous situations as autonomous beings in the world of romance, this generally occurs as a result of the narrative placing the heroine in these circumstances, as opposed to an active desire on the part of the female to seek out adventure: "women who find themselves in a situation analogous to the hero's quest in romance are

[34] For a discussion of the historical significance of feminine space, see Dhira B. Mahoney, "Symbolic Uses of Space in Malory's *Morte Darthur*".

most often victims rather than agents, compelled to leave the safety of their own homes and at other people's mercy" (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 53).

The objectification of women in such terms is conventional in medieval romance, as discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three, below. From explicit material objectification, as in *Floris and Blauncheflur*, to dynastic engineering in *Havelok the Dane*, the use of women as social currency is a recurring trope in the medieval romance world. While these female characters may display autonomous dexterity and wisdom in their social and personal dealings, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, this demonstrates the female capacity for success in relation to the promotion of the male, without allowing for any recognition of autonomous feminine aptitude. Female competence and ingenuity, as demonstrated through the actions of these characters, is generally utilised in the reinforcement of masculine authority.

The female literary enthusiast enjoyed a certain degree of independence in their reading and literary tastes while co-existing in what remained a principally male-dominated society. It is interesting to note that, despite this medieval perception of women as being submissive to their male counterparts, the heroines of a number of romances adopt a number of typically masculine traits, often enabled by the very act of loving a man. By the term "masculine traits", I refer to characteristics such as physical and mental power, emotional strength, autonomous actions of authority, ingenuity, and unabashed displays of passion. Historically, we are aware that women were not viewed as being socially equal to men, yet in the romance world, it appears that a couple in love were often not bound by these social constraints and expectations but were equal in each other's eyes; indeed, the woman has often emerged as the stronger of the pair in these situations, as evidenced by *Bevis'* Josaine, *Havelok*'s Goldeborw, and, to a certain extent, Malory's Guinevere.

Being in a romantic relationship allows the romance heroine to escape from the binding constraints of social expectation and demonstrate the abilities that had previously been prohibited by femininity.

Alexander states that romances "indicate that at this time there was some taste for stories that showed women as resourceful, determined, and committed to the pursuit of emotional satisfaction", while it is a possibility that "the story-tellers were responding to a desire felt by women in their audience, to imagine an autonomy and freedom of action denied them by their actual position in family and society" (37-38). The popularity of such narratives leads us to believe that there was in fact an audience for stories of heroic females who contested the widely-held social perception of the passive, meek, and dutiful woman. These heroines are actively involved in their stories and provide much of the motivation for the narrative dynamic. However, these romances are not entirely revolutionary in their active femininity; the authoritative independence awarded to the heroines generally comes about only as a result of their love for a man. Consonant with medieval social expectation, this autonomous strength of character is derived from the needs of the hero as the women in these romances display the vast scope of their abilities in order to attain or protect the man they love.

In addition to the active heroine is the introduction of a second, yet equally influential female character: the mother figure. As Wogan-Browne notes, medieval women "are often conceptualised and addressed by their marital status (*either* wives and mothers *or* brides of Christ)" ("'Clerc u lai, muïne u dame'" 65); thus, those women without a religious vocation were often defined by their role within the family unit. Jennifer Fellows' "Mothers in Middle English Romance" discusses the historical medieval mother, with an examination of the lack of maternal accountability and autonomy in the way that it was not unusual for a child to be

taken from their mother (in elevated social circles), and administered to by a wet-nurse who would assume responsibility for all aspects of the care of the infant. As one of the essential functions of the female human body in its basic form is to procreate, then nourish and nurture the child, this consignment of the child to an employee rendered the female in question powerless in one of her fundamental roles as woman and mother.

In addition, the birth of a female child was considered to be a slur upon the father's "virility" and so "the practice of betrothing children at very tender ages was [...] common" as parents viewed their daughters as being "useful primarily for the forging of dynastic links between families" (Fellows 43). The entire process of childbirth was considered shameful, a social perception reflected in Josiane's confinement in *Bevis*, reinforcing the reluctance of the male to be present at the birth of his child and the female's perpetuation of this convention.

The matriarch in medieval romance remains an engaging figure, of particular note in texts such as *Octavian*, *Bevis*, and in the *Morte Darthur* itself. Often, this matriarch is noted only in relation to her children and is rarely a dynamic entity in regard to her own persona. This reflects comparably on the fact that many upper-class mothers were maternal figures in title only, as the raising and nurturing of the child was assigned to a wet-nurse. A faithful and dedicated mother, however, is a symbol of constancy, reliability, and unconditional love, and commands admiration. The mother figure, when she is an active entity in a narrative, is a significant force in influencing the destiny of her child, if not her autonomous self.

The physical, intellectual, and emotional placement of women in these texts combine to establish significant implications for female conduct on chivalric society, in comparison with the actual authority and social prominence of women in

fifteenth-century society. This concept will be discussed in detail in the following chapters, encapsulating the fact that although the majority of the active primary roles in the medieval texts are tilted towards male characters, the dynamic of these narratives is hugely influenced and motivated by the consequences of female endeavours, in an intricate subtext that almost indiscernibly exerts a narrative force on masculine society.

Medieval Religious Literature and Women

While the production of manuscripts in medieval Britain encompassed an extensive assortment of varying subject matters which often reflected on the social positioning of women of the time, social propriety reigned in terms of literary suitability for the ostensibly impressionable female. As addressed above in relation to Christine de Pizan and *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, scant attention is paid to the contribution of women to social, economic, or political learning. In a nod to the rights of women, and feminine ability, social enthusiasm is concentrated wholly on religious and spiritual instruction.

Effectively, the conviction stood that, "bokis that speke of loue fables, and of other wordily vanitees [...] of fayned stories and fables, suche as may not cause encrese of science" were "inprofitable vnto the soule" (*The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* 118). Female literary engagement was to be motivated by the sole purpose of education; even within these boundaries this education was aimed at nourishing the soul and cultivating suitable morals that defined appropriate behaviour in female society. Romance material was regarded as inimical to such moral purity, a contrivance by which to squander valuable time.[35] Nicola McDonald

[35] For a discussion of the medieval female audience of devotional literature, see Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* 1-33.

observes, "[r]omance, so its censors insist, perverts the mind; it incites illicit thought, obscene behaviour, and a propensity for violent action" ("A polemical introduction" 3), quoting Juan Luis Vives in his "sweeping prohibition of romance" which "outlines its dangers more precisely: 'they make them [men and women] wylye and craftye, they kindle and styr up couetousnes, inflame angre, and all beastly and filthy desyre'" (3).[36] Rosalind Field, however, argues that "[i]t is entertainment for an audience; [...] a successful romance is one which gives pleasure, whether or not accompanied by information or instruction" ("Romance in England" 152-53). Interestingly, such romance matter often highlights the necessity of decency and integrity, as knights are compelled to exert virtue and nobility, often in the name of love. However, it appears that feminine literary participation was for singularly instructive purposes, not to be misspent in the pursuit of leisurely enjoyment.

Christine de Pizan reinforces this belief in the passage cited earlier; despite an active personal interest in the literary realm, as a female whose contributions assisted in shaping contemporary literary society, her message reinforces the necessity of enriching the feminine mind with religious observations and utilising these in the practice of daily life. It is noteworthy that both de Pizan and the *Book of the Knight of la Tour-Landry* recommend the life of St Catherine to women with literary aspirations, as this particular saint was highly dynamic in her autonomous actions. St Catherine bore the title of "patron saint of philosophers and lawyers, as well as of young, unmarried girls"; she also possessed knowledge, independence and a honed ability for quick-witted argument (Meale, *Women and Literature in Britain* 2). The study of the life of a renowned saint was certainly in keeping with the

[36] McDonald cites Juan Luis Vives from *The office and duetie of an husband made by the excellent philosopher Lodouicus Viues*, trans. T. Paynell (London, 1546).

religious precepts prescribed to young women with an interest in literature, yet this particular saint was a paradigm of the type of self-directed behaviour that was socially prohibited in acceptable fifteenth-century society. Nevertheless, it remained that religious guidance and spiritual fulfilment were considered most suited to the prescribed feminine literary palate.

Remarkably, it was not uncommon for love and romance to be depicted in religious terms, and correspondingly, for religious experiences to be portrayed in terms of romantic love. In her *Book*, many of Margery Kempe's encounters with Christ in her visions are defined by a superceding sense of the sexual, as discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this work. This is a direct allegory for Christ and his desirability to the human soul, yet to describe this in terms of romantic love both imbues the religious concept with an extensive general appeal, and simultaneously associates it with the romances which were frowned upon due to their frivolous and spiritually insubstantial content.[37] It appears that, in the awareness of the inherent human desire for romantic gratification, religious scribes exploit this to initially attract the vulnerable soul, and demonstrate to them the incomparable satisfaction of spiritual fulfilment in terms of that with which they are pleasurably familiar.[38]

The promotion of religious materials and female saints' lives as acceptable reading material for medieval women proves to be particularly interesting in consideration of the fact that these texts were predominantly scripted by a male representative of the church, thus the material could be censored in keeping with

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[37] Flora Alexander discusses the way in which the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* uses "sexual and nuptial imagery as a way of expressing perceptions and ideas about spiritual love" (28). Employing the metaphor of the wooing rituals of romantic love to describe the relationship between Christ and one's soul, the author portrays Christ as an enamoured suitor, first presenting the woman with gifts and jewels, then revealing his handsome face, all in an attempt to attract the attention and devotion of a lady.

[38] This study is focused on the feminine, therefore concentrates on a female literary presence; Richard Rolle, however, would be a relevant comparative example here of this sexual register as established in male terms. See Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*; S.J. Ogilvie-Thompson, ed., *Richard Rolle, Prose and Verse*; Ralph Hanna, ed., *Richard Rolle: Uncollected Prose and Verse with Related Northern Texts*; and Rosamund S. Allen, ed., *Richard Rolle: The English Writings*.

social values as dictated by men. Female saints renounced conventional marriage and consequently, sexual activity, yet their writings of their relationships with God are often more explicit in their adoration than contemporary chronicles of marital love. The passion related in these testimonies is deemed appropriate due to its spiritual context and even so may seem extravagant in its fervour. Such writings allow women to rejoice in the magnitude of their feeling, yet only within the confines of spiritual experience – boundaries which are once again set in position by the patriarchal church. Feminine freedom of expression is acknowledged in their embracing of the spiritual and abdication of conventional female life as defined by marriage, yet this freedom is essentially bound by the regulations as dictated by the church and its male judgement. In her introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Lynn Staley explores the implications of female saints' lives: "[t]hose lives are radical, in the sense that they are designed to challenge the tepidity of contemporary devotion, yet also conventional, since the very devotion that turns the holy person into a fit example contains the effect of that challenge when it is recorded by a male member of the institutional church" (Par. 3).

As mentioned, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, dictated by Margery Kempe herself, further reinforces the correlation between the religious and the sexual. As a female, Margery retained a sense of social security as an established member of the guild of the Holy Trinity, and was thus ideally placed to comment on the workings of her provincial environment and its broader social corollaries. Her father, John Burnham, and husband, John Kempe, were both men of repute, and Margery Kempe's marriage and subsequent rearing of fourteen children gives credence to the image of the female model of social propriety and reliability. However, following a divine visitation, "Margery's disengagement from conventional female roles and duties — and consequently her daring rejection of the values of her fellow

townspersons — is a response to her growing commitment to her spiritual vocation" (Staley, Introduction Par. 1). In a work that can be read as endorsing autonomous feminist ideals in terms of the female renunciation of social convention, the text explores "Margery's efforts to dissociate herself from the acquisitive and restrictive values of what we now recognize as middle class life" (Staley, Introduction Par. 2), although it must be read with the awareness of the potential for "deliberate falsification and lapsed and false memory" that accompany such autobiographical accounts, in addition to "the basic urge to construct the evolution of a distinct personality filtered through the necessarily subjective interpretation of experience" (Goodman 10).

Margery Kempe's account of her life and experiences are distinctly subjective, although none the less relevant for that, as "*The Book* is valuable for its projection – ostensibly – of a woman's reactions and sensibilities" (Goodman 57). While Margery's rebellion against masculine society may be read in terms of feminine triumph over an oppressive patriarchy, her allegiance lies with her spiritual father. Margery's decision to remove herself from society, with its overt patriarchal consciousness, may not necessarily be a protest against the male as such, but a denunciation of the oppressive institutions of society as a whole; her loyalties lay with the divine father, masculine in perception but removed from the parochial precincts set by contemporary society. As such, although she was requested to commit her sacred experiences of "hyr felyngys and hir revelacyons" (I.Prologue.60) to paper by the "worthy and worshepful clerkys" (I.Prologue.57) of a male-governed church, in a positive affirmation of her position of spiritual worth, it remains that even spirituality was bound by those males who directed the workings of the church and its followers: "Than went sche be the byddyng of the Holy Gost to many worshepful clerkys, bothe archebysshopys and bysshoppys, doctowrs of

dyvynyté and bachelers also" (I.Prologue.49-51).[39] The physical act of scribing Margery's tale was executed by a male – a man of Margery's choosing, admittedly, but a male nonetheless:

> Than had the creatur no wryter that wold fulfyllyn hyr desyr ne geve credens to hir felingys unto the tym that a man dwellyng in Dewchlond whech was an Englyschman in hys byrth and sythen weddyd in Dewchland and had ther bothe a wyf and a chyld, havyng good knowlach of this creatur and of hir desyr, meved I trost thorw the Holy Gost, cam into Yngland wyth hys wyfe and hys goodys and dwellyd wyth the forseyd creatur tyl he had wretyn as mech as sche wold tellyn hym for the tym that thei wer togydder. And sythen he deyd.
>
> (I.Prologue.66-72)

Even the repeated references to Margery as "the creatur" in the preface of the book conjure an image of an androgynous figure, neither male nor female, but an isolated entity in her blind devotion to God. Such references dissociate textual content from the social confines of sexual categorisation; as such, sexual ambiguity removes any social associations with either gender, thus concentrating the reader on the significance of the spiritual experience alone.

This conscious awareness of the spiritual is further emphasised by annotations left on the manuscript (British Library, Additional 61823) by subsequent readers. One particular set of annotations, scribed in red ink and believed to have been added in the early sixteenth century, seems to aim to direct the reader's attention almost exclusively to the divine meaning contained within the text. Employing terms such as "ignis divine amoris" to accentuate Margery's

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[39] All quotations from *The Book of Margery Kempe* are taken from Lynn Staley's edition, in the format of (book.chapter.line).

"flawme of fyer" (I.35.2060), this reader annotates the original work in an effort to encapsulate Margery's feelings: "ebrietas sancta" (Chapter 41), "amor impatiens" (Chapter 45), "fire of love" (Chapter 46), "langor amoris" (Chapter 57), and "langyng love" (Chapters 74 and 81). In addition to these phrases, illustrations of the fire of Margery's spiritual love and distinct red hearts are positioned throughout the text at apposite junctures.[40] Such visual indications, coupled with descriptive phrases, focus the reader's awareness on the intensity of Margery's divine passion, thus positioning the reader's comprehension of the text as a whole. This intention may simply be an expression of this reader's appreciation of the religious value of the text, and a subsequent desire to direct the attention of ensuing readers to this divine lesson. However, this concentrated accentuation of the heavenly in the text may also be an attempt to navigate the reader's attention away from dramatic elucidation upon Margery's personal life as she rejects convention and social propriety in her quest for sanctification and spiritual fulfilment, particularly when the reader also undertook to elimination of certain lines in the text. The person who scribed these particular annotations may have objected to the manner in which Margery, as a woman of relatively distinguished social repute, discarded social precepts and feminine decorum in the name of religion.

Evidently, the sacred aspect of Margery's tale is to be advocated, while moderating the element of social insurgence so unbefitting of a female in polite society. As Staley says of the restrictive notations, "[w]hile this can be described as a preference for piety, it also testifies to a distaste for the potential disorderliness dramatized in an account of a woman who abandons conventional roles to become poor and itinerant for the sake of her private vision of Jesus" (Introduction Par. 11). As such, it is quite probable that the annotations to Margery's text were a deliberate

[40] For a more detailed description of these annotations, see Staley's Introduction to *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

endeavour to diminish her demonstrative renunciation of established social convention. The seditious element of Margery's text, rebellious in the context of feminine revolution against conservative patriarchal society, is curtailed in favour of the message of divine piety and religious devotion.

In keeping with this societal principle of the suitability of spiritual works, female patronage was largely concentrated on religious materials in the fifteenth century, in keeping with the concept of books suited to women previously discussed. Lady Margaret Beaufort was an avid patron of the early printing industry, in addition to being an author in her own right, although "too self-effacing to emerge from behind [her] work" due to her prominent social standing (Barratt 11).[41] Having been depicted as being "evangelical" in her religious devotions, Lady Margaret was a compelling authority in religious education in both her own household and in a prominent number of both religious and educational establishments (Edwards and Meale 100). She was also a formidable force in the literary arena, as prayers, service books, saints' lives, other religious propaganda, and even a secular romance, *Blanchardin and Eglantine*, were brought to publication under the recognised seal of Lady Margaret.

Wynkyn de Worde appointed himself as Lady Margaret's printer throughout the years during which she was actively operational in the printing industry, until a number of years after her death. While no official professional relationship was ever formally established between Lady Margaret and de Worde, his partially self-assigned close working relationship with her elevated his eminence as a printer in the competitive professional province. Correspondingly, albeit in a less triumphant venture, aspiring printer Inelbert Haghe associated himself with Lady Margaret

[41] For more on Lady Margaret Beaufort and her authorship, see Barratt's introduction to *Women's Writing in Middle English*, 1-19.

Beaufort in his only extant publication, in the hope that, in correlation, his work would be acclaimed as being noteworthy by religious academics and by Lady Margaret herself.

Lady Margaret Beaufort may or may not have furnished patronised printers with financial awards as extracted from her own personal resources; without considerable substantiation in the form of documented records and certification, this assertion is contentious. It is, however, evident that Lady Margaret wielded a signficant amount of power in the literary arena of Middle England, and was almost a romantic figure in her own right in her contemporary circumstances. She may not have been a leading figure in industry, a position which would solely have been designated to a suitable male individual, but was indisputably an imposing figure of authority within the area in which she excelled. In a commercial business arena dictated principally by dominant male figures, Lady Margaret exercised an unobtrusive credibility and forged an admirable reputation, a subtle yet persuasively influential female force in the male-dominated publishing world of fifteenth-century England.

Conclusions

Literary audiences are born of an amalgamation of authorial intention, aspiration, and the interests of the society by which the text is received, the culture (literary, political and social) that is practiced by this society, and any possible barriers to the successful circulation of the text in its original form, including linguistic and literacy barriers. The reception of a text by its audience is obviously crucial, while being completely subjective, and never more so than during the Middle Ages, when a text was likely to have been disseminated to a community orally as well as in print. This form of dissemination is sure to have changed the emphasis of the message of the

text in some way – but the relevance of this is negligible, since every reading and interpretation of a text is individual and subjective. As evidenced, social precepts may have dictated suitable reading material for medieval women, yet this did not prevent the active involvement of the female in contemporary literary arenas.

This, then, was the climate in which Malory initially wrote the women of the *Morte Darthur*, and it was into this culture that his narrative was disseminated. W.R.J. Barron clarifies the subsidiary nature of the female in the heroic warrior society that pre-dated that of the chivalric society of medieval literature: "[h]eroines were unknown in this man's world, where the only women were shadowy background figures: noble mothers, chaste wives or patiently waiting betrothed" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1). While the concept of women occupying a specific role remained, the acknowledgement and respect offered towards that role became more of an active awareness with the dawning of chivalric thinking, as reflected in Malory's work; "in that code devotion to women was a primary article: protection of the weak was the professional concern of knights errant, only the brave deserved the fair, and the love of a noble woman inspired the perfect practice of chivalry" (*SGGK* 2). Barron goes on to claim that this "perfect practice of chivalry" was at its "most [perfect]" when the woman in question was "unattainable, already married to another" (*SGGK* 2), a theory that comes into play continuously in Arthurian literature, most specifically in terms of Lancelot and Guinevere, but also evidenced in Gawain's relationship, or lack of one, with the Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Bevis' mother's manipulation of both Guy and the German emperor in *Bevis of Hampton*.

Although masculine authority was unequivocal, the female presence in medieval society was not necessarily of as little consequence as it may initially appear; while their influence was relatively inconspicuous, it was certainly assertive

in its actuality, and, as demonstrated, women made very valid contributions to the literary culture of their time. This dynamic is both reflected and rejected in relative ways in popular medieval English literature, as feminine presence and characterisation is constitutive of the romance narrative of Malory's *Morte Darthur* and other romances of its time, allowing for the exploration of women in these texts with the simultaneous consciousness of the texts themselves in the hands of women.

Chapter Two

Women in Romance I: Lovers, Victims, and Enchantresses

Popular medieval English romance is dominated by a male-oriented focus, as summarised by David Salter:

> The massive preponderance [...] of male heroes can be attested simply by turning to any anthology or bibliography of the genre, and listing a selection of the titles that we find there: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Orfeo, Sir Isumbras, Sir Gowther, Amis and Amiloun, King Horn, King Alisaunder, Torrent of Portyngale, Sir Tristrem, Ywain and Gawain, Sir Percyvall of Gales, Sir Degaré*, and so on. [...] Middle English romance is a genre that deals almost exclusively with male concerns, and that puts male experience at the centre of its universe.
>
> ("Born to Thraldom and Penance" 42-43)

Salter goes on to acknowledge that "this is not to say that women do not figure at all in Middle English romance", but "almost always play a secondary or supporting role, and one that is both defined and determined by the central male figure" (43). Women are very much present in these romances, yet this presence is often established in relation to a male hero, where the woman will be defined as mother, sister,[42] or lover, and is often not granted the autonomy of an independent title.[43] However, in the midst of this patriarchal concentration exist "independently-minded female heroines" (Radulescu, "Genre and Classification" 40) who subvert masculine dominance, while discreet power and a definitive influence can also be

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[42] For an overview of sibling relationships in Malory, see Carolyne Larrington's *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, with particular discussion of Arthur and his sister in "Morgan and Arthur" 29-50.

[43] This is particularly interesting in the case of Perceval's sister in the *Morte Darthur*, one of the most autonomous female characters in the text who is, at the outset, defined only in relation to her brother and is not named independently. See Chapter Four of this study for an examination of her presence and influence.

found in the subtleties of those apparently peripheral women who are presented as subsidiary characters. This chapter will focus specifically on the portrayal of women as lovers, victims, and enchantresses in medieval romance, and the implications of these traditions for the female figure in Malory.[44]

This chapter examines texts that preceded Malory's *Morte Darthur* in an exploration of the presentation of the female figure in medieval popular romance, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* (which, despite being a non-romance text, provides a particular point of interest for the female voice in medieval literature). This chapter places particular focus on the representation of the female in *Bevis of Hampton*, *Havelok*, and *Guy of Warwick*, due to their recognised popularity and the dual resonance of these texts both with their audience and Malory's writing.

Nicola McDonald writes, "[m]anuscript evidence – unmatched, in the sheer number of surviving texts, by any other secular genre – attests to the [romance] genre's capacity to generate desire for its distinctive form of narrative and with it the pleasure of gratification: romances written in the thirteenth century continue to be copied into the fifteenth century" ("A polemical introduction" 11). This is particularly relevant to the texts of *Bevis* and *Guy* in the context of this study; first composed in thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman, they enjoyed popularity from this point, through to the sixteenth century, and so form a relevant point of comparison to Malory's *Morte Darthur* by virtue of the thematic and contextual represententation of the feminine.

That these texts were well-known by medieval society is evident in their referencing in other, later texts; Spenser's Redcrosse echoes Bevis' battle with a

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[44] See also Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees, eds. *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, for an overview of the female tradition in Middle English romance.

dragon, while Guyon of Book II of *The Faerie Queene* is reminiscent of Guy in title. Even Shakespeare makes reference to these romance texts, validating their popularity and the familiarity with which they were viewed by readers throughout the Middle Ages and beyond (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 31).[45] The popularity of these texts in Medieval England as such is part of the literary context for reading Malory's romance. The appeal of these texts is apparent in the proliferation of manuscripts alone, and this establishes a comprehensive indication of the type of material enjoyed by audiences contemporary with Malory's time, and the expectations with which they would have approached his *Morte Darthur*.

Raluca Radulescu observes, "[a]n expectation shared by medieval and modern audiences alike is that, broadly speaking, medieval romance deals with male aristocratic heroes who engage in some extraordinary exploits, usually in the service of ladies" ("Genre and Classification" 39). Women are presented in various forms in these texts, from the admirable, to the wicked, to the "disempowered heroine" ("Genre and Classification" 39); as in the *Morte Darthur*, women are not solely utilised as a tool by which to reinforce the propulsion of the narrative, but are often active characters in their own right. The narrative of *Bevis*, for example, asserts the potential destructive power of the female, with the hero declaring "Wikked beth fele wimmen to fonde!" (line 548)[46]; this text provides examples of both the "wikked" woman in Bevis' mother, and her antithesis, Josiane, who establishes all that is to be celebrated about the feminine. This disparity is echoed in

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[45] Andrew King also notes the relevance of these works, acknowledging that "*Bevis of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick* (both *c.* 1300) were two of the most influential of Middle English romances, adapted and imitated in later romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; indeed, their popularity remained strong until well into the seventeenth century" (*The Faerie Queene and Middle English Romance* 31); similarly, the three extant manuscripts in which *King Horn* survives "suggest a complexity of attraction" in the accompanying content of each (Drake, Salisbury, and Herzman, Introduction, Par. 9). Myra Seaman writes of *Bevis*: "This narrative, dating from before 1330, enjoyed enormous popularity during the Middle Ages and remained widely known for centuries afterward [...] Medieval English audiences' appreciation of *Bevis* is evidenced by six remaining manuscript copies of the text, an unusually high number for a romance; only seven other English romances produced before 1380 appear in five or more surviving medieval manuscripts" (49-75).

[46] All quotes and translations from *Bevis of Hampton* are quoted from the Drake, Salisbury, and Herzman text, *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston.*

the dichotomy between *Octavian*'s empress, "an unambiguous force for good", and her "irredeemably evil" mother-in-law (Salter 49).

While there is no evidence to suggest that Malory drew directly from these texts, based on their established popularity it is reasonable to assume that he would have had an awareness of them. These romance texts also present a modern reader with a contextual awareness of the time in which they were produced. In keeping with the idea of an intended audience addressed in the previous chapter, the opening of the Middle English *Havelok*, like Caxton's preface to Malory's *Morte Darthur*, addresses the forthcoming tale to a varied audience: "Herknet to me, gode men –/Wiues, maydnes, and alle men –" (lines 1-2)[47]. Directing the address all men, wives, maidens, and anybody who cares to stay and listen to the tale, the introduction to *Havelok* embraces as wide an audience as Caxton's prologue to the *Morte Darthur*[48], once more reinforcing the sense of the popularity of these tales and their assimilation into the literary culture of Medieval England.[49]

The axioms by which King Athelwold reigns in the story of *Havelok* are also comparable with Arthur's rule in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, acknowledging a feminine presence and the precepts of nobility by which the Knights of the Round Table lived in accordance with the Pentecostal Oath. Athelwold similarly refuses to tolerate dishonourable behaviour in his court:

And wo-so dide maydne shame

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[47] Quotes and translations from *Havelok* are taken from the Drake, Salisbury, and Herzman edition.

[48] The concept of intended audience has been discussed in Chapter One of this work; Carol Meale's essay "'gode men/ Wiues maydnes and alle men': Romance and Its Audiences" explores the concept directly, incorporating the *Havelok* address in its title.

[49] In keeping with Malory's use of his French sources, the *Havelok* tale also has potential roots in French source material, allowing for further comparisons between the handling of themes and characters. Shepherd observes: "Perhaps the best evidence about the background of *Havelok* is available in two French texts [...] Neither text can conclusively be shown to be a direct source for *Havelok*; then again, it is not impossible that, armed with a formidable imagination, the *Havelok* poet relied upon little more than the story matter represented by these two texts. In their case, a comparison of the French material with the ME text gives an impression of the kinds of ideas and motifs which the *Havelok* poet could have adapted from pre-existing material" (*Middle English Romances: Authoritative Texts, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism* 316).

Of hire bodi or brouthe in blame *brought*

(Bute it were bi hire wille) *Unless*

He made him sone of limes spille. *lose limbs*

(83-86)

Just as the Pentecostal Oath rules that the chivalric knight must defend the virtue of all women, so too does King Athelwold reinforce the necessity of chivalric duty; there was no knight "so strong" or powerful that he would not be punished for bringing "shame" to a "maydne" by violating "hire bodi" or her reputation (unless, of course, it was "bi hire wille" and with her consent). While Athelwold's doctrines are more brutally phrased than Arthur's Pentecostal Oath, the philosophies of both remain complementary, in their promotion of the sacrifice of masculine gratification for the protection of the vulnerable female. This is but one example of how such reoccurring motifs establish audience expectation, providing a framework by which a modern reader can formulate an impression of the literary tastes of a medieval audience, and the expectations with which they would have approached Malory's *Morte Darthur*.[50]

With "[a]l hire love"[51]: Women in Love

The presentation of the feminine as an aspect of a patriarchal medieval society is often a negative one; women, however, are not denounced as a wholly destructive or entirely subsidiary influence in medieval romance. The most prominent of these women, conspicuous by their admirable portrayal, are those who find themselves worthy of the hero's attentions – namely, the love interest. Helen Cooper writes of

[50] For analysis of the historicity of *Havelok*, see Shepherd 315-16; Smithers' Introduction to *Havelok* i-xciv; and Drake, Salisbury, and Herzman's Introduction to Havelok in *Four Romances of England*: *King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* Par. 1-6; 31-32.

[51] *Bevis of Hampton* (764).

Malory's *Morte Darthur*: "The women who are presented most closely and sympathetically are the ones who love, whether that love is reciprocated or not" (Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur* xviii); this is equally relevant to the presentation of the lover in texts contemporary with Malory. These women are widely celebrated for their beauty and virtue, particularly when this love is reciprocated, yet they may also suffer the heartache of unrequited affections, whereby the heroine is often left to pine without cause for hope of redemption. Generally, the portrayal of the lover is one of the most admirable feminine presentations in medieval romance, providing relevant scope for the study of the positive female presence.

Bevis' Josiane is one such woman, celebrated by her husband and providing a necessary foil to Bevis' mother's "wicked woman". Her introduction is lyrical in its imagery as Josiane is depicted as a model of perfect beauty, in the familiar romance motif:

Josiane that maide het,	*was named*
Hire schon wer gold upon hire fet;	*shoes; feet*
So faire she was and bright of mod,	*mind*
Ase snow upon the rede blod -	
Wharto scholde that may discrive?	*To what; compared*
Men wiste no fairer thing alive,	*knew*
So hende ne wel itaught	*gentle nor well brought up*

(519-25)

Although somewhat typical of the medieval appraisal of beauty, Josiane's description epitomises the best of femininity; her beauty, manner and temperament are indicative of the ideal female. Her countenance is unsullied, unlike Bevis' mother, whose complexion is marred by her malevolent nature.

Josiane's only fault is that "Boute of Cristene lawe she kouthe naught" (526), an accident of birth rather than any personal deficiency (reflective of the familiar topos of the virtuous heathen in medieval literature). While this is noted as her sole failing, it is a significant one, especially when the pagan Josiane is viewed in comparison with Bevis' Christian mother. In the course of the text, we see the pagan woman in need of deliverance from her social circumstances, while the Christian woman, with all the connotations of her religious positioning, is presented as being a source of evil that needs to be eliminated in order to allow for a happy ending. Josiane's willingness to convert to Christianity for the sake of her love offers narrative redemption here; the heroine takes the autonomous decision to align herself with her love's beliefs and forfeit her previous persona. Josiane is not simply submitting to Bevis' wishes; her original leanings are not a dynamic decision, but an accident of birth, and so her conversion establishes her as the agent of her own happiness as she comprehensively fulfils the role of romantic heroine, devoting herself to Bevis with "[a]l hire love" (764). While this love is significant for its purity, it also serves to promote Bevis as a powerful figure. Josiane's attentions establish Bevis further in the regard of the reader; just as Malory rewards Gareth's chivalric deeds with marriage to Lyonesse, as discussed in Chapter Five, below, so too does Bevis claim a wife worthy of his heroic stature.

The description provided of *Guy of Warwick*'s "swete Felice" (line 58)[52] is similarly complimentary in its composition, while her objective desirability echoes Josiane's. In reply to Guy's appeal, Felice asserts, "Icham desired day and night/Of erl, baroun and mani a knight" (64-65). Her assurance that "Other lord nil Y non take/For al this warld to winne" (71-72) incites a "joie" (80) in Guy, who "no was never therbiforn/Half so blithe sethe he was born" (82-83). Comparable with the

[52] All quotations and translations from *Guy of Warwick* are from Alison Wiggins' edition.

respect *Bevis*' Josiane engenders from the king, Felice's father is analogously affectionate toward his daughter in both words and actions as he muses on how his "Leve douhter hende and fre" (94), "has ben desired of mani man" (91). In short, Felice is presented throughout the text as the paradigm of feminine integrity: "In this warld was non better wiman" (3338).[53]

Women in medieval literature, in this sense, exert influence through their desirability. Josiane's proposal to Bevis reinforces her status as an active and aware woman with a definitive sense of autonomy, comparable with Malory's Guinevere. Stereotypical gender identity is subverted as Josiane assertively declares her love. This also mirrors the numerous female attempts at the seduction of Lancelot in the *Morte Darthur*, although Josiane's overtures are justified in their sincerity and reciprocity. However, her appeal does echo a certain sense of desperation as she laments the purposelessness and futility of life without the reciprocation of her love by Bevis: "Boute thow me love, icham dede" (1096). With an intensity of emotion that resonates with Malory's Elaine of Ascolat's unrequited love for Lancelot (discussed in detail in Chapter Four), Josiane's longing is explicit:

Ichavede thee lever to me lemman,	*I would rather; my lover*
Thee bodi in thee scherte naked,	
Than al the gold, that Crist hath maked,	
And thow wost with me do thee wille!	

(1106-09)

Bevis' reaction parallels Josiane's appeal in its intensity; the manner in which he petitions his god serves to draw attention to the religious disparities that have kept

[53] For further analysis, see Martha W. Driver, "'In her owne persone semly and bewteus': Representing Women in Stories of *Guy of Warwick*" 133-53.

the pair apart thus far, and emphasises his subsequent refusal. Josiane's loss seems insurmountable; "hire wo with alle" (1139), she "thoughte, the tour wolde on hir falle" (1140). Despair acting as a catalyst for rage, she is active in her wrath, antagonising Bevis, branding him a "cherl" (1117).

The female character is here mercurial in heightened emotion; she oscillates wildly from devotion, to anger, to despair. In the position of the actively wooing woman, each fluctuation of sentiment is exhibited without censorship, echoing the conventional imagery of the instability of feminised fate in Lady Fortune.[54] Intensely emotive, Josiane continues to address Bevis as her "lemman" (1181), while he is more restrained in his reply, instead calling her "Damesele" (1185). Only when Josiane offers to "false godes al forsake/And Cristendom for thee love take" (1195-96), does Bevis agree to their marriage, and both are united in joy.

This incident ultimately serves to emphasise the equality of the lovers in their relationship. Josiane initially dispenses with the etiquette of social boundaries in her proclamation of love[55], yet this love is sincere, as demonstrated by the fact that Josiane eventually renounces her religious beliefs for Bevis. While Josiane's wretchedness is illustrated in great detail, Bevis appears to be equally as affected by the exchange, though less demonstrative. While he does seem to be in control of the situation, his elation at their eventual union is equal to hers, as "he was negh after schent" (1200). Josiane's supplication echoes Malory's Hellawes and Elaine of Ascolat in their respective appeals to Lancelot; here, however, love is reciprocated and the emotion of the scene demonstrates the mutuality of Bevis and Josiane's relationship, in contrast to Malory's women, who both die of heartbreak.

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[54] Judith Weiss' "The Wooing Woman in Anglo-Norman Romance" directly addresses this concept of the woman in active pursuit of love, while Joan Cadden's *Meanings of Sex Difference* explores the idea of female hysteria.

[55] See Gerald Morgan's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness* for clarification of the proscribed behaviour of the female in courtly society.

Felice's romantic sorrows are equitable with Josiane's; Guy's departure, as he sets forth on a journey to right the wrongs of his misspent youth, elicits a deep woe in his forsaken wife, "bileft at hom in care/With sorwe and wo and sikeing sare" (400-01). Her desolation is such that she "thought have slain hirself for sorn/Withouten more delay" (410-11); she contemplates taking her own life in order to gain relief, utilising the cause of her despair, in the form of her "lordes swerd" (409), as the agent of the destruction of that same despair, and with it, her life.

Again, Elaine of Ascolat's fate is comparable, as unrequited love precedes her lonely death. However, Felice's love for Guy is but temporarily unrequited, and her sole motivation for survival is provided by her unborn child as maternal instinct and the promise pledged to her husband prevent suicide as a means of escape. While this maternal sensitivity preserves her life and that of her child, her angst is palpable and is demonstrated similarly to Felice's literary contemporaries; "For sorwe that sche hadde that stounde/Aswon sche fel adoun to grounde,/O fot no might sche stonde" (430-32). In keeping with the commonplace trope of the feminine faint in medieval romance, Felice's woe culminates in a swoon. Josiane, Felice, and Malory's Elaine all feel the agony of love lost, and all are equally expressive in their persecution.

Until Death Do Us Part: Female Autonomy in Marriage

Female participation in amorous relationships is seldom voluntary; Josiane's eventual submission and enthusiasm in marriage comes about as a result of both her father's wishes, and Bevis' absence, despite the fact that "Hit was nought be hire wille" (1458). This is very much in keeping with Anne Clark Barlett's observation that "[m]edieval women were generally regarded as marriage objects rather than marrying agents" (71-72). Josiane's acceptance of King Yvor's proposal is

determined by male will; Yvor requests Josiane's hand, which is in turn "grauntede" (1455) by her father, and "Hire fader wil she moste do" (1462).

While both Josiane and Felice are active in the shaping and dynamics of their marital relationships, male supremacy reigns and the primary control rests with men, as Guy leaves, despite his wife's pleas to the contrary, and Josiane must struggle against male dictates. Male devotion and admiration are demonstrated in all of their intensity at various points throughout both of these narratives, yet both heroines are ultimately subjected to the caprices of male desire and dominant authority, just as Malory's Guinevere, in her exalted royal position, is conclusively subdued by masculine supremacy, while Elaine of Ascolat finds peace only in death.

As established by the Pentecostal Oath in *Le Morte Darthur*, and discussed in detail in Chapter Three of this study, the significance of virginity is recognised in relation to both men and women in medieval romance; while acknowledging the necessity of purity of spirit, the celebration of sexual union in the context of marital love is commended in *Havelok*. Cooper observes, "[s]exuality was accepted as part of God's plan for his creation" (Introduction to *Christianity and Romance* xx), and, in direct contrast to Malory's reluctance to explicitly acknowledge the sexual relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere (addressed in Chapter Five), *Havelok* celebrates the physical union of the newlywed couple in terms of their conjoined beauty and its effect on not only the couple themselves, but any who lay eyes on them. As Havelok and his "brithe bride" (2132) lie abed, the narrator reflects:

So faire two weren nevere maked	
In a bed to lyen samen;	*together*
The knithes thouth of hem god gamen,	*sport*
Hem for-to shewe and loken to.	*observe*

(2133-36)

This is an unashamed celebration of the splendour of the couple as their beauty is revered, privately and publically.

In keeping with this sense of equity in love and life, equality in death marks the magnitude of Bevis and Josiane's love. They were separated by forces beyond their control, on numerous occasions, throughout their lifetime; in death, they remain inseparable. Bevis sees that his wife has left this world and follows her. Situated together in "his chaumber" (4600), the lovers lie together in an eternal embrace:

> er her body began to colde,
> In is armes he gan hire folde,
> And thar hii deide bothe ifere.
>
> (4603-05)

The deaths of Bevis and Josiane denote the end of their tale in an emblematic posture of reciprocal love and devotion. The deaths of Malory's lovers in the *Morte Darthur* are otherwise; Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere all die alone. Despite the tempestuous nature of their relationship, Guinevere is laid to rest in same position as she officially occupied in life, at the arm of her husband. She is eternally separated from the man she loved and embraced physically in life, while Bevis and Josiane endured enforced separation in life yet died encircled in each other's arms, together on their eternal journey. Bevis and Josiane reap the rewards of faithful earthly love; both Arthur and Guinevere die independently of one another, no longer bound together by love, yet Guinevere joins her husband in his tomb for the sake of social propriety.

The manner in which both rulers go to their death in *Bevis* and the *Morte Darthur* is symbolic of the conclusions of the narratives; *Bevis* ends on a positive note, as good prevails and the country is restored to glory and peace. Bevis and

Josiane are serene in synchronous death. However, the tragedy of the isolated deaths of both Arthur and Guinevere reflects the generic instability of Malory's text and denotes the unstable world they leave behind. Arthur is killed by a son born of incest; Guinevere prays for a peaceful release. They are buried together in a sense of enforced decorum that does not signify a mutual affection, or any consolation. Death brings with it a finality which is accompanied by a sincere sense of decorum in *Bevis*, and a disconcerting acknowledgement of social expectation in the midst of chaos in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.[56]

The stability of love, and the feminine positioning within the terms of this love, is equally contrasted in *Havelok* and the *Morte Darthur*. *Havelok*'s ending celebrates romantic love between husband and wife in its purest terms; they ruled joyfully together for sixty years in marital harmony, as the whole world spoke in admiration of their love for one another, with quintessential sentimentality:

So mikel love was hem bitwene	
That al the werd spak of hem two;	*world*
He lovede hire, and she him so	
That neyther owe mithe be	*anywhere*
Fro other, ne no joie se	*away from*
But yf he were togidere bothe.	*Unless; they*

(2967-72)

Cooper observes, "[v]ery often, the last incident in a courtship romance is not the marriage itself: there will also be a mention of how many children the lovers have – in *Havelok*, Havelok and [Goldeborw], heirs to Denmark and England respectively, have fifteen" (Introduction to *Christianity and Romance* xx). It is said that their

[56] The concept of death is explored further in Chapter Four of this study; also, see Felicity Riddy, "'Abject odious': Feminine and Masculine in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*" and Jane Gilbert, *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature*.

sons were "kinges alle" (2980), and of equal merit, their "douhtres alle quenes" (2982); the fulfilment of the tale is enhanced by the sense of shared happiness throughout, as Havelok and Goldeborw are equally joyous in their joint reign in the conventional gestures of romance. This once again contrasts with the ending of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which brings only decay; all that remain are the tombs of those who loved so passionately and misguidedly. Havelok and Goldeborw leave a legacy of joy and love; Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot die in the remains of a tangled network of deceit and misery.[57]

A very different fifteenth-century work, *The Book of Margery Kempe* examines the physicality of love and marriage in differing terms, as Margery's spiritual connection with Christ is configured as a marriage. Margery labels herself Christ's "creatur", freeing herself of all female association in order to embrace the purity of the spiritual, yet in Christ's address to her, as she recounts it, Margery is a decidedly feminine figure. Christ states:

> Therfore most I nedys be homly wyth the and lyn in thi bed wyth the. Dowtyr, thow desyrest gretly to se me, and thu mayst boldly, whan thu art in thi bed, take me to the as for thi weddyd husbond, as thy derworthy derlyng, and as for thy swete sone, for I wyl be lovyd as a sone schuld be lovyd wyth the modyr and wil that thu love me, dowtyr, as a good wife owyth to love hir husbonde. And therfor thu mayst boldly take me in the armys of thi sowle and kyssen my mowth, myn hed, and my fete as swetly as thow wylt.
>
> (I.36.2102-08)

The terms of this statement are overtly carnal, with a desire for intimacy as it exists in the sexual terms of a marital relationship. For the reader, this is a spiritual

[57] For a discussion of death in medieval romance and Arthurian society, see Karen Cherewatuk and K.S. Whetter, eds., *The Arthurian Way of Death: The English Tradition*.

metaphor; Christ speaks in terms of the act which demands the greatest intimacy possible in human terms. The sexual connection is intended to accentuate the profundity of the attachment between Margery and Christ; she has voluntarily and eagerly sacrificed a physical relationship with her husband, yet she embraces the projected union with her God, thus removing herself one step further from the bonds of her earthly life.

Margery's womanhood is an integral element of this marriage in metaphor. Throughout the text, Jesus refers to Margery as his wife, mother, daughter, and sister, while he assumes the parallel roles of husband, father, son, and brother. Christ's purpose is to fulfil Margery, completely and absolutely, in keeping with the ideals of fulfilment in romance addressed above. The sense of the spiritual metaphor is implicit here, yet Margery's relationship with Christ is celebrates all aspects of her womanhood. It is impossible for her to be both mother and child, wife and sister to one man, yet Christ projects her fulfilment of every role a woman can occupy. In this way, her every feminine need is satisfied, and Margery can achieve the ultimate spiritual gratification. Margery, in this role, is a far cry from the role of the sexless "creature" she has taken upon herself. Instead, she is a celebration of the feminine, as she experiences divine joy through the essence of her womanhood.[58]

Margery Kempe views her earthly sexuality as interfering with that which is truly important, preventing spiritual fulfilment; it is with due irony that the same language, perfected, denotes her spiritual union. Similarly, women and the lures of courtly love serve as a distraction to the noble knight and a potential threat to his virtue. Geraldine Barnes asserts, "[t]he essentially anti-social force of 'courtly' love, which competes with the feudal obligations of chivalry for the hero's allegiance in

[58] This is explored in more detail in Chapter Three, below; for an overview of the feminine presence and its influence in the text, see also Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, and Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*.

chivalric romance, has no place in the ideal world of Middle English romance" (16). As such, women are often subjected to a subsidiary role, or indeed held accountable for the failure of chivalric virtue, as is notably the case in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[59]

Ultimately, the female is a distinctly influential force in Medieval English society, both real and imagined, despite her subordinate role in a patriarchal world, and never more so than in the role of the lover. As such, Margery, Josiane, Felice, and Goldeborw each represent models of wifely conjugal conduct, whether in the case of amatory or divine love, as presented through the metaphor of the physical. This places the female as a more autonomous agent in marital conjugal relationships, with a sense of reciprocal obligation in the idea of marriage debt and this formalisation of desirous instinct and physical gratification. Having established the idea of female autonomy in amatory relationships here with a view to agency and equality, the concept of feminine power and its exertion though physical sexuality, particularly with regard to the manipulation of men and the significance of virginity to both sexes, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three, in a reading of the exploitation of female sexuality by women and its effects on the male. Here, the physical expression of romantic love is presented as a considerable aspect of the feminine presence in the medieval literary arena, creating a sense of female agency in the language and physicality of love and desire.

The Manipulative Female

Inseparable from the presentation of the woman as lover in medieval English romance is the contrary female who employs manipulation and magic in order to achieve her ends, commonly presented in the form of the enchantress or the

[59] A detailed discussion of female power in the *Gawain* text follows in Chapter Three of this work.

temptress. In both the real and imagined worlds of medieval England, that which is unfamiliar is often viewed with suspicion; in a society dominated by men, the autonomous woman is to be regarded with caution. The economic standing of a number of various social categories of women in medieval English society, such as single women or those who had been widowed, became increasingly pronounced; this relatively protracted rise in female autonomy was accompanied by significant trepidation on behalf of a culture long accustomed to prevalent male domination, as established in Chapter One of this study.[60]

This apprehension may well have been channelled into the literary portrayal of the unmarried female, commonly regarded as being a social hazard, in the guise of a wicked enchantress or a devious shrew, threatening the welfare and security of the narrative world and the male protagonists in it. While the duplicitous female character is evidently an amalgamation of various literary and cultural commonplaces, the inherent distrust of the economically independent single woman bore considerable impact upon the portrayal of the ill-intentioned female. Malory's persistent reference to the devious nature of women, in varying manifestations, warrants examination in this respect. His consternation regarding the power of magic, particularly in the hands of the female, is evident through the expression of characters and in his portrayal of women bearing destructive tendencies in the face of social or romantic rejection.[61]

The female in medieval romance is often resourceful in protecting herself from circumstances beyond her physical control. Here, the use of magic and bewitchments may be employed in the demonstration of feminine capabilities, sometimes presenting a glimpse of unfathomable power, and at other times, falling

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[60] See also Judith Weiss, "The Power and the Weakness of Women in Anglo-Norman Romance", Alexandra Barratt, *Women's Writing in Middle English*, and Georges Duby, "Women and Power".
[61] This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Four of this study.

short and acting as the cause of tension and failure in a text. The magic ring in fourteenth-century *Ywain and Gawain* provides one such storyline which demonstrates the latter. Ywain's lady presents him with a ring that possesses the power to safeguard him against all harm and ill-health, as he leaves on his year-long quest to validate his chivalric identity.[62] Ywain departs with the stipulation that he must return within the appointed time-frame, or risk losing his beloved forever. The gift of the ring is as much a consolation to his lady as it is a safeguard for Ywain; it will protect him against the hazards which may prevent him from making a timely return, as this arbitrary taboo is reinforced by an arbitrary placement of circumstance to ensure its fulfilment.

