

## ABSTRACT

Characterizing Action: Sir Thomas Malory's Development  
of Character in *Le Morte Darthur*

Amanda Leigh Keys, M.A.

Thesis Advisor: D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., Ph.D.

Sir Thomas Malory too often is considered to be a redactor of other tellings of the Arthuriad, uninterested in developing characters and overly invested in narrating action scenes in *Le Morte Darthur*. This thesis brings together analysis of various characters in the *Morte*, with emphasis on Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot, toward the argument that Malory in fact creates his characters through their actions with a specific vision for the conclusion of his unique Arthuriad.

Characterizing Action: Sir Thomas Malory's Development  
of Character in *Le Morte Darthur*

by

Amanda Leigh Keys, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

---

Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

---

D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

---

Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D.

---

Beth Allison Barr, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
August 2009

---

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Copyright © 2009 by Amanda Leigh Keys

All rights reserved

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	v
CHAPTER ONE	1
Introduction	1
CHAPTER TWO	6
Malorian Characters of Action	6
Maintaining a Round Table Balancing Act	
CHAPTER THREE	30
Malorian Women and Their Conflicts	30
More than Pawns in King Arthur's Court	
CHAPTER FOUR	53
Desperately Seeking Dinadan	53
Understanding Malory's Use of an Unconventional Knight	
CHAPTER FIVE	72
Malory Does "A New Thing" with the Deaths of Arthur, Launcelot, and Guinevere: Remembering To Move Forward	72
CHAPTER SIX	86
Conclusion	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY	88

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Dr. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., for his guidance in the development of this thesis. I also would like to thank my other committee members, Dianna Vitanza and Beth Allison Barr, for their time and contributions to this thesis. I appreciate Baylor University's financial assistance, allowing me to study for my master's degree; an especial thanks goes to my colleagues in University Development for their willingness to work with me as I pursued my studies. Last but not least, thank you to family and friends who have inspired and supported me throughout this process.

## DEDICATION

To my parents, Dennis and Kathleen Keys

I could not have done this without you.  
Thank you for your inspiration and encouragement.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Henry VII of England named his eldest son Arthur in an attempt to align the fledgling Tudor dynasty with the power of King Arthur's realm. During World War II, the legend of Arthur's unwavering resistance of invaders struck an inspirational chord in Britain. Inspired by a song from the musical, "Camelot," the "brief shining moment" of John F. Kennedy's presidency in the United States came to be known as Camelot. And on a more recent and personal note, my uncle resisted going on a trip to France because the country is Launcelot's native land, and he felt Launcelot was completely to blame for the downfall of King Arthur's kingdom. The story of King Arthur and the Round Table, of Launcelot and Guinevere's love affair, of the near-perfection Camelot attained—these permeate Western culture and have the power to inspire great emotion. Something about these characters and their dilemmas resonate with readers, particularly, after Sir Thomas Malory's first manuscript embodying the legend of *Le Morte Darthur* appeared in the late fifteenth century.

However, Malory's skill as a developer of character has been called into question. Jill Mann's comments in her essay on "Knightly Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*" offer some key terms for my argument:

"Although Malory is a master in conveying human emotion, and at catching the rhythms of human speech, terse or plangent, dignified or touching, he seems to have little interest in 'character', in the web of emotions and motives that lie behind human speech and action. . . . What modern Malory criticism needs to do—and has to some extent begun to do—is to work out a critical vocabulary and a way of reading that is appropriate for the structure and nature of his particular kind of narrative.

We could begin, in my view, by banishing from this critical vocabulary the word 'character' as inappropriate to his representation of human figures." (Mann 331-32)

In this introduction to an otherwise instructive essay, Mann asks her readers to disregard the notion of "character" when considering the entities who populate Camelot, saying that the critical notion of "character" is not present in Malory's world. Indeed, Malory does have little interest in explicit characterization, for he seldom openly intrudes into his work to tell his reader of the inner workings of his mind or that of his characters. Yet Uri Margolin's definition of character extends the possibility of different methods of working out characterization: "'Character' in the everyday sense refers to one segment of the mental dimension: enduring traits and dispositions to action, in a word, personality. But this is *never* the only aspect of a character's set of properties, and often is not even significant" (72-73). Margolin uses *Don Quixote* as his example, asserting, "Quixote's looks, behavior, and modes of communication, for example, are far more significant than any personality model one could attribute to him" (73). Miguel de Cervantes' and Malory's assessment of chivalry could not be more different, but Margolin's analysis of Cervantes' characterization techniques can be applied to Malory's work. Malory had a unique vision for his Arthuriad, and he uses action and dialogue to guide his readers into determining for themselves who his characters are and how they develop to serve Malory's purposes.

For, as Terence McCarthy notes, Malory "borrows and assembles in order to recreate, to give new form to old stories in a way that does full justice to what he sees as their true significance" (78). Just as Malory does not haphazardly choose the details he keeps, the descriptions he cuts, and the commentaries he adds to his plotline and action, he similarly is scrupulous in the development of



his significant characters. Readers are not immersed in the characters' innermost turmoil, yet they might wince with anticipation of the inevitable downfall; it is my experience that one does not have such a reaction when the composition of the text and its characters is not strong enough to inspire sympathy.

Anyone who doubts Malory's ability to provide "the web of emotions and motives that lie behind human speech and action," need only examine one of Malory's key additions to the *Arthuriad*, the May passage that precedes "The Knight of the Cart" episode. As Malory waxes poetic about "that lusty moneth of May" (Malory 649.1), immediately evident to the reader is Malory's gift for lyrical language: "For, lyke as trees and erbys burgenyth and florysshyth in May, in lyke wyse every lusty harte that ys ony maner of lover spryngith, burgenyth, buddyth, and florysshyth in lusty dedis" (Malory 648.39-41). Moreover, Malory's narratorial interjection gives readers insight into key philosophies of the story and the characters who act it out. First, remembrance: "for than all erbys and treys renewyth a man and woman, and in lyke wyse lovers callyth to their mynde olde jantylnes and olde servyse, and many kynde dedes that was forgotyn by neclygence (Malory 649.3-6). Malory calls his readers to value and lift up the good deeds and kindnesses done in the past, not to let the events of the present erase them; this act of remembrance will become particularly important as the *Morte* ends and characters sometimes make decisions that will emotionally and physically hurt others. Secondly, the matter of love: "lat every man of worshyp florysh hys herte in thys worlde: firste unto God, and nexte unto the joy of them that he promised hys feythe unto . . . And such love I calle vertuose love" (Malory 649.15-17, 20-21). Malory's male characters are called to love, but to remember their priorities: God first, and then the lady to whom you are

pledged; again, this is important to Malory's vision for the conclusion of his Arthuriad.

Finally, Malory brings remembrance and love together and offers a key character as a role model: "And therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre remembraunce the monethe of May, lyke as ded quene Gwennyver, for whom I make here a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (Malory 649.32-35). Here Malory spells out what already is implied in his development of Guinevere's character through her actions; his commentary also can be applied to Arthur and Launcelot, as I argue in this thesis. They are called to act based upon their remembrance of glorious deeds and glorious love accomplished by the knights of the Round Table; therein are the emotions and motives that Mann does not find. In effect, Malory's May passage is a gloss of the key themes and characteristics with which he imbues his story and his characters.

Having established that Malory is indeed capable of explicit characterization and providing his reader insight into the inner emotions of his characters, a reader must conclude that Malory predominantly chooses *not* to provide this information to his reader. Let us not forget that *Le Morte Darthur* is an action tale; of this there is no question. It is therefore appropriate that Malory's chosen characterization technique is, indeed, action, as accompanied by dialogue. For Malory, action is an indication of truth; how better, then, for him to establish the characters in his work? The saying goes that the eyes are the window into the soul; my thesis discusses Malory's execution of action as a window into character. In Chapter Two, I explore Malory's characterization of Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot as they attempt to balance the responsibilities

of being public and private figures. As these characters make choices and execute actions that often result in disastrous consequences, Malory navigates their development from shallow beginnings to fulfilled denouements. Chapter Three addresses conflicts between some of Malory's female characters and the way in which these parallel Arthur and Launcelot's dispute. Malory departs from his sources often where his female characters are concerned, and his interjection and expansion of a few key scenes thus sheds light not only on Malory's development of these women but also on his development of his central male characters. Dinadan, the unconventional knight of the Round Table, is the subject of Chapter Four. I devote a chapter to him because Dinadan, as a relatively minor character, has the freedom to surprise his fellow characters as well as readers with his ideas; his words and actions reveal not only his own character but also signal Malory's interrogation of an alternative way to the life of the characters who inhabit the *Morte*. Chapter Five follows the story to Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot's final and greatest actions: their deaths. Malory reworks his sources to create his own vision of the ending of *Le Morte Darthur*, for in their deaths, Malory's central characters forge new paths. By bringing an assortment of characters together in one study, with emphasis on Arthur, Launcelot, and Guinevere, I show that Sir Thomas Malory is indeed more than a redactor of other works, but is rather a gifted writer who attentively develops his characters toward his carefully constructed conclusion.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Malorian Characters of Action Maintaining a Round Table Balancing Act

A modern reader might say Sir Thomas Malory cut to the chase—sometimes literally—when redacting his various sources into *Le Morte Darthur*. While reading the *Morte*, all one initially might notice are the action scenes—the jousts, the tournaments, the quests. In particular a reader might observe instances in which the characters seem to miscalculate their actions for the given situation; Malory’s authorial skill in characterization is particularly evident in these passages. At the heart of Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot’s troubles is the collision of private- and public-sphere responsibilities. Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot have public political duties, as king, queen, and knight of the Round Table. They all also have private chivalric responsibilities to spouses, loves, and comrades. Unfortunately, these responsibilities are sometimes at odds, demanding different actions from their public personalities and their private personalities. Often these characters overstep or underestimate the necessary actions when trying to address these responsibilities; they thus lay the groundwork for public and private upheaval in the final sections of the *Morte*. In narrating these disastrous choices and actions by Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot that transgress in the public sphere of Camelot, Malory’s end result is a profound understanding of the dilemmas the main characters of the *Morte* face and of how these challenges and difficult choices shape Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot into the characters they become at the story’s conclusion.