In her presentation of the ring to Ywain, the lady emphasises the significance of this "ful dere thing" (line 1528):

> I sal tel to yow onane
> The vertu that es in the stane:
> It es na preson thow sal halde, *hold*
> Al if yowre fase be manyfalde; *foes; manifold*
> With sekenes sal ye noght be tane, *taken*
> Ne of yowre blode ye sal lese nane;
> In batel tane sal ye noght be, *taken*
> Whils ye it have and thinkes on me;
> And ay, whils ye er trew of love,
> Over al sal ye be obove.
>
> (1531-40)[63]

[62] Again, the French source of *Ywain and Gawain* allows for comparisons with Malory's handling of his French materials. The Middle English *Ywain* is "an abbreviated fourteenth-century translation of the Old French *Yvain*, written c. 1177 by Chrétien de Troyes" (Shepherd, *Middle English Romances: Authoritative Texts, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism* 329).

[63] All quotations and translations from *Ywain and Gawain* are taken from Mary Flowers Braswell's edition.

In accordance with this, Ywain's preservation is based on two separate elements – the ring itself, and his own love for his lady, which will keep her at the forefront of his mind. The repetition of "whils ye it have and thinkes on me" augments this; the protection of the ring is only as guaranteed as long as Ywain keeps his beloved in his mind. Essentially, therefore, it is Ywain who assures his own invulnerability, and it is only Ywain who can foil his own successful and timely return. With the concept of the idealised chivalric knight in mind, Ywain's "courtly activities raise questions about the nature of *trowthe* and about the conflict between married love and personal honor" (Flowers Braswell 79). Ywain's failure is his alone, and it is because of this that madness overtakes him.

It is up to the hero, as an autonomous individual, to struggle through this despair and return both to his wife and to himself. His quest is as much a journey of spiritual discovery as it is a physical voyage, as "[i]n humility Ywain's education is complete" (Flowers Braswell 79). Despite the implication of magical properties, the ring itself does not appear to hold any obvious power; it is Ywain's failings as a chivalric knight which prompt his loss, and his capacity for learning and strength that allow his resurrection. Cooper summarises: "[t]he magic of the ring has served no plot function in itself, and we have never seen it in action; but its very existence serves to highlight something in Ywain, to tell us about the nature of his failure and the nature of knighthood" (*The English Romance in Time* 147). Ywain's wife actively attempts to influence her husband's fate in the conception of the enchanted ring; however, her well-intentioned plan proves fruitless in the face of male autonomy and Ywain's personal failings. The ring may indeed by magic, but does not show any real capacity for supernatural powers beyond its practical purpose as forget-me-not. Instead, it highlights the desire for female control as Ywain's wife uses it in an attempt to manipulate her husband's career, and the progress of the narrative.

The utilisation of the ring motif in *Bevis of Hampton* is also a clever ploy put in place by a woman.[64] In this case, Josiane is faced with submitting herself and her virginity to King Yvor. Josiane's discomfiture in these circumstances is evident, yet this does not alter them in any way as she is forced to abide by her father's will: "Tho Josian wiste, she scholde be quen,/Hit was nought be hire wille; I wen" (1457-58). It is only through her own quick mental agility that Josiane's purity is preserved, as she eludes subjugation by circumvention with the use of an apparently magical ring: "While ichave on that ilche ring,/To me schel no man haue welling" (1471-72). Josiane's preservation of her own physical state is solely as a result of her own autonomy, and so the presence of the magic ring in this text is a symbol of feminine resourcefulness in a patriarchal domain. "The ring acts as a secular equivalent of divine intervention in a rewriting of miracle that renders the woman the agent of her own protection" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 205), in direct contrast to the ineffectual influence of Ywain's token, the force of which is lost in his "pursuit of his own self-aggrandizement" (Flowers Braswell 79).

Comparably, in the *Le Morte Darthur*, female autonomy is viewed with a suspicion attributed to enchantment and witchcraft. In addition to the manipulative ways of Morgan le Fay, Dame Brusen, and Elaine, which are discussed in detail in Chapter Four, below, the knight Balin's social status is elevated due to his interaction with a female whose influence is held in questionable regard. A lady, sent by Lile of Avelion, enters King Arthur's court "gurde with a noble swerde, whereof the kynge had mervayle" (I.61.27-28), in search of "a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson" (I.61.34; I.62.1-2) to "draw oute thys swerde oute of the sheethe" (I.62.3-4).

[64] The ring motif in *Le Morte Darthur* is explored Chapter Five of this work.

Having failed to find her saviour amongst the knights of King Rience, the hope that a suitable candidate would be found in Arthur's court, of "the beste knyghtes of the worlde withoute trechory other treson" in her thought (I.62.28-29), is dashed as not even the king himself can remove the sword. It is for Balin, who is "poore and poorly arayde" (I.63.5), having been imprisoned for the murder of Arthur's cousin to take it, in a scene reflective of Arthur's own youth.

Balin is deemed by the woman "a passynge good knyght and the beste that ever y founde, and moste of worship withoute treson, trechory or felony" (I.64.1-3). Not only is Balin held in high regard by this lady, but Arthur's judgment soon follows in kind as he apologises for his "unkyndnesse" (I.64.26). Balin's fortunes revolve accordingly; the successful completion of this feat sees him vindicated, freed from his prison and held in high accord by the king. Balin's virtues are apparent in his own integrity, yet his redemption is brought about because of the request of this woman. While the lady in question appears to be little more than a narrative tool, she allows for Balin's rise through the social strata, garnering the respect of Arthur and the corresponding jealously and scepticism of a number of his knights: "the moste party of the knyghtes of the Rounde Table seyde that Balyne dud nat this adventure all only by myght but by wycchecrauffte" (I.65.6-9).

Notably, the knights' aroused suspicions are channelled through their apprehension toward "wycchecrauffte" (I.65.9), by definition a decidedly feminine pursuit.[65] Balin's actions may have augured mistrust, yet his actions are not attributed to him as a male and a knight, but viewed in the feminine light of witchcraft. While respect and cynicism combine, by association with male and female characteristics respectively, Balin's social standing is indisputably more prominent due to this episode of female engagement.

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[65] See Heidi Breuer, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England.*

The female as an agent of magic and mystery is a common trope in medieval English romance; however, what may appear to be otherworldly and magical is often little more than clever manipulation and a mastery of emotional and psychological consciousness. The stigma of the enchantress establishes an immediate and simultaneous sense of awe, vitiated by misogny, while magic (or what appears to be magical) can amplify women's abilities beyond all reasonable expectation. In either sense, the dual concepts of magic and manipulation allow for the establishment of the female figure as one of power in medieval English romance.

The Victimised Female

In a familiar trope in Middle English romance, the female is repeatedly viewed as a token of material worth, to the advantage of the male. Gayle Rubin's work on the commodification of women within society is based on the premise of women possessing both a "use value" and an "exchange value" in the social dynamic, taking sexuality and turning it into a possession of objective value to be traded as such.[66] In this way, Herbert McAvoy states, "women have underpinned the stability of society, capitalism and the family because of their tradability and their use of value to that society, but in so doing they have also been commodified by the dominant ground" (99). A woman retains possession of "a social and cultural body which is imbued with a symbolic value because of its exchangeability" (Herbert McAvoy 99); while this affords them the worth that is associated with this symbolic value, it simultaneously devalues the woman herself as she is viewed as little more than a tradable object, defined by and distributed within patriarchal society.[67] A woman's potential "exchange value" is established in relation to male subjectivity, based on

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[66] See Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" 157-210.

[67] For more, see Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market", in *This Sex which is Not One* 170-91.

the traits held estimable by masculine society and the desirability these characteristics and skills offer. When a woman's exchange value is exhausted, then, by virtue of her either being claimed by a man in marriage, and thus becoming his property, or in the case where her value is diminished by age or disability, she becomes reduced to her "use value", or her capacity for contribution to the working of society. Here lies the concept of a woman's value, not defined by autonomy or individual worth, but in terms of her place in society, and how her position may be manipulated for male benefit.

The beginning of the Middle English *Floris and Blauncheflur*, a "beautiful, amoral fantasy of love" (Kane 48) drawing from the French *Floire et Blancheflor*, is an early example of this skewed value system, as the reader is presented with King Fenix's despair at his son's desire to marry Blauncheflur. The king's social consciousness is vexed by Blauncheflur's slave status and his initial reaction is to call for her death. His queen, however, dissuades him from this course of action, instead inducing him to trade Floris' intended wife to commercial merchants: "Than may ȝe for þat louely foode/Haue muche Catell and goode" (lines 149-50).[68]

While she does escape death, Blauncheflur is discussed solely in terms of material worth, a commodity to be utilised for commercial gain. Following this transaction, Blauncheflur is traded yet again by merchants, this time to the Emir. While the spoils gained by Blauncheflur's sale are plentiful, demonstrating the prominent worth attributed to her objectively, the very fact that she is essentially evaluated and sold negates any complementary impressions that her monetary value of "Seuyne sythes of golde her wyȝt" may raise (196). Blauncheflur, while providing significant narrative impetus, is nonetheless relegated to the ranks of goods for trade in her function as a possession.

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[68] All quotations from *Floris and Blauncheflur* are taken from George H. McKnight's edition.

Even Floris, whose love for Blauncheflur is evident throughout the narrative, refers in kind to his beloved as a belonging. Upon hearing of her alleged death, Floris presents the conventional apostrophe to Death by a lover: "of alle trechorye,/Refte þou hast me my lemman" (282-83). While sincere in his despair, Floris nevertheless maintains this cultural condition which views the female as an expendable entity and his fury is directed at Death for flouting the conditions of fair trade through his perceived robbery. This concept of the commercial assessment of the female persists as Floris learns the truth of the matter and resolves to liberate Blauncheflur from the clutches of her procurer; his father provides him with a golden cup with which to reclaim his lover.[69] Blauncheflur was disposed of through the medium of trade and will be repossessed through the same channels.

These concepts of merchandise and the commodification of relationships reappear repeatedly in Middle English romance, also emerging in the Arthurian court, as in the tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain has entered into a bond which can be viewed in terms of commercial repayment: "[l]ike the merchant who owes a debt that may cost him dearly, Gawain is bound by a contractual obligation to which he has freely consented, but which requires him to act against his impulses" (Putter, *SGGK and French Arthurian Romance* 239). Gawain is a pawn, not only manipulated by the inhabitants of the castle, but in the terms of the bond to which he has been tied, as is evidenced on a daily basis as he trades the spoils of each day with his host at their evening gathering. Here, as opposed to the distinct commodification of an individual, as in *Floris and Blauncheflur*, the audience is presented with the concept of assigning a material or financial value to that which is essentially priceless: one's integrity. Interestingly, the gender

[69] The cup in question bears a history which draws a significant parallel between the trials of Floris and Blauncheflur, and those of Aeneas and Helen. Similarities can be drawn between the cup, as a tool of the mercantile trade, and the objective value placed on both Blauncheflur and Helen as commodities to be bought and sold in accordance with suitability.

definitions here are somewhat reassessed (in keeping with the idea of subversion discussed further in Chapter Four), as it is Gawain who is objectified by the lady of Hautdesert, in a manipulation of the more stereotypical victimisation of the female in a commercial sense.[70]

Floris and Blauncheflur and *Gawain* establish these motifs and attitudes which continued to be used in medieval romance, positioning audiences' expectations of what a romance text should involve. Words such as "Catel" (461), "marchaundise" (464) and "tresour" (690), used in reference to Blauncheflur, resonate with the Emir's perception of women as items of value in a culture which is dominated by the male. Having paid plentifully for Blauncheflur, it is clear that while she is evidently deemed to be little more than a possession, she is a possession which is abundant in appeal to the Emir. He is rigorous in his marital selection process, employing an enchantment to authenticate the chosen woman's purity and resultant value. Demonstrably, the Emir selects only the finest of women to be included in his harem; however, the selection process remains in place, and the supremacy of the women chosen is undermined by the fact that the Emir chooses a new wife on a yearly basis, disposing of the previous spouse by death.

In a similar fashion, *Sir Isumbras* sees the hero's wife claimed as a trophy by the Sultan who demands that Isumbras renounce his faith and fight by his side. Isumbras is absolute in his refusal to sell his wife to the Sultan; having married her in the eyes of God, to sell her would be to abandon both her and his faith. He asserts that he "weddyd her in Goddys lay" and, as such, will "holde here to myn endyng day,/Bothe for wele or woo" (lines 283-85).[71] The Sultan is impervious to Isumbras'

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[70] See Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "The Bartering of Blauncheflur in the Middle English 'Floris and Blauncheflur'"; Francis Ingledew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and The Order of the Garter*; Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*"; and Gerald Morgan, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness*.

[71] All quotes from *Sir Isumbras* are taken from the Harriet Hudson edition.

Christian principles, and claims his wife as his own anyway, with utter disregard for the hero and his love, in a resounding display of masculine social authority persevering over romantic love and morality.

Such exploitation of the female for social gain is again highlighted in *Le Morte Darthur*, in the episode of Perceval's sister (discussed in detail in Chapter Four), whereby a silver dish full of the blood of a virgin of high birth is required to cure an ailing queen, and so it is decreed "there shall no damesell passe thys way but she shall blede of hir bloode a sylver dysshefull" (I.82.3-5). In this case, the female blood is precious for its curative properties and consequently is in great demand; however, the means by which this commodity is procured, through harm to the female vessel that carries it, displays a blatant disregard for the autonomous welfare of the woman herself. The blood carries a significant value; the female that conducts the blood is, in essence, a disposable product. Notably, effective blood must belong to "a clene mayde" (I.82.1), once again accentuating the importance of the virginal status. While pure, the blood is a valuable commodity, though the destruction of the body which carries it may be deemed a trivial price to pay for the treasure within. Once sullied, however, both body and blood are, in effect, worthless to the male court.

Conversely, the reader of the *Morte Darthur* is also at times presented with a glimpse of humanity toward womankind. Pellinore, eager to complete his quest, fails to prevent the death of a young woman, at which his "herte rwyth sore of the deth of hir that lyeth yonder, for she was a passyng fayre lady, and a yonge" (I.119.2-4). Admitting to his recklessness, Pellinore states, "I was so furyous in my queste that I wolde nat abyde, and that repentis me and shall do days of my lyff" (I.119.26-27). Even before the realisation that this lady was, in fact, his own daughter, Pellinore bitterly rues his heedlessness, mourning the loss of a young woman and

acknowledging the sorrow of this occasion in its own right. The woman is afforded some status through the male display of grief, reminiscent of Lancelot's eulogising of Guinevere.[72] Essentially, women are a subsidiary element in a patriarchal culture; when their worth it acknowledged, it is done so through a man, and thus they often serve as little more than a narrative device in the medieval literary world, positioned in order to promote the necessity of the male in both a personal and social context.

Power, Punishment, and Possession: The Queen as Victim

Objectively speaking, *Bevis*' Josiane and Malory's Guinevere are both women of prominence, their positioning as queens elevating them as high as it was possible to be in medieval romance culture. This, however, does not prevent them from being condemned by men; their fates resonate with one another as they are both sentenced to burn at the stake as a result of inflicting injury on a man.

Josiane's narrative experiences, widely-disseminated, establish a level of expectation for Malory's audience. Malory's Guinevere, however, subverts the nature of Josiane's circumstances; Josiane's actions are studied and unambiguous in their intention, while Guinevere is punished without justification in terms of the accused crime, yet is not without cause for blame.

While the commonalities are evident, the motivation behind the respective behaviour of each woman differs, as Josiane makes a conscious decision to hang Miles and preserve her purity, while Guinevere is the victim of an abortive deception when Sir Patrise dies at her dinner table, having eaten poisoned fruit destined for Gawain.

Guinevere is innocent of any wrongdoing in this circumstance; it is Sir Pinel who, "for pure envy and hate [...] enpoysonde sertayn appylls for to enpoysen sir

[72] This masculine presentation of Guinevere's death is examined in detail in Chapter Four of this study.

Gawayne" (II. 1049.3-5). In circumstances resonant of Eve, Guinevere is earnest in her innocence at this juncture in the text, just as Eve was relatively guiltless in her being betrayed by the serpent. Guinevere's poisoned apple, redolent of the biblical forebear, is a portent of things to come; just as Eve sacrificed life in Paradise to the lures of temptation, so too does Guinevere succumb, eventually proving instrumental in the destruction of the chivalric world of Camelot. Malory's apple resounds with a prophetic sense of eventual catastrophe, as the biblical apple led to the unravelling of Paradise with Eve's lapse of judgement.[73]

Guinevere's deficiencies are varied and unambiguous as she contrives to manipulate both her husband and Lancelot, yet it is for a crime of which she is innocent that she is punished. It is believed that she has killed a knight, thus she must suffer accordingly, and it is only Lancelot's intervention and Nenyve's testimony which prevent her from dying at the stake. She is subject to trial by duel, as "for favoure, love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente, as well uppon a kynge as uppon a knyght, and as well uppon a quene as uppon another poure lady" (II.1055.12-15). Josiane's sentence is less civilised; she has killed Miles, and thus she must suffer the penalty. She is condemned without further validation: "Sum hire demte thane/In a tonne for to branne" (3259-60). Guinevere is placed in "the Conestablis awarde" (II.1055.9) while the verdict is decided and "a grete fyre [is] made aboute an iron stake" (II.1055.9-10), yet Josiane is afforded no such courtesy: "In hire smok she stod naked,/Thar the fur was imaked;/Ase men scholde hire forbrenne" (3289-91). She is stripped of all but a smock and is left in public view to await her death, as a common criminal. Malory's text establishes the fact that Guinevere must be subject to judgement as any other

[73] See Julie Nelson Couch, "With Due Respect: The Royal Court in Malory's 'The Poisoned Apple' and 'The Fair Maid of Astolat'" 63-77 for further exploration Guinevere's actions and the court's reactions in the biblical context of Eve's fall.

citizen would be, but it is Josiane who suffers the indignity of public humiliation as preparations are made for her murder.[74]

Both women are saved: Guinevere by Lancelot and Josiane by Bevis. While their fortunes run parallel with one another as they face the stake, it is paradoxical that the morally flawless Josiane is condemned for an act of self-protection, yet Guinevere, who could have been justifiably castigated for her adultery, is wrongly sentenced to death for a crime that she did not commit.

While held in high regard as a "bright" (564) "faire mai" (556), Josiane is still subjected to the objectification that this chapter has previously explored, and victimised as a result. The treatment of the female as an object to be socially traded, particularly in marriage, is, as has been established here, a common precept in medieval literature; the fourteenth-century translation of *Ipomadon* acknowledges the issue of a feminine free will in the act of marriage, emphasising a woman's right to reserve judgement on whom she will wed. The narrative depicts the Fere in a state of uncertainty about a paramour, and so Sir Darras steps up in her defence, affirming, "Be the lawe" (line 1809), her right to "Respytte VIII dayes" (1810).[75] In doing so, the Fere is afforded some authority in terms of choice, and time in which to compose herself and her wishes. In keeping with the chivalric code, a woman must be treated with a certain degree of respect: "A woman to take be hyr own wille be/Ys thefte of curtessy" (5440-41).

In general, however, while such courtesy is afforded on a perfunctory level, its actuality is questionable and the lady remains a consistent source of

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[74] *Havelok*'s Goldeborw faces marriage under dire threat of death; Godrich warns her that to disobey his orders will mean that she will "in a fir brenne" (1163), a warning reminiscent of Malory's Guinevere's punishment and *Bevis*' Josiane. Goldeborw, in a demonstration of the perseverant nature of the feminine, even in the face of doom, is contemplative in her acceptance of what is to come. Even though she is entering into the marriage bond because she is "adrad" (1164) of the wrath of Godrich, she secures her faith in "Godes wille" (1167). She deliberates upon the fact that "God that makes to growen the korn,/Formede hire wimman to be born" (1168-69), taking reassurance from the constancy afforded by faith and life in extremely feminine terms, and retaining some sense of personal autonomy in her faith despite her tenuous social circumstances.

[75] All quotations from *Ipomadon* are taken from the Rhiannon Purdie edition.

objectification in the medieval romance text, as "[w]ithin the chivalric honour system, the woman becomes an object of exchange" (Krueger, "Love, Honor, and the Exchange of Women in *Yvain*" 306). In the case of *Bevis*, the "Ermyn King" (528) is without a son and heir and so, as the king "him lovede wel" (569), he presents Bevis with the opportunity to marry Josiane, providing he first renounces his religious beliefs. The king's phrasing is telling; addressing Bevis, he says, "Hire I schel thee yeve to wive" (559). He is decidedly objective in his offer, referring to Josiane in terms of a possession that is his to give as he pleases. Josiane's virtues, desirable in their purity, highlight her as a prize example of femininity, and in this sense, a source of temptation; this, however, is not presented in terms of Josiane as a seductress, as it is by virtue of her purity that her father is able to present her as an enticing commodity to be won. Her grace makes her a worthy prize, and Bevis' integrity marks him as a worthy competitor, yet the fact that he must renounce his faith and pay a price, so to speak, results in Josiane being an object of negotiation, and a source of temptation in circumstances contrived by her father.

Similarly, Brademond's desire for Josiane affords little concern for her interests. If his request for her hand is not granted, he intends to fulfil his physical desire, leaving Josiane to be married to a member of the lower class, sullied and impure:

Yem me thee doughter to wive!	*Give*
Yif thow me wernest, withouten faile,	*refuse*
I schel winne hire in plein bataile,	*all-out combat*
On fele half I schel thee anughe,	*many sides; provoke*
And al thee londe I schel destruye	*destroy*
And thee sle, so mai betide,	*happen*
And lay hire a night be me side,	

And after I wile thee doughter yeve

To a weine-pain, that is fordrive! *carter; worn out*

(918-26)

Josiane is here treated in what she perceives to be a harsh, animalistic fashion as Brademond makes his wish to possess her evident. He does acknowledge the fact that she is a woman with a social status, but with the explicit intention of damaging this position; once he is satisfied, he will leave her violated and no longer be able to live the life to which she is accustomed, as she will have been dishonoured. As Bevis confronts Brademond, he asks him if he has come to "feche" (1034) Josiane; even his language indicates that Brademond believes that Josiane is his to take as he pleases.

This circumstance echoes the duke of *Sir Gowther*, whose marriage bonds are secondary to the siring of an heir. While the narrative voice of the poem is balanced in observing "He chylde non geyt ne sche non bare" (line 53)[76], the duke is less considered in the placement of blame. Accusing his wife of infertility, he asserts:

Y tro thu be sum baryn, *I believe; barren*

Hit is gud that we twyn; *separate*

Y do bot wast my tyme on the,

Eireles mon owre londys bee *Heirless must*

(56-59)

In response to this, Blamires writes that the duke, "in his untroubled arrogance assumes, first, that fertility is a female responsibility; and second that effective procreation means strong male issue, to govern and police 'his' lands" ("The twin

[76] All quotations from *Sir Gowther* are taken from *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury.

demons of aristocratic society in *Sir Gowther*" 48). Essentially, the duchess appears to be no more than an incubator, to be disposed of if faulty. Charbonneau and Cromwell assert that Gowther's conception is thus "a vindication of the woman's fertility and usefulness" (105), which raises its own questions on the objectification of the physical female form, here in terms of motherhood.

In a similar manner to the duke's totalitarian assertion of authority over even the female reproductive system in *Sir Gowther*, *Bevis*' Brademund definitively claims dominance over Josaine's physicality, stating, "I schel winne hire in plein bataile" (920). A military victory is sufficient for the justifiable claiming of a woman, and it is only an individual knight's compassion and respect which will allow the woman's autonomous desires to be taken into consideration. Josiane's initial refusal does not temper Brademund's determination to make her his physical conquest following military victory. The right to do so is his, following victory in battle, and his lack of moral compunction validates the argument that essentially, the female is little more than an object to be traded and claimed: in this circumstance, "women cannot defend themselves, and there is no recourse against the man who wins the woman's person in battle" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 200).

Comparably, the corruption of women in the promotion of male interests is seen again in *Havelok*. Here, Goldeborw is presented to Havelok in marriage, regardless of her personal compunction. She is accompanied by evocative descriptions of her feminine attractions: "[t]he kinges douther" (280) is regarded as being "the fairest wman on live" (281), for whose beauty and grace "was mani a ter igroten!" (285). She is "wis", "chaste" and "fayr" (288); each of these qualities strike fear and jealousy into Godrich, who begrudges her the honour bequeathed on her by her late father. Godrich's decision to match Havelok with Goldeborw is based upon

his disregarded oath to Athelwold; the pairing is quickly made, despite Havelok's apparent inferior social standing.

Godrich's declaration, asserting that "Havelok is that ilke knave/That shal Goldeboru have!" (1088-89), reinforces the concept of the objectification of Goldeborw; she is a commodity which will be passed from one man to the next. Athelwold, with great intentions, passed his infant daughter into the care of Godrich along with strict instructions to marry her to "[t]he beste, the fairest, the strangest" (1082) man in the land. Godrich, interpreting the late king's orders for his own benefit, passes Goldeborw on to the man he sees fit to remove her as a threat to the reign of his own line.

Goldeborw is initially spirited even in apparent defeat, and swears by Christ and Saint John:

> That hire sholde noman wedde
> Ne noman bringen to hire bedde
> But he were king or kinges eyr, *Unless; heir*
> Were he nevere man so fayr.
>
> (1114-17)

She defiantly refuses to marry or allow any man into her bed that is not a king or an heir to the throne, no matter how handsome he may be. She is fully aware of Godrich's capacity for torment and inflicting misery, having suffered at his hands herself, yet she valiantly remains true to her principles and is staunch in her defiance. Her courage, however, is futile, as Godrich proclaims: "Tomorwe ye sholen ben weddeth/And, maugre thin, togidere beddeth" (1128-29). The manner in which Godrich responds to Goldeborw's defiance once again fortifies the concept of the objectified woman; whether it pleases her or not, she will be "weddeth" and "beddeth", bound to the man of his choosing both physically and in identity. At this,

Goldeborw's resolution crumbles, and "[s]he wolde ben ded, bi hire wille" (1131). Once again, the victimised woman is left wishing for the release of death, as male manipulation in the pursuit of power supersedes any concern for female identity or autonomy.

Physicality and Functionality: The Placement of the Objectified Female

The objectification of the female is often presented in terms of affection, particularly in relation to the male desire for beauty. In Goldeborw's case, Ubbe swears by Saint John that there is no woman in Denmark as fair as she, for she is "so fayr so flour on tre" (1719). He continues in his fulsome praise, asserting the fact that she, in her femininity, exerts a certain power over men: "For hire shal men hire louerd slo" (1745). Men would kill to be in possession of Goldeborw, and while this is a paradoxical compliment in terms of reinforcing her beauty while diminishing her autonomy, the fact remains that while she is described in terms of a possession, she is a commodity of such value that men would kill and be killed in order to call her their own.

This sense of objectification is reminiscent of the motif so explicitly developed in *Floris and Blauncheflur*. Blauncheflur is, in effect, a silent character, whose thoughts and desires are depicted on the whole by the characters that surround her. It is indirectly, through the description of others, that we learn of her beauty, her virtue, her temperament and her present condition. Even her personal sorrow at her separation from her lover is depicted to the reader not through the words of Blauncheflur herself, but those of the innkeeper's wife, who trades this information for treasure. Blauncheflur's capacity for autonomy is effectively removed by the narrative descriptions of other characters that essentially render the heroine mute. This is yet another narrative device which detracts from any sense of

feminine independence in the text, presenting women in the role of objectified entities who are bought, sold or simply discarded, based on their relevance and worth to the dominant male culture.

The concepts of objectification and judgement come into play here, even when couched in terms of adoration, as in a number of the Harley lyrics where the dual aspects of "veneration and hostility" towards the female "continued to exist side by side", each attitude "to some extent a reaction against the other" (Brook, Introduction 24).[77] The descriptions of women in these lyrics incorporate a "force of much exuberant imagery and passionate statements of desire and despair" (Howell 619); devoted, the narrator of "The Way of Woman's Love" refers to himself as his lady's "man", while "The Fair Maid of Ribbesdale" is exalted in terms of a "sonnebem" (line 7), a "roser when it redes" (36), with teeth as "white ase bon of whal" (40).[78] In addition to the nature imagery, the wonder of the Fair Maid of Ribbesdale is couched in terms of the material: gold, rubies, and emeralds (61-66).

Often, however, the message of the poem can often be "dulled" or rendered "incoherent" by these exaggerations (Howell 619), which can seem "ludicrous" in their extravagance (Brook, Introduction 23). Brook addresses this exaggeration in "The Fair Maid", observing in particular that "[a] long neck was thought to be beautiful, therefore the poet thinks that a very long neck must be more beautiful still, and he describes the lady's neck as a span longer than he has seen elsewhere (7.44)" (Introduction 23). The rhetoric of praise can potentially be used to great effect, but may equally descend into farcical imagery which does little to promote the beauty of the woman, instead rendering her a potential object of ridicule. The

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[77] For further discussion of the presentation of the feminine in the lyrics, see George L. Brook, *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle-English Lyrics of MS. Harley 2253*; Andrew J. Howell, "Reading the Harley Lyrics: A Master Poet and the Language of Conventions"; and Thomas G. Duncan, *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric* 19; 29-30.

[78] All quotations from the lyrics are taken from the George L. Brook's edition of *The Harley Lyrics*.

language of love and adoration is removed, in a narrative sense, from that of open commodification, yet the idea of the objectified female remains prominent throughout.

The concept of women receiving their due, also in the context of beauty and regard, is raised in *Havelok*, as the hero rewards the daughters of Grim in return for the family's compassion towards him in his youth. However, even this apparent reward contributes to the promotion of female objectification as, once again, the concept of women as "marriage objects" as opposed to marriage "agents" comes to the fore (Bartlett 71-72). Gunnild and Levive, Grim's daughters, are given in marriage to the Earl of Chester and the Earl of Cornwall respectively. In his gratitude, Havelok elevates the social and economic status of these ladies by arranging for their ascent into the ranks of nobility through marriage; a gesture which is, once more, paradoxical in terms of the acknowledgement of the autonomy of the female. Havelok presents the men with the daughters of Grim by way of recompense; in doing so, he waxes lyrical about the beauty and worth possessed by the women, while simultaneously objectifying them in their presentation as male possessions.

To the Earl of Chester, Havelok promises "The fairest thing that is o live,/That is Gunnild of Grimesby" (2865-66), pronouncing Gunnild the fairest thing alive, as well as being as generous and gracious, "fayr" and "fre" (2876). In addition to flattering her in terms of her own attributes, Havelok then goes on to assert the merit she bears by being in his favour. He announces that "Ther tekene, she is wel with me" (2878); in accordance with this, the Earl of Chester will be "dere" (2882) to him as her husband. Gunnild is complimented and praised in glowing terms, yet for the most part, these terms are relative to the position she is held in by powerful men in a patriarchal community.

Gunnild's sister, Levive, is described in a similar fashion as she is wedded to Bertram, the new Earl of Cornwall. The depiction of her appearance is comparable with Goldeborw herself; Levive is

fayr so flour on tre;	
The hew is swilk in hire ler	*hue; face*
So the rose in roser,	*As; rose bush*
Hwan it is fayr sprad ut newe,	*blossomed*
Ageyn the sunne brith and lewe.	*fresh*

(2917-21)

Levive's feminine graces are thus acclaimed, followed by the statement that the Earl of Cornwall, "dide him there sone wedde/Hire that was ful swete in bedde" (2926-27). From feminine charm to her ability to provide her husband with satisfactory physical pleasure, Levive's virtues veer from the acknowledgement of her own beauty to her capabilities in terms of her role as wife and the necessity of pleasing her husband. In keeping with social expectation, these women are not acclaimed within their own rights but once again used as pawns, as they are given in marriage as part of the social construction of the family's reward.

This is a frequent occurrence in medieval romance; triumph on the battlefield permits a man to claim his prize, and it is the work of an astute female to recognise the potential in this circumstance, taking their lack of autonomy and manipulating this to draw benefit where possible. This is highlighted in the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain*, whereby Alundyne must marry the man who murdered her own husband. Military ability and the capacity for physical victory reign supreme, as Lunete describes:

"Yf twa knyghtes be in the felde
On twa stedes with spere and shelde

And the tane the tother may sla,	*one; other; slay*
Whether es the better of tha?"	*those*
Sho said, "He that has the bataile."	*won*

(999-1003)

Here, apparent lack of personal autonomy can be manoeuvred for feminine gain, based on a woman's self-awareness and social consciousness. When Ywain rescues a susceptible damsel from the attentions of Sir Alers, the lady assesses Ywain's abilities as a chivalric knight and, finding him favourable, offers herself and her estate to him as a reward, declaring: "I wil yelde into yowre handes/Myne awyn body and al my landes" (1961-62). This lady is very much conscious of the precepts by which society functions, and thus, finding her hero to be impressive, harnesses social convention and uses it to her advantage.

This presentation of the female as a prize is reflected once again in *Guy of Warwick,* whereby the grateful emperor proposes that Guy take his daughter, Clarice, as a reward for assisting the emperor in conquering his enemies. This convention is exploited by both men and women, and its connotations differ as such; however, the female, while often treated with a certain chivalric deference, is in essence, an object to be used in accordance with her social functionality, as "the chivalric ethic depends on the individual strength of the knight in battle and the alignment of might with right" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 200).

Following from the concept of female objectification is the concept of feminine purity, as emblematised by virginity; as Saunders writes, "[v]irginity is consistently portrayed as an icon, a physical quality that empowers the woman" (*Rape and Ravishment* 121). The maintenance of the virginal state was a source of autonomous female authority, overcoming the stereotypical vulnerability and/or sexual temptation by which women were perceived. Sexuality is an essential part of

nature and a necessary part of the continuation of society, yet retains associations with the concept of original sin and base desire.[79] Sexual desire was a compulsion in itself, driven by the potency of instinctual lust; the active maintenance of chastity negates the power of reckless sexual desire, while the physical purity of the virgin embodies this idealised virtue. In keeping with this concept, with regard to both men and women (as is particularly evident in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and those on the Grail quest), "[r]ejection of the world repeatedly opens the way for divine guidance" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 124), and never more so than in the case of physical rejection of that which corrupts and violates spiritual integrity.

The protection of the female is one of the cornerstones on which chivalric society is founded, as stated so explicitly in the *Morte Darthur*'s Pentecostal Oath and echoed in other texts contemporary with its time. Purity is revered, in both the physical and spiritual sense; therefore, virginity is in itself a virtue of value. As previously mentioned, a commercial awareness of sexual purity is evidenced in the Emir's reaction to the discovery of Floris and Blauncheflur together, reiterating the mercenary quality of his relationships with his wives. Blauncheflur's virginity has been called into dispute, therefore her commercial value is destroyed and she is essentially worthless. The significance ascribed to the virginal status of a woman is seen to be similarly critical in the *Morte Darthur*; Queen Igraine is "sore abashed to yeve ansuer" (I.10.16-17) when the paternity of her child is called into question. As a masculine possession, a woman is viewed as being damaged property with the loss of her virginity; a lack of chastity, or a display of sexual promiscuity, ascribes destructive attributes to a woman's character which effectively eradicate an admirable social standing. As an individual, a woman is valuable only when she is

[79] In this sense, "sexuality opposed reason and threatened the will to good" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 122).

untouched and can be wholly possessed by her proprietor, abolishing any sense of physical autonomy for the single female in courtly society.

In the early stages of the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's treatment of the female is somewhat tenuous in terms of autonomous respect and mutual reciprocity, displaying a dismissive attitude towards women. Lionors, "a passyng fayre damesell" (I.38.29) who visited Arthur "for to do omage" (I.38.30) following a victory in a "grete batayle" (I.38.30), may be perceived as a reward for the triumphant king. He "sette hys love gretly on hir" (I.38.31) and "had ado with hir and gate on hir a chylde" (I.38.32-33). No further mention is made of Arthur's relationship with Lionors; evidently, it begins and ends with a sole encounter. Despite fathering her child, no subsequent reference is made to the "erlis doughter" (I.38.28), signalling the possibility that her presence was required simply to fulfil the king's desires; no further reference is necessary when her function has been exploited. This highlights the concept of the female as being a disposable entity in the text, particularly in this episode, utilised when necessary, then discarded when her purpose has been executed. While applauding her beauty, it appears to be unnecessary for Arthur to justify or validate his actions, or pursue the consequences of fathering a child. Lionors is a temporary distraction, albeit a "passyng fayre" (I.38.29) one. This is a passing episode in the text; just as this encounter appears to be inconsequential to Arthur, so too does its representation seem insignificant and almost extemporaneous in its description.

The concept of the loss of virginity is also a recurring one throughout the narrative of *Bevis*; Bevis himself is falsely accused of taking Josiane's virginity prior to their marriage. The accusations centre on the hero's actions: "Beves, scherewe misbeleved,/The doughter he hath now forlain" (1208-09) and "he hath Josian forlaie" (1234). Josiane's feelings are almost disregarded; it is as if she is an object

belonging to the king which has been mistreated and thus he must exact his revenge. Autonomous choice is not considered for a moment, despite the fact that we know Josiane would have eagerly engaged in a sexual relationship with Bevis by her own invitation: "thow wost with me do thee wille!" (1109). It is, however, immediately assumed that Bevis has "deflowered" Josiane and must suffer the consequences. She seems to be little more than a passive observer. Even that which is perceived to be patriarchal protection of Josiane is in fact a further emphasis of female objectification; without her virginity, she is worthless. It is apparent that this incident will destroy her social status; she is impure and so cannot marry within her rank and to her father's expectation.

Bevis himself corroborates this perception as he swears only to marry a "clene maide" (1969), despite the seven years and the events which have led him to be separated from Josiane. Not only does the preservation of virginity have social implications, it appropriates qualities of mythical proportions: because Josiane is a virgin, and the daughter of a king, she is preserved from the ferocious wrath of the lions in the forest. Due to her status and her purity, she is untouchable: "Kinges doughter, quene and maide both,/The lyouns myght do hur noo wroth" (2393-94). The preservation of Josiane's sexual purity physically protects her from the fury of the wild lions in the forest, and also from the threat of the metaphorical lions in court, while simultaneously aligning her with Malory's depiction of Perceval's sister, who is celebrated, albeit in death, for the purity of her virginal, high-born blood.[80]

Guy of Warwick further compounds this social expectation, with the hero stating that, "Y nil never spouse wiman/Save on is fre and hende" (137-38). Felice may have been dominant prior to their marriage, controlling all possibility of romance, yet the manner in which Guy later asserts his autonomous will in his

[80] For comprehensive discussion of Perceval's sister's plight, see Chapter Five of this study.

desire to leave on a spiritual quest demonstrates a determined male authority in this relationship. Echoing the beliefs of Margery Kempe, the relationship between Guy and Felice in *Guy of Warwick* demonstrates the possibility of secular love acting as "an impediment" to heavenly love, or, human love as "a transitory stage through which one passes on to divine love" (King, *The Faerie Queene* 66). Just as secular love is an earthly distraction to the higher ideals of the chivalric knight in the *Morte Darthur*, as discussed in Chapter Four of this study, Guy realises the detrimental effect of earthly romantic concerns following his absolute devotion and subsequent success in the conquest of Felice; he relinquishes material luxuries and the comforts offered by a romantic relationship in the pursuit of more lofty ideals and the gratification of spiritual fulfilment.

The value of virginity is absolute and its loss is equally significant, with particular consequences for the female. Whether a woman engages in consensual sexual relations or is subjected to the indignity of rape seems irrelevant: in the social, historical, and literary contexts of this study, a single woman who has lost her virginity is fundamentally without social value. Saunders writes, "[p]aradoxically, to live but to experience rape equates to spiritual death, whereas to die intact brings eternal life" (*Rape and Ravishment* 125). All sense of social propriety is lost and such a woman must live in relative ignominy. A violated woman's family is discredited by association, and reprisal is common. Therefore, the concentrated application of such care to the protection of a woman's virginity may be interpreted as a method of maintaining the social value of women, motivated less by the respect for female autonomy than a consciousness of the associated devaluation of a tainted female.

As previously mentioned, in the context of the female being considered as little more than a material possession, Malory's reader is presented with the tale of

Perceval's sister and a frail queen whose health is failing. The blood of "a clene mayde and a kynges doughter" must be administered to cure the queen of her ailments (I.82.1-2). While the concept of the blood being a valuable commodity without regard for the welfare of the woman it belongs to has been previously discussed, the fact remains that the blood will not be effective in its restorative powers if it is not drawn from "a clene mayde"; sexual purity is a prerequisite. The value of the women's blood is relative to both their birth status and their virginal purity. The fact that virginity is viewed as being such a valuable commodity further limits a woman's social autonomy and functionality; one of the primary purposes of a woman's physical being is procreation, but even this must adhere to the boundaries delineated by a patriarchal society. Femininity and physical beauty are celebrated, indeed expected from a worthy woman, but are not to be used autonomously: a woman may rejoice in her ability to reproduce, but only within the confines of marriage as established by a male-dominated society. The valorisation of virginity is yet another aspect of the control of women and the perception of the female as a potentially precious product, whose value can both rise and fall in accordance with the conventions as determined by a patriarchal society.

The objectification of the female is not limited to her virginal status. In a patriarchal society ruled by men and dictated by a strong sense of a class system, people were socially compartmentalised from birth, and the literature of the time reflects this accordingly. This is particularly demonstrated in the "Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda Legends", a grouping so titled with reference to the thematic relation of these romances to the tale of St Eustace, who faces a struggle with a test of his faith when he suffers the loss of his fortune, and the female figures of Constance, Florence, and Griselda, who are regarded unjustly by society, despite their honourable natures. These tales "feature stories of women dispossessed,

vilified, exiled and subsequently, vindicated and restored to an even better version of their original high status" (Hopkins 123).[81]

According to Harriet Hudson, *Sir Isumbras*, *Octavian*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, and *Sir Tryamour* were "among the most popular" romances of their time, all "important works in a major literary development of the fourteenth century" and continuing in this popularity through to the sixteenth century due to their narrative content, "of exiled queens, orphaned children, and penitent fathers" (1). The texts in this group deploy the trope of "the displaced or dispossessed youth who struggles to gain his proper identity and patrimony" (King, *The Faerie Queene* 78). This is in keeping with the thematic content of *Havelok* and *Bevis*, as the reader follows these respective heroes' efforts as they strive to regain their rightful place upon their particular thrones. All of these stories focus on the initial estrangement and subsequent reconciliation of the family unit, in conjunction with a parallel decline in their social or spiritual position, with an eventual restoration of glory. The focus of three of these tales rests with the feminine in *Eglamour, Octavian,* and *Tryamour*; in each, the female protagonist is incriminated for sexual transgressions, and is banished as such, despite her innocence in all three cases. In each case, an adversary initiates these spurious claims and the subsequent extradition of the wronged woman: "her jealous, sometimes incestuous father (*Eglamour*), her jealous mother-in-law (*Octavian*), or her seducing steward (*Tryamour*)" (Hudson 1).

The women of these legends are subject to social judgement on numerous levels. While the male heroes of medieval literature generally demand the respect of society in keeping with their birth right, such automatic esteem is not afforded to the women in similar positions. Females of privileged birth are not exempt from

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[81] The "Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda Legends" consist of a collection of Middle English verse romances, namely *Sir Isumbras, The King of Tars, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Octavian, Le Bone Florence of Rome, Sir Triamour*, and *Sir Torent of Portyngale*, as noted by Andrew King in *The Faerie Queene and Middle English Romance: The Matter of Just Memory* (78).

social appraisal and discrimination; they are judged by their actions and their deeds, or by the social perception of their deeds. While a high-ranking birth signals a certain nobility, or righteousness, in the male protagonists of these texts, the equivalent female birth right seems to be essentially irrelevant, as they are harshly judged nonetheless based on their reactions to the indignities that life bestows on them. Thus, a virtuous nature is not simply accepted as a characteristic conferred by birth, but must be demonstrated and proven.

The significance of establishing the unblemished nature of the female is particularly relevant here, as "women must remain chaste in order to preserve the legitimacy of birth which is so crucial in the makeup of the male hero" (King, *The Faerie Queene* 84). This concept has a biblical basis in the story of the Virgin Mary, whose purity is called into question following the Virgin Birth; here, Mary faces the essential struggle for validation of spirit, as she must endeavour to assert the truth of her chastity. Women of the Constance-Florence type face similar perjury; "their suffering through slander and banishment is protracted, and they only recover their former place through extraordinary faith and perseverance" (King, *The Faerie Queene* 84). Essentially, while these female characters may seem passive in their acceptance of the ordeals that fortune sets in their paths, their exertions are, in fact, monumental as they strive to maintain their own survival and often that of their children, until their true natures are once again validated and their integrity recognised.[82]

Childbirth bears contrasting implications in its manifestation in *Le Morte Darthur*. Queen Elizabeth, wife of King Meliodas and mother of Sir Tristram, found "grete joy" (I.371.23) in pregnancy, until childbirth took her life "for defawte of good

[82] The mother figure in *Octavian* is analysed in Chapter Three of this work; see also Jennifer Fellows "Mothers in Middle English Romance" 41-60; David Salter, "'Born to Thraldom and Penance'" 41-59; Rosalind Field, "Popular Romance" 9-30; and Harriet Hudson's Introduction to *Octavian* Par. 5 and 9..

helpe" (I.372.14-15). Her words to her son at his birth resonate with a gravity that seems to be somewhat incongruous in the face of a newborn child: "A, my lytyll son, thou haste murtherd they modir! And therefore I suppose thou that arte a murtherer so yonge, thow arte full lykly to be a manly man in thyne ayge" (I.372.19-22). An infant is branded a murderer, and the import of this inadvertent deed marks a prominent future for the young Tristram. Queen Elizabeth did not simply die in childbirth; figuratively speaking, it is perceived that she was murdered by her son. This child is portrayed as having played an active part in his mother's death, in direct contrast to the female infant Blauncheflur, who is socially disregarded from birth, in keeping with "a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products" (Rubin 158). The newborn male is viewed with the promise of glory; the infant female is assessed in terms of potential commercial value.

With the concept of birth comes the essential femininity of motherhood, as augmented at the scene of the birth of Josiane's children.[83] The act of childbirth is an entirely feminine pursuit, in both its execution, as is obvious, but also in the associated connotations that accompany birth; "[w]ays of looking at reproduction [...] assigned women a certain level of responsibility", which in itself "accorded them the dignity of activity in a positive outcome and the burden of blame in a negative one" (Cadden 3). What is natural to women in the physicality of the act is anathema to the male; the base animalistic indignity of childbirth means it is a lonely experience for Josiane, who pleads for solitude in the hopes of maintaining her feminine decorum without witness to her pain. Josiane's request to be left alone reflects the medieval belief that childbirth was strictly female terrain, as she

[83] While the concepts of birth right and child birth are addressed here, the idea of maternal influence is examined in Chapter Three of this work.

declares, "God forbede for is pité,/That no wimman is privité/To no man thourgh me be kouthe" (3629-31). In keeping with this singularly female experience, Josiane does not cry out to God to assist her in her time of need, but to "Oure Levedy" (3634). No male eye must be privy to the discomfiture of childbirth, and so Josiane turns to the Virgin Mary in her time of need. This exclusion of the male from the most natural and essential of human endeavours can be viewed as man acceding to the prominence of the female in the event of procreation. By allowing the woman her privacy, she is granted the ability to maintain her poise and self-assurance.