To begin my argument, I first must establish my usage of the term, “private and public spheres.” Rather than speaking of physical public and private spaces—a dichotomy that historians note did not fully take shape until the nineteenth century—I use this vocabulary to delineate the familial and political worlds in which Malory’s characters live. Certainly physical space is very important to the *Morte*; Elizabeth Edwards’ essay on “The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*” is an excellent discussion of the geographical and geometrical positioning of women in Malory’s tale. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I explore “public” and “private” on a more abstract plane, examining the attempts of Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot to balance the demands of their “public”—the citizens of the Round Table and Camelot—with the demands of their private relationships among family and friends.

Arthur is the first of the triad whom readers meet, and the first to make unfortunate decisions; as such, it seems appropriate to start with him. Although I argue that Arthur is a worthy king whose actions are meant to save the kingdom, I admit that when I first began work on this study, I, like other scholars, was prepared to condemn Malory’s Arthur for his seeming inactivity and for weakness of character. After all, he is more than a knight—he is a knight and a king. As king, he certainly has the power to act and to tell others how to act; as a knight, he should be eager to do so. According to Jill Mann, in Malory’s version of the Arthurian world knights are expected to dedicate, even to submit, their lives to chance and adventure (Mann 333). She asserts: “the knight’s most characteristic activity is within the physical sphere, in physical combat, often undertaken for its own sake” (331). A knight who fails to act is indeed a failure. How much more, then, can the reader expect a knightly king to act? However, I

contend that Arthur has problems not because he fails to act, not because his character is lacking in strength, but because he cannot fully counterbalance the conflicting demands of his public and private lives.

Indeed, to use Mann's terms, Arthur is not a failure of a knight at all: he does physically act as a knight should throughout the first fifth of the *Morte*. In the public sphere, he pulls the sword from the anvil (Malory 8.24-29),<sup>1</sup> and fights and wins against competing kings to prove his rightful kingship and to conquer lands (too many to cite specifically); in the private sphere, he marries Guinevere (although the marriage has political ramifications, too). As befits a king, he also sets a code to guide others' actions, the Pentecostal Oath (Malory 75.36-76:2). However, Arthur does not always act properly. When Merlin prophesies the threat to Arthur's kingdom that Mordred, the product of Arthur's incestuous dalliance with Morgause, will bring about, Arthur takes the problem that started in the private sphere to the public arena. Rather than dispatching Mordred in a one-on-one setting, Arthur arranges the May Day massacre, sending all babies born on May Day to their death on a ship (Malory 37.10-22). Perhaps Arthur's choice of action foreshadows the increasing disruption that balancing public and private responsibilities will incite as the story progresses. Arthur believes he must eliminate Mordred, a product of a private sphere mistake, to benefit the public for which Arthur is responsible. As king, Arthur has the power to take drastic measures; however, his actions are more savage than they had to be. Certainly committing filicide can be condemned as barbaric; how much more, then, does Arthur open himself to judgment for killing the sons and daughters of

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2nd. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). All primary text citations are from this edition. Subsequent citations to the text will be made parenthetically.

the people he is charged to protect? Ironically, his efforts are fruitless, for Mordred survives, and, like his father, ends up being fostered until he is old enough to come to court (Malory 37.17-22). The actual goal is not achieved, yet Arthur's collateral damage is significant and hints at future miscalculations of action intended to save the kingdom from private sphere misdeeds.

Because of this scene and others, Beverly Kennedy, in her 1992 book, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, infers that the late fifteenth-century reader might not have thought highly of Arthur's kingly leadership, noting that he actually was not glorified until the Tudor dynasty (Kennedy *Knighthood* 7). Arthur responds to threats too harshly (decreeing the deaths of babies, ordering the execution of Guinevere, and failing to account for the political ramifications of Launcelot's chivalric obligation to rescue Guinevere) or not enough (by not asserting his power over his wife, knights, and kingdom). Such behavior does not exhibit strong leadership skills. In the massacre scene, Arthur intends to serve both public and private spheres—but his plan of action undermines the proper equilibrium of action. He is too active, making a choice that affects many to solve one private problem. Although Merlin predicts that Mordred will have a large public impact if allowed to survive, involving the public at this point was reckless and harmful. Arthur hurts his people in the name of saving them—an abuse and misuse of his kingly powers. Kennedy points out the similarities between Arthur and Tristram:

they are both Worshipful knights who modify their expression of the basic feudal virtues—courage, prowess and loyalty—to accord with their ambition and their prudence. . . . Their primary objective is to make a successful career in the world, . . . and in both cases this means that they may sometimes be disloyal to those to whom they are bound by feudal ties 174-75).

Arthur has a responsibility to his people, but he kills their babies. He has a responsibility to his wife, but he fails to intervene when Launcelot begins to woo her. Arthur even fails to save Guinevere when she needs him on her side in “The Poisoned Apple” episode. Her life is on the line, having been falsely accused of conspiring to kill Gawain and accidentally killing Patryse; the tensions within the Round Table fellowship are becoming more distinct, marking an unraveling kingdom (Malory 613.27-614: 25). Yet Arthur will not fight for his queen. After reprimanding Guinevere for her inability to keep Launcelot at her side, he coerces Bors into the task; Bors tells Launcelot of Guinevere’s peril and Launcelot fights for her honor (Malory 614.26-620: 7). Arthur primarily protects the *idea* of his kingdom, rather than protecting the people within it. He neglects to consider the personal aspect of his problems.

Thus far in my analysis, Arthur’s character does not seem stellar. Peter Korrel offers an interesting approach to understanding Malory’s development of his title character. Having observed Arthur’s sometimes-lecherous behavior in Malory’s sources, Korrel proposes that Malory’s attempts to suppress the lascivious side of Arthur unintentionally renders his High King a bit dim and weak of character (261). Korrel argues: “When one looks at the king’s real actions, one may wonder indeed how he ever got his splendid reputation, to which he never really lives up” (251). Certainly Arthur gets little sympathy from modern scholars for his (admittedly impotent) efforts to maintain order in the kingdom. Although action is required of King Arthur, the dilemma of balancing his public and private responsibilities occasionally seems to cloud his judgment skills in developing plans of action.



And then enters Launcelot, beginning Arthur's shift into a character accused by fellow characters and scholars alike of passivity. Launcelot first comes into Arthur's public sphere; the only consequence of this new knight to Arthur's level of activity is that Arthur has some well-qualified help in securing his empire. As Emperor Lucius and the Romans attempt to claim Arthur's land and Arthur fights back, Launcelot is very helpful, doing "so grete dedys of armys . . . that sir Cador and all the Romaynes had mervayle of his myght (Malory 129.43-44). We see greatness to come in this knight. However, for all the courageous deeds Launcelot commits to Arthur's cause, he is one of many who pledges himself and his men to Arthur (114-115), and Launcelot is one among many, including Arthur, in a company that Malory extols (in an editorial comment original to Malory): "Was never kyng nother knyghtes dud bettir syn God made the worlde" (Malory 132.36-37). Clearly Malory holds Arthur in high esteem, and Arthur continues to act, even after Launcelot ironically offers services "that shall never fayle you whyles oure lyves lastyth" (Malory 115.18-19). Arthur kills the Giant of St. Michael's Mount by himself (Malory 121.23-122:17) and, with the help of his armies and many heroic efforts by Launcelot, asserts himself emperor "THOROW DYGNYTE OF HIS HONDYS" (Malory 146.19)—through action, in other words, of *his* hands.

However, Arthur also begins the process of surrendering his own story in this section. Of course, this is in part due to Malory's redaction of and addition to the Arthuriad: as Mary E. Dichmann observes in her source studies, Malory departs from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* to enhance Launcelot's role in the "Emperor Lucius" portion of the story and reworks Arthur as a king more

distinguished for his self-control as a leader than for his courage in battle.<sup>2</sup> Immediately following the Roman tale comes “A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake,” of which Launcelot is obviously the key character; this marks a break in sequence from Malory’s French source, *La Mort le Roi Artu*. Launcelot continues to be a star player in the rest of the *Morte*, while Arthur retires to the background. *Le Morte Darthur* does not even conclude with the death of Arthur—the work goes on for another section, ending with the deaths of Guinevere, Launcelot, and the remnants of the Round Table fellowship, a point I will discuss in Chapter Five. For now, the point is this: Malory purposefully alters Arthur’s character, while he emphasizes Launcelot and his actions.

However, I earlier said that I am convinced of Arthur’s goodwill and integrity in his choices to maintain his public and private spheres, and I believe Malory intended his characters to see these traits in Arthur. Through exploration of the Arthur and Accolon battle (Malory 81-93), Kenneth Hodges makes a sound argument for the valor of Arthur’s actions and choices throughout the *Morte*. Hodges argues that, although Arthur fights on behalf of Damas, a traitorous brother, breaking the “no batayles in a wrongfull quarell” clause of the Pentecostal Oath, Arthur fights for the greater good of all the imprisoned knights

---

<sup>2</sup> Dichmann, 74-85. For example, Dichmann cites the addition of Launcelot in the first sentence of the section (Malory 113.1-5), and Malory’s elaboration of Launcelot’s role in the final battle with Lucius, in which “all seyde that hit sawe there was never knyght dud more worshyp in his dayes” (132.7-8); these were not present in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. As to Arthur, Malory curtails his role—yet maintains a sense of Arthur’s power—in the king’s responses both to the Roman ambassadors’ demand that he pay tribute (*Morte Arthure* 119.116-123, Malory 113.9-13) and to learning about the evil deeds of the Giant of St. Michael’s Mount (*Morte Arthure* 142.888-891, Malory 120.5-7). In combination with his concern for his knights’ welfare in battle (seen in several places in Malory), Malory’s Arthur is a contrast to the *Morte Arthure*’s Arthur, whose speech is given more to rage and less to empathy.