The experience of childbirth is distinctly unbecoming in its accomplishment, and so dignity is afforded by privacy. The ability to sustain such pain alone and generally unaided in the process of childbirth also acknowledges the physical and emotional strength of women who bear children, and particularly so in the case of Josiane, who gives birth to twins. However, there is a sense of the distasteful about the male ignorance of childbirth; men display a self-congratulatory pride in their ability to procreate, but avoid the exhaustion and pain of both carrying a child to term and finally giving birth. While Bevis and Terri are abiding by Josiane's wishes by leaving her in isolation, there is a sense of avoidance as they travel so far to evade the sound of "hire paines" (3636) that they abandon her completely, leaving her at the mercy of passing Saracens. The acknowledgement of the feminine pains of childbirth is therefore somewhat contradictory: while conceding the fact that this is exclusively a female domain and must be treated with due respect, it also allows the male to discount all responsibility and its consequences.[84]

Comparably, Margery Kempe's description of her experience of the agonies of childbirth is horrifying, both in relation to physical pain and equally severe

[84] Eamon Duffy also analyses the concept of childbirth, the churching of women, and the consequences of the practice for both women and men in *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 - c.1580*.

emotional distress. Her torment is dismissed out of hand, by male authority, as her confessions and desire for absolution are met with "undyrnemyn" (I.1.146) and "scharp reprevyng" (I.1.148) in condemnation of her sin.[85] The priest who acts in this manner not only approaches childbirth with the natural ignorance of the male, but also enforces the religious authority exclusive to the masculine position. It is this male authority's incapacity to acknowledge what is a fundamentally female ordeal which causes Margery to lose herself in paroxysms of both physical and mental agony, the ultimate circumstance of the repression of the female, body and soul, and its consequent effects. Instead of being aided and forgiven, she is judged; instead of being offered physical comforts, she pushed to extremes of self-harm.

While the experience of birthing a child, particularly for the first time, must be acknowledged as being a traumatic event in itself, the attitude of the male authority overseeing an essentially female practice causes further damage and torment as a result of self-righteous oblivion. "Both literally in her childbirth labour, and in her struggle with mental and physical collapse, Margery labours to the point of death" (Herbert McAvoy, 37), creating an overall impression of the inevitability of female perdition in a dominantly masculine society, even in the circumstances of childbirth, whereby the female purpose is to further social development and, indeed, life. Here, women serve a fundamentally significant purpose, yet remain objectified and victimised in its execution.

Conclusions

Women in the world of medieval literature bear conflicting representations; in keeping with the definitively subsidiary positioning of the female within the

[85] See Joan Cadden's *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* for a discussion of the concept of "hysterical suffocation" and the fact that "women had a set of illnesses all their own and that women's health was dependent upon the reproductive functions" (15).

boundaries of the patriarchal society that ruled medieval England and as reflected in the romances of the time, women, at the outset, often appear to be passive and relatively unimportant, secondary characters which are simply employed as a narrative tool in the process of the promotion of the male protagonist. The actuality of the female circumstance in medieval England, as discussed in Chapter One, above, sets the tone of the literature of the time and the presentation of the female in context. Those texts contemporary with Malory, addressed here, present a subjective appraisal of the time in which they were produced, offering insight into the interests and opinions of an era; the depiction of the female in *Le Morte Darthur* can be compared favourably with that of the general portrayal of women in medieval romance, and by subsequent association with the actual female figure in medieval society.

Each of these texts is testament to the influence of the feminine on the narrative drive within each tale, with particular attention to the prominence of women in the distinct (and often overlapping) roles of lover, victim, and enchantress. Texts such as *Bevis, Havelok,* and *Guy* act as a composite foundation from which the modern reader may establish the expectations of feminine representation in romance before Malory; the texts demonstrate the gradual emergence of the feminine as a dominant narrative force in these respective roles, despite the abitrary representation of the female as both support and threat to social order. While in this way the exemplification of the female ranges from the sublime to the abysmal, the presence of the feminine and its associated influence is indubitable in the power of its presence.

The presence of the female is decisive in its social and literary influence in the chivalric realm; in order to promote a male protagonist, as in the case of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, emergent voices such as Margery Kempe also

present a more autonomous notion of the female as a definitive entity in the literary sphere. Malory's diverse portrayal of the female in *Le Morte Darthur* both compliments and provides a distinct juxtaposition to the perception of the female in contemporary literary works, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five of this work, incorporating the concept of the objectified woman with the idea of female agency.

Chapter Three

Women in Romance II: Power, Authority, Contexts

The fact that women are fundamentally subordinate in a hyper-masculine society does not mean that they are powerless, as demonstrated in Chapter Two. The *Morte Darthur*'s Pentecostal Oath (as explored in Chapter Four) essentially presents an array of women as a discordant demographic, in need of safeguarding. In keeping with this, the woman is essentially defined by a sense of otherness, be it in terms of idealisation or sexual objectification; in either sense, she remains distinct and differentiated by her femininity. The portrayal of women in medieval romance is particularly significant, then, in terms of power, and the way in which feminine control is harnessed and exerted in a distinctly masculine climate. This chapter examines varying representations of female power and their consequences on individual men, and on masculine society, with particular focus on *Bevis of Hampton*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, with a view to determining the methods and models also adopted in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

The Wilful Woman: The Exploitation of Femininity

One of the most prominent ways in which women demonstrate power in a patriarchal culture is through the overt and uncompromising manipulation of the male. Gawain, for example, is initially presented as the chivalric ideal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: in essence, he is the personification of the gold pentangle he bears as his symbol, which "identifies Gawain as a perfect exponent of the ideals of the Round Table" (Barron, *SGGK* 11), and it is because of this portrayed perception

that his partial failure, prompted by feminine influence, is all the more potent.[86] Gawain's tale is but one example of the way in which such an idealised knight can fall from grace, albeit temporarily, due to a woman, demonstrating the female capacity for disingenuous control.[87]

Medieval romance presents women who are commanding in their own right; as a dominant female figure, for example, Bevis' mother's introduction is powerful: "Faire maide she was and bold/And fre yboren" (32-33). A rather conventional description in itself, the language here, naming her "bold" and "fre", may be more suited to the portrayal of a male in its authority – in keeping with the perceptibly masculine power this woman goes on to display. As the narrative progresses, however, the description of Bevis' mother goes from the "faire maide" (32) to "levedi fer" (70) as she manipulates the men around her to do her bidding, employing both her mental agility and feminine physicality; no longer fair, she is now fierce. Although the truth of her nature may be apparent to the reader, it seems that those directly involved in Bevis' mother's machinations are oblivious to her malicious intent. The German emperor's declared ownership of the woman encapsulates the established superiority of the dominant male: "the wif, that is so fre,/To me lemman I chese!" (221-22). Guy's response echoes the emperor's words, immediately protective of what is rightfully his, as man and figure of authority: "Me wif and child, that was so fre/Yif thow thenkest beneme hem me,/Ich schel hem defende!" (226-28). Both men defend the lady and claim her for their own; the German emperor goes as far as to declare her his lover by his choosing.

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[86] For more on the symbolism of the pentangle, see Barron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 10-11.

[87] Chapters Four and Five of this study explore this influence in direct relation to the *Morte Darthur*, most specifically in terms of the influence of women on those most revered male figures, Lancelot and Arthur (245-78; 328-31).

Here, the control that Bevis' mother exerts over her circumstances is absolute, yet subtle. Having walked to his death at his wife's arrangement, Guy maintains his allegiance and blindly fights for what he believes is his devoted family. *Bevis'* German emperor has been led directly to this battle by the schemes of this woman, yet appears to believe that he has actively and independently chosen his lover, despite the fact that he is evidently little more than her puppet.[88]

Bevis' mother's demands are base and uninhibited, particularly in her allusion to sexual fulfilment as she calls for a wild boar to ease her pain. The wild boar is a well-established motif in stories of sexual aggression, while the longing to consume pork is indicated throughout literature, a trope which borders on absurdity, as being evocative of sexual desire.[89] As the boar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* mirrors the actions of the lady of the castle of Hautdesert as a sexual predator in the apparent safety of Gawain's bedroom, here Bevis' mother's supplication for the boar emblematises her desire for sexual gratification from her husband – who does not hesitate to meet her demands, "for love myn" (187) and "be Godes grace" (193). While her deeds are self-serving, it must be acknowledged that this woman possesses the power to force men to do her bidding, in such a way that allows her to maintain an innocent façade as she constructs the world around her to satisfy her personal desires: "And she answerde with tresoun than;/'Blessed be thow of alle man/For mine sake!'" (196-98).

Following the German emperor's murder of Guy, in keeping with the common medieval trope of the victorious male, Bevis' mother becomes the German's "leve swet" (279); the rights to her love have been won and he presents

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[88] See Andrew King, "*Sir Bevis of Hampton*: Renaissance Influence and Reception"; and Corinne Saunders, "Gender, Virtue and Wisdom in *Sir Bevis of Hampton*".

[89] Examples of such can be seen in *Venus and Adonis*, and, later, *Bartholomew Fair*, demonstrating the ongoing references to the metaphorical use of the boar, and the consumption of pig, to establish sexual desire.

her late husband's head to her in such a way that engenders praise. This lady is a prize to be fought over and won in a brutal display of masculine violence; however, it is her cunning machinations which initially instigated these events. She has offered herself as a prize in order to attain her own ends, yet has done so in such a devious way that those in competition, the dynamic and powerful men, believe that it is a battle hard won by their instigation and merit. Indeed, she values herself as a prize worth winning; her words upon hearing of the German's victory echo her poise and self-assurance as she states: "Blessed mot he be!/To wif a schel wedde me" (286-87). Here, the supposedly submissive female has tendered herself as a precious reward in a war of her own initiation, establishing her subtle power in the midst of overt masculine authority.

Malory's Morgan le Fay is similarly resourceful; having been presented with a castle by her brother, she grasps the power she has been given and ambitiously augments it. She leaves Arthur remorseful of his enabling gesture, "by the whyche he hath repented hym sytthyn a thousand times" (II.597.12-13). Morgan le Fay capitalises upon her authority without the subtlety that allows Bevis' mother's iniquity to go generally unnoticed. Morgan houses a troupe of "daungerous knights" (II.597.17) for the express purpose of "dystroy[ing] all thos knyghtes that kynge Arthure lovyth" (II.597.18-19). The reputation of the castle, ruled by this tyrannical queen, creates a sense of foreboding which strikes fear into those who must approach:

> And there shall no knyght passe this way but he muste juste with one knyght other wyth two other with three. And yf hit hap that kynge Arthurs knight be beatyn, he shall lose his horse and harnes and all that he hath, and harde yf that he ascape but that he shall be presonere.
>
> (II.597.19-23)

Morgan le Fay's malevolent reputation is recognised, while Bevis' mother's malicious acts are primarily carried out beneath a veil of feminine innocence. Both women, however, are authoritative figures who effectively induce the men around them into doing their bidding, despite the predominance of the male in the patriarchal society by which they are ostensibly ruled.

Although many of those females in a position of power have come to this point by malevolent means, women of objective integrity also exert influence by virtue of their femininity. *Bevis'* Josiane, for example, when it appears that she will have no choice but to surrender her virginity to Miles, exploits the expectations of timidity and modesty that typify the noblewoman, even manipulating her virginal status in order to escape from his clutches. Stating that "[w]immen beth schamfast in dede/And namliche maidens" (3201-02), her request for privacy in such "secret things" allows her to manoeuvre the circumstances to suit her own ends, namely hanging Miles from the bed-curtains, thus preserving her virginity for Bevis. Having been abducted initially, Josiane postpones sexual relations: "Miles wolde have is wille/and she bed him holde stille" (3161-62). By requesting that the pair be married before engaging in physical relations, Josiane defers Miles' desire and quickly brings about his demise. The fact that she kills him with her girdle, the ultimate symbol of feminine purity, emphasises the female victory of honour over masculine lust. "Be the nekke she hath him up tight/And let him so ride al the night" (3223-24), in the name of feminine preservation: "Schel he never eft wimman spille!" [*despoil women] (3256). Josiane's capacity for self-sufficiency is demonstrated here; establishing the fact that she is not a passive female, susceptible in her vulnerability, she employs a combination of ingenuity and gumption to preserve her physical purity: "Yerstendai he me wedded with wrong/And tonight ichave him honge" (3253-54).

The female's exploitation of her purity through this symbol of feminine virtue, the girdle, is all the more powerful for its evident capacity to conquer the authoritative male, as is evidenced here and similarly in *Gawain and the Green Knight*. The use of the girdle as a means to an end is, however, juxtaposed in *Bevis* and *Gawain*; while the lady of Hautdesert's motivations are far from pure in their intent, "Josian's strength is a daunting response to the patriarchal structures of her world and to the attempt to objectify the woman", as "attempted rape definitively proves female empowerment without any aspect of suffering or martyrdom" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 206). Josiane welcomes the trappings of femininity; instead of allowing these social expectations to dictate her autonomy, she utilises traits associated with the female, such as innocence, temperance, and a nurturing nature, and develops them to act in her favour. However, differences of character lie in motivation; while Bevis' mother exploits her sexuality in order to satisfy her self-serving desires, Josaine's manipulation of her femininity is justified by the purity of her love for Bevis and her desire to maintain her personal integrity accordingly.

Similarly, Margery Kempe harnesses the perception of the vulnerable female and uses it to her advantage, in a manner comparable with female exploitation of perceived fragility as outlined in the Pentecostal Oath of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and Josiane's actions in her manipulation of Miles. When questioned by the Archbishop of York about the nature of her weeping, and almost dismissed for her extremely feminine display of emotion, Margery's response, "Syr, ye schal welyn sum day that ye had wept as sor as I" (I.52.2943), answers in kind. She informs him that her tears are representative of a spiritual plain that he can only hope to reach with time and effort, despite the advantages he possesses of masculinity and religious authority, in keeping with the idea that "[v]isionary women could bypass

the human, male, authority of the Church on earth, and claim to be instruments of a higher, divine authority" (Barratt 6).

Following this, she counters the Archbishop's accusations of her being a "ryth wikked woman" (I.52.2951) with, "Ser, so I her seyn that ye arn a wikkyd man. And, yyf ye ben as wikkyd as men seyn, ye schal nevyr come in hevyn les than ye amende yow whil ye ben her" (I.52.2951-53). Once again, a polite address is trailed with a confrontational assertion of Margery's own validity as a worthy religious figure, in spite of, and perhaps made all the more impressive because of, the fact she is a woman and therefore perceived as being socially and intellectually inferior. Margery's manipulation of very obvious femininity, in terms of dress, social posture, and overwhelming emotion, may indeed be part of a larger strategy designed to command male attention and to achieve her desired outcome. Her utilisation of feminine fragility and the status of vulnerability that accompanies this afford her all the more power as she asserts her autonomy in the face of male authority.

The male reaction to female authority is remarkable; *Bevis*' Miles does not anticipate Josiane's retaliation, and this element of surprise allows for her success, despite her physical disadvantage. Similarly, when faced with almost certain death in his forest, *Bevis'* Sir Guy's reaction is stereotypically male in its bravado. He re-asserts his ownership of his wife, in keeping with the concept of the male figure viewing women as a commodity: "thou havest no right to me wif" (238).[90] Not only is Guy's life being threatened, so is the certainty of his possession and control of his wife and son. He is less concerned about the fact of the emperor's murderous intentions than the insult posed by one man to another in the suggestion of stealing what is rightfully his.

[90] See previous discussion of the female as a commodity in Chapter Two of this study.

Interestingly, as Bevis' thoughts turn to revenge for the murder of his father, his attention is concentrated on the German emperor, not his mother. Although it was his mother who was essentially responsible for his father's death, Bevis' wrath is directed at the man whose sword took his father's life: "Mighte ich with that emperur speke,/Wel ich wolde me fader awreke/For al is ferde!" (388-90). Bevis' mother, by virtue of her gender, is excluded from her son's vengeful thoughts. She is entirely accountable for the death of Guy; however, the fact that she engineered his demise from the safety of her "tour" (57) allows her to shield herself behind the man who physically held the sword that cast the fatal blow.

As established here, both Josiane and Bevis' mother exploit the expected postures of female subjugation in the chivalric world, and use it to their own advantage. The presence of the feminine in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is similarly impressive in its intricacy and authorativeness, demonstrating the idea of feminine control on multiple levels. The crux of this is succinctly expressed:

> For þat prynces of pris depressed hym so þikke,
> Nurned hym so neȝe þe þred, þat nede hym bihoued
> Oþer lack þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse.
> He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,
> And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne,
> And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt.
>
> (1770-75)

Here, the hero's dilemma centres on the feminine: to capitulate to his host's wife's desires is to betray the trust of his host and to compromise Gawain's own integrity, yet by virtue of the chivalric code itself, it goes against everything in which he believes to deny a woman who makes an appeal to him.

The concept of the varied representation of the female is particularly relevant in this narrative. As Sacvan Bercovitch observes, the presentation of the two women of Hautdesert is made all the more emphatic for its distinctions, as the old woman's "[c]rabbed age highlights Bercilak's wife's youthful beauty" (262). As discussed in Chapters Four and Five of this study, Malory's Guinevere both reinforces and undermines the reputations of various knights throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, and similarly, here the lady of the castle essentially characterises Gawain for the reader upon his arrival at Hautdesert. She refers repeatedly to Gawain's reputation, speaking of his skill in the "trweluf craftes" (1527), while noting, "[y]our honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed" (1228).[91] It is this sense of honour she appeals to, stating that one "so cortays" (1525) must capitulate in love, yet referring again to that virtuous honour and courtesy in her request that he keep the gift of the girdle a secret from her husband.

As such, the lady consistently toys with Gawain's emotions and expectations, in what appears to be little more than light-hearted flirtation. This is emphasised by the lady's composure; the nature of her approach is suited to her standing, by means of the manner in which her behaviour is conducted, if not the behaviour itself. Her entrance is heralded by "[a] littel dyn at his dor" (1183), while she leaves in a similarly unobtrusive manner: "Ho dos hir forth at þe dore withouten dyn more" (1308). She is subtle and charming; "the scene is all courtliness and delicacy, and we are asked to imagine no louder pattern of sound that than of the discreet laughter concomitant to an elegant flirtation" (Renoir 151). This apparent flirtation is charming and endearing in its portrayal, yet this pretty façade masks the reality of the lady's actions, as she, a married woman, directs her romantic attentions at her

[91] All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from W.R.J. Barron's edition.

house guest, in a game of harmless intent which culminates in a misogynistic denunciation of femininity.

Here, feminine subtleties, portrayed through charm and delicacy, shield a more disturbing reality: the parallel nature of the hunting scenes in the forest and in the bedroom serves to emphasise the portrayal of Gawain as a helpless beast, being run to ground by a hunter: "Bercilak's pursuit of his quarry becomes a commentary on the lady's pursuit of Gawain, and Gawain's skilful replies become meaningful as the desperate fox 'trantes and tornayeȝ' in parallel fashion, finally attempting to escape through trickery only to run upon Bercilak's waiting sword" (Benson, "The Style of Sir Gawain" 118). This powerful knight is reduced to a figure of weakness as, in a direct contrast with the more typical male pursuit of the female, his host's wife attempts to claim him for her own. Although language of captivity is used flirtatiously by both Gawain and Lady Bertilak, Barron states Gawain's subverted role: "[s]uddenly he is no longer the stereotyped hero of romance, the knight in shining armour, but a fellow being – man the hunter hunted by his prey" (*SGGK* 15).

Although the lady of Hautdesert's actions ultimately reveal Gawain's weakness, his responses triggered by her provocations also serve to highlight his chivalric attributes. Renowned for his skill in the speech of love, Gawain expresses a constructed disbelief that one "so worþy as ȝe" (1537) would pay heed to "so pouer a mon" (1538) as himself, implying, as A.C. Spearing notes, that "any attention she gives him must be a trouble to herself and the greatest of pleasures to him" (180). He is charming in his self-depreciation, and in this way, succeeds in escaping her initial advances. However, Gawain's courtesy is not returned in kind; as Gerald Morgan states in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness*, the lady's presence in Gawain's bedroom is an explicit "violation of the rules of

courtesy" (108), and the knight behaves in a manner as befitting of the expectations of courtesy as is possible in such extenuating circumstances. Morgan argues that, "[f]or all the difficulties created by the lady's intervention, Gawain remains true to the pattern of action required of him by his host" (*The Idea of Righteousness* 108), until of course, the girdle is offered and accepted; however, the fact that Gawain succumbs to temptation in the form of the green lace does not by association devalue his valour on the preceding three days of consistent temptation, when he would accept no more than a kiss.[92]

A situation Malory's Lancelot finds himself in is somewhat comparable with Gawain's dilemma here, as, when held captive by Mellyagaunce, he rebuffs the temptation of the physical act of sexual gratification, but sees no harm in bestowing his temptress with a kiss:

> So she cam to hym agayne the same day that the batayle shulde be and seyde, "Sir Launcelot, bethynke you, for ye ar to hard-harted. And therefore, and ye wolde but onys kysse me, I shulde delyver you and your armoure, and the beste horse that was within sir Mellyaguance stable."
>
> "As for to kysse you," seyde sir Launcelot, "I may do that and lese no worshyp. And wyte you well, and I understood there were ony disworshyp for to kysse you, I wold nat do hit." And than he kyssed hir.
>
> (II.1136.18-27)

Here, it is clearly demonstrated that a kiss stands to "lese no worshyp", with the caveat that should there be "ony disworshyp for to kysse" the lady, Lancelot "wold nat do hit". It is a token of bargaining, and a worthy one at that; Gawain's position can be viewed analogously. As Benton asserts, "kisses and embraces [...] were often

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[92] For further discussion of the value of Gawain's kisses, see Gerald Morgan, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness* 109-11.

a part of medieval greetings, for in courtly circles it could be accepted as reasonable and appropriate to kiss a lady" ("Clio and Venus" 30). The kisses exchanged between Gawain and the lady are all presented in terms of a greeting or a farewell gesture, and are, in turn, passed to Bertilak, in keeping with the men's agreement, at the end of each day. In essence, the manner in which this lady continues to confer kisses upon Gawain, and in an increasingly devoted fashion, can be said to reflect upon his stature as a chivalric knight; "[t]o win kisses so entirely pure and passionate from a lady so beautiful, determined, and clever in the circumstances that Gawain finds himself involves moral action of quite exceptional courtesy and chastity" (G. Morgan, *The Idea of Righteousness* 111). Despite the lady's best provocative efforts, Gawain comports himself with virtuous conduct, and so the lady's actions, instead of being indicative of her character, contribute to the image of Gawain as a worthy chivalric hero.

As Gawain attempts to act so honourably in accordance with the chivalric code, it stands to reason that he fears nothing from his hostess, in keeping with chivalric hospitality. He is unaware that the circumstances are not as they seem, and so, "[w]hen that trust is broken he is rendered vulnerable, and the lady as temptress exploits that vulnerability to the full" (G. Morgan, *The Idea of Righteousness* 34), just as Elaine of Corbin exploits Lancelot's vulnerability in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Gawain cannot protect himself or his character against that of which he is ignorant, leaving the lady free to attempt her seduction and exploit his vulnerability, without his conscious knowledge of the fact that is in such a susceptible position. Indeed, he is presented with a convoluted state of affairs which renders him relatively helpless, as the lady goes from being a flirtatious temptress, to attacking his reputation and questioning his identity, to blessing him in his confusion: "Bot þe burde hym blessed" (1296). The lady presents herself in a number of opposing positions,

reinforcing this sense of confusion and ultimate vulnerability as the knight attempts to maintain some sort of decorum in these mercurial circumstances.

In a manner comparable with Elaine of Ascolat's yearning for Lancelot, the lady of Hautdesert "represents herself as a true unrequited lover, and so destined to a life of bitter unrelieved sorrow (1794-95)" (G. Morgan, *The Idea of Righteousness* 139). Gawain and Lancelot appear similarly resolved in their knightly devotion, both men resolute in their resistance, although Lancelot's heart lies with another, while Gawain is devoted to the virtue of chastity, which, as Gerald Morgan states, "does not imply the absence of feeling but the control of feeling" (*The Idea of Righteousness* 139). The fact that extraordinary control must be exerted in order to contain and curb such feeling in the face of a very human temptation makes Gawain all the more worthy of commendation, although he does not resist alone, appealing to the Virgin Mary once more for her grace in this "[g]ret perile" (1768). Just as he appealed to her while lost in the wilderness, Gawain is again assisted in his hour of need by the mercy of the Blessed Virgin, aided by the ultimate symbol of femininity in his escape from the earthly manifestation of the feminine.

The beautiful temptress is not the sole female presence in the narrative; Bercovitch asserts, "[t]he old woman is so peripheral and her unmasking as Morgan le Fay [...] that her meaning suggests itself only indirectly, as a reflection of larger themes and attitudes" (263). While Morgan le Fay is the instigator of this entire adventure, the emphasis lies with Gawain's experience, and the way in which this experience has shaped him as a knight, irrespective of Morgan le Fay's contributions: "[d]espite her unearthly powers, Gawain is seen, and sees himself, to be the sole shaper of his destiny" (Bercovitch 264). Gawain does not react to the revelation of Morgan le Fay's machinations, and indeed, does not make reference to her when he returns to Arthur's court. Instead, he takes the harsh reality of the

situation and applies it to his own person while denouncing the feminine objectively. Bercovitch argues that this "not only increases the knight's stature but throws Morgan into a new and realistic perspective", as "her real self contrasts with and ultimately serves to deflate her enchanted alter ego" (264); however, while this is absolutely valid in terms of Gawain's narrative, it is she who exploits these circumstances in order to place Gawain into this narrative position of self-exploration and advancement. Once more, the female may take a subsidiary role, but that presence is absolutely felt, nonetheless.

Stephen Manning discusses the concept that "Morgan's temptation is [...] directed towards Arthur's court, which, because of its deliberate dedication to knightly ideals, represents consciousness as a whole" (286). Essentially, Malory's Morgan le Fay is the representative of feminine rebellion against an overwhelmingly male consciousness. Guinevere, the most loved and respected woman to function within the confines of the Arthurian court, "represents here the so-called 'feminine' traits in a man's character which have been recognized and brought under conscious control", and, as such, her marriage to the king is "the necessary prerequisite for the courtesy practised in the court" (Manning 286). This is demonstrative of the definitive rule of masculine thought, as while Morgan "cannot now overthrow [Guinevere], [...] she tries to upset the Arthurian balance" (Manning 286). The marriage of Arthur and Guinevere is emblematic of the success of chivalric society, and the fulfilment of courtesy; Morgan le Fay cannot, from her position of restricted influence, prevent or destroy this, but she can and does attempt to create as much upheaval as possible in the civilised and successful continuation of the court. Guinevere's own disposition contributes to this disruption, as she chooses to betray her husband with Lancelot, but without the malice that is predisposed in Morgan's actions.

Both women, therefore, act as significant contributory factors to the downfall of Camelot and Arthur's reign, despite opposing intentions and motivations. Laura Hibbard Loomis emphasises this, describing Morgan le Fay, in the guise of the withered old woman, as "prime mover in the plot" of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while the beautiful lady of the castle acts as "the agent of temptation" (14) – a simple pawn in Morgan's plot, despite being labelled as Gawain's "enmy kene" (2406). As such, Gawain is able to place all culpability on Morgan, while denouncing womankind as a whole, excusing those men who form the core of his society. Gawain is impassioned in what he believes to be righteous judgement; however, the many facets to a story which is centred on what is intended to be a harmless game leads the reader to potentially consider Gawain's conclusions as undeservedly harsh, a misogynistic assertion of masculine self-righteousness in patriarchal power.[93]

Even when women are physically absent, feminine influence is decidedly felt in the *Gawain* narrative. While the lady of Hautdesert is not actually present at Gawain's altercation with the Green Knight, her presence is still very much felt at the Green Chapel, "since her lace which Gawain is wearing for protection is the reason for his receiving the blow from the challenger" (Carson 252). In this sense, she is very much an active figure in this encounter, and the feminine presence is all

[93] Mills' work on "Christian Significance and Romance Tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" discusses the fact that the appearance of the female as temptress is often overlaid with a textual duality, in that the choice between succumbing to temptation or remaining pure and chaste is paralleled with the battle between good and evil. In the *Morte Darthur*, this is demonstrated in the circumstance of Perceval's temptation and the protective properties of the sign of the cross (considered in detail in Chapter Five) – just as Gawain uses the sign of the cross to protect himself in the wilderness, and later, in the bedroom. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "the Temptation scenes by presenting a situation charged with moral and spiritual danger could easily be made to figure a wider conflict between the powers of good and evil" (Mills, "Christian Significance" 93). However, while Perceval's temptress is demonic, in the *Gawain* text, it is never implied that "the lady is anything more than she appears to be" (Mills, "Christian Significance" 94); she is simply an agent for the execution of a game, which develops from harmless sport into a social critique, based on the perception of the offended knight.

the more established and condemned as Gawain recalls in bitterness and sorrow those men who fell from glory "þurȝ wyles of wymmen" (2415).[94]

He appears to be initially acrimonious in his condemnation of the ladies of Hautdesert and launches into a tirade against women in general, who he declares responsible for the ruin of many worthy men. His attack on the contrivance of women demonstrates the knight as potentially expressing "bad grace in blaming his failure in the quest not on his own weakness but on the deceit of the women" (G. Morgan, *The Idea of Righteousness* 165). Gerald Morgan goes on to address the way in which Gawain "expresses this bitterness in what appears to many modern readers to be a classic piece of medieval anti-feminism" ("Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" 275):

And comaundeȝ me to þat cortays, your comlych fere,
commend me; comely wife
Boþe þat on and þat oþer, myn honoured ladyeȝ,
that other (lady)
Þat þus hor knyȝt wyth hor kest han koyntly bigyled.
Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde,
no marvel; made foolish
And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,
through women's wiles
For so watȝ Adam in erde with one bygyled, *beguiled*
And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsoneȝ –
Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde – and Dauyth þerafter
Watȝ blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.
(2411-19)

[94] See also Mother Angela Carson, O.S.U., "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function" 245-54.

Here, however, Gerald Morgan attests to the fact that Gawain is not simply blaspheming the female in general, but "invoking the fact of his personal experience" and allowing this experience to be "validated by the experience of others" ("Medieval Misogyny" 277). Analogously with the manner in which Lancelot, "the beste knyght of the worlde" (II.792.19), suffers at the hands of the feminine, so too does Gawain place himself in exalted company, as "[i]t is only the very best of men who are vulnerable to women in this way" ("Medieval Misogyny" 277). This can be read as an acknowledgement of the fact that "the highest human excellence is flawed", as "[n]o human attainment is superior to that of these men, and yet all of them fell short" (*The Idea of Righteousness* 165).

When viewed in this capacity, this speech is not so much an invective against femininity, but rather a validation of Gawain's behaviour, acceding to the fact that even those greatest men were essentially flawed by virtue of the human condition. He goes on to re-establish the impression of his generosity of spirit, bidding Bertilak and the ladies of Hautdesert farewell in a decorous fashion, despite the fact that "that these three have been responsible for his bitter self-knowledge of imperfection" (G. Morgan, *The Idea of Righteousness* 166) – and he suffers immeasurably as a result of this knowledge. Thus, both Morgan le Fay and the beautiful temptress are integral to the ideal of the tale, yet are simultaneously extraneous to that final awareness gained by Gawain, as he harnesses his experiences and transforms it into a masculine endeavour.

Here, the influence of the female is strikingly seen in her capacity to cause harm to the best of all men. Gawain's grievances against the female sex are compounded in his second acceptance of the green girdle, which is this time presented to him by Bertilak himself. Once more, Gawain takes the girdle, but this time with the intention of wearing it "as a badge of dishonour" (Barron, *SGGK* 21).

Upon his return to Camelot, the Knights of the Round Table all choose to bear a girdle henceforth, as a reminder of every mortal man's susceptibility to temptation, and the importance of safeguarding one's moral fortitude against the temptation of glory and pride – in this case, as emblematised by a woman with the added implication of sexual temptation. The image of Gawain and his fellow knights bearing the girdle as an acknowledgement of imperfection, serves as a stirring visual demonstration of the loss of "the moral completeness unto itself of its would-be self-concept" (Ingledew 2). In this case, the Round Table Knights' potential for failure is depicted in terms of the symbol of the girdle; a very much feminised symbol which was in itself put in place with the clear implication of sexual temptation, lust, earthly gratification, and inherent danger, as emblematised by the female.

Laura Hibbard Loomis notes that Gawain returns to Camelot "not in conventional glory, but in self-confessed shame" (24), bearing the girdle as an emblem of this. However, "that shame gave him new grace"; instead of being criticised for his lack of propriety and misplaced judgement, he is instead honoured for his capacity to learn from his experience, and in addition, the court of the Round Table attains "a new nobility by its act of compassionate fellowship" as they wear the green girdle as an alliance (Hibbard Loomis 25). One man's shame becomes a court's triumph of compassion and unity, an overwhelming patriarchal victory driven by a female attempt at attaining power. This tale is undoubtedly centred on Gawain's chivalric development; however, the means by which this is explored come almost exclusively from a feminine provenance.[95]

[95] Jan Solomon provides further analysis of the female influence on Gawain's experience in "The Lesson of Sir Gawain" 267-78.

Feminine Autonomy in the Manipulation of the Male

The establishment of feminine control takes a different form in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, in a presentation of the struggle of one woman to maintain autonomy in a male-dominated medieval society. In her desire to remove herself from the earthly and fully devote herself to Christ, Margery Kempe makes an active attempt to set herself apart from society and gender associations, instead labelling herself a "creatur" of Christ. Margery, however, is referred to repeatedly in terms of her gender throughout her *Book*, despite her attempts to maintain her asexual "creatur" nature, and is absolutely judged in relation to her femininity.

In spite of the restrictions and expectations enforced by social authority, Margery Kempe places herself in the masculine role of preacher in a very public manner, even when society attempts to silence her deviant voice. She is greeted with animosity, to the extent that she is told by a monk that she should be kept in solitude, in the confines of her home, so as not to offend the public with her behaviour: "I wold thow wer closyd in an hows of ston that ther schuld no man speke wyth the" (I.13.629-30). In keeping with the accepted tradition of the anchoress, she should be confined within that appropriate space, but as Margery is not an anchoress, but a wife and mother, this is "suggestive of the need for all transgressive and troublesome women to return to the enclosed space of the domestic where they can be similarly categorised, controlled and contained" (Herbert McAvoy 7-8). The words of this vexed monk clearly sum up the general social perspective of the time: that "the most appropriate place for a woman's voice to be sounded is within the stone walls of religious or domestic space" (Herbert McAvoy 8).[96]

[96] This idea of confinement raises the idea of the awareness of the feminine space and the implications of its violation; see Dhira B. Mahoney, "Symbolic Uses of Space in Malory's *Morte Darthur*"; and Anthony Goodman, *Margery Kempe and her World*.

Refusing to capitulate to male expectation, Margery continues to preach the word of God, "depict[ing] herself as disseminator of [...] female wisdom in the absence of the male and within a self-supporting female community" (Herbert McAvoy 193); she is a woman who places herself in what is definitively a male's role, and acts as she sees fit within that authority. The result is a common empathy and sense of community within an entirely female sphere, acted out within that arena dedicated by society to the female – the realm of the domestic. While Margery is on the whole treated with suspicion and disdain, much female support is also offered to her throughout her journey; "[i]n the absence of consistent male approval, therefore, Margery's sense of her own authority is often achieved by an insistent drawing on effectively inclusive female-centred discourses which ultimately serve to destabilise accepted notions of orthodoxy and the need for male approval" (Herbert McAvoy 195). As a woman, she is accepted by many women, and this approval appears to be far more significant than the male antipathy or overt condemnation which she consistently faces. While women who act outside of the realms of social acceptability are invariably condemned in medieval English society, both real and imagined, this circumstance as depicted in Margery's case emphasises the relevance and significance of a female support system within that sphere, in a self-sustained microcosm of the overruling patriarchal arena.

The portrayal of the female is once again of a censorious nature in the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*, a text "frequently cited as an example of the inextricable connection of saints' loves and romance" (Finlayson 452). Amiloun's "wicked and schrewed" wife is one of two manifestly malevolent characters, alongside the treacherous steward (line 1561).[97] Amiloun's illness is, in the eyes of

[97] All quotations from *Amis and Amiloun* are taken from Edward Foster's edition.

his wife, divine retribution for his "ivel" actions (1494). Upon learning of her husband's leprosy, mistreats and starves him:

Thei his lord for hunger and cold	*Though*
Dyed ther he lay,	
He schuld have noither mete no drink,	
No socour of non other thing	
For hir after that day.	*From*

(1664-68)

In a final blow, she banishes him from the kingdom.

While leprosy in medieval England was a source of terror in any community, meted out as a punishment from God according to some, as addressed above, the poet's unequivocal censure of Amiloun's wife as being "wicked and schrewed" removes any shred of sympathy that the reader may have for a woman faced with an incurably ill spouse. In direct contrast, Margarey Kempe cared for her husband throughout his final illness, despite the circumstances of their marital separation. As such, Kratins argues that the woman's brutal treatment of her leprous husband is a manifestation of a wholly pitiless nature that "lacks any redeeming spiritual virtue, such as mercy and compassion" (351).

Contrary to this negative positioning of the female in the text, Belisaunt, at this juncture, is presented as being the antithesis to Amiloun's wife. In contrast to his own wife's immediate disassociation, Amis's wife is generous in her kindness towards Amiloun:

Into hir chaumber she gan him lede	*lead*
And kest of all his pover wede	*cast off; poor clothing*
And bathed his bodi al bare,	*naked*
And to a bedde swithe him brought;	*quickly*

With clothes riche and wele ywrought; *well made*

Ful blithe of him thai ware.

(2179-84)

Belisaunt's benevolence throws Amiloun's wife's ruthlessness into sharp relief, which is further heightened by her attempt to enter into an illicit marriage while her husband is indisposed. In addition to securing his physical comfort, Belisaunt granted the "foule" Amiloun (2173) with her sympathy; she "fel aswon" (2170) and "wepe" (2171) for his pitiful condition, and even "kist" him in her compassion (2174).

Contrasting with this pitiful figure of the invalid male is the leprous Cresseid in Henryson's *Testament*: she is "faiding" (line 461) and "rotting" (464)[98], and, as Riddy observes, "is made to bear the symbolic weight of the expulsion of the feminine [...] defiled by promiscuity and then disfigured by leprosy" ("Abject odious" 236), in a "pessimistic reminder of the processes of time" to which Cresseid is cruelly subjected, while Troilus remains "apparently exempt" from such indignities (233). In a reverse parallel, Cresseid "transmogrifies into unrecognizability" (Riddy, "Abject odious" 233), a grotesque husk of femininity, while her male counterpart in this context, Amiloun, receives sympathy and nurturing despite the nature of his illness. While Cresseid is left to suffer, Belisaunt tends to those in need; her contrast with Amiloun's wife is further enhanced by the fact that Belisaunt is mother to two children, while Amiloun's wife's cruelty is tacitly endorsed by her state of childlessness.

Belisaunt, however, is not necessarily the paragon of femininity that is indicated by her charity. It can be argued that she is the reason Amiloun is struck

[98] All quotations and translations from *The Testament of Cresseid* are taken from David J. Parkinson's edition of Robert Henryson's Complete Works.

down by leprosy, and so is duty-bound to care for him. Her seduction of Amis, and subsequent machinations for her own satisfaction and self-preservation, demonstrate clearly her capability and the full extent of her feminine wiles. She is a complex character, who sacrifices her children to pay her moral debt and save Amiloun from death. In the initial stages of the text, Belisaunt is cunning and shrewd in her selfishness, uncaring of what sacrifices are made in the name of her pleasure. However, by the close of the text, Belisaunt has proved herself to be a worthy woman through the development of her character as a caring, considerate wife, mother and friend. The restoration of her childrens' lives at the end of the text, if viewed as a divine reward, provides the necessary proof that Belisaunt has shed her self-serving nature and progressed as a woman who is commendable in her virtue. Amiloun's wife remains relatively one-dimensional in her spite and her malice, yet Belisaunt's character displays a depth which allows for growth and progression through the development of the text.

Similar complexity can be seen, to an extent, in Malory's portrayal of Morgan le Fay. Primarily portrayed in the narrative as the conniving, murderous half-sister of the celebrated king, closer examination of Morgan's actions reveal a depth to her character that supersedes the somewhat one-dimensional image of the wicked woman. While "kynge Arthur ys the man in the worlde that she hatyth moste, because he is moste of worship and of prouesse of ony of hir bloode" (I.145.33-35), Arthur's involvement with the death of Accolon, whom "she lovyth…oute of mesure as paramour" (I.145.36) may have provided the impetus for her subsequent cruelty. Her power is confirmed as Arthur recalls his past admiration of her:

> I shall be sore avenged uppon hir, that all Crystendom shall speke of hit. God knowyth I have honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kyn aftir.
>
> (I.146.20-24)

The extent to which Morgan has been "honoured" (I.146.22), "worshipped" (I.146.22), and "trusted" (I.146.23), perhaps as a function of family, parallels the degree to which she is now reviled for her "false crauftis" (I.146.19-20) and "fals lustes" (I.146.20).

Upon Accolon's death, Arthur returns his corpse to Morgan, with the words, "sey that I sende her hym to a present" (I.148.30-31) – a callous taunt in the face of her mourning. In keeping with the medieval paradigm of retribution, Morgan le Fay's vengeance is justified to an extent. Negating her brother's accusations of "fals lustes" (I.146.20), the discovery of Accolon's death brings great distress to Morgan:

> But whan quene Morgan wyste that Accolon was dede, she was so sorowfull that nye hir herte to-braste, but bycause she wolde nat hit were knowyn oute, she kepte hir countenaunce and made no sembelaunte of dole.
>
> (I.149.34-36, I.150.1-2)

Her grief is sincere, yet her aptitude for self-preservation is more potent, thus sealing her silence.

Her capacity for enchantment further accentuates this propensity for self-protection. Merging herself and her allies with their surroundings, "she shope hirself, horse and man, by enchauntemente unto grete marbyll stonys" (I.151.19-21), preventing their discovery and capture. Morgan also establishes her faculty for healing, as demonstrated in the case of the injured Alexander, whom she kept in her castle following his recovery, "passynge hevy and all sad" (II.643.13). In spite of her

questionable intentions, here, Morgan's "oynemente" (II.642.7) put Alisander "oute of his payne" (II.642.8), attesting to her auspicious talent as healer.[99]

Morgan le Fay's final testament to social grace comes upon Arthur's death: "thus was he lad away in a shyp wherein were three quenys; that one was kynge Arthur syster, quene Morgan le Fay" (III.1242.5-7). Attending to her brother's last days, Morgan le Fay displays a vein of humanity that has been eclipsed by the many malevolent deeds that punctuate her involvement in the text. Morgan le Fay is perceived as a vindictive woman; however, she is also a woman of passion, resourcefulness, and admirable talents in the realm of sorcery, asserting a definitively female influence on the narrative.

Mothers and Sons

The acceptance of, or conversely, the crisis of, maternal identity, is a defining factor in the portrayal of the feminine persona in medieval romance and alternate genres, as demonstrated, for instance, by Malory's Igraine, *Gowther*'s duchess, *Bevis'* Josiane, and Margery Kempe. David Salter writes that "women tend to be judged on whether they are good wives and mothers to their respective husbands and sons", with the acknowledgement that "those very restricted roles and identities that are available to women tend to be governed by masculine codes and concerns" (44). The maternal role is therefore one in which women can thrive in a personal sense, and be either recognised or judged from a social perspective.[100]

We have seen how Bevis' proclamation of allegiance to his father and subsequent vow to exact vengeance for his murder effectively sever any possibility of familial reconciliation; Bevis' mother is not perceived in the fond terms of a

[99] This incident is considered in relation to Morgan le Fay's wickedness in Chapter Five, below.
[100] For more, see Fellows, "Mothers in Middle English Romance".

mother or a friend by her son, but in the lowest terms of femininity, a "houre" (308) who will utilise her feminine wiles for financial gain. While familial reunion and the celebration of the family unit is one of the most popular motifs in romance literature throughout the ages, *Bevis* sees the sundering of the hero's own family. While he professes his father's nobility and renounces his mother's sexual transgressions, Bevis is, ironically, by his own masculine principles, tainting himself with the possibility that he is "base begot": that is, not actually his father's son. His mother's reaction to his accusations once again reveals a transgression of femininity in what appears to be a dearth of maternal ability; she strikes her child in a rage, heedless of his grief for the death of his father. Her physical fury is curtailed only by the intervention of Sader and with blatant disregard for even the slightest maternal protectiveness, she calls upon her son's mentor to help her to dispose of her child: "Let sle me yonge sone Bef [...] I ne reche, what deth he dighe,/Sithe he be cold!" (339; 341-42).

Queen Igraine's maternal relationship with Arthur can be positioned alongside that of Bevis and his mother. Malory's *Morte Darthur* once again revisits an established narrative concept familiar to contemporary readers of *Bevis*; Bevis is vocal in his opposition to his mother's supposed sexual transgressions, speaking out in support of a father who may, in fact, not be his. An analogous anxiety exists in the *Morte Darthur*, where the legitimacy of Arthur's conception is called into question. Igraine is similarly accused of being "the falsyst lady of the worlde, and the moste traytoures unto the kynges person" by an enraged Sir Ulfius, due to the manner in which Arthur was conceived and born under a veil of enchantments (I.45.10-11).

This is also reminiscent of Gowther's conception in *Sir Gowther*; here, the duke issues an ultimatum to his wife, stating that unless she can produce an heir, the marriage will be nullified, as he declares: "Y do bot wast my tyme on the/Eireles

mon owre londys bee" (58-59). The duchess "preyd to God and Maré mylde" (64) that they would grant her "grace to have a child" (65), with a carelessness born of sheer desperation: "On what maner scho ne roghth" (66). The answer to this plea comes in the form of a "sexual encounter in an orchard with an incubus-fiend bearing her husband's appearance" (Blamires, "The twin demons" 48); this "felturd fende" (74) "had is wylle" (73), then announces that he has "geyton a chylde" (76) on the duchess, who will be "full wylde" (77) in his youth. The duchess' prayers have been answered, in a sense; wish-fulfilment is here double-edged, as she is with child, but not by her husband's doing.

Unlike Igraine, who believed she was lying with her husband at Arthur's conception,[101] Blamires notes that in *Sir Gowther*, "[w]hether the duchess experiences him *as* her husband or as someone else pretending to be her husband remains crucially uncertain" ("The twin demons" 49), raising the dual concerns of the innocence of the "ladé myld" (83), and Gowther's legitimacy. In an attempt to regain some control over the situation upon the realisation of her circumstances, the duchess claims that a "nangell" (85) has prophesized their successful conception of a child, so the duke "pleyd hym with that ladé hende" (94), and she engages in intercourse for a second time, cleansing the "fiendish violation" while simultaneously inviting "the conclusion that the Duke might just as well be the father, or, that the Duke might as well be a fiend" ("The twin demons" 51-52).

In responding to her husband's demands and the consequences of her fiendish encounter, *Sir Gowther*'s duchess does ultimately exert an element of control in her manipulation of the circumstances and seduction of her husband under false pretences. Malory's Igraine, however, requests for a male to represent her in the face of the accusations, thus delegating all responsibility and autonomy.

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[101] See Chapter Four for analysis of Arthur's conception.

Bevis' mother, on the other hand, successfully accomplishes her plots through the utilisation of male messengers and lovers, allowing them to assume control in keeping with the patriarchal society in which the narrative is set. However, she is aware of the ultimate authority which she holds; while men are doing her bidding and acting on her behalf in social terms, she maintains absolute control, leaving the men to act under her influence, seemingly unaware of any such manipulation. Igraine, conversely, is candid in her reluctance to speak independently, stating: "I am a woman and I may nat fyght; but rather than I sholde be dishonoured, there wolde som good man take my quarell" (I.45.28-30).

Aware of the incongruity of a woman's participation in an argument, Igraine is forthright in her request to be represented by a man who will vindicate her, restoring her name and her honour. Despite being queen, she is all too conscious of the boundaries established by society that determine how she must act; while she is earnest in her desire to exonerate herself, she knows that a lone female is socially powerless without the aid of a male shield.

Both Igraine and Bevis' mother safeguard themselves behind men, in accordance with the dictates of society, yet the disparity lies in the fact that Bevis' mother maintains a grasp on her authority through cunning manipulation, while Igraine is ingenuous in her need for male representation to protect her integrity. Implicit in the actions of both is a masculine sense that it is impossible for a woman to retain virtue and power concurrently.