(Malory 75.43-44). The orchestrator of the battle, Morgan, working through Accolon, stands for a literal interpretation of the Pentecostal Oath—technically, Accolon *was* correct to fight for Outlake, the wronged brother. Later on, when Morgan tricks Tristan into using her shield illustrating Launcelot’s disloyalty to the kingdom, (Malory 340-44), Arthur *should* know about Guinevere and Launcelot’s affair. Putting aside the public humiliation that would come from finding out about a wife’s infidelity because of a stranger’s shield at a tournament, as well as Malory’s explanation that Morgan produces the shield because she is a woman scorned (Malory 340.32-39)—and this is a great deal to put aside—the argument can be made that Morgan is trying, in her own rough way, to help Arthur by opening his eyes to the unfaithfulness of those closest to him. However, Arthur’s greatest chivalric responsibility is to his kingdom (Hodges “Swords and Sorceresses” 79). It is difficult to be a king and husband and a friend. As we saw earlier in the May Day massacre scene, Arthur strives to put his kingdom first, to the point of trying to eliminate his own son; this time, in contrast to the massacre, he succeeds in aiding his people with the unfortunate Accolon being the only collateral damage. Nynyve, the “Damesel of the Lake” who often appears to assist Arthur, arrives and affirms Arthur’s choice by helping him to win the battle (Hodges 79).

Arguably, Arthur is successful in calculating the appropriate action to fight Accolon because the choice does not involve the ambiguities of managing his public and private spheres; the route to protecting his kingdom is therefore more straightforward. Arthur can make good choices when he does not have to weigh public- versus private-sphere responsibilities. As Kennedy observes (174-175), Arthur’s choices to set aside the guidelines of chivalry for his own purposes

can be seen throughout the text. Arthur does not set a good example of kingly behavior when he cuckolds King Lot, and his May Day massacre solution to the problem of the child begat by that ill-fated liaison does not improve his strength of character (Malory 27.35-44, 37.10-22). However, as the story, and his character, progresses, Arthur begins to break chivalric convention for the purposes of the kingdom, rather than for personal gain. He agrees to fight on Damas' side, the technically wrongful side, in the "Arthur and Accolon" battle, thus freeing himself and the other imprisoned knights (82.44-83.32). In the Tristram section, Arthur opts out of an *aventure* that Morgan and King Mark attempt to force upon him. Morgan and King Mark desire to force Launcelot and Guinevere's affair into the open, to force Arthur to punish those who have been unfaithful to him. Morgan tries first to expose Launcelot and Guinevere's affair by sending to Arthur's court a horn from which only faithful women can drink (270.6-16)—but Lamerok diverts it to King Mark's court; she then coerces Tristram into using her illustrated shield, which Arthur decides to ignore (Malory 342.27-343.33). King Mark sends letters to Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot, with Arthur's encouraging him to "entermete with himself and wyth hys wyff, and of his knyghtes, for he was able to rule his wyff and his knyghtes" (Malory 381.9-17). However, Arthur defers such a decision. Arthur does not passively let the world go by, watching himself become a cuckold. Rather, he actively chooses not to act: he considers Mark's letter, remembering his sister's similar warnings—but remembering also that she has not been a friend to him, nor to Launcelot and Guinevere—then decides to "put that all oute of his thought" (Malory 381.18-23). If this difficult decision does not exhibit strength of character, nothing does. The affair is not a well-kept secret, as exemplified in "A

Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake,” which I will discuss shortly. However, in order to maintain his kingdom, Arthur must show some hint of power over his private sphere; to acknowledge a cheating wife is to acknowledge a lack of control (Prendergast 313).

Indeed, even though the reader learns Arthur “had a demying of” Launcelot and Guinevere’s affair, he chooses not to “here thereof” because of Launcelot’s many acts of service to him and to Guinevere (Malory 674.37-41). Losing Launcelot would be to lose the greatest advocate of Arthur, and by proxy, the kingdom. Because his kingdom would suffer for Arthur’s knowledge of the unfaithfulness occurring between the two people closest to him, he chooses to ignore the affair. Arthur demonstrates strength of character as he chooses not to defend his own honor, deciding to preserve instead the name of his Round Table fellowship and of maintaining his good relationship with Launcelot.

As Korrel points out, Arthur sometimes seems rather dull-witted in acting out such decisions; however, Arthur chooses denial for a reason. To know would require action, and in Arthur’s attempts to preserve his marriage, his Round Table fellowship, and his kingdom, he cannot balance these public and private responsibilities adequately. Unfortunately, he cannot have it all. Arthur is a practical man, so he opts to value one slightly less than the others; the one he elects to place on the bottom rung of the ladder is his marriage, his private life. Adultery, rampant throughout the *Morte*, is not the primary threat—but losing the Round Table fellowship is dangerous to the stability of the kingdom. Courtly love is valuable to Arthurian society, but it does not keep them safe as knights can, and it cannot bring them God’s glory through quests for the Sankgreal. However, his choice not to act to save his marriage ultimately cannot save

Arthur; his under-response backfires. It is because he loses control of his private sphere that he loses control of everything. All aspects of this Round Table balancing act are crucial, and when one table leg comes up short, that one detail compromises the entire situation. Because the problems of Arthur's private sphere intrude upon his public sphere, unity and balance are subverted. This table cannot stand.