Bevis' mother's desire to murder her son is once again an act in which she both exploits and denounces her femininity. She abuses her feminine wiles in her attempt to influence Sader, addressing him directly with the phrase, "thou ert me lef" (337). As was the case in her manipulation of the German emperor, she expends her sexuality in order to persuade her male targets to do her bidding. However, in

her merciless treatment of her son, she removes herself from that which can be perceived as being the essence of femininity: motherhood. To become a mother is arguably one of the primary functions of the female body.[102] The maternal feelings that accompany this function further exemplify the nurturing, caring qualities that are so indicative of the feminine. To aim to actively kill a child is an act far removed from the concept of humanity as a whole, and is particularly contradictory to all that the notion of motherhood represents. *Guy*'s Felice, insensible with grief in the wake of her husband's departure, aspires to be the agent of her own demise in the simple pursuit of relief from the sorrow. It is only the fact of her pregnancy that prevents her from meeting death at her husband's renounced blade; "To sle hirselven er the child wer born/Sche thought hir soule it wer forlorn/Evermore at Domesday" (412-14). Alexander Murray writes that the bond between mother and child "may be the strongest of all human bonds, and if it is, it follows that its disturbance can be traumatic to either party and in extremes drive either to suicide" (256). Here, it appears that this bond has the opposite effect in the context of Felice's suicidal thoughts; despite her desperation and the hopelessness of her circumstances, Felice's protective instinct reigns dominant and she struggles through her personal torment to protect her child in a labour of love, while Bevis' mother actively seeks her son's death for her own ends.

Bevis' mother's indifference regarding the manner in which her son should die is cold, as she claims, "I ne reche, what deth he dighe,/Sithe he be cold!" (341-42). Bevis, however, asserts her maternal status even as he denounces her, still repeatedly addressing her as "moder" at lines 307 and 313. Ironically, the manner in which she attempts to dispense of her son is reminiscent of the stereotypical

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[102] For analysis of the physical functions of the female body and the significance of pregnancy, see Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference* 3; 15; 280-81.

maternal image, where a mother takes her naughty child by the ear. Here, "his moder tok him be the ere" (492) and attempts to lead him to his death. Directing her knights to sell Bevis as a slave, "Whather ye have for him mor and lesse" (499), she renounces all responsibility for her child. Her eventual death, when "she fel and brak hire nekke" (3462) brought no sorrow to her son: "glad he was of hire,/Of his damme, ase of is stipsire" (3463-64). Bevis' lack of grief at his mother's death marks, with a determined finality, the lack of a mother/son bond between the two.

While Bevis' mother disowns her son after seven years of motherhood and actively attempts to facilitate his demise, Igraine, on the contrary, is ignorant of even the identity of her child until it is revealed following Ulfius's accusations. Igraine was left maternally bereft following Arthur's birth, as the infant was concealed by Merlin; Igraine claims, "whan the chylde was borne, hit was delyvirde unto Merlion and fostred by hym. And so I saw the childe never aftir, nothir wote nat what ys hys name; for I knew hym never yette" (I.45.36-37; 46.1-2). She was deprived of the opportunity to rear and nurture her child, and when she is reunited with her son, following Ulfius's indictment, the moment is one of joy as mother and son embrace: "And therewith kyng Arthure toke his modir, quene Igrayne, in hys armys and kyssed her and eythir wepte uppon other. Than the kynge lete make a feste that lasted eyght dayes" (I.46.12-15). Both revel in the discovery of the other, in a celebration of familial love and the maternal bond that is so clearly absent in Bevis' relationship with his mother. The incongruence between these two relationships is apparent as the narrative threads diverge: Bevis and his mother sustain a relatively normal relationship without undue cause for comment until her dissatisfaction causes her to kill his father and reject her son, while Igraine remains unaware of her son's identity until he reaches adulthood, at which point both rejoice

in recognition of the other. Neither maternal relationship fulfils the ideal, yet both women are definitive in their significant effect on the lives of their respective sons.

Margery Kempe's maternal status is a noteworthy point of comparison here, particularly in relation to Malory's contemporary audience. Despite having had fourteen children before being able to liberate herself from her conjugal duties, Margery's *Book* provides very little information about her family; "the domestic details which one would suppose to have been entirely engrossing in the life of a woman such as Margery are almost entirely absent from her text" (Herbert McAvoy 32). Far from providing any focus on that which would have been expected to be one of the most overwhelming factors in her daily existence, Margery instead seems to deem her children and their presence in her life as being relatively inconsequential; they are extraneous to her quest for spiritual fulfilment, and this is made extremely clear in their presence, or lack of it, in her *Book*.

The only specific references to Margery Kempe's children come as a result of their direct influence on her spiritual journey, in keeping with the concept that "[t]he presentation of Margery's familiar relationships is partial and distorted by the agenda of *The Book*" (Goodman 58). The first reference is her account, in Book One, of the difficult birth of her first child, the birthing process which allowed her to transcend the earthly and gain an awareness of Christ's presence. This is the event which heralded the beginning of her religious devotion, and so it is recounted with due consideration and significance. The only other particularised mention of Margery's children comes in Book Two, with "the return of a prodigal, renegade adult son whom she struggles to convert to a life of goodness and temperance" (Herbert McAvoy 33). It is not indicated if this son is her firstborn; nevertheless, he provides her with further fuel to add to the blaze of spiritual desire.

This is the only point in the text where the reader sees Margery take what can be perceived as a maternal interest in any of her children, as she attempts to persuade her son to atone for his many and varied sins, and to embrace a spiritually worthy existence, as she herself has. These incidents do not serve to encourage any image of Margery as a maternal figure; instead operating with the opposite effect as Herbert McAvoy points out:

> [c]onsidering the absence elsewhere in the text, the dramatic entrance of both of these children at these key points constitutes a strategic engagement with the discourse of maternity, an engagement which here serves a purpose outside that of mere narrative and evidences potentialities within a maternal subjectivity to offer support and authority to Margery's chosen vocation as holy woman of God.
>
> (34)

Both of Margery's recollections of her children bear negative connotations in the text, as she is desperate for her sinful son to "to leevyn the worlde and folwyn Crist" (II.1.15-16), while he is himself determined to remain autonomous in "the perellys of this wretchyd and unstabyl worlde" (II.1.13). While Margery's insistence on her son's renunciation of earthly sin may be viewed as maternal concern for a man who has lost his way in life due to a lack of parental guidance, it can also be seen as a continuation of her quest to exert her power and spread God's word and to guide others in his image.

Through pilgrimage and public preaching, Margery has done everything in her autonomous power to make the word of God heard by society as a whole, yet responses are mixed and people are not always receptive. Her focus on her son, therefore, as one wayward individual, can be seen as being symbolic of her desire to absolve all of humankind from their sins, and to lead them with her on the path to

righteousness. Here, as opposed to being mother of one man, and guiding him as such, she can be perceived in a wider context as displaying these maternal instincts towards all of mankind, from her self-proclaimed position as lover of Christ. The manner in which she counsels her son seems to reach beyond the realms of maternal reprimand, and take the form of a mystical denunciation, "[b]earing more resemblance to a curse than the firm motherly warning she would have us believe she offers" (Herbert McAvoy 42):

> Now sithyn thu wil not leevyn the world at my cownsel, I charge the at my blissyng kepe thi body klene at the lest fro womanys feleschep tyl thu take a wyfe aftyr the lawe of the Chirche. And, yyf thu do not, I pray God chastise the and ponysch the therfor.
>
> (II.1.21-24)

Margery's son does succumb to an illness which bears some similitude with leprosy, and as such, he himself and society as a whole believe that Margery's reproach has condemned her child to this disease as a suitable punishment for his decision to ignore her instructions. As is the case in the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*, illness – particularly leprosy – is viewed as a punishment, meted out by divine intervention. Both her son and those around him view Margery's words, and their supposed consequences, with suspicion born of Margery's self-portrayal as a direct servant of Christ. She refuses to countenance any hope of benevolence or tenderness until her son demonstrates himself to be suitably contrite, and, in time, he does approach his mother out of desperation and a determination to survive.

In this way, Margery is placed in the position of God's envoy on earth, an emissary for the divine, but in a position of maternal power; essentially, she situates herself as a living symbol of the Virgin Mary, the literal mother of her son, but a spiritual maternal figure to all of humanity. This man's earthly mother is viewed as

having a direct link with the Almighty, demonstrating "Margery Kempe's ability to universalise the personal and to personalise the universal in her text, often by means of the seemingly more mundane and prosaic aspects of existence" (Herbert McAvoy 43). Her son "cam to hys modyr, tellyng hir of hys mysgovernawns, promittyng he schulde ben obedient to God and to hir" (II.1.37-38); he directly requests a blessing from Margery, and pleads that she will intercede with her Lord on his behalf. In essence, as Herbert McAvoy summarises, "Margery's son's contrition is a triumph for Margery's worldly *and* spiritual maternity, consolidating for herself, her contemporaries and her readers alike her synonymous subjectivity as dutiful earthly mother and privileged Mother of God" (43).

Essentially, "*[t]he Book* does not dwell on her role as a mother, or on her children, because those subjects were largely irrelevant to its purposes" (Goodman 67). Margery's struggle to separate herself from the domesticities of life as a wife and mother is a long and arduous one; John eventually releases his wife from the bonds of her marital duties after the birth of their fourteenth child, loath as he is to do so. It seems that it is Margery's dogged persistence that enables her success; her honesty is almost audacious in her quest for a life of celibacy, as her "revulsion" towards her husband's attentions "appeared to her as an insuperable obstacle to the development of her spiritual life" (Goodman 68). Her attitude lies in direct contrast to the ideal spiritual and physical union of marriage displayed in *Sir Isumbras*, where, "[t]he bond between husband and wife is both spiritual and emotional, a model of Christian union rather than romantic love" (Hudson 10). Here, Isumbras' wife fights by his side, preferring that they would die together and go to their divine reward as one, rather than forsake him on earth. However, when John Kempe queries whether his wife would prefer to see him killed and decapitated than have him "medele" (I.11.524) with her again, Margery answers in the affirmative, avowing

without reluctance or hesitation; "Forsothe I had levar se yow be slayn than we schuld turne agen to owyr unclennesse" (I.11.527-28). It is at this point that John despairs of his marriage, declaring, "Ye arn no good wyfe" (I.11.528). Margery is decidedly lacking in those qualities that exemplify a good wife and mother, and here her husband makes his dissatisfaction abundantly clear. While this "realist" model of writing is disparate in genre from Malory's romance, the issues that it addresses in a historical sense serve to inform the reader of audience awareness and expectation of the femine role, both real and imagined.

Such maternal disinterest, be it real or imagined, goes directly against that desire to nurture which pervades medieval literature, particularly in the "Eustace-Constance-Florence-Griselda Legends"; for instance, while the story of *Octavian* is one of treachery, betrayal, and misplaced honour, nurture and the maternal instinct is one of the abiding themes that runs throughout the narrative. Octavian is taken by a lioness, but it is clear that the animal is hunting for the protection of her own children, not for the sake of blood, as is evidenced in "her suckling Octavian and of her tender, playful treatment of the babe" (Hudson 47). The lioness herself parallels Octavian's mother, acting as "a symbolic expression of [...] fierce female protectiveness" (R. Field, "Popular Romance" 22), reflected as the empress enters the lion's den in search of her son, with a "self-sacrificing quality" which "seems to be bound up in particular with her role as a mother" (Salter 49). Here, as Rosalind Field observes, the lioness is, in effect, an "externalization of the queen's maternal love" ("Popular Romance" 22).[103] Clement and his wife are equally devoted parents to the misplaced Florent, providing him with a wet nurse as a baby, and protecting and encouraging him as he grows – particularly in this case of his adoptive mother,

[103] See also Jennifer Fellows "Mothers in Middle English Romance" 44-46, and David Salter, "'Born to Thraldom and Penance': Wives and Mothers in Middle English Romance" 48-50.

who is vigilant in the defence of the boy, especially in the face of Clement's occasional tempers. In a marked contrast, it appears that Margery's own children are but supporting characters on her spiritual journey, inconsequential and of negligible relevance.

Margery appears to place little value on her role as wife and mother, evidently wishing to remove herself as completely as possible from the responsibilities associated with that which binds her to the earthly and her role within society. However, another aspect of Margery's character, a shrewd awareness which is removed from divine faith, demonstrates her capacity for manipulation in order to achieve her own ends. She is not above exploiting her status as wife and mother in an attempt to influence those around her, and to protect herself from the hand of the law. Just such an example of manoeuvring takes place in Leicester: when Margery is charged with heretical behaviour and intentions, she faces severe consequences and directly calls upon her marital status in order to convince the court of her innocence. She has, on a number of occasions, used her position as John Kempe's wife to remove herself from problematic circumstances which threaten her well-being; here, she places her position as wife and mother to the fore once more:

> "Sir," sche seyde, "I take witnesse of my Lord Jhesu Crist, whos body is her present in the sacrament of the awter, that I nevyr had part of mannys body in this worlde in actual dede be wey of synne, but of myn husbondys body, whom I am bowndyn to be the lawe of matrimony, and be whom I have born fourteen childeryn. For I do yow to wetyn, ser, that ther is no man in this worlde that I lofe so meche as God, for I lofe hym abovyn al thynge, and, ser, I telle yow trewly I lofe al men in God and for God."
>
> (I.48.2713-19)

Margery stands alone, yet invokes the presence of her husband and children in order to substantiate her character defence and reinforce her self-presentation as "a chaste, loyal and godly woman" (Herbert McAvoy 61). She neglects to mention the reality of the situation in her blatant utilisation of those whom she has forsaken; "[n]o matter that the 'lawe of matrimony' has been renegotiated in her marriage and her children are obviously being cared for by others or by each other" (Herbert McAvoy 61), Margery calls their names into her company in the Leicester court in a display of self-preservation. By placing herself as a creditable, socially upright wife, with responsibility for fourteen children, Margery renders herself far more acceptable to the court, as her evidencing of her social duty curtails the court's ecclesiastical aggravation. Here, Margery retains an active awareness of the way in which society operates and manipulates and exploits her circumstances to her own advantage, allowing her to continue on a path which is very much intimate and personal, and completely removed from all sense of familial responsibility.

The maternal figure, as such, is a fundamentally influential one in medieval literature, be it in terms of direct impact on the male with regard to maternal control, or the employment and exploitation of the significance of the maternal status in a patriarchal society, as is particularly effective in the case of Margery Kempe. While Margery's influence is debatable in the context of recognition by a medieval literary audience, her story establishes the dual expectations and restrictions assigned to the female in both a literary and a historical sense, most significantly in her maternal role. The role of a mother is an essential one, which commands a certain amount of respect, even in a society dominated by male supremacy; it is the way in which individual women harness this potential power, however, and use it to their advantage, which makes the maternal figure a force to be reckoned with in the social constructs of these narratives.

The Power of Sexuality: Virginity and Virtue

From the idealised purity of maternal love to purity of spirit: while virginity is viewed as laudable and required in an unmarried woman in medieval romance, the concept of sexual relations can also be exploited in a reversal of the dynamic that fuels a patriarchal society, as a woman's sexual activity bears a significant influence on the recipient male. Female sexual activity in medieval literature, including Malory's *Morte Darthur,* is restricted: obviously, an unmarried woman's virginal status dictates the social respect with which she is viewed, while the chivalric status dictates a knight's actions regarding the protection of a woman's purity.

This is established as one of the essential conventions of romance in the effective propulsion of the narrative drive; "[i]t is only when romance establishes [...] the importance of female chastity that there is any stake in trying to defend it; but once the import of chastity is established, then the narrative can get on with the business of violating it" (McDonald, "A polemical introduction" 16). This proves a necessary paradox in romance construction; while women may be subjected to male dominance and victimised at the loss of their virginity, the courtly male in chivalric society is equally constrained in his actions by his pledge to defend and safeguard the vulnerable female.

In this sense, the preservation of virginity seems to be equally restrictive in the converse contexts of the male and the female demographic of Arthurian society. By definition, the Pentecostal Oath dictates male behaviour in terms of female autonomy, simultaneously depicting the male as both protector and threat. Malory defines the destructive consequence of active sexuality on the male through the dream of Gawain, which champions young, virginal knights and chastises those who have been weakened by succumbing to the physical temptation of lust (II.942-46).

The pure are represented by young white bulls, who are strong and robust in their virginity, while those who have demonstrated weakness and surrendered to sexual pleasure are blackened in colour and physically exhausted by their transgressions. Here, the reader is presented with an image which emboldens the female and places them in a distinct position of power; however, this power is of a destructive nature and poses a significant threat to the innocent young men who fall victim to the lures of the wanton woman.[104]

Similarly, the sexual pursuits of women are used as both an insult and a drain on male ability in *Bevis,* when, for example, responding to taunts, the emperor aims to kill the messenger and instead fatally wounds his son. His error results in further ridicule, as his inaccuracy is said to be rooted in his excessive sexual activity:

Thow gropedest the wif anight to lowe,	*groped; wife; too lowly*
Thow might nought sen aright to throwe;	
Thow havest so swonke on hire to night,	
Thow havest negh forlore the sight	

(3105-08)

The emperor's prolific sexual activity is said to have distorted his perception, thus leaving him destabilised. He is weakened in battle, and while his own defences are deemed worthless, further shame lies in the fact that he loses his son due to his debility. The truth behind the claim that his ineptitude can be attributed to his sexual voracity is questionable, yet the messenger's extremely public declaration of the emperor's emasculation in battle due to physical desire places a figure of

[104] For a detailed discussion of the significance of the female presence in the Pentecostal Oath, and analysis of implication of the feminine in Gawain's dream, see Chapter Four of this study.

authority in a position of shame and incompetence as a result of his relationship with a woman.

Virtue is, as such, an attribute that is not exclusive to the pure maiden; the chivalric knight must be pure of spirit and of body, and sexual temptation is presented as an enticement designed to ambush the unwitting knight and strip him of his integrity. Cooper explores the significance of sexuality, noting that

> in the symbolic progression of the quest with its male hero, the dangers of sexuality will inevitably take the form of a female adversary, whether the point at issue is ultimately about the danger of women, the danger of his own unbridled sexuality, or (as in *Gawain and the Green Knight*), the danger of temptation at large.
>
> (*The English Romance in Time* 78)

Sexuality is a force to be reckoned with, and generally this force takes the form of a devious woman, contriving to undermine the honour of the virtuous knight. Not only is the seductive woman the personification of sin, she also presents this depravity from an exclusively female viewpoint, feminising as well as embodying the corruptive nature of sexual indulgence.

Virginity, therefore, is a priceless commodity in this patriarchal market, bearing in mind that to give oneself to a man is to submit oneself entirely. This is established in a religious context in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, whereby Margery retracts her husband's right to physical satisfaction in the marital relationship, and instead devotes herself to Christ, body and soul. In the juxtaposition previously discussed in Chapter Two, Margery makes a valiant attempt to renounce her femininity and become a "creatur" of God, yet the essence of femininity is sexuality, and her metaphorical espousing of Christ calls upon this femininity in force.

Margery Kempe resolutely refuses to abide by the social strictures enforced upon her, instead seizing her own autonomy. Herbert McAvoy's studies attest to the fact that "Margery's treatment of her own sexuality in the *Book* becomes part of a personal and narrative strategy which will lead eventually to some measure of social autonomy and literary empowerment" (106); Margery maintains an active awareness of her sexuality and its associated power, and makes a concentrated attempt to control this to her advantage. While she shuns the luxuries of material comfort in favour of spiritual purity, Margery retains control of her finances, and uses this financial authority to exert her personal authority. Having begged her husband to grant her a life of chastity for years, she eventually resorts to buying her peace, telling John:

> Grawntyth me that ye schal not komyn in my bed, and I grawnt yow to qwyte yowr dettys er I go to Jerusalem. And makyth my body fre to God so that ye nevyr make no chalengyng in me to askyn no dett of matrimony aftyr this day whyl ye levyn, and I schal etyn and drynkyn on the Fryday at yowr byddyng.
>
> (I.11.567-70)

In an unprecedented state of affairs, Margery and John come to an agreement whereby she has quite literally bought the security of her chastity. In this way, their marriage is transformed in terms of a business transaction where Margery appears to hold the dominant position, in direct contrast to her previous role of reluctant subjugation. The temptations offered by lust and sexuality have long been utilised in social negotiations and manipulations, particularly by women, as evidenced throughout this work, yet here, this circumstance "constitutes a type of sexualised economic transaction in reverse" (Herbert McAvoy 109), whereby Margery gains physical liberty for the sake of material payment.

This exploration of femininity as expressed though sexuality validates the precious nature of virginity. Analogously, chastity is a valuable asset in chivalric terms, as the true chivalric knight seeks to be pure in body as in spirit, as addressed above in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In keeping with this concept of male valour and virtue in regard to female sexuality is Havelok; while it must be acknowledged that he is in no way a representative of French chivalry, he is, according to Smithers, "manifestly an exemplary figure" (lviii). Havelok is very much a character of integrity, and as such, is a man of virtue, consistent with the teachings of Athelwold and heroic values prevalent in the literary world of Medieval England. It is said that:

Of bodi was he mayden clene:	*pure*
Nevere yete in game, ne in grene,	*sport/sexual desire*
With hire ne wolde leyke ne lye,	*her; sport*
No more than it were a strie.	*witch*

(996-99)

Havelok is sexually innocent, a state celebrated by the chivalric knight who seeks purity of spirit and the strength of character associated with this. With regard to the aspect of the mercantile nature of romance previously discussed in Chapter Two, Havelok demonstrates his integrity in his response to being wed from a position of poverty. He questions, "Hwat sholde ich with wif do?" (1138), as he cannot "fede" nor "clothe" her (1139) and does not have a house in which they can live. Even the clothes he wears belong to the cook who keeps Havelok in his employ: "This clothes that ich onne have/Aren the kokes and ich his knave!" (1146-47). Havelok's inherently noble nature, as afforded to him by his rightful standing in society, means that he is horrified at the idea of knowingly binding a woman to a life of

relative destitution. His integrity means that he would rather be alone in his hardship than subject a woman to such hardship.

Following his eventual enforced marriage, Havelok's reverence towards women, and toward his wife in particular, comes to the fore; he claims that he would rather lay down his life than "she in blame/Felle or lauthe ani shame" (1672-73). He is determined that her reputation will remain unsullied, and would face death to prevent her suffering, in a manner analogous to those knights sworn to the Pentecostal Oath.

As we have seen, Gawain's reaction to the female towards the end of his narrative contrasts significantly with this determined respect and reverence. In both narratives, however, despite differing perspectives, the implications and consequences of feminine sexuality bear a very real and powerful impact on the patriarchal society which simultaneously celebrates and dismisses this female influence.

Spiritual Suffering and Divine Reward

Gawain endures spiritual adversity due to the temptations of a woman, as do the Knights of the Round Table on Malory's Grail quest; Margery Kempe also experiences spiritual anguish, but in a somewhat paradoxical way, as it is both because of and in spite of the blessings awarded to her personally by Christ that she suffers. Robert Easting (190-91) notes that "Margery Kempe was only too well aware of the difficulty in being assured of the divine authenticity of her own visions":

> revelacyons be hard sumtyme to undirstondyn. And sumtyme tho that men wenyn wer revelacyonis it arn deceytys and illusyons, and therfor it is not expedient to gevyn redily credens to every steryng but sadly abydyn and prevyn yf thei be sent of God.

(I.89.5228-31)

Her visions and religious experiences are punctuated by the taunts and the derision of the majority of those around her; she is ridiculed, arrested, starved, and almost sentenced to death as a result of her spiritual encounters. It is a convention of Christianity, however, that any suffering, physical or mental, is to be offered up in the name of Christ; Julian of Norwich draws attention to this as she informs Margery that it is written in the Bible that

> [w]han God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, devosyon, er compassyon, he may and owyth to levyn that the Holy Gost is in hys sowle. Seynt Powyl seyth that the Holy Gost askyth for us wyth mornynggys and wepyngys unspekable, that is to seyn, he makyth us to askyn and preyn wyth mornynggys and wepyngys so plentyuowsly that the terys may not be nowmeryd.

(I.18.973-78)

Margery will prevail through her own personal torture; her piety is both the cause of her suffering and her reward. In a similar vein, those knights who embark on the Grail quest do so in the knowledge that hardship lies ahead, alongside untold perils. They know not what troubles they will encounter on their quest, but they face them bravely and without qualms, as to be deserving of the discovery of the Holy Grail is to be courageous and valiant, without fear of pain or misery.

Margery's spiritual journey mirrors the Grail quest in many ways, in addition to the acceptance of potential fear and suffering. Physical travel is a major element of her religious expedition, exercising her capacity for feminine autonomy, in addition to the spiritual journey she finds herself on in an emotional and mental

capacity.[105] She travels the length and breadth of England, and journeys across Europe, to Spain, Italy, and Germany, in order to "vysiten tho holy placys wher owyr Lord was whyk and ded" (I.26.1382-83). She travels to the far reaches of Jerusalem, in order to complete her work as God's messenger and attain personal spiritual fulfilment. She encounters many stumbling blocks along the way, in terms of negative attitudes, "cruel wordys" (I.26.1418), and financial problems, but perseveres in the name of her faith. Her distinctive expression of spiritual passion is met with antagonism throughout her travels:

> alle the company … wer most displesyd for sche wepyd so mech and spak alwey of the lofe and goodnes of owyr Lord as wel at the tabyl as in other place. And therfor schamfully thei reprevyd hir and alto chedyn hir and seyden thei wold not suffren hir as hir husbond dede whan sche was at hom and in Inglond.
>
> (I.26.1407-11)

In this sense, Margery's travels are beset with the challenges presented to her by the attitudes of the communities through which she journeys. Her path is also plagued by impediments of a physical nature, as with the tremendous storm that threatens to consume Margery and her "felaschep" (I.42.2377):

> And many tymes, as sche went be the wey and in the feldys, ther fel gret levenys wyth hedows thunderys, gresely and grevows, that sche feryd hir that it schulde a smet hir to deth, and many gret reynes, whech cawsyd in hir gret drede and hevynes.
>
> (I.42.2378-81)

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[105] The concept of pilgrimage in the society of medieval England has been extensively explored; see, for example, Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance,* with emphasis on Margery Kempe's pilgrimage 128-41; Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobialka, eds., *Medieval Practices of Space*; Terence N. Bowers, "Margery Kempe as Traveler" 1-28; and Diana Webb "Freedom of movement? Women travellers in the Middle Ages" 75-89.

Mirroring the Grail quest, Margery goes to see the sepulchre of Christ, and while on the whole, her exertions are more social than physical complications, they do echo the Grail quest, where the knights must travel through treacherous territories, facing unnamed beasts and possible starvation. Their only impetus is the reward of the Holy Grail, and, like Margery, the obstacles they face are a test of the purity of their body and their spirit, in order for them to conquer a prize that affords a personal fulfilment which no earthly matter could provide.

The concept of virginity and celibacy leading to spiritual and physical purity is also one which is mirrored in both Margery's *Book* and on Malory's Grail quest. As discussed earlier, Margery is desperate to relinquish the sexuality demanded by her marital relationship; for Margery, purity of the soul is marred by impurity of the body, and she is glad to embrace a life of celibacy in the name of the Lord. The knights of the Grail quest are similarly defined by their sexuality: only the pure of body and spirit are permitted to find the Holy Grail, as evidenced in Gawain's dream of the black and white bulls in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.[106] Engaging in the base interests of sexuality and fulfilling those primitive desires clouds the purity of vision required of the one who is worthy to discover the Grail. Earthly pleasures mar spiritual purity; therefore, those who are distracted by the not inconsiderable indulgences of the flesh do not have the spiritual or mental wherewithal and the dedication necessary to reach the Grail.

Reflective of Gawain's vision of the white bull in Malory is Margery's insistence on dressing in virginal white. In medieval England, only virginal women in orders wore white, in a symbolic gesture of their unspoiled purity of both body and spirit. More pragmatically speaking, it was unfeasible for women to wear white, due to poor sanitation and the practicalities of everyday life which would lead to the

[106] Further reference and detailed discussion to follow in Chapter Four of this work.

spoiling of such pristine garments. All-white clothing, therefore, was the preserve of cloistered nuns, and Margery's decision to dress as such was emblematic of her newly-embraced chastity.[107]

Margery is not unaware of the consequences this may bring. Christ urges, "thu were clothys of whyte and non other colowr, for thu schal ben arayd aftyr my wyl" (I.15.732-33). Margery's reply is demonstrative of an active awareness of social protocol, as she says, "A, der Lord, yf I go arayd on other maner than other chast women don, I drede that the pepyl wyl slawndyr me. Thei wyl sey I am an ypocryt and wondryn upon me" (I.15.733-35).

Women are generally defined in these texts by their beauty, as we have seen in the respective cases of Josiane, Felice, and Goldeborw; *The Book of Margery Kempe* is worth significant exploration in terms of its perspective, demonstrating the manner in which holiness both influences and is influenced by gender; specifically, how Margery's experience of devotion is affected by her femininity. Margery is a woman of extremes, and this is never as evident as in her absorption in sartorial fashion. This is wholly in keeping with the female stereotype; Margery, in fact, progresses beyond the typical womanly preoccupation with attractive clothing, and embraces flamboyant, extravagant outfits that place her in the centre of attention, prior to her conversion. From bright colours to eccentric accessories, it is stated that

> sche wold savyn the worschyp of hir kynred whatsoevyr ony man seyd. Sche had ful greet envye at hir neybowrs that thei schuld ben arayd so wel as sche. Alle hir desyr was for to be worshepd of the pepul.
>
> (I.2.200-02)

[107] Liz Herbert McAvoy makes further observations about the significance of Margery's clothing in *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe: Studies in Medieval Mysticism* 58-59; 97.

In her role as a woman, both before and after her spiritual enlightenment, Margery is not shy or retiring in any form; in fact, before her conversion, she actively desires to be more ostentatiously dressed than her neighbours in a demonstration of wealth and extravagance. In medieval England, one's attire was one of most evident manifestations of wealth. Christ's first apparition before Margery is marked by his dress: he is "clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke" (I.1.171), demonstrative of his elevated social status. Purple has long been recognised as the colour of royalty, and in conjunction with his silken mantle, is indicative Christ's eminent position. The detailed descriptions of Margery's clothing, pre-conversion, echo this as she flaunts her wealth through the opulence of her attire. In the years prior to her spiritual awakening,

> sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevyd and hir hodys wyth the typettys were daggyd. Hir clokys also wer daggyd and leyd wyth dyvers colowrs betwen the daggys that it schuld be the mor staryng to mennys sygth and hirself the mor ben worshepd.
>
> (I.2.193-96)

Not only does Margery command attention, but her intention is to use the feminine influence of her clothing to invite specific male awareness – "that it schuld be the mor staryng to mennys sygth and hirself the mor ben worshepd". This leads the reader to the consciousness that Margery was very much cognisant of her capabilities as a woman to draw and manipulate male notice, and had no hesitation in exploiting this. The way in which she dresses is a prominent marker of her lack of reticence; before and after her conversion, Margery places great significance on what she wears – largely, one is led to believe, because of the impact it creates on those around her. After her initial religious insight, it is not enough for Margery to simply dress modestly, in a suitable manner for a woman adopting the role of a

pious figure. Instead, she insists on being permitted to wear the all-white garb of the virginal nun, in spite of the fact that she is neither a virgin nor a nun. Her white attire is as scandalous as her previous provocative costumes, if not more so, as a married woman and mother of fourteen children dons a virginal status along with the white apparel. There were two distinct societal groupings for women in medieval England, that of the domestic woman and the religious vocation; Margery's actions placed in her neither and excluded her from both.[108]

Margery's influence, particularly when viewed in contrast with that of Julian of Norwich, the "most famous anchoress in England" (Robertson 18), discussed later in this chapter, provides an insight into the workings of the female presence within religious society, while simultaneously offering an interesting paradigm with which to compare the demands placed on the chivalric knight in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, as male and female purity and integrity within the boundaries of spiritual necessity appear to be equally fragile, and equally important.

Female Autonomy: Recommendations and Denunciations

Feminine influence on a questing knight often proves the catalyst for profound personal exploration and development. The concept of the quest being beneficial to the soul is a common precept in Arthurian literature, and *Ywain and Gawain* illustrates this pattern in an emotional and intellectual capacity. Ywain is, at the beginning of the tale, triumphant in his acquisition of his wife, who subsequently releases her husband for a year and a day, allowing him to travel in order to validate his chivalric persona. In keeping with the idea of the temptations of pride, Ywain's

[108] For further analysis of the social context of the placement of the female in medieval society, see Judith M. Bennett et al., *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*; and Terence N. Bowers, "Margery Kempe as Traveler".

immersion in the maintenance of his chivalric identity means that he loses his hold on the passing of time, and in turn, loses his wife.

In a narrative turn similar to Lancelot's descent into madness, Ywain must make a comparable grasp for his sanity and attempt to rediscover his lost self, misplaced while his priorities lay in an egotistical preoccupation with victory. Upon his eventual return to his accepting wife, Ywain demonstrates "that experienced virtue, a knowledge of good and evil and therefore also the self-knowledge of his own capacity for both, that is more praiseworthy – more worthy of honour – than mere innocence, or any youthful eagerness for adventure" (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 87). Like Gawain and his ideological awakening in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Ywain's experience is all the more valuable for his suffering, and for his fallibility. It is this capacity for failure, and his success in overcoming this, that shapes the hero as worthy of acceptance by his wife, and by society at large, while the trope of the waiting wife acts as a narrative tool which allows for this journey.

The presence of the female, then, proves influential despite its relative lack of obvious autonomy. Not only is *Bevis'* Josiane equitable in her thinking, she also displays a sense of autonomous independence that is atypical of the submissive female. She states, "ich wot wel in me thought" (657), assuring her father that she knows her own mind before she imparts her advice with confidence. Josiane is poised in her self-possession, yet maintains a graciousness and courtesy that is fitting of a woman of her position. Even the manner in which she addresses the knights that act as her messengers demonstrates her benevolence, particularly when compared with the orders that Bevis' mother barked at those she wished to do her bidding. Requesting that the knights bring Bevis to her, Josiane says, "To Beves now wende ye/And prai him, that he come to me" (675-76). She is compassionate in her

authority as she requests that they *ask* Bevis to join her, in direct contrast to the imperious orders of Bevis' mother. The disparity is evident; when speaking to her messenger, Bevis' mother says, "'Go,' she seide, 'in to Almaine/Out of me bour!'" (86-87). The way in which each woman approaches their respective subordinates exposes the extremity of their opposite natures; Josiane is courteous, while Bevis' mother is arrogant.

In addition to this unassuming independence, Josiane exhibits courage that prevails over that of the men in her company. While Bevis' mother employs men to carry out her requirements, Josiane's self-sufficiency is demonstrated through her capability to care for herself and for others. When Bevis frightens two knights with his irascible outburst, so that "[t]he knightes wenten out in rape,/Thai were fain so to ascape" (695-96), Josiane apprehends the pair and soothes them with her words: "cometh with me,/And ich wile your waraunt be!" (703-04). Her courageousness surpasses that of two knights; indeed, she must comfort them and act as their guarantor and protector against Bevis' rage. Here, the valour of one woman eclipses that of two men, and in a case of significant role-reversal, Josiane takes the masculine role of guardian upon herself as the apprehensive knights cower in her wake.

Conversely, her immediate actions following this are quintessentially female as she cares for the wounded Bevis and soothes his gashes and lesions alongside his emotional woes, providing both "confort" (710) and "solaste" (711) as she "keste him bothe moth and chin" (709). The fundamentally feminine manner in which she restores calm and placates Bevis further promotes Josiane's gentle temperament which epitomises her integral kindness. Even her father accedes to Josiane's unsurpassed skill, entrusting the injured Bevis to her care and appealing to her to "save" him (728) and heal the "[f]ourti grete, grisly wounde" (724) he has suffered.

This depiction of the archetypal image of the nurturing woman promotes Josiane as an admirable representative of her gender. While her father instructs her to "serve" (1082) Bevis, indicating the domestic role to which a woman is expected to conform, Josiane is pleased and willing to do so to the best of her extensive ability, once again displaying her capabilities as a woman and suitability as a wife.

While *Havelok*'s Goldeborw is inescapably placed in the role of submissive female in the tale, her story of misplaced authority resembles Havelok's own, "allowing reduplication of the situation in which a land initially well ruled falls into the power of a man who breaks his feudal troth, usurps the right of the legitimate heir, and rules with the viciousness to be expected from one who lacks divine ordination" (Barron, *English Medieval Romance* 71). Godrich's enforcement of the marriage of Havelok and Goldeborw, while initially intended to debase England's heiress, in actuality creates an indomitable pairing who succeed in righting the wrongs executed by the usurper.

The reader of *Havelok* is aware of the truth that the hero is in fact of royal birth and not simply a kitchen boy, yet the revelation of his true identity within the world of the text comes through the medium of the female, through the angelic encounters that occur while Havelok sleeps. Initially, it is Grim's wife, Leve, who initially realises the extent of the deception surrounding Havelok and the true nobility of his birth right. When a ray as bright as a "sunnebem" (593) shines from the young Havelok's mouth, Leve is astounded, proclaiming to "Jesu Crist!" (596), and immediately appealing to her husband to investigate further into this anomaly. Subsequently, following their marriage, it is Goldeborw who ascertains her new husband's birth right. The future king is oblivious to the significance of his surroundings, deep in slumber; it is his wife who deciphers the meaning of the "lith" (1252) that shines from her new husband's mouth, as if "it were a blase of fir"

(1255). This crucial moment of revelation, when Havelok is declared a "kinges sone and kinges eyr" (1268) by the voice of the "angel uth of hevene" (1277), is conducted through the thoughts and responses of Goldeborw, allowing the reader to comprehend this momentous moment of realisation and all that it entails through the eyes of the king's wife, while his innocence is maintained a while longer in the unawareness of sleep, as "he slep and nouth ne wiste/Hwat that aungel havede seyd" (1281-82).

Here, the female is endowed with narrative authority in the propulsion of the dynamic of the male protagonist in medieval romance texts. In accordance with the concept of masculine humility, however, *Le Morte Darthur* sees the influence of the female being utilised in such a way as to provide a moral compass for the Arthurian knights. Sir Gawain's execution of a lady led to a rebuke from his king, as he approached displaying the results of his actions for all to see:

> And than they delyverde hym undir thys promyse, that he sholde bere the dede lady with hym on thys maner: the hede of her was hanged aboute hys necke, and the hole body of hir before hym on hys horse mane.
>
> (I.108.21-24)

Both Arthur and Guinevere "were gretely displeased with sir Gawayne for the sleynge of the lady" (I.108.30-31), and chastised him accordingly. The Pentecostal Oath is largely based on the protection of women, and Gawain's actions serve as a harsh reminder of the prime duty of the chivalric knight. Not only does Arthur rebuke the knight, but Guinevere's castigation of Gawain includes a precept by which he is bound to act:

> by ordynaunce of the queene there was sette a queste of ladyes uppon sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all the

> ladyes and to fyght for hir quarels; and ever that he sholde be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy.
>
> (I.108.31-35)

By forbidding the mistreatment of women, the dignity of the knights and their court will also be upheld.

Thus, women are approached with a definite degree of respect, while the simultaneous benefits and limitations of this esteem are evidenced in their autonomy and influence in their literary portrayal. The reader's first impression of Goldeborw as a character is presented by a male figure of supreme authority in the text: her father, the king. She is initially referred to by her father in fond terms, as "my douhter fare" (120). Even as an infant, Goldeborw wields a power beyond her years in the eyes of the King of England, whose dying wishes are not for himself, as "[o]f meself is me rith nowt" (123), but are for her continued wellbeing and personal and professional success.

Havelok's admiration for the female and for Goldeborw in particular is evidenced throughout the text, but never more so than when he offers Godrich the chance to go forth with impunity, if he concedes the throne to its rightful owner. Acknowledging the fact that Godrich is a "god knith" (2721), Havelok reminds him of the oath he swore to Athelwold, and requests that Godrich "[d]o nu wel withuten fiht/Yeld hire the lond, for that is rith" (2716-17). While he champions what is right and just, Havelok is resolute in his purpose of restoring Goldeborw to the throne, and is not hesitant in the act of replacing a male leader with a female one. In keeping with the patriarchal society of the time, when speaking of Goldeborw at this point, Havelok refers to her only as Athelwold's "douhter" (2712); she is described in terms of her father rather than on the merit of her own autonomy, yet Havelok's intention is none the less empowering for its delivery.

At the crux of the matter, Havelok positions Goldeborw before the people of England, assured in the knowledge that if they were to acknowledge her as such, then she would be queen:

Yif that he hire wolde knawe–	*recognize*
Thoruth hem witen wolde he	*understand*
Yif that she aucte quen to be.	*ought*

(2785-87)

The approval of the people reinforces Havelok's conviction in Goldeborw's rightful position, and she is thus celebrated as queen and ruler. Here, Rosalind Field notes the significance of equality in redemption: "Havelok will triumph over his enemies and the kingdom of Denmark, but more importantly, Goldborough's kingdom of England will be saved from misrule" ("Popular Romance" 25).

Goldeborw's satisfaction at the subjugation of Godrich is active; she is not simply relieved in the passive manner so customary amongst medieval literary females, but is "ful blithe" (2842) in her joy. She takes satisfaction from the gruesome nature of Godrich's demise, thanking God "fele sythe/That the fule swike was brend" (2843-44). Godrich is not merely the enemy of her people, but of her, as Athelwold's daughter and rightful queen. She states plainly, "Nu ich am wreke of mi fo!" (2849). Goldeborw takes possession of her actions and of her responses as an autonomous queen and ruler, not a submissive, impassive woman who has been fought for and protected by the male hero.

Here, Goldeborw is a prime example of a medieval woman who is both objectified in terms of her beauty and her physical presence, while simultaneously reserving the right to exploit her potential for power within the world of the narrative. Feminine control may be limited, yet women such as Goldeborw, Josiane, Felice, Margery Kempe, and Malory's Guinevere, all harness that element of control

which they do find in their grasp, and attempt to use it to its best effect, despite society's insistence on interpreting feminine character and value in terms of physical appearance.

The restrictions imposed on women by society retained a dual impact in that they "both shaped the lives of medieval women and allowed medieval women themselves to shape, to some extent, the content of their own experiences" (Herbert McAvoy 10-11). Paradoxically, that which regulated and restrained female autonomy was also that which gave it life in the manner in which these women controlled their reactions to such circumscription. In the case of Margery Kempe, a woman takes the principles prescribed by the labels of wife and mother, and reconsiders these in consideration of her own experiences and spiritual demands.

In contrast to the principally masculine concentration of medieval romance, Margery Kempe's narrative demonstrates an exclusively feminine struggle for autonomy in a world dominated by male authority. Arguably the most interesting manner of support Margery receives in terms of this study is that of Julian of Norwich. Julian had already established herself through the veracity of her "revelations", and her writings were largely accepted and respected for their legitimacy, with figures of authority from both church and state approaching Julian for guidance. Addressing Margery as "syster" (I.18.982), Julian's acceptance of Margery's visions is a validation of their authenticity.

While Margery may receive some support from male figures of authority within the church, their encouragement is based on their moral support rather than any real understanding of her experience. Julian, on the other hand, the only authoritative female figure in the text, can speak to Margery with the understanding of one who has shared in similar trials. Her advice reinforces Margery's self-sufficiency as a woman and as a religious figure, seeking comfort in the grace of God

to the detriment of social acceptance: "Pacyens is necessary unto yow for in that schal ye kepyn yowr sowle" (I.18.985-86). The male encouragement Margery receives is invaluable in that it allows her to continue on her spiritual journey without fear of punishment; however, it is her identification with Julian as a woman that inspires her and strengthens her beliefs and personal values. Thus, "[m]ych was the holy dalyawns that the ankres and this creatur haddyn be comownyng in the lofe of owyr Lord Jhesu Crist many days that thei were togedyr" (I.18.986-88).

As Herbert McAvoy notes, "[u]nlike her encounters with representatives of ecclesiastic authority, this meeting between Margery and the respected anchoress is female-focused, non-hierarchical and, from Margery's perspective at least, mutually satisfying" (198); it differs from Margery's interactions with the clergy to this point in almost every conceivable way. Even when Margery was met with a relatively sympathetic ear from male authority, it still came with the caveat of hierarchical authority. Here, Julian treats Margery as an equal, assuring her that she must "feryth not the langage of the world" (I.18.983-84); counsel which offers Margery consolation both on a personal level, in accordance with the consistent verbal barrage with which she is met, and also in relation to the wider concept of the masculine voice which rules society, that "traditional patriarchal discourse which we have witnessed from a whole host of Margery's male associates and enemies" (Herbert McAvoy 198).

While Margery's experiences are very much unique, and not immediately relatable to the concept of the chivalric knight or medieval heroine, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a relevant point of comparison with the Arthurian world as portrayed by Malory, particularly when viewed in terms of the way in which the earlier investigation of the sexual imagery underpinning Margery's imagined relationship with Christ connects with the tribulations born of romantic love and

sexual attraction in Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Just as Isolde, Elaine, and even Guinevere suffer to varying extents as a result of sexual desire and courtly love, so too does Margery in her romantic perception of a decidedly spiritual connection. Margery Kempe "blurs the boundaries" of her social identity and her feminine selfhood, yet her *Book* is unambiguous in the representation of men as being "unpredictable, unfixed and lacking in the necessary spiritual commitment", due to their reactions to her presence (Herbert McAvoy 5).

Conclusions

Judith M. Bennett writes, "[t]he history of medieval women, then, is in part a history of the constraints of economic disadvantage, familial duty, and prescribed social roles. But it is also in part a history of women's agency within and against these constraints" ("Medieval Women in Modern Perspective" 6); this, in itself, is the crux of the portrayal of the female in medieval society and its literature. Women were expected to fulfil certain presuppositions and were bound by social proscriptions, as most clearly demonstrated in the respective cases of Margery Kempe and *Bevis*' Josiane; however, it is the way in which they reacted to this, and acted within these boundaries, which demonstrated their self-appropriated authority and relative autonomy, in both a historical and literary sense.

The influence of the female in popular medieval literature is, as we have seen, often subtle despite its conventionality. This impact is evident in the praise of the lover (as seen in Goldeborw, Felice, and Josiane), in maternal control, or lack of it (most notably in the case of Igraine, Bevis' mother, and Margery Kempe) and in the sexual manipulation in the context of both male and female (demonstrated by the threat of impurity to maidens and Grail knights). These texts available to fifteenth-century audiences, even if written earlier, provide context for the study of

contemporary literary works of their time and consequent audience reaction, indicating the expectations of Malory's audience with the acknowledgment that, in the fourteenth century, "French Arthurian romance was quite simply the most popular form of literary entertainment for the higher strata of society" (Putter, *SGGK and French Arthurian Romance* 2).

The relevance of these romance narratives is seen in their popularity and their survival; the portrayal of the female here in varying positions of authority and power is then of note in the context of Malory. While it is generally the case that the female narrative presence is established in order to promote masculine endeavour in this literary climate, the feminine presence is nonetheless active and influential; it is with this in mind that we approach a study of the feminine in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, with specific attention to the characterisation of the female in his work and the influence of women on the narrative world of the text, having established the prominence of the female, with both its positive and negative connotations, in the traditions of romance (and related genres) of his time.

Chapter Four

Women in Malory I: Female Agency in *Le Morte Darthur*

The nature of successful chivalric society is often accentuated in Middle English romance by its contrariness, as divergent cultures crusade for supremacy or good battles evil. Opposing forces are morally juxtaposed, with those lacking in honourable government posing a threat to the peaceful society of the chivalric world, as seen, for example, in the disparities between England as ruled by Athelwold and Godrich in *Havelok*, or chivalric England and the Saracen civilisation in *Guy of Warwick*. Geraldine Barnes' *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* argues that "[a]ll the 'negative' kingdoms are unsuccessful in their confrontation with the 'positive' because they lack, in various ways, the harmony and well-being which prevail in the ideal society governed by a benevolent ruler guided by wise counsel" (14). In the case of the *Morte Darthur*, however, the threat to Arthurian society comes from within and is neither explicitly positive nor negative, but simply a result of the vagaries of the human condition, often specifically associated with the influence of women on masculine culture.

A generalised reading of *Le Morte Darthur* may result in the perception of the female as marginal to its concerns, or used as a device for the evolution of more prominent male characters, as "[t]he Round Table is [...] the locus of conventional Arthurian male bonding" (Lacy 41). Elizabeth Archibald reiterates that "[c]hivalry is an all-male club", as medieval romance largely focuses on "male ideals of chivalric prowess and male fantasies" ("Women and Romance" 166). However, as Lacy observes, "[a] good many of the women are nameless servants or messengers, who often play crucial roles in the narrative despite their anonymity. Others are named and prominent, and they are arguably more varied in their roles and more complex

in their presentation than their male counterparts" (41); it is frequently the less conspicuous female characters in the text that compel the narrative.[109]

As previously addressed, the influence of the female in the text can immediately be seen in the structuring of the Pentecostal Oath, which, as a trope, forms the core belief system of chivalric society in the narrative and affords the female a paradoxical power in her apparent vulnerability. In her work on *Counsel and Strategy*, Barnes defines the ethos of Middle English romance as being based upon "the principles of constitutional government" (13), whereby society is governed in accordance with very specific ideals and ethics, definitively outlined in the case of Malory's Arthurian society in the principles demarcated in the Pentecostal Oath. Barnes notes that the "ideal state in Middle English romance is [...] a community of benevolent rule, peace, and justice, extending to all classes of society" (13), an exemplar which corresponds fittingly with Malory's oath. This is the ideal. The reality of society and those who inhabit the Arthurian world, however, submit to the caprices of the human condition. Therefore, rarely in Middle English romance, and particularly in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, is such an ideal sustained without impediment.