Indeed, despite Guinevere's initial passivity, her role in the collapse of the kingdom is significant, particularly in her character's transition from passivity to action—from a near lack of character to a forceful character. Guinevere enters the story almost as an object: she and the Round Table come together as a set (Malory 60.15-16). Carol Hart notes that Guinevere does take on the important role of judging knightly behavior after their quests (6); however, she lacks any real authority—she cannot banish a knight for poor behavior, for example, and she cannot prevent Launcelot's attentions. (At least she does not at this early date in the story. She does embrace her power and sends Launcelot away in "The Poisoned Apple" [Malory 612.19-25] and "The Fair Maid of Astolat" [Malory 622.12-26] sections, although her authority backfires on her in both instances.) Throughout "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake," Launcelot consistently sends the losers of his battles to no one but "my lady, quene Gwennyver." While serving Guinevere, his queen, is entirely appropriate, Launcelot already must deny many accusations that his motives for his loyalty to Guinevere have nothing to do with Arthur: everybody knows that he loves Guinevere. The narrator tells us at the section's beginning:

Wherefore quene Gwennyvere 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 (Malory 149.12-15).

Already the narrator hints at how this love will end. Just one page earlier, Arthur had won the emperorship “THOROW DYGNYTE OF HIS HONDYS” (146.19). Now the reader learns that Launcelot will save Guinevere “thorow his noble chevalry.” The course is set: Arthur will try (and fail) to uphold his public sphere, the kingdom, although he will abandon until the end using his “hondys” to do so; Launcelot will try (and fail) to uphold his private sphere, his love for Guinevere, through chivalry. I will explore Launcelot’s role more fully later in the chapter. To return to Guinevere, the reader must understand that, by courtly guidelines, she had to accept Launcelot’s “many dedys of armys.” However, in the subtext of her accepting these favors, Guinevere passively accepts the courtship.

Part of Guinevere’s dilemma in balancing her public and private responsibilities is her lack of agency within her feminine roles as queen and wife. Because she is the queen, she has to accept favors from the Round Table knights. However, Launcelot’s special attention to her is evident to the kingdom, inciting rumors about her fidelity to Arthur. By the rules of chivalry, she behaves properly: she allows knights to do good deeds in her name and judges the behavior of knights that Launcelot sends back to her. On the other hand, where politics are concerned, she opens her husband, the king, to defamation,<sup>3</sup> thus undermining not only her marriage but also the kingdom.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Malory 622.3-7, when people are gossiping that Guinevere chose to stay behind from the tournament because Launcelot already had bowed out, rendering the king “hevy and passynge wroth.”

Guinevere is caught at an intersection in which the public and private spheres are blurred. Her private life should include only Arthur; however, Launcelot, a knight who should be part of her public life only, inserts himself into the private sphere through his abundance of attention. To confuse matters even more, chivalry governs both private and public actions, dictating proper behavior both for quests and for the bedchamber—but often in conflicting ways. That their love is “trew” leaves Guinevere and Launcelot no choice but to pursue it wholeheartedly (Waldron 60). However, by chivalric guidelines and law, cheating on the king is treason, a crime not only against the private but also the public sphere. Sarah J. Hill asserts that Guinevere’s character is pulled in opposing directions by Christian morality and the chivalric code: her “trew” love for a worshipful knight such as Launcelot is acceptable, even expected, by chivalry—but it is a sin to the church (Hill 267). I extend Hill’s point: not only does Christianity pull Guinevere in an opposite direction than does chivalry, but the conflicting guidelines of chivalry point Guinevere in opposing directions. If Guinevere rejects Launcelot, she rejects chivalric love and the ideals of Camelot, but by embracing chivalric love, she rejects Arthur and commits treason. For an initially flat character, Guinevere’s problems certainly have many dimensions, and she will have to develop some of her own to handle them.

Launcelot and Guinevere do try to maintain a balance in favor of the demands of the public sphere, choosing at first not to act on their love: their relationship remains chaste for a long time, per Malory’s redaction of the story. However, their (relative) faithfulness to Arthur is not for Launcelot’s lack of trying to consummate the relationship in the Tristram section. Because Launcelot thinks Elaine is Guinevere, he willingly goes to Elaine’s bed, only to



realize his mistake the following morning (Malory 479.35-480.30). The introduction of Elaine pushes Guinevere from passivity to action. In fact, we see that when provoked, Guinevere crosses all the way over to desperate action, much like Arthur in his massacre of innocents. As Guinevere leaps into action, the reader finally sees her emotional side, her personality—and because it is a most challenging situation, we perhaps do not see her best side. Threatened by Elaine and Launcelot's conception of Galahad and understanding Elaine to be a competitor for Launcelot's affections, Guinevere eschews her roles as wife and queen and invites Launcelot to her bed. Of course, he repeats his prior mistake and goes to the wrong bed (Malory 486.40-487.25). Now Guinevere is upset, and Launcelot flees, a wild man whom they will not see again for two years (Malory 487.23-487.38). Once he regains his senses, Launcelot returns, but Guinevere's actions begin to stretch her boundaries further and further: she becomes jealous and sends him away, only to need his knightly services in "The Poisoned Apple" (Malory 612.19-25, 615.32-34); she makes him wear her token in "The Great Tournament" (Malory 642.35-40); and she finally consummates the relationship in "The Knight of the Cart" (Malory 657.20-42).

After Elaine, nothing is ever the same for Launcelot and Guinevere. In a sense, Elaine—with her presence at Camelot and her preceding tryst with Launcelot—is the catalyst that brings them together; in so doing, Elaine also precipitates the fall of their relationship and, therefore, the fall of the Round Table (Sklar 67). As Dorsey Armstrong notes, women do not have to swear an oath in the *Morte*; they therefore are free to act as they will (Armstrong "Script/Print" 141). Elaine's actions are guided first by a prophecy that she will conceive Galahad with Launcelot (Malory 479.26-32), and then by her love for

Launcelot (Malory 486.4-6), not by the guidelines of chivalry. She thus instigates Guinevere's jealousy, bringing out the rash side of the queen, the side of Guinevere that acts for her own pleasure without considering the political ramifications or the public sphere. Guinevere's self-service culminates when she calls Launcelot to her chamber, even when murmurs are in the air that a coup is about to take place. As Elaine's unregulated action pushes Guinevere into equally unhindered action, both become threats to the security of the Round Table. Guinevere gives up trying to balance the public and private spheres, to be a queen, a wife, and a lover. Trying to manage the conflicting demands of both was not serving her very well, and so she opts to choose one: she lives in her newly defined private sphere, that of Launcelot's lover. Like Arthur, Guinevere sacrifices two-thirds of her responsibilities; like Arthur, Guinevere loses much not only for herself but also for the kingdom.

After the damage to the Round Table has been done, Guinevere continues to act, but now tries to redeem herself in the public sphere. When Mordred attempts to depose Arthur and to marry her, she takes command of the Tower of London and "answerd hym shortely, opynly and pryvayly, that she had levir sle herself than to be maryed with hym" (Malory 708.21-23). The Guinevere who previously acted primarily in a passive sense, merely judging those whom others sent before her at the court, now literally rallies the troops and takes responsibility for her destiny. Her stronger side resurfaces, for her actions here may remind the reader of "The War with the Five Kings," an early hint at Guinevere's capacity for action, before her conflicting responsibilities stifle that capacity. In that episode, Guinevere, having already agreed to accompany

Arthur to battle, has a choice of actions when faced with fording a turbulent river:

“Now may ye chose,” seyde kynge Arthure, “whethir ye woll abyde and take the adventure on this side, for and ye be takyn they wol sle you.”  
“Yet were me lever to dey in this water than to falle in youre enemyes handis,” seyde the quene, “and there to be slayne” (Malory 78.31-36).

Guinevere opts for action that might be her death in lieu of waiting passively for her fate. As was the case for Arthur, Guinevere’s choice between action and inaction is simpler when not complicated by conflicting public and private spheres. At this point, Guinevere’s public and private spheres are perfectly aligned: dying at the hands of Arthur’s enemies would be hurtful to him both as a king and a husband. She can fulfill her role as a wife and queen by courageously following his lead. She acts honorably, unhampered by the confusion that Launcelot will bring into her life.

Perhaps, in holding forth from the Tower of London, refusing to further cuckold Arthur or to agree to a marriage that would most certainly undermine Arthur’s already damaged kingship, Guinevere attempts to take back some of her own honor and worship. She now recognizes that sacrificing both her roles as queen and wife was too much. Having now lost the final third of her persona—that of Launcelot’s lover—she reclaims public responsibility as queen and private responsibility as Arthur’s wife. Here, Guinevere does not interact with her world passively, nor does she over-act. Guinevere found agency when she chose to pursue Launcelot; she now applies that agency for the good of Arthur. When Mordred threatens to intrude upon her private sphere, Guinevere acts in a way that sacrifices neither private nor public integrity but is well

calculated and effective. She can and does act in a way that defends Arthur's honor in the public sphere.