The conception of the oath itself was largely inspired by the fact of feminine presence in the society of the text, and so a fundamental element of the establishment of the court of the Round Table was developed:

> than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir [...] and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour:

[109] For general analysis of the female figure in Malory's text, see Elizabeth Edwards, "The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*" 37-54; and Thelma S. Fenster, ed., *Arthurian Women: A Casebook* 97-114; 171-90.

> strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe.
>
> (I.120.15-17; 20-23)

By pledging their allegiance to Arthur and swearing a declaration to abide by these vows, the Knights of the Round Table champion the necessity of the respect and protection of the women in their court.[110] As previously established, the preservation of a woman's integrity is of considerable consequence, based on her perceived physical vulnerability. This chapter examines the exploitation of the tensions between vulnerability and agency in female figures, contrasting authority with victimisation, as this perceived fragility is subverted.

The Positioning of the Female in *Le Morte Darthur*

Essentially, the distinction of women as a discordant element, in need of protection, is the root of two divergent presentations of the female in the Arthurian society of the text. Corinne Saunders, in *Rape and Ravishment*, clarifies that "both positive and negative views of women develop out of the same set of ideas, in particular, the placing of woman as Other. Women are made into stereotypes, essentialised instead of treated individually" (16), and it is this sense of the "other" which creates the perceived necessity for codes of behaviour. The chivalric code calls for the fortification of the female, yet sexual desire, while it may be tempered, is a natural phenomenon; following from this, "the idealisation and sexual pursuit of the woman in courtly literature both dispossess her" (*Rape and Ravishment* 16), as, whether a woman is viewed as a sexual object or an untouchable ideal, she remains a disparate entity.

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[110] See Hyonjin Kim, *The Knight Without The Sword: A Social Landscape of Malorian Chivalry* (1-19; 100-37) for further discussion of the significance of the chivalric code and its associated expectations in Malory's Arthurian culture.

Catherine Batt, in "Malory and Rape", also notes the paradoxical element of the classification of the female in the Pentecostal Oath, as it "highlights the fact of a woman's social definition in the *Morte Darthur* as physically and sexually vulnerable, even as they proclaim her rights" (805). In avowing their loyalty to the Pentecostal Oath, these knights assume accountability for the conservation of female propriety; women are thus determined to occupy a specific social category in which the conservation of their integrity is an established condition that may be jeopardised by objectively independent influences.

The existence of this element of the Pentecostal Oath affords women considerably more authority than may be initially perceived. The oath, while underscoring the frailty of the female, acts as a catalyst through which the narrative engages with the feminine, thus allowing them an approximation of autonomous influence in Arthurian culture which stems from their perceived powerlessness. Geraldine Heng observes, "knightly obedience to and cooperation with the feminine supply effective means for actualisations of feminine will, creating an agency by which women may be active in the world" (842). In accordance with patriarchal social structure, the male narrative culture takes responsibility for the protection of women, essentially deeming them incapable of autonomous action. However, by definition of this perceived frailty, women are conferred with a social distinction which commands male deference. In essence, the susceptibility of the condition of being female awards women in the narrative a certain authority in their social definition; however, the very nature of this authority accentuates the assumed fragility of women through social perception, undermining female autonomy in a paradox which both defines and subverts the concept of women in the text.

This feminine aspect of power is best observed in the manner in which Malory's Knights of the Round Table are obliged to preserve feminine honour, while

they must also control their desires and abstain from the illicit gratification offered by sexual temptation. Gawain's prophetic dream discloses the caustic nature of moral impurity: this, as Saunders notes in *Magic and the Supernatural*, "is a world of prophetic dreams, allegorical meanings, visionary experiences, and miracles" (253), and Gawain's experience is recounted as such, in the context of the significance of such dreams.

The dream depicts a meadow, symbolic of the Round Table community, which accommodates three secured bulls; two have pure white coats, and one is blemished by a black spot. These three bulls are accompanied by one hundred and fifty black bulls, which are malnourished and untethered. The two white animals represent the virginal Galahad and Perceval, "for they be maydyns and clene withoute spotte" (II.946.22-23), and the bull with the solitary black spot is symbolic of the almost-pure Bors, "which trespassed but onys in hys virginité. But sithyn he kepyth hymselff so wel in chastité that all ys forgyffyn hym and hys myssededys" (II.946.24-26).

These three remain secured to the meadow of the Round Table, and grow in strength, nurtured by their virtue. The meadow, a place of "humilité and paciens [...] the thynges which bene allwey grene and quyk" (II.946.7-8), symbolises the fellowship of the Round Table, which binds its true champions in faith and nourishment. Those black bulls, "whych for their synne and their wyckednesse bene blacke" (II.946.18-19), cannot avail of the sanctity of "humilité and paciens" (II.946.32-33) in the meadow, but must wander the "waste contreyes: that signifieth dethe" (II.946.33-34).

The temptations aroused in the fallible male, stimulated by the female, condemn the weak man to a lifetime of exile to these "waste contreyes" (II.946.33). The notion of the physically weak, ineffectual female is overwhelmed by this

demonstration of autonomous feminine power, as women wield the ability to render a man helpless in the futility of a morally deficient life. As a result of this, in terms of both the male and the female, "the pursuit of chastity came to be seen as the means to counter the unruly force of sexuality", and consequentially, "the virgin's physical intactness came to stand as an extraordinarily powerful emblem of spiritual purity" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 122).

In this sense, virginity is as significant to the knight as it is to the vulnerable lady, if not more so. As previously established, in medieval romance culture the worth of a woman is partially defined by her virginal status; to be pure is to be valuable. Here, to be pure is to be infallible, while the temptation of lust is the sword upon which the Grail knight may fall without hope of redemption. Resistance to this, in the protection of virtue, demands a sense of fortitude equal to and greater than that physical strength required on the battlefield. The progression of the narrative demonstrates the true implication of a sullied soul; "[a]s the quest unfolds, it becomes clear that only those who never lose the mysterious strength of virginity may be directly received into heaven" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 255). This is explicit in the culmination of the Grail quest; Galahad looks upon Christ as He rises from the Grail and is transported directly to the heavens with Him, on the wings of the divine, while Perceval follows soon after. Bors and Lancelot, who have succumbed to earthly temptations in life, cannot look directly upon the Grail and are bound to remain on the earth and must return to their court and the earthly misery that prevails there. As such, the autonomous power of the female is demonstrated, albeit indirectly, through the ultimate reward and punishment of the divine.

Despite the threat posed by sexual temptation, particularly in terms of magic and enchantment (discussed in detail in Chapter Five of this study), it remains that

a romantic relationship is often the force which motivates a chivalric quest. Gerald Morgan's "Medieval Misogyny" states, "[i]t is not surprising that the destinies of great knights and beautiful ladies are [...] interwoven, for it is the very function of a knight to fight for justice for the weak and helpless, for women, widows, and orphans" (266-67). "Love in the courtly romances is [...] not infrequently the immediate occasion for deeds of valor", Erich Auerback observes, as love is "an essential and obligatory ingredient of knightly perfection" which motivates chivalric deeds "performed primarily for the sake of a lady's favour" (427). The concept of sexual desire runs parallel with this motivation, alongside the added consideration that sexual temptation is not only present as a condition of humanity, but may also be employed as a device by the manipulative female. Women here are both the motivation for, and possible destruction of, the successful chivalric knight.

The prevailing perception of feminine vulnerability is juxtaposed with the fact that the need for protection exists because of the certain threat that comes from the same arena as that which offers protection: men. This reality is defined in the concept that "[t]he definition of woman as in need of defence and rapeable makes rape a founding aspect of social organization" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition* 68). As such, "Woman, and what 'to hir hath be don' are the impetus for adventure" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 68); the positioning of the feminine in the text is the foundation of much of the narrative drive. The notorious nature of the act of rape and its consequences, for example, is epitomised in the episode of the Giant of Mont Saint Michel, whose opposition to Arthur demonstrates the social extremes of behaviour, intent, and integrity. This representation of base evil, set in direct contrast with and challenge to Arthur's own rule, exemplifies that against which the king and his Knights of the Round Table are sworn. The Pentecostal Oath essentially defines the knight as being autonomous in

the guardianship of his own behaviour and wider social propriety, "both acknowledg[ing] masculine aggression and seek[ing] to contain and redirect it"; this dynamic is definitively ascertained by feminine presence, motivating social action and individual behaviours in the narrative world (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 69).

Feminine Physicality and Purpose

In the establishment of medieval female sociability, the introduction to Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless's *Victims or Viragos* discusses Kimberley LoPrete's point that "the binary gender oppositions of male/female are largely modern constructions, and that medieval views saw men and women as having gendered elements in different proportions" (12).[111] As such, the classification of the female "virago" is one which incorporates the concept of an authoritative female, who may display "manly" traits in terms of political and social authority. The accepted view of the female model in medieval society, however, primarily remains that of the homemaker and the nurturer; as Alcuin Blamires points out, "the chief medieval womanly virtue was guarding or keeping, not giving" ("Refiguring the 'Scandalous Excess' of Medieval Women: The Wife of Bath and Liberality" 59). While medieval men fulfilled the masculine role of hunter/gatherer and provided for the homestead, it was the woman's priority to ensure the preservation of these provisions.

Blamires' notes Christine de Pizan's promotion of this same concept, establishing the social acceptance of this idea of woman as nurturer and bearer of chief responsibility in the successful running of the household ("Refiguring the 'Scandalous Excess'"). While a man may demonstrate his capabilities in the rather ostentatious role of providing, a woman's talents lay in the far more subtle art of the

[111] See Chapter Three for a discussion of such social gendering, particularly in the case of Margery Kempe.

micromanagement of what she is given. Survival essentially lies in the hands of the provider, yet the responsibility for provision of comfort rested on the shoulders of the women who must ensure sufficient supplies of food and clothing on a daily basis. The role of the female, therefore, lay in "guarding or keeping", encapsulating family, homestead, secrets and trust (Meek and Lawless, *Victims or Viragos* 12). The distinction between these objective male/female roles is evidenced in Chaucer's description of Troilus' first impression of Criseyde: "that creature/Was neuer lasse mannish in seminge" (I.283-84). Criseyde's beauty is defined in terms of her lack of masculinity, a concept which "refers doubly to the way she appears and the way we perceive her" (Robert R. Edwards 327). The positive nature of her essential femininity is emphasised by Troilus' observation that he has never "seen so good a sighte" (294); here, the woman is celebrated for her womanhood.

However, Meek, Lawless, and LoPrete also acknowledge the potential for a more overt authority as demonstrated by women, as the exertion of political power by aristocratic women was not unheard of in medieval English society. They assert that, "'[m]anly women' were not men, but neither were they average women. Female political power was not accepted as an equal substitute for male, but as something that might be expedient in hard times" (*Victims or Viragos* 12); while patriarchal dominance prevailed, there remained an element of female authority in circumstances which demanded and allowed for it. This idea of the "manly woman", or one who steps outside of the socially prescribed role of domestic carer, is established, but "to assume this command a woman must cease to be a woman, must take on masculinity, must change in gender" (Duby 78). In such a case, feminine authority in a patriarchal dominion is justified by the theory that such a woman is essentially embracing those masculine traits associated with power; in essence, the feminine simply cannot be awarded any sort of autonomous social

distinction or commendation. A powerful woman can only be so when taking on the guise of masculine competency, and in doing so, is stripped of the feminine in her authoritative stance.

Women, in varying guises of their assigned feminine virtues, are admittedly at times an actively destructive force in the narrative structure of Malory's *Morte Darthur*; the author also grants the female a negative power by virtue of their very social presence in the text without any active involvement. Just as Criseyde brings joy to Troilus by virtue of her presence, the placement of the female in *Le Morte Darthur* often incites negative consequence. Sir Meliagaunt and Sir Lamorak, for example, "bothe of the courte of kynge Arthure" (II.486.33), "aythir smote other so sore" (II.486.23) in defence of the perceived beauty of their respective ladies. Lancelot's intercession contributes to the fray in defence of Guinevere, until the situation is diffused by the reasoned intervention of Sir Bleoberis. Had it not been for this mediation, bloody battle would have been fought purely because of the alleged misperception of beauty. The women were neither threatened nor insulted, yet the knights were moved to arms based on a superficial slight that was nothing more than a particular opinion. Here, the feminine provokes discontent by association, without intent or provocation, once more demonstrating the reality of the female influence in a masculine culture.

Cooper's *English Romance in Time* highlights the fact that, in the majority of cases, medieval heroines are described in terms of their superior beauty; they are defined by their image, and their value in the text is signalled initially by the reader's first impression of their appearance and the virtues that such beauty represents. It is commonplace for the heroines of medieval narratives to be extraordinarily beautiful, as "there is a minimum of beauty below which a heroine cannot fall" (*The English Romance in Time* 15). Physical beauty is a sine qua non

amongst medieval heroines; it is how these women make use of their allure that bears examination. In Malory's Guinevere's case, beauty is a destructive property, despite her personal lack of malicious intent.

The reader of the *Morte Darthur* learns of the extent of Guinevere's charms through allusion to other female characters and their similarities to the queen. The greater part of women in the narrative, when being described in terms of beauty and virtue, are compared in kind to the criteria embodied by Queen Guinevere. Elaine is thought by Lancelot to be "the fayryst lady that ever he saw but yf hit were quene Gwenyver" (II.792.22-23). Similarly, Queen Isoud is described by Lancelot as "the fayreste lady of the worlde excepte youre quene, dame Gwenyver" (II.743.6-7). Guinevere is celebrated as being the epitome of the female figure, unsurpassed even by Isode, who "is pyerles of all ladyes; for to speake of her beauté, bounté, and myrthe, and of hir goodness, we sawe never hir macche as far as we have ryddyn and gone" (II.764.4-7). Although she is thus celebrated, Lancelot, in identifying Isoud, states, "hit is quene Isode that, outetake my lady youre quene, she ys makeles" (II.743.9-10). Comparison here between the two queens serves to emphasise the splendour of both, and further accentuate Guinevere's magnificence.

Malory's descriptions of the women in his text are largely ambiguous, for the most part; beauty is never in doubt, yet the detail of individual features is left vague and inconclusive, similar to the description of *Sir Orfeo's* Heurodis. Heurodis, "[t]he fairest levedi, for the nones" (line 53), is "[f]ul of love and godenisse -/Ac no man may telle hir fairnise" (55-56).[112] She is honourable and matchless in her virtue; her physical description, however, is less forthcoming. This ambiguity does not deny the physical grace of the heroine, nor does it delineate it in any prescriptive manner; it avoids the invitation of "an intrusive or voyeuristic male gaze" (Cooper, *The*

[112] Quotes from *Sir Orfeo* are taken from the Laskaya and Salisbury edition.

English Romance in Time 16), while similarly circumventing the danger of clichéd depictions of feminine beauty. Chaucer's description of Alison his "Miller's Tale" (lines 3233-70) contrasts with this; in effect, Kiernan observes, it is "the description of a woman by a person who is unequipped to provide a proper rhetorical description, because of his own personality, or the particular qualities of the lady he describes, or both" (14). In this case, the fact that his descriptions of her person and her clothing maintain the gaze "coursing over Alison's body" reflects more on the lecherous tendencies of the Miller than on Alison herself, although the reference to her "weasel"-like bearing (3234) is indicative of her sly nature (Kiernan 14). The male gaze presents the female to the reader in both of these cases, as in Malory, allowing for a certain amount of individual interpretation in its ambiguity.[113]

In accordance with this, the reader is not aware of the physical appearance of the main female characters of the *Morte Darthur* in any great detail; the women in the text, for the most part, fall into the category being "fair" (I.7.6) or "rychely beseyne" (I.41.15). No further elaboration is awarded to varying types of physicality and features of beauty. As P.J.C. Field asserts in his *Romance and Chronicle*, Malory "has one solitary young lady with 'fayre yalow here' (V 119.15)", a specification which "only points up the fact that we do not know the colour of Arthur's or Lancelot's or Guenivere's" (84). Malory and his peers in medieval romance utilise this ambiguity of description to depict a beauty that is potentially beyond encapsulation in words, often placing respective characters, specifically heroines, beyond the realm of the earthly and projecting them into almost angelic magnificence through the power of association, suggestion and relative silence.

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[113] For further discussion of this idea of physical beauty and the male gaze in relation to Chaucer's Emily of *The Knight's Tale*, see Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 16-17.

In keeping with the ebullience of a thriving heroine's beauty, harrowing circumstances and their effect on a woman are measured not in terms of a description of consequent unattractiveness, but instead a summary of what has been lost from the vitality and joyful energy they once exuded. Cooper touches on this in her *English Romance in Time* (18), in a discussion of Chaucer's Criseyde. Chaucer accordingly describes her not as looking positively ugly or unattractive but in terms of the beauty and vibrancy she has lost:

> Hir face, lyk of Paradys the image,
> Was al y-chaunged in another kinde.
> The pleye, the laughtre men was wont to fynde
> On hir, and eek hire Ioyes everychone
> Ben fled, and thus lyth now Criseyde allone.
>
> (IV.864-68)

While Chaucer dedicates further description to Criseyde at the end of Books III and V, here, her desolation is not explicitly defined in certain terms; instead, her loss is highlighted by the loss of that which she loves, and the depletion of the joy that had previously bestowed upon her such grace and beauty as that known only in Paradise. Similarly, Felicity Riddy's "Abject odious" essay discusses how, in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, the heroine "is cut off from her own former beauty and desire" (233) by the sentencing of the gods:

Thy greit fairnes and all thy bewtie gay,	*great; glorious beauty*
Thy wantoun blude and eik thy goldin hair	*lustful blood; also*
Heir I exclude fra thee for evermair.	*Here; banish from; forever*

(313-15)

Riddy establishes the manner in which Cresseid's appeal, "Quha sall me gyde, quha sall me now convoy" [*Who shall guide me; convey] (131), highlights "the voice of the ungoverned woman whom the authorities in late-medieval society continually attempted to control; husbandless, protectorless, cast adrift from the structures of male authority which the poem does not question" ("Abject odious" 234). Branded an "abject odious" (133), the loss of aesthetic beauty is but one way in which Cresseid's social exclusion is ultimately and cruelly demonstrated.

Cooper argues that "inward virtue is what outward beauty should represent" (*The English Romance in Time* 18); physical beauty is demonstrative from an objective perspective and these medieval heroines represent both virtuous and physical glory. This marks a decided contrast in the case of villainous women, making the dichotomy between outward appearance and inner integrity all the more striking. "Beauty can function as a rather sinister kind of dramatic irony, to set up assumptions about the matching of inward and outward form in the minds of other characters or indeed of the readers, and then to betray them" (*The English Romance in Time* 18); this is most evident in the case of the lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and to an extent within Malory himself, whereby Guinevere's beauty is betrayed by her ambiguous moral code and capacity for destruction.

In keeping with the portrayal of the physical, Cooper explores the fact that one rather subversive, but nonetheless relevant, element of feminine power lies within the depiction of the male in medieval texts. Authors in the Middle Ages often reversed the process of the admiration of feminine beauty in order to allow the male to be appreciated through the eyes of a lady; instead of a simple description of a hero's good looks, the reader is instead presented with an attractive male figure whose allure is enhanced all the more by the fact that he is being introduced

subjectively, with the approval of the female. In addition to reinforcing the appeal of the male, this narrative device also affords the female a significant amount of autonomy and responsibility; she is in possession of an active emotional and intellectual life, augmented by dynamic social and personal responses to the people and the world around her.

Criseyde's first impressions of Troilus substantiate this; her declaration, "so fresh, so yong, so weldy semed he" (II.636), portrays a hero of significant physical substance, while also heightening the reader's sense of Criseyde as a dynamic character, with valid opinions and responses (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 19). Similarly, the assertion that "quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis" (I.253.15-16), awards Malory's Lancelot a certain cachet, in receipt of the good favour of the queen. The presentation of the knight through the eyes of a lady substantiates the knight's physical impact, while awarding a certain element of autonomy to the woman through whose eyes the male subject of discussion is presented. This is also an interesting aspect of male physicality, as evidenced in the description of the young hero in *King Horn*:

Fairer ne mighte non beo born,	*be*
Ne no rein upon birine,	*rain fell upon*
Ne sunne upon bischine.	*or sun shone*
Fairer nis non thane he was:	
He was bright so the glas;	*as*
He was whit so the flur;	*flower*
Rose red was his colur.	
He was fayr and eke bold,	*also*
And of fiftene winter hold.	*old*

(lines 10-18)[114]

Both Horn and his mother, Godhild, are described as "faire" (8), while the nature imagery employed in the description of Horn's beauty is vividly reminiscent of that often used to depict the glory of the damsel in courtly romance, such as in the portrayals of Havelok's Gunnild and Levive addressed in Chapter Two of this work. Horn's physicality is effeminate in its description, a technique which serves to highlight his physical impact in decidedly feminine terms.

This concept of beauty and the objective gaze also comes into play as Marhalt, Ywain, and Gawain each choose one of three ladies to accompany them on their quests in the *Morte Darthur*. Ywain, in choosing first, picks "the eldyst damesell" (I.163.13-14), branding himself the "yongest and waykest" (I.163.12-13) of the three, and so in the "moste nede of helpe" (I.163.15) from a woman who has "sene much" (I.163.14). Marhalt chooses "the damesell of thirty wyntir age" (I.163.17-18), leaving "the yongyst and the fayryste" (I.163.20) for Gawain, who rejoices in his choice. This, according to Beverly Kennedy, suggests Ywain's "humility", Marhalt's "courtesy", and Gawain's "sensuality" (74), all aspects which are brought to bear later in the text. Here, female physicality is viewed and judged objectively, yet it simultaneously reflects on those men who make such judgements.

Comparably, Lancelot's practical joke, whereby he unseats Dinadan "disgysed" (II.669.27) in the "maner of a damesell" (II.669.26) and subsequently dresses Dinadan in "a womans garmente" (II.669.31-32), also subverts the objective narrative gaze. Here, masculine supremacy battles with femininity before descending into the ridiculous, as Guinevere laughed so much "that she fell downe; and so dede all that there was" (II.670.1). The feminised Dinadan becomes an object of ridicule, and he is disillusioned by his brother-in-arms, berating, "sir Launcelot,

[114] *King Horn* quotes and translations are from the Drake, Salisbury, and Herzman edition.

though arte so false that I can never beware of the" (II.670.3-4). Beverly Kennedy notes that Lancelot and Dinadan's relationship is here "sore tried" (192), as Lancelot's efforts to entertain the queen prove successful on a surface level, while Dinadan's shame is not quickly dismissed. Here, however, this ludicrous entertainment parodies masculine chivalry through the physical appearance of women's clothing, creating a mockery through the feminisation of masculine strength to the objective observer.

As such, female perception and influence is an active entity in medieval romance, considering the fact that the theory which underscores the belief system of the true chivalric knight assumes deference towards women, while simultaneously perpetuating the dominant governance of the male in the male/female relationship. Molly Martin's *Vision and Gender* thus argues that "masculinity primarily depends not on the projection of male vision, but rather on the projection of male images"; in this way, it "capitalizes on the production of physical displays of acts that are coded male by the society that defines it" (2). In the story of *Sir Gowther*, for instance, Gowther rescues a mute princess, whose recovery from apparent death brings with it a voice, signalling the redemption of her rescuer as well as her life, as her "recovery and new-found voice recall the promise of resurrection" and "[d]emonic intervention is replaced by divine" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 233). Here, a damned male is redeemed through a display of admirable physical force rooted in feminine engagement. Once again, the placement of the female in the text acts as a catalyst for male success, this time in a demonstration of a positive social influence.

Women as Active Agents in the Real and Imagined Literary Worlds

In keeping with this idea of the objective narrative viewpoint in terms of respective male and female influence, "Malory emphasizes displays of gender, and particularly masculinity, by sharpening [...] visibility and focusing on those who see and react to male behaviours" (Martin 1).[115] The feminine gaze evidently shapes male presentation, while the physical presence of the female affects male characters. Arthur was conceived as a consequence of duplicity and covetousness, as alluded to in Chapter Three, in a manner somewhat analogous with the conception of his own son, Mordred, with his sister. The uncertainty regarding Arthur's beginning is reflected in Mordred's conception, which once more brings a sense of ambiguity surrounding sexual gratification to the fore as concealed identities and lustful desire come to into play. Saunders writes, "[t]here is a strange symmetry to the fact that both the king and his destroyer are conceived as a result of unnatural sexual encounters" (*Rape and Ravishment* 239); in addition, both encounters are imbued with a sense of the magical, as Merlin plays a significant part in Arthur's conception, while Morgan le Fay employs her powers of enchantment to ensure the sexual encounter which leads to Mordred's birth. There is a skewed sense of equilibrium about the two events, one which leads to the birth of a king, the other, to the birth of the man who would bring about the same king's downfall.

The synchronicity reflected in both sets of circumstances creates a certain sense of inevitability as the sexual desire which preceded Arthur's own conception comes into play in the series of events which will eventually lead to his demise. Essentially, in a world dominated by politics and the rights enforced by social

[115] For example, Guinevere asserts Palomides' nobility, stating, "he that ys curteyse and kynde and jantil hath favoure in every place" (II.764.30-31), while Tristram narrowly avoids death in his battle with Elyas by drawing strength from the faith that Isolde placed in him, and his desire to return to his beloved.

standing, the pull of feminine sexuality has the power to cause even the mightiest of men to fall.[116]

The conception of Torre "half be force" (I.101.14), as portrayed in the "Tale of King Arthur", once again highlights this concept of female autonomy and sexual ambiguity as incorporated in the chivalric code. Essentially, the code is in place to protect and preserve female virtue, yet the indication of any "force" at all denotes an element of reluctance on the part of Torre's mother. She herself describes her son's conception, with Sir Pellinore:

> she tolde the kynge and Merlion that whan she was a mayde and wente to mylke hir kyne, "there mette with me a sterne knyght, and half be force he had my maydynhode. And at that tyme he begate my sonne Torre, and he toke awey fro me my grayhounde that I had that tyme with me, and seyde he wolde kepe the grayhounde for my love."
>
> (I.101.12-17)

It is Malory who determines that Pellinor's actions were undertaken "half be force", in contrast to the total unwillingness of the woman in his source material (the *Suite du Merlin*). Malory's presentation hints at a skewed seduction scene, essentially excusing Pellinor. P.J.C. Field, however, in *Romance and Chronicle*, defines "sterne" in this case as having primary associations with "fierce" or "violent" (136), creating the impression of a forcible sexual encounter, initiated by the knight. While the very mention of Pellinor's strength and the "force" used alludes to an involuntary coupling, "this is balanced by the lessening of the degree of force and the fact that, as in the case of Arthur's own conception, the end seems to justify the means" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 241). This detailed description of a half-

[116] Saunders observes, "Throughout the work, sexuality is a powerful and threatening force, which even when authorised, may prove dangerous, and which finally causes the destruction of the Arthurian world, both through the betrayal of Arthur by Mordred and through the rift caused by the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere" (*Rape and Ravishment* 239).

force also, in a sense, validates the woman's part in this situation; the fact that Pellinor did have to exert some force intimates that the lady did not submit to him easily and did not simply relinquish her "maydynhode" without contention.

Torre's conception is technically legalised in the same way that Arthur's was: Torre was conceived prior to the marriage of his mother, and so she was never guilty of adultery and its associated ignominy. As Merlin clarifies to Torre, "ye were begotyn or evir she was wedded" (I.101.25), and as such, his conception was socially unobjectionable on a number of counts, despite the moral ambiguity surrounding the notion of Pellinor's half-force.

Malory's account of Torre's conception is yet another indication of the sense of equivocation which often surrounds the relationship between male desire and female consent in the text. Torre's mother provides a "confusing testimony [...] which makes it impossible to establish either rape or consent" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 65). The precise nature of her phrasing avoids any conclusive determination of rape, yet nor does it indicate a true willingness to participate on her behalf. This again demonstrates the nature of the female in the world of the text: often a passive entity, a tool by which masculine intention is fulfilled. Once more, the female is effectively positioned as a narrative tool, but her autonomy becomes ambiguous in the face of male intention and desire.

Some women of ability and moral substance hold a worthy position among the dominant knights, such as Perceval's sister, who "plays a crucial role in the Grail quest, despite the fact that women are expressly excluded from the enterprise" (Lacy 43). During her relatively brief appearance in the text, Perceval's sister is actively allowed to "take part in the quest", through being permitted to "choose her fate" (Thornton 43) and achieve some semblance of the spiritual purity aligned with the

Holy Grail – or come closer than any other female, and many men in the text, to doing so.

Perceval's sister's initial appearance in the *Morte Darthur* comes towards the end of "The Quest of the Holy Grail", where she acts as a guide for Galahad, taking him to sea with the promise of "the hyghest adventure that ever ony knyght saw" (II.983.3-4) – an adventure which contributes to the shaping of his chivalric career. It is on this journey that Malory begins to make certain changes from his source material in his portrayal of Perceval's sister, creating a far more dynamic character than her French counterpart in the *Queste*. She exhorts Galahad to leave his horse behind, shedding the trappings of the earthly as they board the Ship of Faith:

> "Sir," seyde she, "leve youre horse hyre, and I shall leve myne also"; and toke hir sadils and hir brydyls with them, and made a crosse on them, and so entird into the ship.
>
> (II.983.29-31)

The source material demonstrates Galahad as having made such decisions, and so Malory places the female, in this case, as an active entity, who determines her own fate.[117]

The dynamic nature of Malory's characterisation of Perceval's sister is most clearly demonstrated in her posture at the castle which demands bloodletting as currency for passage, as she "acts independently of the Grail knights and without a man's authority" (Robeson 114). The knights of the castle champion their leprous lady, and so Perceval's sister must "yelde" (II.1000.26), as "there shall no damesell passe thys way but she shall blede of hir bloode a sylver dysshefull" (I.82.3-5), with

[117] For further discussion of the concept of fate, destiny and choice, see Ginger Thornton's analysis of Perceval's sister, 43-53.

the stipulation that this blood must come from "a clene mayde" (I.82.1). The question is posed before the company there gathered, determining whether or not Perceval's sister is "a mayde" (II.1000.15); distinct from the French, where she allows Bors to answer on her behalf, Malory's narrative demonstrates Perceval's sister answering autonomously, stating, "Ye sir, [...] a mayde I am" (II.1000.16).

While the French *Queste* identifies Perceval's sister individually as being the one predestined to save the lady of the castle, Malory's prophecy is not so explicit, and there remains an ambiguity around the exact identity of the maiden whose blood will save the dying lady. This allows Malory's maiden to be proactive in her death; it is she who takes the decision to donate her blood and face certain death without being conscripted into action against her will. Perceval's sister, in the *Morte Darthur*, does not depend on the knights to sanction her decision or indeed, to make the final decision on her behalf: "'Now,' seyde sir Percivallis sister, 'fayre knyghtes, I se well that this jantillwoman ys but dede withoute helpe, and therefore lette me blede'" (II.1002.25-27). Thornton observes,

> [w]here the French maiden is indecisive and looks to the three companions for guidance, Malory's maiden has already made up her mind when she speaks; her words are meant to prevent her male companions from interfering, not to request their guidance.
>
> (47)

Perceval's sister is strong-willed in her interpretation of the scene, and expresses her intent based on this, brooking no argument from masculine authority.

The *Queste*'s lady looks to the knights in her company for guidance, and when the decision has been reached, addresses her request to them; in doing so, she petitions to be permitted to adhere to the custom of the castle, and passively allows the men to explicate her final decision. Malory, however, has Perceval's sister advise

her companions of her intention, then directly address the knights of the castle with her ruling: "And therefore there shall no more batayle be, but to-morne I shall yelde you youre custom of this castell" (II.1002.32; 1003.1-2.). "More clearly here than at any other point, Malory has redrawn the maiden's character, giving her not a secondary role, but a forceful, primary one" (Thornton 48), characterising the lady as being autonomous in her own identity.

The treatment of Perceval's sister throughout the narrative, while evidencing her autonomy, can also be held in comparison with elements of Galahad's journey, as both "are symbolic representations of an ideal moral perfection" (Lacy 43). Both are recipients of a talisman, both possess healing powers and the opportunity to demonstrate them,[118] both utilise blood in a healing capacity, and both are buried at "the spirituall palyse" at Sarras (II.1003.27-28). The maiden makes her wishes known to Perceval as she prepares to die:

> And as sone as ye three com to the cité of Sarras, there to enchyeve the Holy Grayle, ye shall fynde me undir a towre aryved. And there bury me in the spirituall palyse. For I shall telle you for trouthe, there sir Galahad shall be buryed, and ye bothe, in the same place.
>
> (II.1003.25-29)

Her final wish is acknowledged, and she lies in death with Perceval and Galahad, those two successful Grail knight knights who ascended to a spiritual plain, far from the earthly purgatory of the court. Her burial in such company, and in such a location, places her as a person of substance, a character worthy of her place; and the only woman to be positioned in the text as such.

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[118] Galahad cures the "Maymed Kynge" (II.1031.10) while Perceval's sister welcomes death in order to heal the "syke lady" (II.1003.9).

Any sense of autonomy possessed by Perceval's sister, however, does remain somewhat ambiguous by virtue of her femininity. Once again, "[t]he name 'Perceval's Sister' individuates the protagonist only relationally" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 138); the lady is identified only in terms of a male. The fact that she remains unnamed does indicate the acknowledged objectification of the female, yet if we take the paradox of power stemming from vulnerability and apply it here, Perceval's sister may be seen as being a figure of significant power in this enforced objectification. However, while she provides invaluable help to Galahad, Perceval, and the Grail knights in his company, her defining moment comes in death, as she donates her blood and her life in order to bring salvation to the dying lady. She remains an unnamed entity, recognised only for her brother, despite the actions and knowledge unique to her which absolutely mark her as a comprehensive and worthy character in her own right.

Despite presenting a definite element of authority, Perceval's sister remains ultimately defined by her femininity, and even her sacrifice is undermined by the events immediately following it. On the day after these events, the castle itself and all who dwell in it are destroyed in what appears to be an act of divine intervention. The fact of this destruction "both privileges and obscures Perceval's Sister's achievement" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 145); her blood, and her sacrifice, did what countless maidens before her could not, and healed the lady of the castle. However, her death appears to have been in vain, as that which she cured and brought to the good is annihilated. The cured lady and her castle are both "destroyed in thunder and lightning", in a "patterning [which] is full of melancholy in its suggestion of Christ's sacrifice for sinful, ungrateful, unloving man" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 256), aligning Perceval's sister with the ultimate spiritual sacrifice in her selfless actions.

The value of Perceval's sister's blood is undoubtedly precious: "Her bleeding allies her with women saints and holy individuals whose blood is credited with miraculous powers" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 145). This value, however, is questionable in terms of her place in the narrative; the worth of her blood cost her dearly, as she pays with her life, and the situation as a whole serves to underline the perception of the female as a commodity, objectified in terms of worth and cost. Perceval's sister, therefore, is simultaneously bound by the associations of femininity while being unusual in the restricted autonomy that she does possess.

Thornton observes "more often than not, Malory defines his women in terms of their men" (50), as is demonstrated repeatedly in the circumstances of women such as Guinevere, Morgan le Fay, and Elaine. Even Perceval's sister, one of the most compelling female characters within the narrative, is defined as such, in terms of her relationship to a man. Despite the relative autonomy of female motivation in this circumstance Perceval's sister nevertheless dies, a martyr for chivalric society, and is essentially defined and remembered in relation to her brother and her company of knights. Here, once more, the female is characterised in terms of male supremacy, both in identity and action, in a further demonstration of patriarchal dominance, despite the admirable nature of the feminine presence, or her worthy contribution to society.

Masculine Responsibility and the Subversion of Power

As previously addressed, the ideal of masculine responsibility outlined in the Pentecostal Oath allows for the characterisation of the male, in terms of their relationship with the female. Pellinor's characterisation is influenced in this way, as is effectively demonstrated in his dealings with Nenyve which provide a positive foil to the questionable circumstances of Torre's conception. Here, he rescues the

abducted lady, as "she cryed and made grete dole" (I.103.11) having been taken "away with forse" (I.103.10) by a marauding knight. Pellinor serves as Nenyve's saviour, in circumstances which clearly indicate the dichotomy between this and his role in Torre's conception, presenting, perhaps, a demonstration of inconsistency in the treatment of women, according to their respective social classes. The fact that Torre's mother is not of the nobility essentially condones Pellinor's actions, in the context of the argument that women of different social positionings demanded different behaviours.[119] Torre's mother and Nenyve hail from divergent social standings, and the disparity in the way in which both are handled by the same knight testifies to the fact that social class definitively determines social reception.

The fact that the woman that Pellinor strives to save, in order to avoid "disworshyp" (I.103.15), is Nenyve, the agent of Merlin's destruction, adds a certain sense of incongruity to proceedings; the paradoxical circumstances of Pellinor's rescue of Nenyve serves to highlight the somewhat indeterminate nature of an extremely decisive code: "[t]hat the lady whom Pellinor now rescues from rape and abduction is Nenyve [...] effects a dramatic tension between the potential danger represented by women and the need to protect them" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 241). The fundamental cornerstone upon which Arthurian society stands is built on the prerequisite of the protection of those who may intend harm to their protectors.

The opposite of this ideal of masculine protection is evidenced in Mordred's capture of his stepmother, and his distinctly dishonourable intentions. Malory depicts Mordred's appropriation of Guinevere as objectionable in terms of both his betrayal of his father, and his inappropriate desire for his stepmother:

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[119] This is in keeping with the idea that "force used against peasant women is acceptable, although it would be condemned if the woman were noble" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 240).

> And aftirwarde he drew hym unto Wynchester, and there he toke quene Gwenyver, and seyde playnly that he wolde wedde her (which was hys unclys wyff and hys fadirs wyff). [...] wherefore quene Gwenyver was passyng hevy. But she durst nat discover her harte, but spake fayre, and aggreed to sir Mordredys wille.
>
> (III.1227.8-14)

The theme of sexual violation, specifically in the context of incest, recalls the beginning of the *Morte Darthur*, and the duplicity and sexual ambiguity that surrounded Arthur's own conception.[120] The end of the text revisits the beginning, while the concept of sexual violation remains a force throughout the narrative; essentially, the element of female sexuality, be it untouchable, taken by force, or used as a form of temptation, is very much a valid and significant authority in Arthurian society, as demonstrated consistently throughout the text.

Abduction is a familiar trope in the romances; this particular incident, however, proved to be Arthur's final battle, the one which heralds the fragmentation of the reign of Arthur and his chivalric society. Here, it is Arthur who leaps to Guinevere's defence, not Lancelot, and a battle initiated in error, with the simple killing of a snake, leads to the deaths of both father and son, and the dissolution of Arthurian rule. As Jane Gilbert notes in *Living Death*, "death provides a significant horizon against which medieval courtly texts question the values and behaviours involved in love [...] its value is variable and often unclear, multiple or ambiguous. Thus, although dying for love is proof of superlative devotion, it is typically not allowed to stand as a finite event" (64). Guinevere's rescue is convoluted and precipitates the death of her rescuer, and, "[w]ith the breaking of this romance

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[120] Speaking of Mordred's state of degradation, Saunders observes: "This desire points to the fact that the wheel of Fortune has turned full circle: the reiteration of the incest theme of the start recalls the strange fact that the whole of the Arthurian world, its inception and its end, has been constructed on illicit sex, one manifestation of which is rape" (*Rape and Ravishment* 262).

pattern, which would have afforded victory, the model of secular chivalry disintegrates" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 263). The queen is not technically rescued, but instead absconds, removing herself to the sanctuary of the abbey of Amesbury, dedicated to living out her days in the solitude dictated by her contrition as the court which she once ruled as queen collapses in ruin.

Guinevere's rejection of rescue heralds the end of Arthurian society as it exists:

> [h]er active choice to abandon the possibility of a knight protector and adopt instead a holy life in turn triggers Launcelot's penance, and the narrative thus returns, finally, to the ascetic and chaste existence of the Grail quest; there is no further need either to fight for the love of a woman or to protect her.
>
> (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 263)

Saunders here underscores the essence of the *Morte Darthur* as it reaches its conclusion; when Guinevere removes herself from society, "there is no further need either to fight for the love of a woman or to protect her". This completely alters the dynamic of functioning society in the narrative, as "[t]hroughout the *Morte Darthur*, men judge each other through their success or failure in upholding the ideal of the protection of women; women provide the measure of male achievement not only as objects and instigators of quests, but also through their own sexual menace" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 263). Finlayson also emphasises, in terms of male self-assertion, that "[t]he examination of self through the demonstration of martial prowess in the encounter with fated adventure within an unreal world governed by chivalric modes of conduct still remains" (451). While woman may be viewed as submissive and secondary to the dominant male characters in the text, their presence, their needs, and their influence provide the

measure by which male accomplishment is determined, as "[a] knight, after all, has only one way of winning the lady fair, or of advancing his own honor, and that by demonstrated prowess in battle" (Todd viii).

The active force of female influence though sexual violation also tempers Bors' journey. His brother, Lionel, is without weapon or armour, and is physically outnumbered as he is mercilessly attacked by two knights. In the same moment, Bors is faced with a woman, restrained and powerless, and in apparent fear of physical violation:

> And so he loked uppon the other syde of hym and sawe a knyght which brought a fayre jantillwoman, and wolde a sette her in the thyckest place of the foreyste for to have be the more surer oute of the way from hem that sought her. And she which was nothynge assured cryde with an hyghe voice, "Seynte Mary, succour youre mayde!"
>
> (II.960.33-35; 961.1-4)

Bors must act with a sense of immediacy, and so his decisions are born of a spontaneity which emphasises his chivalric integrity. Saunders explores this dilemma, observing that

> Bors' anguished decision to save the woman from rape rather than his brother from death forms one of the most resonant moments in the entire work, in its extraordinary logic that the virginity of an unknown maiden is of more value than the life of a beloved brother:
>
> "For if I latte my brother be in adventure he muste be slayne, and that wold I nat for all the erthe; and if I helpe nat the mayde she ys shamed, and shall lose hir virginité which she shall never gete agayne".
>
> (*Rape and Ravishment* 256-57; II.961.14-17)

The necessity of making such a decision seems almost inconceivable; Bors' own brother is near death, yet his ultimate loyalty lies with the oath he has taken to protect the vulnerable female. The concept of the permanency of the effects of rape counters that of death; death is but an ending to physical existence, while rape is the irredeemable destruction of virginity and the spiritual purity which this represents.[121] Hope remains for Lionel, in the sense of eternal life and divine reward, while the rape of the lady offers a conclusive finality as all elements of integrity would be destroyed beyond redemption.

The duality of this destructive consequence incorporates both male and female, as the loss of virginity resonates equally with the maiden and the Grail knight. This double responsibility weighs heavily on the knight; not only must he retain his own integrity but must also ensure the protection of female virtue, and so it remains that Bors chooses to rescue the lady, placing Lionel in the hands of God. The import of these actions is further underscored later, when it is declared that, had Bors not interceded on the lady's behalf, "five hundred" other knights would have met with death in their attempts to do so (II.962.8). In addition to this, not only would the woman's virtue been irreparably damaged, so would the soul of her rapist; both would have been eternally doomed by his actions: "he had dyed for the synne of hys body, and shamed, and I dishonoured for ever" (II.962.15-16).

"The refusal of the woman's consent in rape is completely irrelevant here, and it is the physical loss of virginity, irrespective of consent, which would cause shame and damnation" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 257); Bors' decision offers salvation on a number of different levels, championing the greater good despite the individual suffering he is forced to undertake by abandoning his brother to death, in

[121] Essentially, "[r]ape, unlike death, is shameful, and the notion that virginity 'she shall never gete agayne' starkly opposes the idea that life will be restored in heaven; earthly life is expendable whereas virginity is not" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 257).

the hope that he will be left to a merciful God. Gilbert establishes that "[d]ying is seen as ceasing to be one kind of person and becoming another, significantly altering but by no means destroying social roles and relations. The medieval dead and living had reciprocal obligations and complementary spheres of activity as members of a greater community" (2); Bors' decision emphasises this concept of death as an active entity in social workings, particularly in relation to the male/female dynamic in the construct of Arthurian culture.

In comparable terms of feminine influence, the efficacy of King Arthur's authority is also undermined and finally destroyed by the dissident actions of women in the text. The king is cuckolded by his beloved wife, and equally adored knight, as "many in the courte spake of" their affair (II.1045.19-20), "opynne-mowthed" (II.1045.21); moreover, Arthur, crushed in defeat, meets his demise at the hands of his own flesh and blood, conceived in an instant of defenselessness in the face of base desire for a woman which blurred the realities of truth. Tempted by this "passynge fayre lady" (I.41.17), Arthur "caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her" (I.41.18). Lust blurred the clarity of identity, with the result that "kynge Arthure knew nat that kynge Lottis wyff was his sister" (I.41.24-25). The objectification of the female respectively as wife and lover here is a somewhat tenuous concept; although the narrative declares that King Lot's wife was "sente thydir to aspye the courte of kynge Arthure" (I.41.14), it is also noted that when the king "desired to ly by her" (I.41.18), "they were agreed" (I.41.19). This agreement indicates a consensual encounter between two autonomous individuals, creating a dynamic that affords an element of self-sufficiency to both parties.

The phrase "they were agreed" denotes that King Lot's wife was a willing participant in this encounter; conversely, the fact that Queen Morgause is referred to here only as "kynge Lottis wyff" (I.41.13), or Arthur's sister ("syster on the modirs

syde Igrayne unto Arthure" (I.41.20-21)), denies her any semblance of autonomous identity, implying instead that she is simply an object to be used as the king sees fit. It must be noted, however, that Malory's *Morte Darthur* is the first text in which Queen Morgause is identified by name; prior to this, King Lot's wife was accredited solely by social rank and lineage. Dhira B. Mahoney's study of Malory's awareness of narrative identity considers that "in those of Malory's French sources which mention the character, the prose *Tristan* and the two versions of the *Suite du Merlin* [...] she is known only by her title: 'La roine d'Orcnie' or 'la feme le roi Loth d'Orkanie'" ("Narrative Treatment of Name in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*" 648). Malory's particularised identification of Arthur's previously unnamed sister eliminates the relative inconsequentiality conveyed by anonymity; however, Morgause is, at the point of conception of Mordred, referred to only in relation to her husband and her brother, accentuating a sense of the peripheral nature of feminine autonomy.[122]

The subtle subversion of power in Malory's *Morte Darthur* appears to be precariously balanced in the case of a number of particularised women who actively attempt to influence the social order, yet the dominant nature of patriarchal authority essentially asserts ultimate authority over attempts at female control. Just as Perceval's sister is given a certain degree of autonomy in Malory's depiction, so too does Morgause gain a more definitive identity; neither of these women, however, retains any powerful sense of independence, as the female is once more subsumed by the masculine dominion of chivalric rule.

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[122] For an overview of the significance of female identity in the context of being named in Malory's work, see Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Middle English Romance* 23-26.

Placement and Possession of the Female

The possession of the female in terms of marital and sexual relations further reinforces the dominant concept of male pre-eminence; as apparent, while glimpses of feminine authority in terms of autonomy in matters of the heart are seen throughout the narrative, it remains primarily a dominion of masculine ascendancy.[123] Dhira B. Mahoney's "Symbolic Uses of Space in Malory's *Morte Darthur*" demonstrates this in her discussion of the way in which the knights eventually "have no compunction about invading Guenevere's private apartments: on the contrary, they turn them into a battleground, a siege of a defended place" (106); the chambers of the queen, once guarded and protected, are now ransacked as a result of her own actions, and knight stands against knight as Lancelot attempts to protect his lover from his peers. Here, Guinevere is objectively perceived as a threat to male dominion due to her betrayal of the king, and in a scene which can be metaphorically read as rape, the knights force entry into her personal space.[124] The female space is here physically and emotionally violated as masculine supremacy is asserted.[125]

This concept is highlighted further by the acquisition of women by force exerted even by those chivalric knights who are held in admiration for their valour. For instance, Gawain and Lamorak, two worthy men, enter into an altercation with one another, based on their desire for a lady in the possession of a slumbering knight. Gawain is the first to express his intentions, citing his relationship with the king as placing him in the position to do so. Stating, "I am nevew unto kynge Arthure" (I.449.27-28), Gawain proceeds to fulfil his desires: "Ryght so com sir

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[123] For detailed discussion of evidence of female authority in romantic relationships, in the *Morte Darthur,* see Chapter Five.

[124] See Mahoney's "Symbolic Uses of Space" 106 for analysis of the literal and metaphorical readings of this situation.

[125] This is also addressed by D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. in "Malory, the *Mort[e]s*, and the Confrontation in Guinevere's Chamber" 78-90.

Gawayne and toke the knyghtes lady and sette hir up behynde hys squyer" (I.449.22-23).

Lamorak thwarts Gawain, but not in order to uphold any favourable aspect of chivalric integrity. Instead, he maintains his right over the lady as it was he who first happened upon the scene, and promptly disposes of the sleeping knight. Not only is this woman treated as an object to be claimed as a possession, the right to this prize is also the cause of dissent and violence among a fraternity of knights who pride themselves upon kinship and loyalty. Saunders considers, "[i]n these episodes, women are once again reduced in absolute terms to objects who are to be fought over and won by the male brotherhood, cause for male rivalry" (*Rape and Ravishment* 251). Once more, this simply serves to reiterate the fact that while a knight may pay homage to a lady's virtue by fighting for her honour, the same scenario subverts any element of female autonomy by means of the comprehensive objectification of the same woman, as she becomes the trophy of the man who has fought for her honour – and can just as easily be claimed by any other knight who demonstrates superiority in battle.

The story of Sir Epinogrus's lady, in Malory's "Sir Tristram", presents yet another depiction of the balance between masculine possession and enforcement; Epinogrus, having claimed his lady following military victory, subsequently loses her the very next day to Sir Helior and his superior strength. The nature of the ownership of this woman and the manner in which she is passed from one man to the next highlights the workings of this value system where women are treated as chattels, especially when the circumstances of Epinogrus's victory are described:

> I rejoysed my lady and wan her wyth myne hondis and loste her agayne: alas that day! And fyrst thus I wan her: my lady was an erlys doughtir, and as the erle and two knyghtes cam home fro the turnement of Lonezep, for her sake

> I sette uppon this erle myselff and on his two knyghtes, and my lady there beynge presente. And so by fortune there I slew the erle and one of the knyghtes, and the othir knyght fledde. And so that nyght I had my lady.
>
> (II.771.2-10)

This lady was forced to stand by as her father was slain, then seized by his killer. Epinogrus is laconic as he glories in his triumph, stating simply, "And so that nyght I had my lady". The simplistic nature of his declaration both underscores and undermines the dramatic circumstances of the manner in which she was captured; it is but his right, and the suffering of the unnamed woman is of no consequence. She is not even afforded an identity in her position as pawn and prize.

Her appropriation by Sir Helior, the very next day, simply serves to substantiate this approach (II.771.11-17). Possession of the lady is passed to Helior in much the same way as Epinogrus gained it; she is then wielded as a forfeit of sorts, as Helior places her in the custody of Sir Saphir, in return for the former's life (II.772.12-13). It is Palomides who frees the lady from this circle of force and possession, subduing Saphir and consequently becoming the fifth knight to claim ownership over this particular woman. He, however, chooses to break the cycle; despite the circumstances of her initial capture, the lady deplores the loss of Epinogrus, lamenting: "Alas [...] that evir I knew hym other he me! For I have for his sake loste my worshyp and also hys lyff; that greveth me moste of all" (II.772.20-22). It appears that, in spite of the harsh nature of their meeting, Epinogrus and the lady have formed a bond based in love, and so Palomides returns her to her first possessor.

The lady's lament emphasises the worth of a knight's existence; the life of the knight is perceived at a greater worth than the conservation of the lady's honour, yet there seems to be a sense of mutuality in their affection for one another. It is

because of this that Palomides defies the code of military defeat and ownership, acknowledging the equality in the strength of feeling demonstrated between the pair, and affording this pre-eminence over military posturing. Palomides' actions here exemplify the notion that "[a]lthough military prowess remains the defining quality of the knight, then, Malory sets up a new ethic of the Round Table, an ethic that is encapsulated in the chivalric oath and that opposes the rewarding of physical strength irrespective of love and consent" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 252). As ever, this principle is derived and implemented by men in a masculine society, but it simultaneously inspired and perpetuated by the female presence.

The Justification of Male Desire

Malory's *Morte Darthur* "presents a highly conventional self-justifying narrative of desire" through the text, as the gratification of male desire is often validated by circumstance (Batt, Preface to *Malory's Morte Darthur* xiii). This is highlighted particularly in the conception of Arthur, and the means by which he was conceived as a result of the urgent nature of Uther's sexual appetite. Just as Elaine manipulates her appearance to facilitate the seduction of Lancelot, so too does Uther take on the shape of Gorlois, with Merlin's magic, in order to fulfil his "entente and desyre" (I.8.25). Both Elaine and Uther approach these sexual unions with a sense of purpose, and both result in the conception of figures essential to Arthurian history; Elaine gives birth to Galahad, while Uther fathers Arthur.

Uther's act of desire, however, is undertaken "with the specific purpose of orchestrating the conception and upbringing of Arthur" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 237). It is clarified to Uther that "the first nyght that ye shal lye by Igrayne ye shal gete a child on her" (I.9.1-2), and so his coupling with Igraine is purposeful. Despite the magical interference of Merlin, Uther's seduction of Igraine

not does technically constitute adultery, as it takes place "more than thre houres" (I.9.22-23) after the "deth of the duke" (I.9.22), yet this simply serves to contribute to the queen's distress, as she slept with the man she believed to have been her departed husband:

> But whan the lady herd telle of the duke her husband, and by all record he was dede or ever kynge Uther came to her, thenne she merveilled who that myghte be that laye with her in lykenes of her lord. So she mourned pryvely and held hir pees.
>
> (I.9.26-30)

The immediacy of the king's desire is emphasised by the fact that he is actually sick "for angre and for love of fayre Igrayne" (1.8.11-12), and he finds satisfaction in lying with her by virtue of imposture and artifice, despite the ambiguity surrounding the circumstance and timing of her husband's death. The justification of such pretence comes solely from the conception of Arthur, while the disorientation surrounding Igraine's husband's time and situation of death is clarified only to authenticate Arthur's status as legitimate.[126] The reality of the future king overshadows any potential doubt about the nature of his conception and eliminates any judgement of Uther's actions, in spite of the possible negative connotations that they hold. It seems to be a case of the end justifying the means, as Uther's actions, fuelled by desire, are not condemned but instead celebrated, as they yield in the eventuality of the future king.

Saunders observes, "Malory's pragmatic presentation of the pain and silencing of women suggests how common these emotions are within the male chivalric world" (*Rape and Ravishment* 238). This is particularly worth noting in comparison with Lancelot and Elaine's conception of Galahad, as considered in

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[126] This is comparable with Sir Gowther's conception, as addressed in Chapter Two of this study.

Chapter Five. Elaine seduced Lancelot, just as Uther tricked Igraine, both taking the form of the beloved of the seduced, both armed with the foreknowledge that a child of great social import would be conceived, and both with magical assistance in the respective forms of Merlin and Brusen. Interestingly, Igraine bears this circumstance relatively well, while Lancelot descends into a temporary fit of insanity due to Elaine's second deception; when the manipulative party is female, it seems, the end does not justify the means in the same way. Elaine is judged and condemned for her actions, as Lancelot is vocal in his persecution of her duplicity, yet Uther's actions are validated by Arthur's birth and Igraine remains relatively silent.

Uther effectively raped Igraine, yet the effect that this intrusion and violation may have had on the queen is not open for discussion; instead, it is celebrated that she has conceived a child with Uther, and this joy is compounded by the fact that their coupling was not, in fact, adulterous, as Gorlois had already passed at the point of conception. "Deception and pain become unimportant, justified in the figure of Arthur" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 238), while Igraine, once lusted after as "a fair lady and a passyng wyse" (I.7.6-7), is now little more than a means to an end as she has served her purpose. Igraine is unambiguous in the statement which clarifies her maternal distance from her son: "I saw the childe never aftir, nothir wote nat what ys hys name; for I knew hym never yette [...] I wote I bare a chylde be my lorde kynge Uther, but I wote never where he ys becom" (I.45.37; 46.1-2, 5-6). Felicity Riddy writes of Igraine that, "She is a voice, no more: self-possessed, unmelodramatic, disillusioned" (*Sir Thomas Malory* 38-39). The emotional implications of this somewhat chaotic union, coupled with the explicit deception by the father of her child, are all completely disregarded as the focus rests on the political aspect of these events; the conception of Arthur is

undoubtedly a cause of celebration, despite the somewhat inauspicious circumstances that heralded his conception.

"Illicit sexual relations and illegitimacy, however, are not uniformally subject to moral censure", as is evident in Arthur's conception, and further examples such as the circumstances of conception of Galahad and Torre (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 47). It appears that the gratification of sexual desire is often validated by a providential birth, justifying the ambiguity of the moral circumstance surrounding conception. Sexuality is, without doubt, viewed as a weapon or a manipulative tool throughout the *Morte Darthur*; it heralds a potential for danger so great that the Pentecostal Oath is established in order to exert some element of moral standard and control over its usage. However, as Batt writes, "[t]his lack of a consistent moral attitude in individual cases blurs the lines between human beings as responsible agents of their own destiny and as instruments of other powers" (*Malory's Morte Darthur* 48), removing all sense of individual culpability and endorsing that element of ambiguity that permeates the moral structure of Malory's Arthurian world.

Arthur's conception is preceded by Uther's original desire; it is this intensity of desire which precipitates the narrative as a whole, establishing the nature of the social workings of the *Morte Darthur* and its moral code. Merlin, in helping Uther to achieve gratification, "initiates a schema of reciprocity for male social relations: 'So ye wil be sworn unto me [...] to fulfille my desyre, ye shal have your desyre' (I.8.37-39)" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 55). It is a common practice throughout Malory's text that a woman should utilise her potential for desirability in order to receive a similarly desired result from a male, and Merlin manipulates the situation to exploit this concept of reciprocity.

Merlin is a third party to this union, an external observer with the power to manipulate circumstances to his will. Here, two desires are satisfied, both male, and Igraine is simply the tool by which this masculine gratification is achieved. The resultant conception of Arthur, then, validates the potentially dubious nature of this situation, instead manoeuvring it so that Merlin and Uther work together to achieve the siring of the future king, to be championed and celebrated. Here, Malory establishes the concept of desire as currency, in effect, with a system of reciprocity activated between powerful men, at the expense of women (although often exploited and manipulated by women). This, then, establishes the moral tone of the society which Arthur, born in a circumstance beset by possible moral ambiguity, ultimately rules.

As such, the positioning of the woman in Arthurian society is a precarious one. The juxtaposition of feminine presence with chivalric culture leads to certain difficulties in attempts to preserve the intention of integrity, as defined by the Pentecostal Oath. Balin is subjected to the punishment of exile from Arthur's court as a result of his murder of the Lady of the Lake, and Arthur's condemnation of his actions is absolute: "Therefore I shall never forgyff you that trespasse" (I.66.8-9). Balin's chivalric career is much directed by his behaviour as motivated by women; Batt notes that his "unhappy relation to the feminine charts his alienation from his chivalric self" (*Malory's Morte Darthur* 62).[127] Evidently, violence against the female in any form or by any provocation, "makes for confusion over moral legitimization" and the "social institutionalization" of such an attitude (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 63). In essence, the use of violence against women is

[127] See Geraldine Heng's "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory" (100-01), for further investigation of the impact of the feminine on Balin's career.

inconceivable in the chivalric mode; yet rape is veiled by desire and the justification wrought in the name of gratification.

The exploitation of the female as a narrative tool, employed for most part to further the interests of dominant male characters, is extensive throughout development of the *Morte Darthur*, while lust, and desire for sexual gratification on the part of both sexes, is a recurrent schema throughout the narrative. Saunders, in *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance,* argues: "the violation of chastity functions as a powerful manifestation of evil" (232). The element of jeopardy garnered by lustful tendencies is exemplified by the Giant of Mont Saint Michel, who "quite literally ruptures and silences" the women he rapes and murders in the act (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 243).

Malory's depiction of the giant's actions in the tale is explicit: "Here is a douches dede, the fayryst that lyved; he hath murthered that mylde withoute ony mercy; he forced hir by fylth of hymself, and so aftir slytte hir unto the navyll" (I.201.3-5). A similar fate is dealt upon those three maidens who, at the hand of the giant, man the spits upon which children are roasted, as they await their own destiny: "three fayre maydens that turnys the broche that bydis to go to his bed, for they three shall be ded within foure oures or the fylth is fulfylled that his fleyshe askys'" (I.202.1-3).

The demonic here takes the form of the cruel and the grotesque, directed towards the female. Comparably, the infant Gowther of *Sir Gowther* evidences similarly physical destructive tendencies resulting from the circumstances of sexual violation and a "demonic" conception; before he reaches the age of one, he has bitten off his mother's nipple and caused the death of nine wet nurses due to the

ferocity of his feeding.[128] The consequences of lustful desire, as channelled through the Giant of Mont Saint Michael (and the infant Gowther born of sin) are agony, torment and death. While the tale of the Giant of Mont Saint Michel is a story in itself, the capacity for suffering as instigated by lustful urges and fleshly temptations is explicitly emphasised in terms of anguish and eventual death, as the grotesque sexuality which drives the giant exposes the extreme consequences of unrestrained desire.[129]

The giant is not simply a monstrous anomaly; "despite the absolute proscription of violation of women by the chivalric code, the threat of rape is also present within Arthur's own kingdom" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 244). The existence of knights who pose a threat to the defence of peace within Arthurian society serve as a foil to those chivalric Knights of the Round Table, and indeed, vindicate the existence of the chivalric code. Sir Perys de Forest Savage is one such specimen of this threat to the chivalric ideal, in knightly form. Malory's handling of Sir Perys is significant in itself; in his French source (the *Prose Vulgate*), Perys is simply portrayed as no more than a thief. It is Malory who attributes the crime of rape to Perys, and in addition, labels him with the moniker of 'de Forest Savage', which, as Saunders notes, "places Perys outside the world of the court, and suggests his affinity with the threat and disorder of the wilderness beyond civilisation, where rape frequently occurs" (*Rape and Ravishment* 244), in a motif reminiscent of the distress of the lost hero in *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Perys haunts the roadways for unsuspecting women, primed for attack: "here by this way hauntys a knyght that dystressis all ladyes and jantylwomen, and at the leste he robbyth them other lyeth by hem" (I.269.19-21). The very existence of

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[128] For further discussion, see Corinne Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*.

[129] R. Warm explores this further in "Arthur and the Giant of Mont St. Michel: The Politics of Empire Building in the Later Middle Ages" 59-71.

men such as this are far from the giant and the obvious threat he poses, but present just as deadly a risk as the monster, if not more so, as the capacity for menace is concealed behind the façade of normality, allowing for easier exploitation of vulnerable prey.

The nature of Perys' transgressions harnesses the acts of sexual terrorism committed by the Giant of Mont Saint Michel and transfers this sense of sexual nihilism into the realm of the court and the apparent safety that this offers. Saunders discusses the discordant nature of Perys' nature and actions within Arthurian society: "whereas the giant behaves according to his monstrous nature, Perys' behaviour is unnatural, and contravenes his noble blood" (*Rape and Ravishment* 245); accordingly, Lancelot questions "who dud lerne the to distresse ladyes, damesels and jantyllwomen!" (I.269.35-36). The eventual beheading of this "traytoure unto knyghthode" (I.269.35) is extolled by Lancelot, who justifies the death of Perys as he states, "Now haste thou thy paymente that longe thou haste deserved!" (I.270.7-8). Lancelot's lack of mercy towards Perys places him firmly in the role of protector of women; while Lancelot is equitable in his treatment of all, in this case, his oath to ensure the preservation of women overrides any potential display of clemency, and so the deserved death of Perys is glorified in a sense of true exoneration.

Similarly, Sir Breunys Saunz Pité's demonstrations of sexual brutality place him as "a grete foo unto many good knyghtes of kyng Arthures courte" (I.406.6-7). Malory positions Breunys in the "Tristram" section, where he is found "chasyng a lady for to have slayne her, for he had slayn her paramour afore" (II.512.15-16). While it is not categorically described, the implication of rape, with the accompanying physical and mental cruelty, is made

> unmistakably clear in the lament of a lady to Sir Dinadan; she is "makyng grete dole" (II.553.6) as she shares her tale of woe:
>
> Sir knyght [...] I am the wofullyst lady of the worlde, for within thys fyve dayes here com a knyght called sir Breuse Saunz Pité, and he slewe myne owne brothir, and ever syns he hath kepte me at hys owne wylle, and of all men in the worlde I hate hym moste.
>
> (II.553.8-12)

Denounced by Lancelot as a "[f]alse knyght, destroyer of ladyes and damesels" (II.538.16), Breunys is another sexual transgressor who masks his crimes behind the technicalities of social norms; in a sense, it appears as if he was won the hand of this woman through battle, and so the objectification of the female as a prized possession overshadows the far more serious underlying threat of sexual exploitation. As Saunders observes, the element of rape "is masked by the convention of winning the woman through combat, so that any erotic import of the scene is negated, replaced by a more general sense of ravishment" (*Rape and Ravishment* 246), yet the fact that the lady is kept "at hys owne wylle" removes any doubt about the nature of Breunys's intentions and purpose in her abduction. The existence of such men in the text once more draws the reader's awareness to the active nature of evil in its varying forms, to be countered by those in possession of integrity of spirit.[130]

The threat of sexual violation is most effectively explored in terms of both male and female exploitation. Malory's presentation of the workings of the Castle of Maidens is conspicuous in its basis in the reality of rape and male sexual aggression. The castle, home to abducted women subjected to "wycked customes" (II.887.10), is

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[130] See Alex West, "Saints and Sodomites: Theological and Literary Depictions of Rape and Sexual Aggression in the Middle Ages" for more on sexual violation in context.

enclosed within the boundaries of the banks of the river Severn, and it is only the great Galahad who can penetrate the precinct and conquer the seven knights who shield the castle and the wickedness that lies within. This tale of intemperate carnal desires and their grisly consequences serves to demonstrate in turn the repercussions of unbridled lust on the manner in which society is in itself able to function.

The actions of the seven knights, and the behaviour that frequents the Castle of Maidens, is depicted in detail:

> hit ys past a seven yere agone that thes seven brethirne com into thys castell and herberowde with the lorde of this castell [...] And than they toke the maydyn and the tresoure of the castell, and so by grete force they helde all the knyghtes of the contrey undir grete servayge and trewayge, robbynge and pyllynge the poure comyn peple.
>
> (II.889.8-10; 15-19)

Here, amidst the "robbynge and pyllynge" lie indications of sexual transgressions and the objectification of the duke's daughter; her beauty instigates the attack, thereby her subsequent rape is present by implication, while her objectification is clear in the fact that she and the treasure are taken together, the former viewed similar terms to the latter, as trophies of battle to be claimed and utilised as their victor sees fit.[131] Their lust is depicted in animalistic terms of an insatiable hunger: "they have devoured many maydyns" (II.889.29-30), an image indicative of base lust and carnal gratification reminiscent of the Giant of Mont Saint Michel.

The fortification of their castle is at the forefront of the knights' priorities; upon learning of the prophecy that one knight will vanquish them all, the seven

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[131] Saunders observes, "[t]he scene is one of sexual violation as well as possession: that the lady's fairness is the cause of the battle implies that the seven knights subsequently rape her, and her objectification is suggested in the taking of both maiden and treasure" (*Rape and Ravishment* 255).

knights swear an oath that "there shall never lady nother knyght passe thys castell but they shall abyde magré their hedys other dye" (II.889.26-27), for fear of the destruction of their fortress, and the stream of captors upon which they sate their desire. The death toll mounts as "many" women are submitted to their fancies; as with the Giant of Mont Saint Michel, extremities of rape in the narrative are paralleled with the certainty of death, an indication of the force with which sexual violations are exercised, and the extremity of the threat which unbridled desire poses to civilised society if left unchecked. This threat proves equally hazardous to both men and women, as the duality of the nature of sexual gratification is highlighted throughout Malory's narrative; the consequences of this are relative to the individual circumstances, yet remain indiscriminate in terms of gender and sexuality.

"[F]or quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company"[132]: Queen Guinevere and the Promotion of Patriarchy in Duty and in Death

In all of its patriarchal glory, Malory celebrates the nobility of knighthood above all else, as demonstrated in his portrayal of the scene in "The Tale of King Arthur", whereby the exiled Ywain and Gawain come upon twelve damsels in a forest, dancing around a tree and casting abuse at a white shield hanging from it: "and ever as the damesels com by hit they spette uppon hit and som threwe myre uppon the shelde" (I.158.29-30). Their reason for such degradation of a symbol of knighthood comes as they explain that Marhalt, the owner of this shield, "hatyth all ladyes and jantylwomen" (I.158.35-36), and thus they offer him no respect. Gawain is appalled

[132] *Le Morte Darthur* (III.1184.3-5).

by this behaviour and castigates the women unreservedly, justifying Marhalt's aversion towards these ladies by stating that there must be some cause for it,

> And peraventure thoughe he hate you he hath som cause, and peraventure he lovyth in som other placis ladyes and jantyllwomen and ys belovyd agayne.
>
> (I.159.1-4)

He places the blame solely on the women, and warns them of the consequences should Marhalt return:

> damesels, methynke ye ar to blame, for hit is to suppose he that hyng that shelde there he woll nat be longe therefro, and than may tho knyghtes macche hym on horsebak. And that is more youre worshyp than thus to do, for I woll abyde no lenger to se a knyghtes shelde so dishonoured.
>
> (I.159.12-17)

Gawain is completely intolerant of the behaviour of these women, and shows no restraint in condemning them. Here, chivalric deference to the female is replaced by the veneration of the shield, this symbol of knighthood in all of its glorious nobility.[133] The significance of the shield is further highlighted in another passage, although this time in conjunction with the feminine instead of being in opposition to it. In this instance, Tristram refuses a request from Dinadan to borrow his shield, as it was a gift from his beloved. He remonstrates, "I woll nat departe frome my shylde for her sake that gaff hit me" (II.505.31-32), refusing to come to the aid of his companion for the love of his lady (Vinaver, *Malory* 64).

Malory's authorial identity in the assertion of relative male and female prominence in the text is evident in his handling of source material and moral

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[133] Marhalt's validation in his condemnation of "sorsserers and inchaunters" (I.161.32) and validation of "good ladyes and jantyllwomen" (I.161.36; 162.1) is addressed in the Introduction to this study.

issues. Further to concerns with commercialism and commodification previously discussed as a common narrative trope in medieval romance, while Malory's descriptions of physical feminine beauty are sparse in the text, his attention to detail in terms of the decoration of these women is spectacular in its portrayal of grandeur. Vinaver asserts that Malory's "realistic point of view [...] sometimes causes the author to give particular attention to details of scenery and to descriptions of the splendour and brilliance of his heroes' garments" (*Malory* 50). The damsel of Morgan le Fay sports an enchanted mantle, which was "the rycheste mantell that ever was sene in the courte, for hit was sette all full of precious stonys as one myght stonde by another, and therein were the rycheste stonys that ever the kynge saw" (I.157.12-16), while later in the text, the three ladies who encounter Ywain, Gawain, and Marhalt at the fountain are depicted in illustrative detail:

> the eldyst had a garlonde of golde aboute her hede, and she was three score wyntir of age or more, and hir heyre was whyght undir the garlonde. The secunde damesell was of thirty wyntir of age, wyth a cerclet of golde about her hede. The thirde damesel was but fiftene yere of age, and a garlonde of floures aboute hir hede.
>
> (I.162.31-36)

Malory may be lacking in detail concerning physical female beauty, but his portrayal of magnificence in decoration and dress is clear. This is perhaps in part due to the material connotations of wealth and power, which reinforces the previously addressed idea of the objective judgement of women in terms of their commercial value.

The idea of male supremacy is reiterated throughout the narrative; while the women of consequence evidenced in this study do possess a certain element of narrative influence, the predominance of patriarchy consistently returns to the fore.

For example, while King Arthur initially elects to disregard the love affair taking place between his wife and Sir Lancelot in order to ensure the continued welfare of Camelot, he cannot but concede to the source of the eventual collapse of the kingdom towards the end of the narrative. However, it is not the loss of his supposedly beloved wife that grates on the king, but the treachery of Lancelot:

> And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene: for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company [...] there was never Crystyn kynge that ever hylde such a felyshyp togydyrs.
>
> (III.1184.1-5; 5-7)

It appears that Arthur "is not Lancelot's rival", but is "distinctly more interested in the preservation of his fellowship than he is in Guinevere" (Lambert 196). His statement dismisses the significance of the female as an autonomous entity within the world of the text; essentially, the king seems to dispassionately consider women as being little but transposable items that can be interchanged with ease. Indeed, it is not simply the typified, commonplace woman that he views with such detached objectivity, but Queen Guinevere herself, ostensibly indicating her expendability.

Upon an initial understanding, it may indeed appear that Arthur is denouncing the female and her objective presence and its consequence in the predominantly male-dominated world of the text, particularly in the face of the loss of a highly regarded friend and retainer. Conversely, this may be perceived in such a way that Arthur is, in fact, paying an accolade to women as, for all intents and purposes, he states that he could obtain a new queen with relative ease, "for quenys I might have inow" (III.1184.3), while a loyal and trustworthy band of knights would be a significantly more problematic acquisition. This is a potential interpretation of the king's statement, yet the accepted reading aligns with the dismissal of the female

in both a romantic and a political sense, as patriarchal prominence rises to the fore once more.

Despite Arthur's apparent dismissal here, Guinevere is, needless to say, one of the most prominent and established female characters in the narrative. Arthur's attraction to Guinevere is immediate and intense; he declares that she is "the moste valyyaunte and fayryst that I know lyvyng, or yet that ever I coude fynde" (I.97.19-21). Merlin, while admitting that "she is one of the fayrest on lyve" (I.97.23), simultaneously warns Arthur that Guinevere "was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff" (I.97.30).

This introduction to the queen serves as an immediate indication of her status in the text as an objectified female. Presented through Arthur's subjective view, Guinevere is a prize to be won; the king weds Guinevere, despite Merlin's cautions. In this sense, Guinevere's power is in her beauty, yet as it is this desirability which commended her to Arthur at the outset, she is indeed objectified by that which empowers her.

Guinevere's influence is positive at the outset, as she plays the role of dutiful wife impeccably at the beginning of her marriage, demonstrating flawless etiquette and unerring support of her husband in his role as ruler; in keeping with the models of conduct of wife and queen, she states, "I am at youre commaundemente, and shall be redy at all tymes" (I.127.20-21). Arthur's response to Guinevere's devotion appears to be equally ardent in the initial stages of their marriage. He hates to be parted from her, declaring, "I may nat longe mysse you. Ye shall cause me to be the more hardy, what adventure so befalle me; yette woll I nat wyghte may lady to be in no joupardye" (I.127.16-19). The queen's response is apt and upon her king's departure to Rome, she bewails his absence in conventional postures: "Than quene Gwenyver made grete sorow that the kynge and all the lordys sholde so be departed,

and there she fell doune on a swone, and hir ladyes bare hir to her chambir" (I.195.11-13). Her behaviour is resonant of that of the devoted wife and lover, as previously discussed in the context of the medieval romance culture in Chapters One to Three of this work, asserting her positive persona as wife and queen.

In addition to her initial matrimonial devotion, Guinevere boasts power as queen. Her word is law, particularly amongst the female division of the court. Her favour is bestowed in chivalric circles, in such cases as Sir Kay's bravery, when she states, "amonge all ladyes [...] I shall bere your noble fame, for ye spake a grete worde and fulfylled hit worshipfully" (I.129.20-22). Her ability to judge fairly and wisely is invoked on a number of occasions regarding the misbehaviour of knights and the abuse of women, while she presides over various tournaments and knights at court, directs their attire, and provides Bors, Hector, and Lionel with "tresoure inowe for there expence" (II.808.24) as they leave to pursue the Holy Grail (Vinaver, *Malory* 49).

Upon Arthur's departure to Rome, he declares that Guinevere will take responsibility of the country in the interim, in tandem with Sir Baudwen of Bretayne and Sir Cador of Cornwall. Such allocation of power is evident recognition of Guinevere's capabilities as queen, yet the reality lies in the circumstance of her shared authority with two male knights, in this particular instance. The position of queen brings with it inevitable obligations and concomitant authority, yet this authority is severely curtailed and constrained by the wishes of the king. Automatic respect accompanies the title of queen, but this title is little more than that, and the true power resides with the king.[134]

[134] S.J. Hill summarises, "[b]ecause Arthur is her husband, Guenevere, like other queens, does wield a certain amount of power, although her power is circumscribed by what Arthur allows to her" (272).

Guinevere's circumstance highlights the way in which women are victimised by the removal of autonomy through objectification, in life and in death. The significance of the deaths of Arthur and Guinevere has been discussed in Chapter Two in terms of their dissonance, yet this is also relevant to Guinevere's portrayal by Malory, whose account of Arthur's death is lacking in absolute closure: "som men say in many partys of Inglonde that kynge Arthure ys nat dede" (III.1242.22-23) and "he shall com agayne" (III.1242.24-25). Gilbert notes that "[m]ale-authored texts, perhaps unsurprisingly, tend to represent the masculine melancholy as subjectively and ethically the more serious, whereas female death, however gratifying in one respect to the male ego, retains a troublesome aspect insofar as it represents an independent female desire" (215-16); this male superiority is asserted once more as Malory allows for the possibility that Arthur has in fact absconded to Avalon to be healed, sustaining the prospect of the king's potential return.[135]

Notably, even in this circumstance, Arthur is placed within the remit of the feminine as he sails away in "a lytyll barge wyth many fayre ladyes in hit" (III.1240.14-15), and is cared for by this group of women on his final journey: "in one of their lappis kyng Arthure layde hys hede" (III.1240.21-22). Paradoxially, this "company includes both Morgan, Arthur's great enemy, and her opponent, Nenyve, who despite her frequent beneficence has imprisoned Merlin, Arthur's greatest protector" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 260); Arthur ends his life surrounded by those who offered both protection and threat in life.

Malory concludes this scene with the ambiguous "rather I wolde sey: here in thys worlde he chaunged hys lyff" (III.1242.26-27); while the general consensus is that Arthur has passed away, this is lacking the concrete certainty that accompanies Guinevere's demise. This creates a certain "antagonism", which "lies between the

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[135] See also Jeffrey L. Morgan, "Malory's Double Ending: The Duplicitous Death and Departing".

normative and the disturbing, in living as in dying; and even this produces [...] a mutually reinforcing dynamic" (Gilbert 220), whereby the circumstances of Arthur's burial are shrouded in mystery, and consequently, possibility, while Guinevere's death, however, is incontrovertible. The only manner in which Guinevere can return to the consciousness of Camelot is through the recollections of those that live on; the only way the queen can be "healed", or brought back to life, is in Lancelot's final reminiscence on her beauty. Guinevere may only live through the impermanence of memories, while Arthur's departure preserves a glimmer of hope in its uncertainty. Possibility stems from the ambiguity of his circumstances, yet there is no scope for doubt regarding Guinevere: she is gone, and lives only in the imperfect transience of recollection.[136]

It is interesting to note that Guinevere's final presence in the narrative is presented to the reader by Lancelot. Her conclusive moments are not her own; instead "the ladyes tolde syr Launcelot that quene Guenever tolde hem al or she passyd" (III.1255.31-32), and so she is remembered by the man who both completed and destroyed her in life. Lancelot's presence in her life essentially dictated the course of her being; now in her death it is through the words and memories of this man that she retains relevance. While the depth of feeling in Lancelot's words is irrefutable and this scene is undoubtedly an extremely moving one, it remains that Guinevere's closing scene is one without her actual presence; she is an ephemeral memory, being recounted by a male. Here, Lancelot is "the figure caught in the overlap or interstice between life and death" (Gilbert 220); it is he who controls the reader's final impression of Guinevere, presenting to us in his words her "beaulté" (III.1256.29) and "noblesse" (III.1256.30). Once more, the male dominates; even as

[136] Wilfred L. Guerin also discusses the king's death in context in "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution" 233-74.

her final words are presented to the reader, through the filter of Lancelot, it is explicated that Guinevere's final thoughts were of him,

> Wherefore the quene sayd in heryng of hem al, "I beseche Almyghty God that I may never have power to see syr Launcelot wyth my worldly eyen!" "And thus," said al the ladyes, "was ever hir prayer these two dayes tyl she was dede."
>
> (III.1255.35-37; 1256.1-2)

Gilbert observes, "[i]n human meditation, death provides a kind of yardstick to measure love, the affirmation 'I would die for my beloved' defining a horizon which is a constitutive element of love itself. Love often leads narratively to death, which is sometimes seen as successful consummation" (60). Conversely, death here acts as the "yardstick" to the collapse of Lancelot and Guinevere's love. Her lover was Guinevere's main preoccupation in life, and remains so as she approaches death, although her desire is now centred on his continued absence as opposed to yearning for his company. She hopes that death will come before her former paramour does, establishing "mortality [...] itself" as "an object of desire" (Cooper, "Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romances" 155). He is her final thought, and her final moments are depicted through his thoughts.

Guinevere is dead, and it is a man who presents her final image, no matter how complimentary this may be. Arthur, on the other hand, maintains some autonomy, even in death; the uncertainty that surrounds his death allows for the possibility that he may be in Avalon and could one day return, healed. This is by no means an active prospect that is highly anticipated in the text, as Arthur's death is accepted as such. However, the lack of concrete closure means that Arthur retains some form of personal independence, even in his passing, while the queen's memory is the possession of a man. Guinevere does exert forceful influence at

points throughout the text, yet the ending demonstrates the finality of the social dominance of the male. While Arthur retains some sovereignty in the ambiguity of his passing, Guinevere's death is conclusive, and lives only in the brevity of memory, as depicted by a man. Notably, the author also remembers the "ded quene Gwenyver" (III.1120.11) fondly, observing that "whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (III.1120.12-13); once more, the queen is recalled fondly, but through her relation to a man as a lover.

Conclusions

The portrayal of woman inimical to the moral and physical health of knights exists in tandem with the image of the vulnerable, defenceless female reliant upon the protection of men. Malory narrates examples of the conniving female who exploits her femininity in order to entice the chaste knight; as a knight is honour-bound to preserve the modesty of women, the devious female may use this commendable intention in order to exert emotional control over men, exploiting this paradox to the detriment of masculinity throughout the narrative. Equally, Malory presents the genuinely vulnerable female, desired by men and in need of protection from them, yet it remains that even in her innocence, such women retain influence over male chivalry by virtue of their need for protection. Whether the manipulator or the victim, the female possesses an influence over the chivalric male which far surpasses her proscribed social categorisation; it is simply the manner in which this control is exerted, with varying elements of force or subtlety, which places particular women in the glare of public celebration or condemnation within the narrative.

In accordance with their presence in Arthurian society, "[t]he need to control desire and to limit the unlawful seizure of women becomes a central aspect of the assertion of order within the realm, and, ultimately, the failure of such control

leads in different ways to the fall of the realm" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 264). While responsibility for the collapse of the Arthurian reign cannot be placed squarely on the shoulders of any one individual within the narrative, the actions and reactions of women in the text are incontrovertibly influential in the eventual disintegration of the society in which they prevail. Lancelot, for example, could potentially have maintained chivalric supremacy: Merlin's prophecy states that Balin's sword will be achieved by "the best knyght of the worlde, and that shall be sir Launcelot *other ellis* Galahad, hys sonne" (I.91.22-23, emphasis mine). The choice does exist: "Merlin's prophecy says that either Lancelot will be the successful Grail knight, or Galahad will be, and thereby implies that the choice is up to Lancelot" (B. Kennedy 9). Lancelot's fate is a matter of choice, but Guinevere's power over him is such that he chooses her affection rather than chivalric success.

The manner in which Malory presents this, the existence of feminine exploitation in the text, operates as "a reminder of the betrayal, treachery and deceit inherent in [this] apparently golden and timeless realm" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 264). The presence of the feminine in the text is well established, yet the autonomy of these women remains open to question. Guinevere, as queen, is by default of her political standing the most powerful woman in Malory's Arthurian society; nevertheless, her autonomy is curtailed by virtue of her gender. As queen, she is awarded authority only by the supreme hand of her husband. Similarly, while prominent female characters are many and varied throughout the text, their characters often remain somewhat one-dimensional in their development, as the relative traits of the female are utilised in the promotion of the masculine. At the centre of this is the paradox that women are powerful, even if weak. Individual female characters are conferred with autonomy in their existence; while their presence is primarily related in terms of their effect on the men around them, the

fact that this influence exists demonstrates a feminine power in itself.

Chapter Five

Women in Malory II: Romance, Manipulation, and Magic in *Le Morte Darthur*

As has been shown in preceding chapters, the portrayal of the female in the patriarchal culture of a chivalric society often abounds with negative connotations; indeed, it frequently appears that for women to possess any aspect of power or authority, they must behave in a decidedly negative fashion in order to be seen as an autonomous presence, or risk simply being objectified as subsidiary characters, by both characters within the narrative and the audience. As discussed in Chapter Two, however, with regard to heroines such as Josiane and Felice, the medieval woman could exert an autonomous presence, both in a positive and a negative sense, when viewed as a lover and as an active element of a romantic relationship. Some of the most authoritative female figures in Malory's *Morte Darthur* are lovers, with their influence according to types, such as the desired woman, the pursuant temptress, the abandoned and unrequited lover, and the jealous admirer (the final two of which often merge).

Malory peoples Camelot with a cast of such female types who, as described in the previous chapter, prove to be highly influential in both indirect and more manifest ways. Certain female characters are central to the progression of the narrative; their presence and effect in the text are palpable, particularly in terms of sexual influence and the relationship dynamic established between men and women as a result of this. Saunders' *Rape and Ravishment* places Malory's work in the context of medieval romance literature and femininity, establishing that the text, "written about a hundred years after the seminal Middle English romances of the fourteenth century (c. 1470), presents a compelling retrospective view of romance

and of the role of rape within this genre" (234). In accordance with Saunders' analysis, Malory's manipulation of the forces of desire and lustfulness in the relationship between men and women reflects more widely on the darker influences compelling social unease in chivalric society itself: "[i]n the *Morte Darthur*, rape and abduction, both human and otherworldly, hint at the darker forces of lawlessness and violence against which chivalry defines itself and which are inherent in it" (*Rape and Ravishment* 234). Malory's handling of the twinned concepts of base desire and sexual gratification, and the chivalric effort to contain these destructive forces, encapsulates the essence of the chivalric ideal and all this entails, both positive and otherwise, particularly in terms of the social positioning of the female.

Many of the women depicted in Malory's work are both desirable and desiring, and so any element of an autonomous presence that they may demonstrate is registered based on this classification, as their behaviours differ in keeping with their respective romantic natures. Having noted this, it must also be acknowledged that not all female lovers are definitively good or bad; certain characters do appear to be almost wholly one or the other, such as Gareth's Lyonesse, who is an admirable feminine presence celebrated for her beauty and honour in love and marriage, while Morgan le Fay is an evil influence, who will torture other women because of their superior beauty and romantic appeal. However, women such as Guinevere fall between these definitive lines of delineation; beautiful and admirable, Guinevere's actions are based on a sincere and genuine love for Lancelot, yet this love is rooted in untruths and betrayals, while her behaviours torture and essentially destroy Lancelot as his chivalric integrity is blinded by his love. The presence of the female in terms of love and romance is undoubtedly a powerful one,

yet the manner in which this power is exerted, and its consequences, is liable to variation in Malory's Arthurian world.

This presence is particularly significant when exploring the character definition of the male as well as the female in the text, as it is not unusual for the male to be presented in female terms; "the connection with Guinevere is, for example, what Morgan 'knows' about Launcelot (I.257.26-29)" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 88), in a feminine dynamic whereby one woman recognises a man in terms of his relationship with another female. Lancelot, accordingly, is a "sexualized hero" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 87-88) and in such circumstances, a hero defined by his relation to a woman.

Lancelot's discomfort with such perception is evident in his response to social identification of this type, as demonstrated by his encounter with the Damsel of the White Palfrey. This lady's approach to Lancelot is one of reluctance in her dismay at his acknowledged love for Guinevere. She is obviously discouraged at his romantic unavailability, and his response, vague in the face of her direct line of questioning, follows: "I may nat warne peple to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem" (I.270.28-29). Lancelot's disinclination to admit publically to a romantic interest in the queen is obvious, yet the ambiguous nature of his displeasure here indicates his discomfiture as being exposed and defined in terms of his relationship to the queen.

Such public and open acknowledgement of the romantic relationship as it exists between Lancelot and Guinevere, and Lancelot's evident discomposure at this, "comments on the vulnerability of the masculine subject in a woman-mediated narrative" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 88), placing, for a time, the individual male at the mercy of feminine judgement. In this definition and perception lies a certain threat to Lancelot's sense of self; recognition in terms of the feminine intimidates the figure of Lancelot on a variety of narrative levels, from the personal

to the potential political and social repercussions of his romantic affair, in a demonstration of the often subtle and indirect feminine influence in the chivalric culture of Malory's narrative.

A Ladies' Man: The Feminine Influence on Sir Lancelot

In this patriarchal climate, the female impact is most effectively established in terms of a woman's influence over men. Guinevere, for example, is unquestionably one of the most significant female influences in *Le Morte Darthur*, yet this power does not necessarily come from a sense of autonomous control, but her impact on those men around her. Declared "the trewest lady unto hir lorde lyvynge" (I.258.5-6), "the queen has an excellent reputation for generosity among those in her service" (B. Kennedy 112). As queen, however, her actions bear consequence for some of the most prominent male figures in the text, as she betrays the king and prevents Lancelot, the "the beste knyght of the worlde" (II.792.19), from reaching his full potential in terms of achieving the Holy Grail. The negative influence of the feminine in the text, relative to this circumstance, is shown persuasively as Lancelot's love for Guinevere undermines the knight's capabilities on the Grail quest. Although Lancelot's love for Arthur's queen is sincere, the circumstances under which the relationship is cultivated demonstrate the disparity between the moral ideal and Lancelot's flawed human behaviour.

Sir Lancelot's forbidden devotion to Guinevere brings about the knight's descent into insanity, itself provoked by the dual feminine influences of Guinevere and Elaine. In a similar vein, "the love Trystram and Palomydes experience towards Isode renders them weak from the point of view of temperance, undermining their fidelity to the Round Table oath and their mutual respect as fellow knights" (Radulescu, "'Oute of mesure': Violence and Knighthood in Malory's *Morte*

Darthur" 125); however, the influence of the female, through love and desire, is far more pronounced in the case of Lancelot and Guinevere. As the weight of fraud, treachery, and the reality of his lover being married to the king mounts in Lancelot's mind, it is Elaine of Corbin's shrewd deception and presentation of herself as the queen in order to make the knight her conquest which acts as the final trigger that provokes his mental collapse. While Elaine's devotion to Lancelot means that "oute of mesure she loved hym" (II.803.21), the great knight's "unkyndenes" (II.803.23) and subsequent dismissal of her attentions in his preoccupation with Queen Guinevere propel the affronted lady to great lengths in an effort to salvage her romantic affairs.

Lancelot unwittingly succumbs to Elaine twice, on both occasions tricked into believing that the woman he was intimate with was Guinevere. Elaine is not alone in the machinations of her romantic conquest; aided by Dame Brusen, the women successfully lead the knight to Elaine's bed on both occasions, the first of which results in the conception of Galahad. The knight's wrath is initially assuaged by word of his son, and he "toke hys leve myldely at that yonge lady Eleyne" (II.796.26). However, the second time that Lancelot is lured into Elaine's bed, where the "lady was glad" (II.804.33), the consequent guilt and grief sends him "wylde woode as ever was man" (II.806.6-7) in his "hartely sorow" (II.805.31) at his unconscious betrayal of his queen. In a demonstration of mental agility, Elaine and Brusen on the first occasion beguile the unwary Lancelot with a draught of wine and what appears to be Guinevere's ring,[137] in a manner reminiscent of those enchanted rings discussed in Chapter Two. In the second circumstance, they exploit Lancelot in his most vulnerable state, rousing him from his sleep in the depths of the night

[137] Brusen's wit in utilising the ring motif is all the more clever here, as Guinevere does send a ring to Lancelot as a plea for his presence when she is captured by Meligaunte, pleading "beare thys rynge unto sir Launcelot du Laake, and pray hym as he lovythe me that he woll se me and rescow me" (III.1123.34-36).

when "all folkys were to bedde" (II.804.23) and his wits are dulled, both by slumber and by the expectation of a summons from his lover.

Although effective, the plot hatched by the women takes advantage at the knight's most vulnerable moment, when his physical senses are blunted by the late hour, and any suspicions would have been allayed by the anticipation of Guinevere's bidding. However, this supposition of male susceptibility is not the defining means by which the ladies' strategy is triumphant; despite the hour and the circumstances, Sir Lancelot is ever the chivalric knight and departs for Guinevere's chambers with "his swerde in hys honde" (II.804.30), somewhat alleviating the sense of complete vulnerability afforded by the idea of the sleeping lover. This fact, coupled with the resultant conception of Galahad on the first occasion of her seduction, somewhat dilutes the negative connotations of Elaine's actions; while her conduct is, of course, utterly manipulative and in no way commendable, it must also be acknowledged that her behaviour is motivated entirely by desire – the same overwhelming desire which prompts Lancelot and Guinevere to betray their king and court, and the same desire which validated Uther's seduction of Igraine, as addressed in Chapter Four. When parallels are drawn here, the intensity of Elaine's lust, and her desperation to fulfil this, appears to be somewhat understandable, if not acceptable. Here, unscrupulous actions born of an emotion which can be recognised universally bear positive as well as negative consequences; it is only when Lancelot succumbs to Elaine the second time that he is truly driven over the brink of mental anguish, as Guinevere's presence compounds his sense of shame.

Lancelot's mental breakdown is precipitated by a sense of self-awareness in his betrayal of Guinevere, as both his lover and his queen. Before he loses his grasp on reality, he assures Guinevere that he "was made to lye by" Elaine (II.802.20); he denies any willingness in his participation in the conception of Galahad, asserting to

Elaine that "ye and dame Brusen made me for to lye by you magry myne hede" (II.825.26-27). He assumes the role of the violated, in a reversal of "the normative gender definitions of the Pentecostal Oath, where it is women who are sexually violable" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 122), calling into question the accepted definition of the masculine in the chivalric domain, and Lancelot's placement as such. While those close to Lancelot "knew for whom he wente oute of hys mynde" (II.833.4-5), Arthur, on the other hand, regards Galahad "as 'evidence' of a love for Elaine worth the forfeit of one's rational faculties (II.832.30-35)" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 123).

As for the knight himself, "Launcelot's response carefully avoids social or moral explicitness: 'yf I ded ony foly I have that I sought' (II.833.1-2)" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 123). In a manner similar to the Red Knight's placement of responsibility of his actions on the shoulders of his old love, as he justifies his destructive behaviour to Gareth (addressed later in this chapter), Lancelot, whose sorrow at his actions evidently runs deeply, still apportions the blame squarely on the shoulders of Elaine and Brusen. Elaine remains defiant, as demonstrated when she speaks of her son in relation to his father: "he shall preve the beste man of hys kynne excepte one" (II.832.12-13); here, Galahad is defined in terms of his father, and both are glorified in the eyes of an adoring woman – heroes categorised by the feminine, through Elaine. Further to this, this manifestation of Elaine's devotion proves to be somewhat of a validation in the midst of deception, as the narrative becomes justifiably driven by female motivation and perception.[138]

Essentially, Lancelot's suffering is here premeditated by a variety of factors: his love for Guinevere and her reciprocation, Elaine's unrequited desire, Dame

[138] For a full discussion of how "the motif of madness" as perpetuated by Elaine, is used to "proliferate adventures" in the narrative, see Muriel Whitaker, *Arthur's Kingdom of Adventure* 63.

Brusen's magical interference, and Guinevere's discovery of his second transgression. In this maelstrom of feminine involvement and influence, Lancelot is left overwhelmed and the potential of feminine power is highlighted in the knight's ultimate collapse, as prompted by the combined forces of female influence: here, "sex and death are equated in a highly threatening way" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 252).

In a similar manner to the way in which Lancelot's physical integrity is brought to bear before the desire of Elaine, Malory also highlights the malevolent intentions of Hellawes, who once more employs the stereotypical vulnerability of the female in order to coerce Lancelot into a detrimental situation. "Sexual violation [...] is not a defining characteristic of worship for women only" (Robeson 114): Hellawes is a menacing force, with even the name of her estate, the Castle Nygurmous, insinuating the forces of black magic aligned with necromancy. In a twisted mirroring of female objectification for male sexual gratification, Hellawes regards Lancelot with an eye to the fulfilment of her own autonomous desire. The impossibility of this, as far as Lancelot's resolute refusal is concerned, triggers a narcissistic reaction in the flouted female, perverse in her insistence that if he will not be hers, then he must die, while Guinevere must simply suffer the consequences of Hellawes' egocentricity. Hellawes manufactures a complicated plot, leading Lancelot to come to the rescue of a damsel in distress within the forest, concocting her plan with dedicated attention to detail, in order to lay claim to Lancelot – dead or alive:

> And, sir Launcelot, now I telle the: I have loved the this seven yere, but there may no woman have thy love but quene Gwenyver; and sytthen I myght nat rejoyse the nother thy body on lyve, I had kepte no more joy in this worlde but to have thy body dede. Than wolde I have bawmed hit and sered hit, and

> so to have kepte hit my lyve dayes; and dayly I sholde have clypped the and kissed the, dispyte of quene Gwenyvere.
>
> (I.281.13-20)

Hellawes' desire is underscored by a morbid determination; if Lancelot will not be her conquest, then she will have no choice but to kill him in order to preserve his being from the attentions of any other woman.[139]

In a clear case of feminine objectification of the male, Hellawes "proposes [...] to commodify Launcelot, to use his violated body as a trophy with which to taunt Guinevere" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 90); here, not only does Hellawes demonstrate a complete lack of regard for Lancelot's autonomy, but simultaneously defies any element of sisterhood amongst women, singularly expressing her lack of respect or care for her fellow female's emotional balance. It is not simply that Hellawes has no concern for Guinevere's romantic fulfilment; she actively wishes to exploit her own experience of jealousy in order to make Lancelot's preferred lady suffer, for the very fact of her standing in the knight's regard, comparably with Morgan le Fay's cursing of Elaine for the sole fact of her superior beauty in the *Morte Darthur*, and Morgan's antipathy towards Guinevere in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Lancelot's indisposition to comply with Hellawes' wishes provokes her determination not only to prevent his loving anybody else, but also to punish Guinevere's for loving him and being loved in return. Hellawes wishes Lancelot dead, but wishes a potentially more painful punishment on Guinevere: to live without her love, whether he is dead or in the arms of another woman.

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[139] This idea of necrophilia is reminiscent of the princess' devotion to the corpse of the man she believed to be her lover in *The Squire of Low Degree*. See Erik Kooper's Introduction to the *Squire* in *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, 127-35.

Hellawes' threats are short-lived and without substance; however, she quickly succumbs to the predicament of unrequited desire, and dies: "And as the booke seyth [...] she toke suche sorow that she deyde within a fourtenyte" (1.281.24-25). In spite of the ferocity of her intentions, "the threat of her obsessive desire absolutely to define and possess him soon dissolves"; with it, goes her life (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 91). Saunders summarises this type of circumstance, in an exploration of these reversed gender roles and their sexual manifestations:

> The threat of unreciprocated and untrammelled desire is grotesquely represented in the interweaving of sex and death, and the unnaturalness of the scene is heightened by the reversal of gender roles: it is the woman who threatens the man with a kind of rape.
>
> (*Rape and Ravishment* 247-48)

The culmination of this situation restores those subverted gender roles, resulting in Lancelot's liberation and Hellawes' death as a result of unrequited passion; as demonstrated by the Elaine incident, the rejected woman cannot face a life devoid of the attentions of her beloved, and so death is the only respite. His encounter with Hellawes, however, "enables Lancelot to demonstrate his courage, his service to ladies in distress, his fellowship, and his fidelity to Guenevere" (Whitaker 60); once more, a wicked woman has contrived to take Lancelot for her own pleasure, and these circumstances allow him to demonstrate his chivalric prowess. "Not only does the man escape, however, but also Malory reverses the unnatural gender dynamic in describing Hellawes' subsequent death from unrequited love; the woman returns to the role of the victim" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 248). Hellawes' fleeting power, like Elaine's, is essentially useless; while both inveigled Lancelot into their own desired circumstances to a certain extent, both attempts at entrapment were

only transitorily successful. Once more, "[d]espite her magical powers [...] the woman becomes the victim" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 252). The male desire, or lack of it in this case, prevails, and Lancelot escapes relatively unscathed, while both women meet with certain death in a demonstration of prevalent patriarchal dominance.

Lancelot serves as the antithesis to the base cruelty of those predators such as Sir Perys, Sir Breunys, and the Giant of Mont Saint Michel discussed in Chapter Four (themselves serving as a manifestation of the wickedness of desire), and this in itself places him a position of distinct vulnerability in the context of feminine control. Felicity Riddy explores Lancelot's placement in the narrative, positioned in relation to the women he is bound to protect:

> At the explicit level Launcelot is a knight who proves his worth in part through his defence of women: he is shocked at Sir Perys de Forest Savage [...] [T]he ideal of the knight as a protector of women rests on the assumption that they are impotent and defenceless, and that is one role they play in the tale. Nevertheless Launcelot's experiences also tell us otherwise. Women are able to tap sources of malignant power: they put spells on him, imprison him, dissemble and tell lies to him and seek his death, calling it love.
>
> (58)

The sexual pursuit of Lancelot is a common recurrence in the *Morte Darthur*, as the knight repeatedly finds himself in a position of potential vulnerability as a result of female desire. "Throughout the book, Launcelot's naked body is the object of female desire and attempted possession" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 248), each

instance of which evidences examples of both female manipulative tendencies, and hopeless womanly desire. He is entrapped with a distinct view to sexual possession by Morgan le Fay and her accompanying three queens, where, once more, his options veer between sexual capitulation or death: "Now chose one of us, whyche that thou wolte have to thy paramour, other ellys to dye in this preson" (I.257.32-34).

Here, Lancelot is again placed in the position of those helpless women he has so valiantly defended throughout the narrative. Janet Jesmok says of the role reversal of Morgan le Fay and Lancelot: "Morgan as sexual aggressor puts Lancelot in a passive – and therefore stereotypically feminine – position [...] Here it is Lancelot who is being 'enforced'" (318, n.5). Saunders elaborates, "[a]gain, enchantment replaces physical force, and traditional gender roles are reversed, but here too Launcelot, unlike the female victims of force, is ultimately able to save himself" (*Rape and Ravishment* 248). While the male sexual deviants in the narrative, such as Perys, Breunys, or the Giant of Mont Saint Michel, generally employ brute force in their acquisition of their prey, female sexual predators cannot rely on their physical strength, and so must explore alternative avenues of persuasion. When these feminine methods of manipulation prove successful, the ensuing role reversal places the male firmly in the position of the victim, vulnerable and susceptible to the desires of his captor. This inverted archetype is only broken due to the established superiority of the male, and of Lancelot in particular; his masculine capabilities allow for his repeated escape.

Lancelot and Guinevere

Lancelot, paragon and agent of destruction of Arthurian society, embodies the concept of a society which comes under threat from within. He does not tally with the medieval depiction of the true chivalric knight, confirmed by his failure to see the Grail in the fullness of its glory, nor does he display villainous motivations. A complex character, the reader's pleasure in following Lancelot's adventures must be tempered by his obvious moral deficiencies. He is simply human (although progidously so in martial terms), and his actions, while flawed, are recognisable as human failings and desires. The initial affinity between Lancelot and Guinevere in the *Morte Darthur* is resonant:

> quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry.
>
> (I.253.15-19)

However, despite their mutual affection, both are aware of the "shame" (II.617.24) of their adultery. Sexual love in medieval romance is accompanied by moral challenges, as discussed in terms of the obstacles it presented to the chivalric knight on the Grail quest itself, with adulterous love as the ultimate forbidden desire. The affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is thus an abasement of the chivalric code, which defames the Arthurian ideal. While their love affair is less than discreet, both parties maintain an affected ignorance when confronted by knights and damsels alike with their misdemeanours. As referenced earlier in this work (262-63), Lancelot, for example, is told by a damsel that "there may no woman have thy love but quene Gwenyver" (I.281.14-15), while Morgan le Fay states, "we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is quene Gwenyvere" (I.257.26-28). His

reply to this is simply to claim that Guenevere "is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvynge" (I.258.5-6), in a response that is completely obscure in its avoidance of the issue. The queen's reputation must be seen to be preserved, despite a widespread knowledge of the truth of the situation, for the sake of propriety and political peace.

The inevitability of Lancelot's and Guinevere's relationship is apparent from Arthur's first encounter with his wife, when Merlin, as previously addressed (20; 251), warns his king of certain sorrow to follow: "For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne" (I.97.30-31). Lancelot is Arthur's most beloved knight, and the initial warmth Guinevere displays towards Lancelot seems to be resultant from this; naturally, the queen will bestow due regard upon her husband's favoured knight. However, common knowledge of their affair quickly becomes extensive amongst Arthur's subjects, with even an unknown maiden, rescued by Lancelot, indicating that "hit is noysed" (I.270.22) that he and Guinevere are engaging in illicit relations. Similarly, La Beale Isode requests that Palomides conveys a message to Guinevere, referencing her relationship with Lancelot in bold and certain terms as she asserts, "recommaunde me unto quene Gwenyvere and tell her that I sende her worde that there be within this londe but foure lovers" (I.425.27-29) – namely Lancelot and Guinevere, and Tristram and Isode. Here, Isode explicitly equates her own romantic relationship with Tristram with the analogous nature of Lancelot and Guinevere's connection; both couples are lovers. There is no scope for hesitation or reservation in this statement: Lancelot and Guinevere are unequivocally recognised as lovers, just as Tristram and Isode are.

Malory, however, is less overt in the exact nature of the Lancelot-Guinevere affair than a number of his sources, as addressed in comparison with Havelok and Goldeborw earlier in this study (79). While his French sources, such as Chrétien de Troyes, expound upon the physical relationship between the knight and the queen,

Malory avoids explicit acknowledgement of their physical connection, apart from the sole instance of their sexual encounter when Lancelot wounds his hand in Guinevere's bedchambers. This contrast is most greatly evident in comparison with Gareth and Lyonesse[140], whose relationship is tactile and heated:

> And so there was ordayned grete cowchis and theron fethir beddis, and there he leyde hym downe to slepe. And within a whyle came dame Lyonesse wrapped in a mantell furred with ermyne, and leyde hir downe by the sydys of sir Gareth. And therewithall he began to clyppe hir and to kysse hir.
>
> (I.333.18-23)

Comparatively, the most physical aspect of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship comes in "The Knight of the Cart" episode, when Lancelot, in a frenzy of emotion, "sette hys hondis uppon the barrys of iron and pulled at them with suche a myght that he braste hem clene oute of the stone wallys" (III.1131.21-23), cutting his hand "thorowoute to the bone" (III.1131.24-25), before "he lepe into the chambir to the quene" (III.1131.25). As we have said, however, this is an unusually demonstrative depiction for Malory, whose tendency has been to minimise the sexual nature of their relationship.[141] This episode is one of the defining moments of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship, in which their love is physically evidenced; ironically, it is also the episode that signals the beginning of the end of their affair.[142]

Guinevere's reign as queen is a tempestuous one; she repeatedly finds herself in precarious circumstances, and it is Lancelot who proves to be her rescuer and redeemer, both of her physical welfare and her reputation. It is he who rescues

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[140] Indeed, it could be argued that Gareth is a more successful knight than Lancelot, as he is able to manage a gratifying career and a rewarding romantic life. The fact that Lancelot kills Gareth, albeit accidently, may indicate Lancelot's inability to comprehend the necessity for equilibrium between these two facets of life, as this stability is something that the great Lancelot cannot achieve.

[141] Further examination of this can be found in A. Koplowitz-Brier, "The Naked Truth, or Why in *Le Morte Darthur* La Beale Isode May Be Naked but Queen Gwenyvere May Not", and Lambert's *Style and Vision* 206-07.

[142] See Elizabeth Archibald, "Lancelot as Lover in the English Tradition before Malory" 199-216 for analysis of Lancelot's presence as a lover in medieval romance.

Guinevere and proves her innocence following the accusations of attempted murder when Gawain consumes the poisoned apple, and subsequently when she is held captive by Meliagaunt. Her blamelessness is true on these occasions, yet Lancelot continues to protect the queen even when she is sentenced to death for the infidelity of which she is guilty. The slight sense of ambiguity that surrounds Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship in Le *Morte Darthur* is emphasised by this protection offered by the knight to his queen. It is evident that the pair are lovers ("they loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde" (II.1045.17-18)); yet they also seem to sustain the typical dynamic expected of a queen and a knight of the court. Lancelot, as a chivalric knight, defends Guinevere and keeps her from harm in a manner appropriate to other vulnerable maidens and chivalric rescue-missions in the text.

Their refuge in the sanctuary of Joyous Garde demonstrates this, as it is said that "there he kepte her as a noble knyght shulde" (III.1178.14-15). There is little ambiguity in the chivalric intent indicated here; Lancelot shelters Guinevere here only temporarily, with the intention of returning her to her rightful place in the court when danger has passed and the king's wrath has cooled. Sir Bors acknowledges this: "in Joyous Garde may ye kepe her longe inowe untyll the hete be paste of the kynge, and than hit may fortune you to brynge the quene agayne to the kynge with grete worshyp" (III.1173.6-9). Although Lancelot and Guinevere have fled following discovery, their exodus is but a temporary one; while this could have proved an ideal opportunity to leave Camelot and be together freely, they seek transitory asylum in the hopes of an eventual return to their rightful positions in court.

In contrast, Tristram and Isode's retreat to Joyous Garde is described in glowing terms of animated affection, as "they made joy togydrys dayly with all

maner of myrthis that they coude devyse" (II.682.23-24). The unity and intimacy denoted in this description of this Joyous Garde retreat is far removed from the dispassionate, almost impassive depiction of Lancelot and Guinevere's sojourn there, as the queen is guarded by her knight in preparation for her return to the king's side.

The positioning of women in the narrative of the *Morte Darthur* is interesting in its paradoxical nature; the female must be protected due to the vulnerability afforded to her by virtue of her sexuality, yet this affords her a certain degree of authority in a society where men are bound to act by the chivalric code and its dictates, as observed in Chapter Four. In Guinevere's case, this sense of authority and propriety is further heightened by her position as queen. However, certain characteristics attributed to women in the text, namely jealously in Guinevere's case, undermine any sense of feminine susceptibility as she exploits social perception and her position of relative power in order to exert control over Lancelot. Thus, Lancelot's dedication to the preservation of feminine integrity places him in a position of susceptibility in relation to women, whether he welcomes their advances, as in Guinevere's case, or not.

The Victimised Woman in Love

Following the conclusion of the Grail quest, and the ascension of the worthy into heaven, the focus of the *Morte Darthur* returns once more to concerns of the secular. In accordance with this, "the motifs of the protection and possession of women converge in the successive ravishments of Guinevere herself, first by Meliagaunt, and then by Launcelot" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 258); the fact that the focus on the influence of the feminine within chivalric society is centred on

Guinevere makes it all the more powerful. Here, the reader is presented with the victimised lover and all of the connotations this brings, as previously discussed in Chapter Two, yet on a scale of even greater intensity, as Guinevere is both queen and adulteress.

As one of the major female authorities in the text, Guinevere's abduction holds the potential to bear far more significant repercussions than those which have come before. It is Guinevere's capture by Meliagaunt which triggers the causal sequence that is the beginning of the end of the Arthurian reign, and is all the more compelling for its context and the circumstances of her abduction. Malory locates Meliagaunt's attack directly after his appraisal of virtuous love and the month of May, apparently celebrating the joy and purity that imbues both. The fact that Malory places Guinevere's seizure directly after this ode to virtuous love, while the queen is on a "peaceable Maying expedition" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 258), serves to emphasise the ruthlessness of the situation, reflected in the precarious balance of Arthurian society as it moves inexorably towards its inevitable collapse. The contrast between the romance festivity of May and the rapacity of Meliagaunt's actions is made all the more striking by the fact that his victim is his queen, and he is thus committing the ultimate act, not only of chivalric dishonour, but also treason against his king, anticipating of Mordred's later treachery. Malory "makes it clear that Guinevere suffers the public violation of abduction but not the irremediable violation of rape" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 259); this, however, offers scant comfort as Meliagaunt launches an attack not only on the female, but by association of the queen's position, on the Arthurian court as a whole.

Guinevere is spirited in her response to her attack; not the passive female, waiting plaintively for rescue, she demonstrates an active courage in her reaction: "Thou shamyst all knyghthode and thyselffe and me. And I lat the wyte thou shalt never shame me, for I had levir kut myne owne throte in twayne rather than thou shoulde dishonoure me!" (III.1122.12-15). In a motif well-played throughout medieval romance and hagiographic texts, Guinevere declares that she will die rather than be sexually violated by Meliagaunt; his response, however, is supercilious in his contempt for her words. His reply, "As for all thys langayge [...] be as hit be may [...] I woll take you as I fynde you" (III.1122.16-17; 19), rejects her response an empty threat.

Guinevere remains, however, somewhat in control of her own destiny in this circumstance, employing a mental agility that allows her to remain relatively safe while appearing to be selfless in her actions. She presents Meliaguant with the option of her submission, on the condition that her party would not be harmed: "sle nat my noble knyghtes and I woll go with the uppon thys covenaunte" (III.1123.10-11). Saunders discusses the discerning resourcefulness Guinevere's actions here; "While she appears to sacrifice her body for the lives of others, her offer is cunningly constructed precisely to avoid rape: she gains a constant guard by requiring that her knights never go from her" (*Rape and Ravishment* 259). As such, while ostensibly sacrificing herself, Guinevere is, in fact, safeguarding herself against the possibility of rape by ensuring her constant company, with a dexterity of wit that is admirable.

The fact that such significance is placed on Guinevere's redemption here, and that her person remains unviolated, highlights all the more the contrast with her unyielding accordance with Lancelot's desire. Lancelot is the champion of Guinevere's chastity when it comes to the queen being placed under attack from

external sources, yet he simultaneously remains the captor of her virtue, given willingly on her behalf. The discord between the legitimate feeling from which their relationship is born, and the treacherous circumstances under which it is conducted, underscores the essentially dishonourable nature of their love. Simon Gaunt's discussion of the influence of sexuality on wider society asserts that "[s]exuality is a powerful regulating force in romance, but it has the potential to destroy social cohesion" (109), and this is an exact summation of the collapse of Arthurian society. Chivalric rule, as ordered by the Pentecostal Oath, hinges on the balance of sexual dominance and protection. The skewing of this sense of proportion leads to social chaos, from the individual victim to the ultimate treachery in the king's betrayal and the subsequent collapse of the court.

The reality that women exert influence in the narrative is never more evident than in the condemnation of those who reassign proscribed gender roles, creating vulnerability in masculine supremacy. Bearing in mind the perspective of a patriarchal culture, these women are often to be as much pitied as damned, particularly in cases where it is desire, or even love, which prompts their conduct. Elaine of Ascolat, for example, pursues Lancelot in her devotion; in contrast to Guinevere's enforced detachment, Elaine "dud suche attendaunce to hym that the Freynshe booke seyth there was never woman dyd never more kyndlyer for man" (II.1082.29-31). Additionally, she is respected in court; "there was never chylde nother wyff more mekar tyll fadir and husbande than was thys Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat" (II.1085.13-15). A worthy woman in all respects, "thys maydyn Elayne never wente frome sir Launcelot, but wacched hym day and nyght" (II.1082.28-29).

Elaine adores the knight; while Lancelot agrees to wear her sleeve, in conjunction with his own motivations, his acquiescence is coupled with a voiced reluctance to align himself with any woman but Guinevere as he states: "Never dud

I erste so much for no damesell" (II.1068.21). His repudiation of Elaine's love, however, leads to her premature death from sorrow. While Lancelot's regret at the death of a maiden is legitimate, it is without the depth brought by genuine personal affection; in keeping with his chivalric status, Lancelot proclaims his sorrow at Elaine's death, but absolves himself of all responsibility, telling her father:

> And me repentith [...] that she lovith me as she dothe, for I was never the causer of hit; for I reporte me unto youre sonne, I never erly nother late profirde her bownté nother fayre behestes.
>
> (II.1091.2-5)

Lancelot's relationship with Elaine is a tragic one; she genuinely loves Lancelot, yet the knight's concern is for the feelings of his beloved Guinevere. Even his decision to wear Elaine's "rede slyve" (II.1080.21) is tainted, as he fears the repercussions of a wrathful Guinevere:

> And than sir Launcelot compaste in hys mynde that sir Gawayne wolde telle quene Gwenyvere how he bare the rede slyve and for whom, that he wyst well wolde turne unto grete angur.
>
> (II.1082.24-27)

The colour red, vivid and distinctly conspicuous, is a source of anxiety to Lancelot in his bearing of Elaine's sleeve, as such a perceptible token would put him at risk of offending Guinevere. The queen does react as anticipated, despite the fact that "[t]he courtliness of the gesture is superficial rather than substantial for he is motivated only by his desire to hide his identity" (Whitaker 96). However, what is simply a practical gesture on Lancelot's part is read as a definitive indication of his devotion by both Elaine and Guinevere.

Representative of Elaine's sexual desire, the red sleeve may be perceived as a symbol of love, lust, bravery, or sacrifice, but is definitively a symbol of danger. The

colour comes into play once more, with the same conditions, as Lancelot later wounds his hand when he breaks into Guinevere's bedchamber, and stains her bed sheets red with his blood. Reminiscent of the red sleeve, the red blood is once more an indication of perilous circumstances; the sleeve held the capacity to incite jealousy in Guinevere, while the blood presages an even more dangerous revelation, that of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair.

Elaine's presentation of the red sleeve and Lancelot's misgivings about bearing it foreshadow the chaos to come, as blood is spilled and truths revealed that lead to the destruction of the civilisation of Camelot. However, the very existence of this relationship seems positioned in such a manner as to enhance the development of the dynamic between Lancelot and Guinevere in the text: her jealousy, his unerring devotion, and the fact that their alliance here leads to the loss of one valued life, is a precursor of the more extensive damage to come. Elaine is a narrative tool used to demonstrate the precarious nature of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship in both a personal and political context, as the loss of an individual life at this point in the narrative foretells the collapse of society as a whole when the reality of their adultery is revealed.

Malory's portrayal Elaine of Ascolat in death is presented with the relative lack of pomp evident in much of his language of physical description. The "fayre dede mayden" (II.1097.33-34) is beautifully dressed in repose, in a "ryche bed, coverde unto her myddyll with many rych clothys, and all was of cloth of golde" (II.1096.15-16). Malory's Elaine commands the respect that comes with death in spite of, and perhaps because of, the reality of her circumstances, as "dying for love seems not only an honorable, but a sensible, down-to-earth, self-respecting course of action" (Lambert 151). So pitiful is the sight of her funeral barge that even Guinevere berates Lancelot, saying "ye myght have shewed hir som bownté and

jantilnes whych myght have preserved hir lyff" (II.1097.14-15), regardless of the ironic fact that it is she who holds Lancelot's heart and so prevented him from returning Elaine's affections, simultaneously displaying her "jealousy and her regal inconsistency" (Lambert 205). Here, "the hero's courtesy has been limited by loyalty to the queen" (Whitaker 96) and death following unrequited love is the sad result. Ironically, Malory does connect Lancelot and Elaine in death; in repose, Elaine's "corse" (II.1096.5) "lay as she had smyled" (II.1096.16), while Lancelot, "stark dede", also "laye as he had smyled" (III.1258.16). This echo creates a sense of poignant sentimentality as the ill-fated lovers are paralleled in death.

While much emphasis is placed on physical exploitation of the female, explicit sexual violation is not the sole manner in which a lady may find herself damned at male hands; Elaine of Ascolat's hopeless end, for example, was brought about as a result of a distinct lack of sexual gratification. Helen Cooper notes the distinction between those women who exploit their sexuality in male manipulation, often with the aid of enchantment, and those, such as Elaine of Ascolat, who do not: "the contrast makes all the more poignant the plight of those who have nothing but love to offer in a world where love is unlikely to be enough" (Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur* xix). The emotional wellbeing of women is often overlooked in the narrative culture of the *Morte Darthur*, allowing Elaine to appear as little more than a narrative prop, without any real concern dedicated to the actuality of her suffering.

Temptresses and Enchantresses

Whether they are viewed as potential victims of society, or manipulative conspirators, women such as Elaine of Corbin and Hellawes are but two examples of desiring females who employ both wit and enchantments in order to seduce the men

for whom they yearn; role reversal, as the manipulative female attacks the vulnerable male, wielding her sexuality as the ultimate weapon, is one of the primary obstacles that threatens the integrity of the Grail knights. Here, "[e]nchantment replaces physical force, and traditional gender roles are reversed" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 252).

The fear and apprehension with which these enchantresses are viewed is voiced by Accolon, who condemns "false damysels that faryth thus with theire inchauntementes" (I.140.19-20), who are "fendis and no women" (I.140.17). This possibility that "the supernatural is a manifestation of the demonic" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 248) reasserts itself later in the Grail quest. In scenes reminiscent of the temptations put forth by Morgan le Fay, Nenyve, Elaine, and Hellawes earlier in the narrative, the Grail section of the text focuses on those "temptresses conjured up by the devil" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 254). The temptation of Perceval, and his resistance, epitomises the magnitude of the female threat and its consequences; he finds himself exposed to the elements on a desolate mountain, "closed with the se nygh all aboute" (II.912.16). Here, *Magic and the Supernatural* depicts the way in which "the Grail landscape opens onto a violent, demonic world constructed around the motif of the enchantress" (254). He has simultaneously proved both his spiritual and physical strength by rescuing a lion from a serpent; the lion, with its connotations of spiritual strength, is offered salvation from the satanic serpent by Perceval, in an affirmation of the championing of good over evil and morality over corruption. Perceval's actions are, as such, the physical manifestation of the virtue that accomplishes this.

Following his demonstration of spiritual supremacy, Perceval is approached by "a jantillwoman of grete beauté" (II.916.1), aboard a ship bearing a black sail and offering provisions. Her beauty rouses a fierce desire in Perceval, while her

reluctance to capitulate to his overtures simply serves to excite his passion all the more: "Than she refused hym in a maner whan he requyred her, for cause he sholde be the more ardente on hir" (II.918.13-15). Here we observe the concept of sexual gratification as power, as the female exercises her circumstantial authority through the provision or denial of sex.

The knight swears an oath, offering himself in courtly language as servant to the woman, swearing, "by the feythe of my body!" (II.918.22). Her presence, her beauty, and her hesitancy all combine to incite in him such a passion that he strips himself of his clothing and lies down beside her, imperilling his vow of chastity. Physically naked and at his most vulnerable, it is the sight of the Christian cross etched on the blade of his sword which causes Perceval to reflect momentarily, and in doing so, to realise the error of his ways. The association between Perceval's physicality and his sword incites a mirroring effect, resultant in Perceval making the sign of the cross in a reflection of the cross before him, impelled by providence which opposes the instrument of evil embodied by female sexuality. This prompts the immediate disappearance of the temptress, who recedes into the wilds of the elements that surround them. Perceval comprehends that "that jantillwoman was that mayster fyende of helle, with hath pousté* [*power] over all other devyllis" (II.920.3-5); to have acceded to temptation would have culminated in eternal perdition.

The true nature of this demon in disguise is epitomised by the darkness in which she disappears; as discussed previously, in terms of Gawain's dream, while "white signifies purity and divinity" (Whitaker 78), it follows that "darkness was absence of light, evil absence of good" (Whitaker 79). Perceval, and later, Bors, experience the "black smoke, burning heat, cacophony, tempest and evil smells" which "indicated demonic presences" (Whitaker 79) as they resist the lures of

seduction and are privy to the frustrated results of the rejected demons. Here, "[l]iteral and symbolic interweave as what appeared to be physical realities prove demonic illusions [...] The enchantress is rewritten as the demonic temptress – and the devil as woman" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 255).[143]

Merlin's entrapment, after the wizard "felle in dotage" (I.125.2) on Nenyve, does not have such a positive conclusion. Nenyve, tiring of his unwavering attention, "departed and leffte Merlyon" (I.126.27) confined under "a grete stone" (I.126.23). Merlin's adoration for Nenyve was all-consuming, in a manner which echoes Elaine of Ascolat's devotion to Lancelot; "Merlion wolde nat lette her have no reste, but allwayes he wolde be wyth her" (I.125.5-6), as "he was assorted uppon hir, that he myght nat be from hir" (I.125.8-9).

While she grew "ever passynge wery of hym" (I.126.18), Nenyve employs her feminine desirability to manipulate Merlin, exploiting his desire for her in order to extort his knowledge from him: "ever she made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thynge that sche desyred" (I.125.6-8). At this point, she promptly disposes of her unsolicited suitor. Nenyve, "aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son" (I.126.19-20), channels her aversion into her personal advancement; she utilises her "subtyle worchyng" (I.126.24) and traps Merlin beneath a stone. Here, "she wrought so there for hym that he come never oute for all the craufte he coude do" (I.126.25-27). Merlin's authority atrophies in the face of the duplicitous qualities employed by Nenyve, qualities which are portrayed in the text as being uniquely treacherous in their femininity.[144] The capacity for manipulation,

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[143] Essentially, "lust is the instrument of the devil, and consummation would place Perceval's soul irrevocably in his power" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 254). The wound which Perceval administers upon his own thigh serves as an expression of this, an admonition against the dangers of physical weakness.

[144] This is not the only point in the text where Merlin is viewed in terms of the feminine, and not positively so. As Saunders notes in *Magic and the Supernatural*, "Some of the British kings laugh 'and mo other called hym a wytche', a detail not in the French that gestures towards contemporary concern about witchcraft (I.8, 18)" (238). Suspicion born of fear and ignorance leads to mockery, and this mockery in turn takes the form of the feminisation of the wizard.

extortion, and subtle cruelty, are all traits which are distinctly attributed to the feminine capability to conceal malevolent intrigues ingeniously beneath a benign façade.

Saunders considers the way in which this "episode offers the first instance of a recurring motif in the *Morte Darthur*, of the man ensnared by the woman through supernatural means, a motif that balances the numerous examples of male force in the work" (*Rape and Ravishment* 240). Fundamentally, Merlin's relationship with Nenyve is one of masculine desire tempered by feminine control. His downfall is foreseen and perpetuated in time; having been defeated by his own wit and wisdom, and "putte in the erthe quycke" (I.44.29) by Nenyve, "Malory's Merlin is a tragic figure whose great achievement in establishing Arthur's kingdom is undermined by a humiliating and destructive passion for a woman" (Whitaker 57). It is through the placement of the female in the text that Merlin exposes both his extraordinary capabilities and his very human flaws. Here, the female figure, in the form of the temptress or the enchantress, demonstrates the true nature of the powerful male in the text; in Perceval's case, a commendation of his integrity of spirit, and in Merlin's, his weakness in the face of desire. While these encounters may be perceived as simply being arbitrary, the presence of the magical highlights the potential power of enchantment, particularly when employed in conjunction with wit in the workings of these women – and their social consequences.

As demonstrated by Nenyve in particular, proficiency in the magical automatically affords power, and as Cooper points out in *The English Romance in Time*, "[s]kill in enchantment is in any case not necessarily bad" (160); Saunders' *Magic and the Supernatural* argues that "[f]or Malory, sorcery can be positive", particularly in the case of Nenyve, who, despite her initial destructive presence, possesses a magical ability that "is largely protective and healing" and "is rooted in

foreknowledge" (244). It is Nenyve who establishes Guinevere's innocence in the case of the poisoned apple, while it is also she who saves Arthur in his encounter with Accolon, where "she knew how Morgan le Fay had ordayned for Arthur shold have bene slayne that day, and therefore she com to save his lyff" (I.142.22-24) against the "false treson" (I.144.20) set in place by his sister.

Nenyve's magic is neither wholly a positive nor a negative force in the text, but "the forcefulness of her various interventions indicates the transformative extremes of her powers: intention is the decisive factor in their effect" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 244). It must also be acknowledged that Nenyve, throughout the narrative, acts as Arthur's protector, Pelleas' love, and Guinevere's saviour in the circumstance of the poisoned apple; "ever she ded grete goodnes unto kynge Arthure and to all hys knyghtes thorow her sorsery and enchauntementes" (I.1059.13-15). In this sense, Nenyve is "unambiguously benign" (Holbrook 767), proving both constructive and destructive in her presence, but nonetheless remaining a consistent source of power.[145]

Morgan le Fay is also proficient in such skill, having "acquire[d] her magic through education" (Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* 161). Malory clarifies that she was "put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (I.10.9-10), a claim which indicates a far wider knowledge than that solely concerned with dark magic. As discussed in Chapter One of this work in the context of historical women and their relative prominence, powerful women were often viewed with apprehension in medieval times, irrespective of the nature of this power, be it magical, social, or political, and literary treatment of characters such as Morgan le Fay reflects this.

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[145] For further discussion of Nenyve's presence, see Beverly Kennedy 100-101, and Mark Lambert 155-158.

In her evil machinations, "Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half-sister, is the chief source of baleful magic in the *Morte Darthur*" (Whitaker 58); her abilities are "characterised by [...] deception, jealousy and betrayal" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 248). While never wholly successful in her attempts to wreak havoc, Morgan is a significantly malicious power within the narrative. As noted, Morgan has gained her skills from her time in a nunnery, while Nenyve, a far less overtly hostile source of enchantment, learns magical skills at the hand of Merlin himself. So impressive is Nenyve's competency that she succeeds in disposing of Merlin through the use of his own magic, yet she is not a natural enchantress; an element of humanity is evident in the fact that she must be rescued by Pellinore, having been kidnapped. "She evidently has no innate skill in magic, for she must inveigle from Merlin his knowledge", but she takes this knowledge and uses it well, taking the exiled Merlin's place as "chief guardian of the Arthurian court" and demonstrating her abilities admirably (Whitaker 59). Discounting her entrapment of Merlin, Nenyve is a source of positive magical force in the world of the text, a "necessary counterpart" to Morgan's evil enchantments; Nenyve's "participation is less memorable, however, being confined to foresight and simple enchantments rather than to creating magical artefacts, shapeshifting, and devious plots" (Whitaker 59), leaving Morgan with the attribute of the most powerful magical woman in the text, by virtue of sheer ferocity, cunning, and immorality.

Just as women are objectified and commodified, the existence of power and authority in a material sense draws the attentions of those who crave such power, to be used to their own ends; Morgan le Fay exhibits a preoccupation with such objects. The sword of Excalibur and its scabbard bear qualities beyond that of simple earthly protection. Merlin outlines their capabilities:

> the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded. Therefore kepe well the scawberde allweyes with you.
>
> (I.54.3-6)

Such possessions are items of inestimable power, and it is this quality which draws interest from sources beyond that of their possessor. "Because the sword and scabbard together represent Arthur's sovereign power, longevity, and invulnerability, associations of treachery accrue to them through the machinations of the malicious Morgan le Fay" (Whitaker 12). Morgan's wit and capacity for manipulation allow her to commandeer the sword and the scabbard, transferring them and their inherent magic to Accolon, in the hope that her lover will be protected. Here, however, Morgan's actions instead allow Arthur to demonstrate his strength and skill as a knight on the battlefield, as he emerges triumphant from battle with Accolon, despite the fact that his opponent wields armour of enchanted proficiencies. Arthur is, admittedly, not alone in doing so; while one woman attempts to manipulate his downfall, another offers her protective services through enchantment, and Nenyve assists in Arthur's triumph by "inchauntemente" (I.144.24-28). The king having reclaimed his sword, Morgan refuses to capitulate and is ferocious in her determination to bring about her brother's downfall. Consequently,

> whan she sawe she myght nat ascape she rode unto a lake thereby and seyde, "Whatsoever com of me, me brothir shall nat have this scawberde!" And than she lete throwe the scawberde in the deppyst of the watir. So hit sanke, for hit was hevy of golde and precious stonys.
>
> (I.151.13-17)

The scabbard is lost, yet outside of the essential narrative progression offered here, the encounter also serves to highlight both Arthur's remarkable aptitude, and Morgan's malevolent nature, along with the lengths she will go to in order to fulfil her malicious intent.

Morgan's wicked nature is further explored through her treatment of other men in the text, aside from her prolonged attempts to bring an end to her brother's successful reign. Dosing him with a potion that takes him from his senses for a number of days, "suche a drynke that of three dayes and three nyghtes he waked never, but slepte" (II.642.31-32), Morgan captures Alexander the Orphan and keeps him locked away in her castle. Saunders' *Magic and the Supernatural* discusses the way in which "Morgan's power, again like that of otherworldly enchantresses, is both prescient and disturbingly physical" (251), particularly in terms of tending to Alexander's wounds: when he is installed in la Beale Regard, she "gaff hym suche an oynement that he sholde have dyed. And so on the morne whan she cam to hym agayne, he complayned hym sore. And than she put another oynemente uppon hym, and than he was oute of his payne" (II.642.4-8). Morgan ostensibly cures the knight, with the condition that he must remain in the castle for one year and one day, in gratitude, "for none other entente but for do hir plesure whan hit lykyth hir" (II.643.21-22).

Alexander's response is unambiguous; he replies, "A, Jesu defende me [...] frome suche pleasure! For I had levir kut away my hangers than I wolde do her ony suche pleasure!" (II.643.23-25). The knight is crude in his disgust at such a demand, mirroring that which is implicit in Morgan's own request. Her desire for sexual gratification is viewed with revulsion, a far cry from the attitude of most men to their own sexual fulfilment. His escape is abetted by a "fayre damesell" (II.644.3) and her uncle, who lays siege to the castle. Alexander demonstrates his healthy

sexual appetite in his relations with this damsel; having arranged for his release, "he kyssed hir and ded to her plesaunce as hit pleased them bothe at tymes and leysers" (II.644.7-8). The equitable nature of this union is acknowledged, as is the mutual gratification derived by both participants, while Morgan le Fay is stripped of her conquest.

Morgan le Fay's cruelty is not directed solely at the male demographic; a vindictive being, she is equally callous toward the women against whom she takes umbrage. One such "dolerous lady" (II.791.32), Elaine, left "in paynes many wyntyrs and dayes" (II.791.32-33) as she "boyleth in scaldynge watir" (II.791.33), becomes the hapless victim of Morgan's jealousy; Lancelot finds her locked in "the fayryste towre that ever he saw" (II.791.24-25), set in torturous confinement in spite of the beauty of her surroundings. She remains doused in a vat of boiling water "as hote as ony styew" (II.792.12), where she has suffered for five years already, waiting to be released by the best knight in the world.

In a series of events which categorise Lancelot as the agent of such a definition, the heavy iron doors which guard the scene open independently of human assistance, to allow him entry into the chamber of torture. She is "as naked as a nedyll" (II.792.14), abject in her vulnerability, yet her beauty is indisputable, and indeed, is the reason for her torture; she is so incarcerated "bycause she was called the fayryst lady of that contrey" (II.792.16-17). Lancelot's touch offers salvation, thus confirming his status as "the beste knyght of the worlde" (II.792.19) through female interaction. This development serves the dual purpose of reaffirming Lancelot's worth, and condemning Morgan as a bitter, cruel individual, who pays no heed to the social values of community and loyalty (in this case, to womankind) which are such a fundamental element of chivalric society. Justifying her behaviour as "an erthely fende" (I.149.25) with the excuse that she was "tempted

with a fende" (I.149.27), Morgan only serves to "sustain the emphasis" of the demonic and reassert her evil nature (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 248).

In direct contrast with the exemplar of the chivalric ideal, Malory's Morgan le Fay also makes her presence felt in an indirect fashion, as she subtly, yet irreverently, indicates society's knowledge of the cuckolded king's relationship with his wife and his knight, through a shield depicting an image of a triumphant knight perched upon the heads of a king and a queen: "a kynge and a quene therein paynted, and a knyght stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge uppon the kynges hede and the othir uppon the quenys hede" (II.554.24-26). Arthur is ignorant in the face of this graphic indication of his future; Morgan admits that the shield "signyfieth kynge Arthure and quene Gwenyver, and a knyght that holdith them bothe in bondage and in servage" (II.554.30-33), but will not elucidate upon the identity of this knight. While reluctant to come forth with such information that would decimate the reputations of both King Arthur and Queen Guinevere and thus doubtless lead to the subsequent punishment of the envoy, Morgan le Fay, in a fit of pique at Lancelot's affection for the queen, presents Sir Tristram with this shield, "to that entente, that kynge Arthure myght undirstonde the love betwene them" (II.555.8-9) without being explicitly informed to this effect.

Guinevere's susceptibility as a vulnerable female comes to bear at this point in the narrative, as the implication behind the monstrance of this shield is immediately clear to the apprehensive queen; she "demed as hit was, wherefore she was hevy" (II.557.28-29). Arthur, on the other hand, in his ingenuousness, has to be informed that "thys shylde was ordayned for you, to warn you of youre shame and dishonoure that longith to you and youre quene" (II.557.33-35). Even when any immediate danger has passed and Arthur is somewhat appeased, Guinevere remains "sore aferde" (II.558.20). This incident demonstrates a battle of wits

between two autonomous females, providing a driving narrative force during which the male characters involved appear to be entirely manipulated in their obedience. The shield is an innovation of Morgan le Fay; Tristram is merely an emissary by which the shield and its veiled connotations would be displayed in the most provocative circumstances possible. Both Tristram and Arthur wonder at the significance of the illustration; however, neither distinguishes the true import of the message until it is elucidated, to an extent, for the king. Guinevere, conversely, is instantly alert to the consequence of this implicit threat and remains vigilant at the possibility of exposure. In this manner, Malory takes an elemental symbol of knighthood and chivalry,[146] and with the influence of the feminine, twists it to become the trigger with which that chivalric society which it champions, could very well be destroyed.

Morgan le Fay plots to bring about her brother's demise; the battle between Arthur and Accolon, in possession of Excalibur and its magical scabbard, is engineered to do exactly this. Nenyve's intervention allows for Arthur's triumph, despite Morgan's designs, and the overall effect of the battle is to "establish Arthur's chivalric quality by allowing him to demonstrate prowess, nobility, courage, endurance, mercy, justice, and generosity" (Whitaker 66). Arthur's greatness is further emphasised by the fact that "[e]ven his opponent ends by describing him as the greatest man of prowess and worship in the world" (Whitaker 66), in a gracious admission of the superiority of the king in terms of both martial skill and noble virtue. Morgan's scheming and impressive capacity for manipulation simply serve to accentuate the magnitude of Arthur's imperial authority at this juncture in the narrative, alongside the extremity of the female facility for corruption in a

[146] The significance of which is evidenced in Chapter Four, as Gawain castigates the women in their disrespect of Marhalt's shield.

masculine domain. Here, once more, the powerful female inadvertently serves as a foil to the chivalric male, providing a useful narrative device which contributes to the championing of chivalric integrity and the superior strength of the male; Morgan le Fay's presence has a dual influence, as the obvious destructive impact she bears simultaneously highlights the capacity for good in others.[147]

Dame Brusen, Elaine's consort, is comparable with Morgan le Fay in the sense that she herself is referred to in the text as "one of the grettyst enchaunters that was that tyme in the worlde" (II.794.19-20). However, her greatest skill seems to be that of considerable mental agility by which she leads Lancelot into a false sense of security and to Elaine's bed. She sends him a ring, "frome queen Gwenyver lyke as hit had com from her, and suche one as she was wonte for the moste parte to were" (II.794.23-24) by means of a man whom Lancelot "knew well" (II.794.22) and recognised as a courtier, substantiating the belief that this gift was indeed from the queen, employing the ring motif that this work has previously explored.

It seems that more can be attributed to Lancelot's unquestioning, trusting nature allowing for the ease of deception than the actuality of the presence of the supernatural. Saunders' *Magic and the Supernatural* asserts that "Dame Brusen's unorthodox methods are left nebulous, but seem to rely on shape-shifting and illusion" (246); the narrative reveals that "by dame Brusens wytte" (II.794.21) these circumstances came to pass. Lancelot, however, rages against "enchauntemente" (II.796.13) and "wycchecrauftys" (II.796.15-16), accrediting his misbehaviour to a higher power than simple duplicity, despite the fact that "Brusen's dubious arts are specifically directed to good", with the foreknowledge of Galahad's conception

[147] The incongruity of Morgan le Fay's intentions and actions within the chivalric society is highlighted throughout the narrative. Palomides voices such disgust when he learns of Morgan's custom of holding captive Arthur's knights, as he declares, "this is a shamefull and a vylaunce usage for a quene to use, and namely to make suche warre uppon her owne lorde that is called the floure of chevalry that is Crystyn othir hethyn" (II.597.24-27). Arthur's eminence as king is once more underlined, with the gratuitous cruelty of Morgan presented in stark contrast.

(Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 246). Although he declares Elaine a "traytoures" (II.795.27), he also de-humanises her by questioning: "What arte though that I have layne bye all this nyght?" (II.795.27-28). He repeats, "[t]elle me anone [...] what thou arte" (II.796.4-5), stripping Elaine of her very humanity alongside her femininity, as if nobody of this world could possibly be in the possession the capacity for such deviousness. Through these declarations, it is almost as if Elaine is isolated not only from the feminine, but from the human species, indicating either that she has been objectified as a worthless entity, or alternatively, that the great Lancelot has not been usurped by a mere woman, but a far more powerful creature against which no mere man could triumph.

Analogously with Lancelot and other knights of the Grail quest, Bors is tested by a temptress, distinguished by the fact that she is the "fayryst lady that ever he saw" (II.964.26); he is not, in his virtuous determination, easily swayed, and the lady's maidservants press in order to convince him of the necessity of their coupling:

> Have mercy on us all, and suffir my lady to have hir wyll; and if ye do nat, we muste suffir dethe with oure lady for to falle downe of this hyghe towre. And if ye suffir us thus to dye for so litill a thynge all ladys and jantillwomen woll sey you dishonoure.
>
> (II.965.30-34)

These women exploit the quintessentially feminine traits of sentiment and vulnerability, compounding to create a poignant appeal to the senses which proves just as much a force to be reckoned with as physical strength.

Virtue, specifically in terms of chastity, is spoken of merely as "so litill a thynge" (II.965.33), yet for Bors to have freely given his virtue would have been to

damn himself, beyond redemption. A vision of the cross offers salvation to Bors, just as it did to Perceval, while the allegorical content of their trials remains much the same; in his meetings with these temptresses, Bors has faced the devil in the form of desire.

Temptation often takes the form of the seductive female, and the implied judgements of the narrative celebrate morality in the chivalric knight while endorsing what could potentially be read as misogynistic contexts. This encounter, when taken in consideration with Bors' decision to protect the lady before Lionel, as discussed in Chapter Four, symbolises once more the battle against evil, and its earthly manifestation in sexual gratification; "[v]irginity has its own innate significance, and the preservation of the lady's honour literally counters evil with good and contributes to the battle against the devil" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 257-58). Therefore, for Bors to allow for rape to take place would have been to condone the damnation of both the lady and her attacker; the hermit, in his explication, clarifies:

> And, sir Bors, ye had bene a grete foole and in grete perell for to have sene tho two flowris perish for to succoure the rottyn tre, for they had synned togydir, they had be dampned; and for ye rescowed them bothe, men myght calle you a verry knyght and the servaunte of Jesu Cryste.
>
> (II.968.17-22)

The value of virginity has been explored in detail in various contexts throughout previous chapters; here, the reader is once more presented with the concept of male responsibility for female salvation, to the extent that Bors himself would be condemned as a sinner, not by virtue of misbehaviour, but through a lack of

preventative action. Bors' experience demonstrates the way in which the chivalric hero is consistently subject to the consequences of the caprices of female behaviour. In this way, the female influence is inextricably linked with the success of the chivalric knight, and in turn, with chivalric society as a whole.

The powerful woman, therefore, boasts an authority which is both defined and restricted by womanhood. The subjugation of female authority is further emphasised by the de-mystification of the enchantress; for example, Malory is clear about the fact that Nenyve gleans her knowledge of the magical from Merlin. Cooper concludes, "the properties of magic do not change – these women really do have powers of enchantment – but the source of such power is demythologized. They may still be marvellous in the sense of being an object of wonder, but they are not inherently supernatural" (*The English Romance in Time* 184). In this manner, medieval literature allows the female those virtues necessary for their placement within the narrative, but all the while diminishes their power to a certain extent, applying a de-mystification of the enchantress alongside the objectification of the ordinary woman, in order to place the female in a fitting position in this patriarchal landscape.

"[I]nsomuche all that he dud was at a ladyes requeste I blame hym the lesse"[148]: The Marital State and Possession of the Female

The concept of the female as an active participant as a lover within the narrative allows the reader to examine female autonomy through the idea of amatory equality, particularly in terms of the balance of power in marriage. Malory's expression of his regard for the marital union comes in varied discourses,

[148] *Le Morte Darthur* (I.325.24-25).

beginning, again, with the depiction of the female in the Pentecostal Oath. The content, and indeed the very existence of the oath is, as discussed in Chapter Four, in itself a tribute to the respect of Arthurian society for the feminine: as noted, Arthur requires his knights "allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe" (I.120.20-23). Such a statement indicates a marked degree of respect, acknowledging the rights of the female without necessarily assuming a patronising tone. Whilst women are depicted as being fragile in their feminine vulnerability from a physiological perspective, actively necessitating their autonomous rights to be reinforced by the chivalric knight, this physical deficiency is not necessarily presented as being a significant weakness as such, but simply one of the terms of the condition of femininity.

Malory's account of the state of matrimony, however, conflicts with this apparently compassionate notion of the delicate female. Lancelot's opinions on marriage may be seen to diverge from the Pentecostal Oath: "But for to be a weddyd man, I thynke hit nat, for than I muste couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis, batellys and adventures" (I.270.29-32). Vinaver writes that Malory's "most cherished ideal is that of happy marriage" (*Malory* 46-47), yet Lancelot's romantic fate is somewhat lost in his inability to reach this utopia of a happy marriage with the woman he loves, as is evidenced in his discussion with the "damesell" (I.270.13) who pities Lancelot for being "a knyghte wyveles" (I.270.19) because of his enduring devotion to Guinevere and the fact that he "shall never love none other but hir, nother none other damesell ne lady shall rejoyce" him (I.270.24-25).

Were he not emotionally bound, be it "by enchauntement" (I.270.23) or by choice, to Guinevere, Lancelot would have his choice of wife; as the damsel clarifies,

his unavailability means that "many in this londe, of hyghe astate and lowe [...] make grete sorow" (I.270.26-27). He provides an equally damning condemnation of casual romantic encounters with "paramours", stating his dissent toward extra-marital relations,

> in prencipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advoutrers nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys [...] And so who that usyth paramours shall be unhappy, and all thynge unhappy that is aboute them.
>
> (I.270.33-36; 271.2-4)

Lancelot's renunciation of marital love is absolute, as is his antipathy towards the concept of marriage when it involves any lady but his beloved. In denying the fact that his wifelessness is due to his illicit love for Guinevere, Lancelot depreciates the state of marriage as being a desirable one for a young knight, instead condemning it as the kiss of death to a man's career as a knight.

Sir Lancelot's testimony against marriage may have been born of a desire to protect his illicit relationship with Guinevere, but this sentiment does not ring true in the narrative world, particularly in the instance of Sir Gareth, who is presented in high regard as a knight rich in virtue, honour, and morality. A married man, Gareth's marital status is in no way an impediment to his chivalric career, instead adding to the fulfilment of character of a man who is both a thriving knight and husband. In his essay, "The Tale of Gareth: The Chivalric Flowering", Guerin writes:

> "The Tale of Gareth" is an index of the noblest elements of the chivalric ideal – and an effective contrast to the loves that will later wither the flower of chivalry.
>
> (111)

Gareth's and Lyonesse's marriage is one of mutual love and fidelity, born of a reciprocal desire. However, even in this idealised union, the male possession of the female is asserted, as "Sir Gringamour gives Gareth permission to marry his sister" (Robeson 112), stating "this lady my sistir is youres at all tymes [...] for wete you well she lovyth you as well as ye do hir and bettir" (I.332.8-10). In keeping with masculine dominance, Lyonesse is presented to Gareth, yet both are aware of the significance of marriage and its bearing in both courtly and religious society.

Although their chastity is not voluntary, Gareth and Lyonesse refrain from engaging in sexual activity prior to their marital union. Nonetheless, sexual union is celebrated in the text. Prior to their marriage, the couple "had nat theire intentys neythir with othir as in her delytes untyll they were maryed" (I.333.11-13).

As such, Gareth and Lyonesse's union is held up as the pinnacle of marital bliss in Malory's *Morte Darthur*; the couple's reputation represents the characters of both individuals involved. Their first meeting is pre-empted by Gareth's desire to rescue Lyonesse from one of "the perelest knyghtes of the worlde" (I.296.33), the Red Knight, who exists and acts beyond the boundaries of the chivalric code of justice and morality. Gareth's triumph over the Red Knight follows the latter's defeat of forty more men who came in the hope of vanquishing this terror and rescuing Dame Lyonesse, demonstrating Gareth's ultimate superiority, in terms of both physical strength and chivalric valour.

Gareth's nobility of spirit is further underlined in the episode of Sir Persaunt's daughter, who was actively sent to Gareth's chambers with the express intention of testing his virtue. The knight's courtesy is presented once more through engagement with the female as he is steadfast in his refusal to entertain the maiden upon finding her naked in his bed: "God deffende me [...] than that ever I sholde defoyle you to do sir Persuante suche a shame!" (I.315.9-10). His declination of the

lady is voiced in terms of the potential damage he would inflict on her father's reputation, rather than the corruption of her own autonomy, yet his denunciation comes from a position of virtue, all the same.

The maiden's explicit offer to Gareth is not a gesture born of free will, but is undertaken upon her father's direction: "I com nat hydir by myne owne wyll, but as I was commaunded" (I.315.13-14).[149] While she is not under the influence of direct masculine force in the sense of rape, she is still enforced into placing her purity in a precarious position at the instruction of her father, calling into question "the ambiguous status of consent"; "[h]er acceptance of the command against her will calls into question the nature of female consent" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 249), incorporating the varying aspects of masculine force that come into play in the sexual forum.

Gareth's refusal of Persaunt's daughter, alongside his rescue of Lyonesse, essentially "rewrites this archaic pattern of marriage rooted in force with the possibility of courtship based on consent" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 250); while the Red Knight had enforced his ownership of Lyonesse in terms of having rightfully acquired her in battle, claiming "she is my lady, and for hir I have done many stronge batayles" (I.321.36-37), Gareth's insistence on Lyonesse's autonomy in this case challenges the Red Knight and in doing so, challenges the tradition he represents, of enforced marriage based on military strength.[150] Lyonesse substantiates this conception, highlighting the fundamental conflict between the voluntary consent of love and application of force; the Red Knight "attendyth unto

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[149] Here, Saunders observes, "[v]irginity is objectified: she would be corrupted whether or not she consented" (*Rape and Ravishment* 249).

[150] See Chapter Four for clarification of this concept of military strength and victory as the conditions by which a woman could be claimed.

nothing but to murther" and for this reason, she says, "I can nat prayse hym nother love hym" (I.318.25-26).

However, the fact is that Gareth's subsequent claim to Lyonesse, following his own military triumph over the Red Knight, essentially follows the same pattern of masculine dominance; he declares, "well I am sure I have bought your love with parte of the beste bloode within my body" (I.327.15-17), emphasising both the genuine nature of his feelings towards Lyonesse, but also the military nature of his victory and the rightful claim to Lyonesse's love that he now believes he holds. It is Gareth's willingness to abide by Lyonesse's wishes and, in essence, prove his love with a period of enforced separation that sets his claim to victory apart from the Red Knight and his bloodthirsty determination.

Gareth's acquiescence with Lyonesse's wishes allows for the concept of an active love to be introduced into the dynamic of this particular relationship, as, for Lyonesse, physical force and the military victory it ensures are to the detriment of the natural progression of consensual love, as evidenced by the declaration that she "can nat prayse [...] nother love" the Red Knight (I.318.26). In accordance with tradition, a knight will win a lady's hand upon becoming her redeemer, in a demonstration of a divergent type of enforced marriage, but of a less severe nature. However, "although Lyonesse is dependent on physical protection in a military and male world, she does not unquestioningly associate victory and love" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 250), and it is this conviction which prompts their separation, allowing for the eventual knowledge that their love is reciprocal and active in its consensual dynamic.

Gareth's appeal to Lyonesse, as he requests her favour, is pragmatic in its construction, and comparable with the commodification of women throughout the

narrative. He presents himself to her with an "awareness of his own body as a unit of value for currency within the chivalric economy" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 95), stating "I have nat deserved that ye sholde shew me this straungenesse [...] I am sure I have bought your love with parte of the beste bloode within my body" (I.327.12-13; 16-17). Gareth presents his physical being, and his blood, in particular, as currency, in a motif reminiscent of the demand for a maiden's blood to cure a queen in the episode of Perceval's sister. Here, however, Lyonesse remains prudent in her judgement and demands that he take his leave until he, admittedly a "curteyse knyght" (I.327.18), has proved his worth and both parties are mutually agreeable to their marital union.

In a reflection of the common concept of the female as a commodity, to be traded or won, Gareth here presents himself as such, as an object of value, worthy of Lyonesse's acceptance. Lyonesse's temporary refusal to allow Gareth to enter her estate, as an extension of her refusal to permit access to the physicality of her personal space, delineates the boundaries between the male and the female; Lyonesse presides over her world, and actively protects those boundaries from male intrusion. "Gareth's attempt to enter Lyonesse's castle is his first venture into a space that has not been defined, or appropriated, by men" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 96), and he must act accordingly, accepting of the dictates of its queen. Lyonesse's edict serves to propel Gareth's narrative interests further as he embarks on the quest which will lead to the establishment of his chivalric character.

The critical aspect of Arthurian social attitudes toward the female is displayed once more as Gareth battles the Red Knight, when the latter attacks Lyonesse's castle in an expression of his hostility towards the Knights of the Round Table. His offensive is incited by an ill will that originates with a former lover, to whom he promised revenge for the death of her brothers, at the hand of "sir

Launcelot du Lake othir ellys sir Gawayne" (I.325.2-3). The Red Knight proves a ferocious opponent, a recognised "man-murtherer" (I.337.21), yet Gareth is generous with his forgiveness, due to the nature and source of his animosity. The Red Knight himself admits that "all the shamefull customs that I used I ded hit at the requeste of a lady that I loved" (I.337.23-25), and as a result, Gareth declares that "insomuche all that he dud was at a ladyes requeste I blame hym the lesse" (I.325.24-25). All accountability is here assigned to the absent lady, as the working of the narrative serves to "disavow responsibility in the exercise of masculine violence" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 97). Blame is apportioned to a woman, and, in a similar manner to Gawain's judgement in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a woman not present; because of this, the primary players in this masculine arena are far more disposed to excuse the harm that has passed and offer their respective regrets and forgiveness.

Lynet is the principle female presence in Gareth's predominantly masculine province, save Lyonesse, who is conspicuous only by her absence (an absence which, admittedly, motivates Gareth's actions). A companion to Gareth, Lynet is dubbed a wild woman or a "damesell Savyage" (I.357.5-6), yet she is not a threat to Gareth in terms of enchantment, manipulation, or sexual desire. Her arbitration means the survival of both Gareth and Gawain when they cross swords, as she dresses wounds and stops the bloodshed that would otherwise lead to an unfortunate death. She gently derides his accomplishments, almost dismissing his chivalric victories, but this is presented in such a way that "makes feminine judgment appear comic and exasperating", while "Gareth himself rewrites her negative language as incitement to further feats of arms" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 98), just as Lyonesse originally instigated his adventures with her temporary rejection. As the major feminine presence on Gareth's journey, Lynet is a subtly powerful authority; her

often contemptuous attitude, coupled with consistent companionship and care, motivates the knight and contributes to his fulfilment of Lyonesse's terms.

Not only does Lynet prove a worthy companion to Gareth, she also ensures the sexual virtue of the couple is not tarnished when they are finally united and eager to explore their love and "to abate their lustys secretly" (I.332.37; 333.1); she "employs still more striking 'subtyle craufftes' of the body, intervening to delay the "over-hasty" (VII.22, 333) consummation of her sister's love" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 245). Lynet, all too aware of "the need to temper lust to social constraint" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 99), refuses to allow the lovers to capitulate to their passion. Twice, Gareth and Lyonesse steal away for a secret rendezvous, and twice, Gareth is subject to attack by an unidentified knight, brandishing an axe. Gareth is injured on both occasions, demonstrating the degenerative nature of casual sexual activity outside of the bonds of marriage; his wounds serve as the physical manifestation of the damage inflicted on the spirit by the pursuit of earthly gratification by the chivalric knight.

Lynet is unashamed of the fact that it is she who is taking such preventative measures, proclaiming, "all that I have done I woll avowe hit, and all shall be for your worshyp and us all" (I.334.32-34). Even when Gareth vanquishes his opponent, cleaving his person asunder, Lynet restores this defender of virtue with an apparently magical capability, and "repeats that she works in the interests of honor" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 99). Gareth, "caught in a tension between autonomous agency and social inscrutability" (Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* 100), accedes in acknowledgement of the virtuous nature of Lynet's behaviour, and recognition of the fact of chivalric righteousness. In this sense, not only is Lynet skilled in the mending of potentially fatal wounds, but also the binding of relationships in the face of potentially dangerous circumstances. Bearing in mind

her restoration of both the wounded Gareth and the mysterious knight of this tale, Lynet is one example of the way in which "[w]omen in this tale literally make and unmake bodies, shaping the identity of the hero in the most acutely physical but also inexplicable ways" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 245).

Malory's treatment of Gareth's journey in the *Morte Darthur* is an interesting perspective of the concept of chivalric courtesy, as "[i]t is the lady who defines chivalric virtues and rewards" (Whitaker 48), while the union of Gareth and Lyonesse at the conclusion of his tale "epitomises the concept of courtesy as aristocratic virtue and order" (Whitaker 49). Both Lyonesse and Lynet demonstrate capabilities that venture beyond the earthly and explainable, but in the same way that Nenyve's magic holds the potential for opposing forces of impact, here again "[w]hat is crucial is motive rather than kind: the love-magic, magical healing, foreknowledge and marvellous, shape-shifting devices of Lyonesse and Lyonet test and prove Gareth's chivalry and his virtue, allowing him to take up his rightful place at the Round Table" (Saunders, *Magic and the Supernatural* 246). Through the depiction of the courtship and marriage, Gareth and Lyonesse's union is upheld as one of integrity, virtue, and love, in a celebration of all that marital bliss should be, and has the potential to be, within Malory's chivalric society.

As Gareth's chivalric journey is significantly shaped by the actions and needs of his beloved and her sister, the portrayal of Gawain in the *Morte Darthur* is comparably influenced by female influence; Malory's manipulation of the introduction of Gawain and Ettarde deviates significantly from his source material, as their original gradual courtship is transformed into a demonstration of Gawain's lustful tendencies through his rapid seduction of Ettarde. At the claim that Pelleas has died at Gawain's hand, Ettarde immediately pledges her devotion to him: "of all men on lyve I hated hym moste, for I coude never be quytte of hym. And for ye have

slayne hym I shall be your woman and to do onythynge that may please you" (I.169.12-15). Gawain's reply is to request Ettarde's assistance in the wooing of his lady love, whose identity is revealed as being Ettarde herself in a flirtatious exchange; and so within the space of a paragraph, "she graunted hym to fulfylle all his desyre" (I.169.30). Here, Gawain "employs the old ruse of the rash promise" (B. Kennedy 75) in order to fulfil his desires, highlighted by the fact that he "lay with hir in the pavylyon two dayes and two nyghtes" (I.170.1-2). Pelleas, upon discovery of this, declares, "Alas, that ever a knyght sholde be founde so false!" (I.170.16-17), denouncing Gawain's "shameful behaviour", which appears to be "to be motivated only by lust" (B. Kennedy 76).

P.J.C. Field's *Romance and Chronicle* ascertains Malory's influence in the machinations of this courtship, as "[t]he tacit understanding in the ambiguous use of words, and the picture of lechery in action, are not found in the source of this passage, nor anywhere else in Malory" (139). Field indicates that both Gawain and Ettarde maintained an active awareness of their flirtation, and the phrasing used in this instance holds secondary meaning which betrays this "lechery", despite the proclaimed innocence of Ettarde as she declares, "I may nat chese [...] but it I sholde be forsworne" (I.169.28-29). However, Ettarde is left feeling "used, abused, undone" (B. Kennedy 76). Whatever the consequence, here Malory manoeuvres his sources to emphasise Gawain's desirability and sexual vigour. In this sense, Malory demonstrates his control over the authorial voice in the narrative; "whatever the motives for his changes, these incidents show Malory as an author", with "tantalisingly great potential in the portrayal of individual character through dramatic dialogue" (P.J.C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle* 139) – an authorial voice which actively positions the female in the romantic relationship as being a significant component of the dynamics of the male-female union.

Interestingly, Ettarde, having been seduced and then discarded by Gawain, who takes his leave "into the foreste" (I.171.16), is then brought to judgement by another woman. Nenyve is condemnatory of Ettarde's behaviour, asserting "hit is no joy of suche a proude lady that woll nat have no mercy of suche a valyaunte knyght" (I.171.26-27), and casting an "inchauntemente" (I.172.3) upon Ettarde which causes her to fall deeply in love with Pelleas: "she loved hym so sore that well-nyghe she was nere oute of hir mynde' (I.172.3-4). Pelleas brands Ettarde a "traytoures" (I.172.13), and by what Nenyve deems "the ryghteuouse judemente of God" (I.172.8), Ettarde "dyed for sorow" (I.172.29) while "the Damesel of the Lake rejoysed sir Pelleas, and loved togedyrs duryng their lyfe" (I.172.29-31). Beverly Kennedy writes that "Malory seems to feel very strongly on this subject, and even to take some delight in meting out poetic justice to Ettarde" (77); here, a foolish girl is seduced by a charming knight, and meets sorrow and death as a result – a punishment which is set in place, without equivocation, by another woman.

As we have seen, amatory relationships were ambiguous in their construction in medieval romance, almost always involving some degree of masculine possession of the feminine which undermined any demonstration of equality between the parties involved. Gareth and Lyonesse's pairing serves as Malory's most prominent celebration of romantic love, cemented by marriage. Substantiating this glorification of marital love, Malory's definition of virtuous love exemplifies the values of contemporary society in their romantic attitudes. The narrative, employing complementary terms of the natural and the spiritual world, appears to indicate the author's own particular convictions regarding his perception of the balanced state in which love should ideally exist.

> Therefore, lyke as May moneth flowryth and floryshyth in every mannes gardyne, so in lyke wyse lay every man of worshyp florysh hys herte in thys

> worlde: firste unto God, and nexte unto the joy of them that he promysed hys feythe unto; for there was never worshypfull man nor worshypfull woman but they loved one bettir than anothir; and worshyp in armys may never be foyled. But firse reserve the honoure to God, and secundely thy quarell muste com of thy lady. And such love I calle vertuouse love.
>
> (III.1119.22-30)

Malory here queries the lack of moral fortitude concerned in the social and religious violations that characterise promiscuous love, delineating, in contrast, the simple purity and perfection of a virtuous romantic relationship, or "vertuouse love".

By its very definition, Malory's depiction of "vertuouse love" derives its foundations from a conviction in an equal balance of power between each individual concerned in the relationship, both male and female. There is no expectation that one must serve the other; rather, both must serve God. A relationship is founded in both the spiritual worship of God and the physical and romantic worship of the lover on earth. The celebration of human equality in Malory's definition of virtuous love allows the female to assume the equivalent authority to the male, within the margins of the relationship, contrary to the actuality of social dictate of the time where the balance of power rested firmly in the hands of the male.

Batt observes that the May passage is "central to how the *Morte* configures the relation between narrator, subject matter, and imagined reader", as the narrator presents "the nature of human love, invokes the wisdom and stability of the past, of which Arthur's days are exemplary, in order to contrast its self-restraint with present incontinence" (Preface to *Malory's Morte Darthur* xiii). Malory's May passage incorporates all of those elements which defined the concept of romantic love in Arthurian times – "deference, mutual respect, and abstinence", as Batt defines in her Preface (xiii) – yet held in comparison with a modern attitude

towards the same romantic relationships, a contemporary approach to love is sadly lacking. With "no wysedome nother no stabylité" (III.1119.19-20), it appears that the narrator finds the courtship of his time a precarious beast, weak in comparison with the romantic attitudes of Arthurian times. However, as Batt acknowledges, "[i]t seems odd to have the narrator here judge, and find wanting, modern human behaviour against the mores of a story that often owes its very existence to the declared necessity, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes covert, of gratifying (usually male) desire" (Preface to *Malory's Morte Darthur* xiii). The May passage, in all its apparent incongruity with the content of the narrative which precedes it, serves to highlight the ideal of romantic love, while emphasising the failings of a time which appears ignorant in its approach to the fulfilment of such love, and the social qualities which this demands from both men and women.

Conclusions

Vinaver describes Malory's *Morte Darthur* as being "an earnest endeavour to revive the moral grandeur of what he thought was 'the old custom and usage of this land'" (*Malory* 64). Despite this evocation of a golden age, women in the narrative, it seems, are most compelling and authoritative in negative terms, particularly in amatory relationships, rather than deriving worship from their femininity and gendered acts. The bond between Lancelot and Guinevere is one which manifestly illustrates the influence of women in a romantic relationship, as the power she wields demonstrates a feminine supremacy, under which Lancelot must exert an autonomous will in order to maintain a sense of self. In this instance, the balance of power fluctuates, futile in any attempt at equal footing for the lovers. Elaine of Corbin, an admittedly improvident woman with a compelling love for Lancelot, is

portrayed as being a devious shrew. Nenyve is ambiguous in regard to virtue of character; the individual who led Arthur to Excalibur, and recouped the sword after his death, she is a woman of power. She is capable of overwhelming Merlin, and in this accomplishment, she is viewed as being a nefarious force. However, the narrative also acknowledges Nenyve's evident wit and capability as an autonomous being; she was independently proficient enough in her art to outmanoeuvre the most influential sorcerer of the time, while acting as an agent of protection for Arthur, Guinevere, and Pelleas. Nenyve's actions were admittedly ruinous to Merlin; however, the actuality of these actions can also be acknowledged as being supremely powerful, at a woman's hand, while her positive force as an enchantress and saviour is equal to her destructive capabilities.

William B. Todd asserts, "Malory was intent upon ancient times and places and, in the aura which such distance makes enchanting, was able to create from olden days that marvellous kingdom" (vii). However, Malory's interpretation of his sources in the production of the *Morte Darthur*, as discussed, tends to focus on the promotion of the historicity of events, in terms of social and political actualities, despite the concentration of his French sources on mysticism and enchantment.[151] This allowed for the demystification of the world surrounding the working chivalric ethos, and supplementing the possibility of the construction of "a practicable chivalric ideal for his own time" (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 236), as demonstrated by the Pentecostal Oath.[152]

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[151] For a discussion of the historicity of King Arthur's reign, see Stephen Shepherd, *Middle English Romances: Authoritative Texts, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism* 330-31.
[152] For further discussion, see Terence McCarthy, "Old Worlds, New Worlds: King Arthur in England" 5-23.

In light of this dynamic between the real and the imagined, the manifestation of the female in the narrative of *Le Morte Darthur* demands close scrutiny in its analysis. Thornton (50) acknowledges that

> the final explicit of Malory's "hoole book" does show at least the awareness of a female reader:
>
> I praye you all jentylmen and jentylwymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and his knygthes from the begynnyng to the endynge, praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce. And whan I am deed, I praye you all praye for me soule.
>
> (III.1260.20-24)

However, the fact remains that the positioning of patriarchy ensured masculine dominance of both the social and literary realms of the time. Female characters in the *Morte Darthur* veer in their portrayal from the innocent and consequentially ineffectual, to the antagonistic and therefore destructively influential in relation to the chaos they exert on an unsuspecting society. P.J.C. Field references Fiona Tolhurst's essay on "Why Every Knight Needs His Lady: Re-viewing Questions of Gender and 'Cohesion' in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" in his argument that, "although Malory's ladies are of course often objects of quests or of male sexual passion, they are much more than that, and the fates of men and women are inextricably bound up together. Malory's ladies are active participants in the story, and the knights' chivalry is incomplete without them" (Introduction to *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur* 6).

This is particularly relevant in the exertion of power through sexual desire, temptation, and amatory relationships, as discussed here. Men were more significantly and overtly recognised than women in social terms, and this is

reflected in the relative import of the emotional troubles of men rather than their more severely distressed lovers, as we have seen in the cases of those women who died of heartbreak. Admittedly, Elaine of Corbin occupies an extremely active position in the demolition of Lancelot's sanity. However, the reverberations of the affair were even more severe for Elaine, who is ultimately punished by death. Her actions were of course misguided, but it could also be argued that so were those of Lancelot when he embarked upon his affair with Guinevere, thus betraying his king. Lancelot and Guinevere's conduct is almost vindicated by the fact that their love was sincere, thus exonerating them somewhat. Elaine's seduction of Lancelot led to his madness, but it could also be argued that, as Elaine's love for Lancelot was equally as ardent as his desire was for Guinevere, her actions can, in the same way, be justified as being the acts of an individual who is deeply in love.

This demonstrates one such case of the inequitable treatment of the feminine in the narrative. True love is celebrated in the text, as demonstrated by Gareth and Lyonesse, yet for the most part, it appears that sexual gratification proves more of a threat on the whole, than an asset, while unrequited love brings nothing but heartbreak. The female lovers of the *Morte Darthur* often end up victims of desire, be their motivations pure or otherwise. Those female lovers of consequence in the text are largely depicted as being malevolent in their influence, yet the very force of this influence and its corollary effect on society in general accords a manifest sense of autonomy to the depiction of women in the narrative as a whole.

Conclusion

From "honoured ladye3" (*SGGK* 2412) to "wikked wyves" ("The Wife of Bath's Prologue" 685), the female exerts an inexorable presence on the world of the medieval romance narrative. Judith M. Bennett summarises:

> Medieval gender ideologies [...] were created, consumed, and performed by women as well as men, and although women perhaps participated in some distinctively female ways, these ideologies remained profoundly, albeit ambivalently, misogynous in their assessments of the nature and potential of women. Women were necessary but inferior. They needed to act but never freely. Women could be saved but were evil. At every turn, medieval culture struggled with the simultaneous humanity and otherness of women, and its gender ideologies were deeply inconsistent and contradictory.
>
> ("Medieval Women in Modern Perspective" 167)

This effectively encapsulates the essential "otherness" by which the female is defined in a misogynistic medieval culture. This "contemporary" social and historical perspective resounds even in romances set in a distant past or golden age, and in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, offering a model of response based in tradition to Malory's audiences.

Critical studies of Malory's *Morte Darthur* have been prolific, as recorded in detail by Marylyn Jackson Parins in *Malory: The Critical Heritage*. More recently, research conducted by scholars such as Raluca Radulescu, Carol Meale, Corinne Saunders, and Helen Cooper has significantly contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of the world of Malory's *Morte Darthur* from a feminist perspective, in addition to the more political analysis that

had been the previous focus of this arena of study. That the female maintains an autonomous voice in Malory's *Morte Darthur* has been seen in the writings of critics such as Saunders, Meale, and Radulescu; this study examines the authority of this voice and the force with which it is wielded, in comparison with the varying strengths of other female voices within the broader spectrum of romance narratives, incorporating the encounter of authentic and imagined with the addition of the more direct voices of writers such as Margery Kempe, Christine de Pizan, and Julian of Norwich. While the texts discussed in this work span a relatively wide period, and many pre-date Malory entirely, the relevance of the feminine presence in each is highlighted in the dynamic encounters of texts from different ages, as these voices resonate throughout different time frames, genres, characterisations, and narrative motifs, to provide a frame of research which highlights the influence of feminine authority, albeit often a negative influence, within the restrictions imposed by a definitively patriarchal culture.

"Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* has exerted a unique shaping on other literary works and on popular consciousness" (Parins 1), and is important in its "centrality to the larger context of contemporary English prose romances" (Cooper, *The Long Fifteenth Century* 4). This is particularly relevant in the text's inheritance of material and models from popular English romance, calling to mind the heroines and female protagonists (such as those addressed in this study) who have established models of female behaviour and influence, and who would have resonated with the consciousness of Malory's audience in their reception of the text. Women in medieval romance, as demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three of this work, bear conflicting representations in keeping with Bennett's analysis above, with the essential struggle between medieval culture and its portrayal and perception of the feminine. The female in popular romance is often objectified or

commodified, while those women who do appear to possess any autonomy, or a sense of authority within their place in society, generally do so in a distinctly negative way and are portrayed as a threat to the heroic male, and following from this, to society as a whole. However, aside from this obvious and relatively superficial branding of the female as either a secondary character or a malicious threat, there exists a very subtle yet equally distinct characterisation of the female as an indirect, yet relatively powerful, influence within this male-dominated arena.

The freedom of audience response interacts with the absence of narrative judgement, allowing for varying literary appetites which may indeed welcome rather than condemn the scandalous excesses of wicked women. Lacy clarifies this sense of duality:

> With regard to most Arthurian women [...] convention appears to inscribe in the construction of female characters a deep ambiguity, less in their overt behaviour than in the way readers may be led, whether by tradition, personal inclination, or textual strategies, to interpret them. One reader may take satisfaction in finding a good many females in Arthurian romance who are strong, capable women [...] Another reader may construe that same strength and resourcefulness as shrewishness.
>
> ("Arthurian Literature" 43)

This duality of influence is particularly well demonstrated in Malory's authorship of *Le Morte Darthur*, which is based upon the author's translation and interpretation of a collection of source texts, which he amalgamated with original material, such as the French prose *Queste del Saint Graal* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, in order to create the final narrative. While King Arthur's tale is not of

Malory's own creation, and he did not deviate hugely from the original source material upon which he based his writings, it remains that Malory did exert authorial independence in his restructuring of these materials, and the addition of new events, ideals, and characterisations, such as Lancelot's healing of Sir Urry, and his presentation of Perceval's sister as an active agent in the text. This is of particular note in terms of the women in the narrative; characters such as Guinevere, Morgause, Elaine, Morgan le Fay, and Perceval's sister are all adapted and represented in ways which do not necessarily comply with their source presentations, often creating elements of sympathy or authority where initially there were none; Perceval's sister, for example, while meeting the same end as her source, is a far more positive and forceful individual in her autonomous agency. It is impossible to definitively determine the meaning or intention behind alterations to the source material, yet Malory's exertion of authorial influence here allows the reader an often enhanced perspective on feminine influence, to be asserted at the discretion of audience interpretation.

We have seen how the power of the female in medieval literature is most effectively explored, in the context of this work, in relation to feminine influence on prominent male characters. One of the main purposes of this study has been the examination of the influence of femininity on the male, as evidenced in a positive sense in relationships such as those of Bevis and Josiane, or Havelok and Goldeborw; however, when taken in the context of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, these individual circumstances of varying female influences serve as a microcosm in the larger scale of social destruction. The downfall of individual chivalric knights, themselves representatives of chivalric society as a whole, resonates on a far wider scale. Lancelot has long been revered as the best of all knights, yet that ultimate achievement for the chivalric knight, the acquisition of the Holy Grail, is effectively

rendered impossible for Lancelot due to his adulterous actions. He is therefore unable to successfully make that transition from earthly to celestial, and to achieve that ideal of true spiritual fulfilment. Because he is the best of all earthly knights, he does acknowledge his sins and attempt to atone for them in an active attempt at a spiritual awakening, but once again, the same fact of his being the best of all earthly knights limits him in these efforts as his very self will not allow him to attain spiritual perfection; "of all worldy adventures he passyth in manhode and proues all othir, but in this spyrytuall maters he shall have many hys bettyrs" (II.801.31-33).

Lancelot is essentially defined by that which awards him the title of the best of all earthly knights: the chivalric code which is integral to his persona. This fundamentally binds him to the earthly, as "[h]e is himself the personification of the secular chivalric way of life; to abandon it would be to abandon his own identity" (Moorman 192); Malory, however, softens the element of spiritual failure here by acknowledging the fact that Lancelot has "more worldly worship than ony knyght that ys now lyvynge" (II.896.31); if he cannot be heralded as the spiritual ideal, he will be celebrated for unparalleled physical ability. Lancelot is susceptible to human weakness; as the knight is presented as the personification of all that is good about chivalric society, yet still suffers from these flaws, it follows that the Arthurian kingdom, as ruled by the strictures of the chivalric code, its analogously vulnerable to these flaws and will ultimately suffer the same failures as that knight who embodies it.

Lancelot asserts his worth in the context of his love, as he himself "attributes to Guinevere everything which distinguishes him as the flower of chivalry" (Hynes-Berry 98). However, "[i]f the Grail is to be attained, it must [...] be won by the finest knight the Round Table has to offer – Lancelot. In Lancelot's failure lies the failure of the whole system, since Lancelot, through the perfect embodiment of the system,

himself represents the sins which are to lead to the destruction of this society" (Moorman 191-92); those sins compromising largely of betrayal born of desire, as driven by women. Through this development of Lancelot's character, Malory highlights the imperfections in the chivalric culture of the Arthurian court, as it essentially provides the instruments of its own destruction in its construction of the female as "other" and her social placement as such. Lancelot's love of Guinevere is one such weapon, although unintentionally so; the chivalric knight loves deeply, and the fact that this love is misdirected in its moral circumstance makes it no less powerful in its intensity.

Comparably, Malory's Arthur is equally influenced by feminine presence, which is even more significant in the circumstances of his kingship, and the absolute power he possesses as a man and as a king. In spite of the king's eventual failings, Malory's Arthur is described as being a "moste noble/kynge" (III.1054.1-2), "with a grete egir harte" (II.530.21); indeed, he appears to be unparalleled in his victories at the beginning of his illustrious career, as he claims Excalibur as his own and establishes the court of the Round Table, while claiming the woman he desires most as his wife. The very title of Malory's work, *Le Morte Darthur*, identifies Arthur's centrality in the text, but more so, favours his death over his life. Lives are for saints, it seems; 'Deaths' for historical worthies, generically. In this sense, the title of the work, while focused on the king, shows the limits of patriarchal authority as it narrates its demise – an end directly influenced by the female presence in the text and by the dangers of desire, through Lancelot and Guinevere, and Arthur's own lust which led to the conception of Mordred, at whose hand the king eventually meets his end. Once again, romance begins and ends with women.

Women in Malory's *Morte Darthur* may be loved, admired, and respected, and exert a positive (and usually subtle) authority in this case. They may be openly

manipulative and deceptive, exploiting their sexuality in order to exert physical and emotional control over knights who may be susceptible in their desire. While this obviously reflects negatively on both parties involved, in terms of malicious intention and weakness of character, respectively, such manipulation holds a further threat, in that a chivalric knight's chastity is an integral part of his character; to have this damaged or destroyed results in a knight left without purpose or ability to fulfil his course. On the whole, the protection of female purity, in both a physical and a moral sense, is a principal element of the subsequent preservation of the more widespread values and virtues of Arthurian chivalric society. As these knights stray from the rules established in the Pentecostal Oath, particularly with regard to the treatment of the female, social order and the court's functionality analogously begins to falter and fail. It becomes evident, therefore, that female authority in the world of medieval English romance, and Malory's narrative in particular, though often displaced, is in actuality far more influential than it may initially appear to be, where the balance of power is not always as direct or uncomplicated as it may appear. In essence, "[w]hat women want is not an insignificant issue, and feminine desires often propel these narratives so that the notion that women are merely the passive objects of male desire is highly questionable" (Charbonneau and Cromwell 100).

Chapters Four and Five of this study have demonstrated the fact that, in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, feminine control is most effectively asserted through emotional or sexual manipulation, while physical influence is once again brought to bear through the exploitation of the body for the purposes of gratification and desire. Lancelot, Arthur, and Merlin all falter in the face of femininity. Lancelot's love for Guinevere, for example, is such that he idealises his joy in their love even in his sleep: "in his slepe he talked and claterde as a jay of the love that had bene

betwyxte quene Gwenyver and hym" (II.805.15-17). It is the intensity of this love, however, that betrays the king, prompts the downfall of Arthurian society, and provides Elaine with the means to seduce Lancelot herself, triggering his own personal devastation. As such, the feminine, as embodied by Guinevere here, asserts a powerful element of social control belying female social constraint.

Guinevere's narrative presence is a significant one, and her authority becomes progressively diminished as the narrative advances and as the male world collapses. In the beginning, she is a figure of beauty and desirability, as Arthur determines to make her his wife at any cost, despite the fact that Merlin has warned him of the consequences. Lancelot's devotion follows Arthur's, as the knight betrays his king and his code for the love of Guinevere, and suffers for it. However, upon Lancelot's return to civilisation, a role reversal of sorts occurs as the dynamic of this relationship undergoes a shift; regretful of her previous actions, Lancelot's return sees Guinevere become far more reliant on her lover's attentions. In a departure from her autonomous allure, she is now possessive and under intense emotional strain; for example, she weeps upon the discovery that Lancelot "had many resortis of ladyes and damesels which dayly resorted unto hym, that besought hym to be their champion" (II.1045.22-24), a display of distress that mirrors Lancelot's previous pain, at her own hand. She banishes him once more in this fit of pique, but in stark contrast to his earlier torment, he now feels a "grete hevynes" (II.1047.10), yet retains his dignity and sense of self. Here, Lancelot has regained control of the relationship that once controlled him. Similarly, Arthur, who valued his acquisition of Guinevere above all else at the beginning of their relationship, dismisses her loss as trivial when compared to the loss of his knight, following his discovery of their adultery. The queen's fall from grace, and corresponding loss of authority and control, is absolute, as the men by whom she was once revered both eventually

prioritise masculine loyalty over desire for a woman.

Guinevere, as queen and lover, is undoubtedly one of the most significant female figures in the narrative; she "is allowed to have some drawing power independent of her role as Arthur's wife and Lancelot's lady" (Lambert 168), yet this position of authority fluctuates throughout her narrative journey, most evidently so in accordance with the successes and failures of her romantic positioning, in relation to both her husband and her lover. Acknowledged as both "a destroyer of good knyghtes" (II.1054.7) and "a maynteyner of good knyghtes" (II.1054.8-9), Guinevere's descent from her position of relative authority is, equally, concurrent with the decline of the Round Table court. Gawain argues that Guinevere acts "for goodnes and for none evyll" (III.1175.7), with the caveat that "oftyntymys we do many thynges that we wene for the beste be, and yet peradventure hit turnyth to the warste" (III.1175.12-14); Guinevere has acted in misguided love, yet the consequences have been severe. As Arthurian society ceases to function, both Arthur and Lancelot reassert masculine dominance, prioritising politics over romance. This is evident in Arthur's observation that his queen was of less value than his most respected knight (III.1184.1-5), while Lancelot rebuilds his sense of self and reinforces his strength of character as he reinstates his masculinity.

Not only is Guinevere effectively dismissed by these men, she also comes under attack from women – from Morgan le Fay, who endeavours to reveal the reality of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair to Arthur and to the public through the employment of the decorated shield, depicting the three in a parody of their relationship. This strategy fails in its intended purpose, as Arthur does not acknowledge the meaning behind the picture, but the sole person to successfully deconstruct the veiled reference to the affair is Guinevere. Here, one woman attempts to manipulate the fates of the main male protagonists in the text, and fails

to do so, yet the only person to recognise the complexity of this plot is another female. It is an accolade to the female intelligence that only Guinevere "demed as hit was" (II.557.28) and can see the truth of the meaning of the three symbols on the shield, while the men remain oblivious (II.557.28-29). This testament to female wit and capability, however, is lost in the undesirable nature of its circumstances: one woman intends to wreak havoc on society, while the other is an antagonist of a different kind, as she indirectly contributes to this social chaos by being unfaithful to her husband and her king. Both women are admirable for their autonomous abilities, yet it is the way in which these abilities are exploited that removes any sense of worth from their presence. Essentially, Guinevere is a dominant character within the confines of the culture in which she lives; a queen, a lover, and a woman, she is simultaneously constrained as she exerts her autonomous authority. In this way, *Le Morte* is as much the Death of Guinevere as it is Arthur, as the romance begins and ends with her.

Evidently, Malory views women as being an essential component in the very existence of the chivalric world, yet as paradoxically acting as a threat to the effective dynamic of this world, as femininity poses a number of hazards to the survival of the patriarchal culture in the various guises of lover, ruler, victim, and enchantress. Helen Cooper observes,

> Women [...] play a crucial role in his work. Without Igraine, Dame Lyonesse, Guenivere, Isode, or Elaine the mother of Galahad, almost none of the events of the *Morte Darthur* would happen. Most of them, moreover, are active agents, not more passive damosels: Isode falls in love with Tristram before he does with her, and later travels in his company almost as a fellow-knight; Elaine has to scheme to get her man; Guenivere controls Lancelot's passion for her for better or for worse.

(Introduction to *Le Morte Darthur* xviii)

In his *Morte Darthur*, Malory presents the female as being a fundamental threat to the successful execution of masculine authority, while simultaneously acting as a means by which these same men construct and assert their patriarchal power.

"The ultimate failure of the Arthurian ideal presented in the last Tales in the *Morte Darthur* presents a contrast to the ideal court depicted at the beginning of the work" (Radulescu, *The Gentry Context* 1); the fall of the Arthurian court is almost spectacular in its absolute collapse. As Guerin observes in "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution", "[t]he Round Table society is magnificent in failure, for it helps many of its members to reach their ultimate goal, and its aspiration stands – somewhat ironically – as a monument to the great potential in every man: his ability to desire and to seek perfection" (271). The narrative of *Le Morte Darthur* acts as a documentary of this quest for perfection, chivalric idealism in a courtly society. This quest is both aided by the feminine, as a female presence is necessary for the chivalric knight to demonstrate his capabilities as such, yet at the same time, it is unequivocally impeded by female influence, both directly, at the hand of the manipulative female with malicious intention, and more indirectly, in terms of male desire for physical gratification. The patriarchal rule of the court, in all of its earthly glory, is devastated, yet the possibility of spiritual salvation remains, providing some element of hope despite the enormity of the scale of social destruction. The spiritual hope, however, remains geared toward male prominence and the continued masculine reign; while the protagonists of Arthur's court and Malory's narrative are dead, the manner of their deaths reinforces masculine supremacy once more. Guinevere, as discussed, is passive in death, remembered by Lancelot, and, while mourned for her beauty, grace, and femininity, is nonetheless a mere memory, presented by a male without any form of

autonomous presence.

Is it the case, then, that if a woman is to possess any sort of power in Malory's Arthurian world, that this authority will largely take the form of a negative or destructive influence, as opposed to proving to be a positive contribution to chivalric society? For the most part, it appears as if this is true. Saunders, in *Magic and the Supernatural*, writes that "[r]omance provides a canvas for the battle between good and evil, which is enacted in the most dramatic and material ways, and often written on the body itself, in monstrosity, transformation, illness, healing and perfection" (233). However, it is not necessarily such a simple concept; while a number of female characters in Malory's *Morte Darthur* do appear to be genuinely malevolent, acting on purely cruel motivations, not all of the women in the text who ascertain their autonomous presence are necessarily bad. While they undertake actions which can result in devastating consequences, this does not always come from the desire to cause harm to an individual or to society as a whole. Nenyve's thirst for knowledge prompted her manipulation of Merlin and his subsequent entrapment; however, Nenyve herself also used this knowledge and magical skill, gained from Merlin, to protect Arthur and save his life on more than one occasion. Guinevere betrayed her husband and embarked upon a physical relationship with another man, yet she did so because she sincerely loved Lancelot. Elaine drove Lancelot to the brink of insanity, and pushed him over the edge, but again, this is because she believed that she loved him, not from a malicious intention to cause him harm. It appears that, as is often the case for men, desire is all-encompassing; for these women in particular, it seems that it becomes impossible to see past the limitations of this desire. They become blinded by it, and equally blind to the potential consequences of their actions.

It appears that for a woman to appear to claim any sort of authority in this patriarchal society, her influence must be negative in order for it to be noticed. This model is most prominent in a literary context of saints' lives, which have largely not been considered in the scope of this work; however, their language and postures are presented through Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, in part, and to an extent, through Perceval's sister, who is quasi-saint-like in her circumstance. She appears to be active in her behaviours; however, it still remains that hers is a decision prompted by society, and her admirable intentions left her dead. There are women in Malory's narrative who are caring, nurturing individuals, acting within the confines of their society, but it seems that, in order to appear authoritative or powerful, they must break beyond social restrictions, and this will generally be to the detriment of a man, or this masculine society as a whole. "Sexuality was a given of created beings: it was how you used it that mattered" (Cooper, *Christianity and Romance* xxi); essentially, these women are not all necessarily bad, but the exertion of power or control in this patriarchal culture demands a certain amount of rebellion towards that masculine dominance, and that in itself will often be presented as a negative element.

Cadden writes that "[t]he conceptual and social dependence of the female on the male and the woman on the man does not make medieval distinctions of sex and gender superficial; indeed, it *is* one of the important distinctions", bearing in mind that, "the definition of the feminine in terms of the masculine was not all-encompassing" (281). This study reinforces the implications of such a distinction, while placing Malory's manipulation of this in the wider context of the female voices of his time. While this study provides a widely-encompassing discussion of the female in context in the particularised roles of lover, victim, temptress, and ruler, further scope for exploration exists in the more specified exploration of women in

various other aspects incorporating feminine authority. Within the reach of this work, it is sufficient to conclude that the narrative fate of the great romantic hero is influenced by the feminine in one of a variety of ways. From the evolution of the romance text itself, to the content of these tales, the female is unequivocally a driving force in the world of medieval romance literature – however, within the narrative world, she is simultaneously the force of destruction who triggers the collapse of that which she has created. Just as the chivalric knight must protect the vulnerable female from the threat which is generated by male existence, women are analogously the catalyst for the collapse of the romance worlds they engender. Ultimately, that which is presented as the submissive, subservient female is in fact the beginning and ending of romance.

The scope for comparison within the annals of medieval English romance is vast, and so the texts discussed here have been selected due to their complimentary nature with Malory's *Morte Darthur*, or because they form relevant points of contrast in their treatment of the female. For example, while *Havelok* is a tale of heroic endeavour rather than chivalric enlightenment, as a precursor to Malory it provides models of female portrayal, perception, and influence, which all contribute to literary consciousness of Malory's audiences, and they way in which whey would have received his text as a result of the conditioning of its predecessors. The inclusion of Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, similarly, may not be the most obvious points of comparison for Malory, yet the direct authoritative female voice, in a real context, offers a relevant comparison with those imagined voices in the narrative of romance (while there are some resonances between both the real and the imagined, as in the case of Perceval's sister). This study has taken those influences and models, in a reading which aims to provide a comprehensive sense of

both the discord and harmony of these female voices in an age defined by a patriarchal, and often misogynistic, belief system.

While previous readings of Malory's text have highlighted many and varying aspects of the portrayal of women in both the real and imagined worlds of medieval England, as indicated throughout this work, this study presents the idea of female autonomy and authority in a new context of these different voices, with the focus on the paradox outlined by the conferring of power on the female through vulnerability. There remains further scope for analysis and comparison in the popular medieval romances; this study provides a comprehensive exploration of Malory in the context of models of female authority, autonomy, and influence, in both the imagined world of the narrative and the actual world of the audience.

The portrayal of women in medieval patriarchy resonates with and is representative of a social consciousness incorporating authorial intention and intended audience in its depiction of "all good ladyes and jantyllwomen" (I.161.36; 162.1). Women of consequence in Malory's text are largely depicted as being destructive in their influence, yet the very force of this influence and its consequential effect on society in general awards a substantial sense of autonomy to the depiction of the power of women in the narrative as a whole. In their relative roles of lover, ruler, victim, and temptress, the female occupies a definitive social space, yet these roles, for all of their defined expectations, often blend and amalgamate with one another so that any one woman proves to be more than she appears, with a depth of character that may be powerful in its complexity. Essentially, "the definitions and properties of female and male represented a principle which, at least partly, ordered the world" (Cadden 281). The women discussed here are often socially invalidated by male superiority, in keeping with the

accepted patriarchal dominance of medieval culture; nevertheless, it remains that "[k]nights are inspired by ladies and are prepared to die for ladies" (G. Morgan, "Medieval Misogyny" 266). This study evidences the subtle autonomy of the female in medieval literature, and the authority which may be underestimated by virtue of its feminine shape as the female proves to make a substantial and compelling contribution to medieval literature, and in particular, to Arthurian society in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

EETS:	The Early English Text Society
ELH:	English Literary History
OS:	Original Series
PMLA:	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
TEAMS:	The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages

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