In the end, Guinevere makes another choice with her newfound freedom to act. She surrenders from the public sphere and from action—or does she? Guinevere commits herself to life in the completely private sphere of the convent, a world in which her future actions will have no bearing on any earthly king or kingdom. However, her sphere of influence is not yet extinguished: Launcelot seeks her out, ready to propose marriage. She refuses: ““Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne”” (Malory 720.15-17). There is no more Round Table, marriage, nor kingdom; Guinevere is therefore free to forfeit her public sphere to live completely in the private sphere, and without Launcelot. By Guinevere's choice not to act, she makes one of the greatest actions of all: to save her soul, and ultimately, Launcelot's, as he too retires to the contemplative life. She understands that even the world's greatest lovers cannot have a happy ending in this story: too much has been lost in the public sphere for the sake of their private love. Thomas L. Wright sums it up well: “what will endue the *Morte Darthur* with its tragic character is the sense of wasted potential; what will relieve it of mere futility is the idea, urged by Malory, that even in the smoke of ruin, the men and women understand what they have lost” (65). Guinevere understands the consequences of her choices to act; now she chooses not to act as her male lover asks, hoping to attain salvation. Her choice is well-reasoned and thoughtfully articulated and executed. Guinevere journeys all the way in

Malory's *Morte* from a passive being to a contemplative character who takes responsibility for herself.

However, Launcelot takes awhile to fully comprehend his role in the rise and fall of the kingdom. Launcelot's reputation precedes him wherever he goes: the whole of the kingdom and beyond knows he is the knight who has the most worship and prowess: "of the knyghthode of sir Launcelot hit were mervayle to telle. And of his bolde cosyns ar proved full noble knyghtes, but of wyse wytte and of grete strengthe of his ayge sir Launcelot hathe no felowe" (Malory 130.18-21). Launcelot proves himself in battle after battle, temptation after temptation. (Temptation, that is, on the part of various sorceresses and maidens who wish to lure him away from Guinevere. Of course Launcelot does not prove himself entirely immune to temptation when it comes to the matter of loving the king's wife.) He constantly participates in tournaments, woos Guinevere, overcomes magic, goes on quests, and even performs a miraculous healing. He seems to spend little time doing anything but acting; considering honestly the ramifications of his illicit affair with the wife of his comrade and king is quite low in his priorities.

However, for Launcelot, the problem of public and private spheres is particularly difficult. Janet Jesmok argues that Launcelot has something of an identity crisis: he, and everybody else, knows exactly who he is publicly: a great knight who loves Guinevere. Yet his private self is a mystery to all, including himself (Jesmok "Comedic Preludes" 27). Catherine Batt's application of Lacan's concept of "exculturation" bolsters this idea: "Launcelot is sometimes more reassuringly known 'in pieces' than as a 'whole' that would have to reconcile the conflicted claims on him" ("Narrative Form" 89). He cannot reconcile his role as

Arthur's best knight and fellow of the Round Table with his love for Arthur's queen and wife. While it is clear that he is a courageous man of integrity in battle, his private personality is something of a question mark . . . although the text uncomfortably hints at a covetous man who is willing to betray a friend.

However, action at first transcends the identity crisis for this knight. Launcelot knows he is a man of action, and in the public sphere he has little trouble with determining the right action. The private sphere is where he finds himself confused. He cannot possibly maintain both his service to Arthur and his love for Guinevere, but he really wants to maintain both relationships. He has some reason to believe he might be able to sustain both: after all, he partially achieves the Grail (Malory 596-97) and heals Sir Urry (Malory 668) when no one else can. Despite Launcelot's transgressions against Arthur, Launcelot still accomplishes much—God appears to be on his side. However, Aggravayne is not. Although Launcelot can manage to balance his relationships with Arthur and Guinevere so long as the affair remains secret—or at least unaddressed—the moment Aggravayne and Mordred force the private affair into the open, Launcelot's real troubles begin.

For it is the public concerns that complicate the issue of the private affair. Angela Gibson argues that Malory handles the disloyalty and sin of his favorite knight, Launcelot, by demonstrating throughout the *Morte* the dangers of knowing or revealing too much about others' private lives (64). For example, because Balyn proves to Garnysh that his lover is unfaithful, Garnysh kills her and the "fowlest knyghte," berates Balyn for revealing her secret, and then kills himself (Malory 55.14-35). Later, only King Mark condemns Tristram and Isode's adultery—the lovers are allowed, even encouraged, to have a private-

private life. In fact, Arthur himself is “passyng glad” that Isode comes to Joyous Gard with Tristram—he does not condemn their adultery (Malory 415.39). Yet I must point out that hiding identity or private life certainly does not always result in good things in the *Morte*. For example, Balyn and Balan commit fratricide when fighting in disguise (Malory 57). On the smaller scale, certainly Launcelot deserved a private life; a private life with the queen, however, creates a problem. It is perhaps because Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot are all worthy, mostly virtuous characters that their private transgressions matter so much and set the kingdom so off balance. In the case of Tristram and Isode, while their adultery is wrong, the reader knows King Mark cannot be trusted and largely deserves whatever ill treatment he receives. The people of Camelot, however, are just doing their best to do good. Despite their mistakes, they do not deserve to lose everything—but they do. Even if Malory does put the blame onto Aggravayne and Mordred for forcing the affair into the open (Malory 673-74), the private relationship of Launcelot and Guinevere is a key factor in the resulting collapse of the public kingdom.

In the bedchamber raid, Aggravayne and Mordred’s brainchild that publicly reveals Launcelot and Guinevere’s relationship, Launcelot does not get another miracle. He miscalculates his ability to maintain equilibrium in the kingdom: for once, this man of action cannot possibly act enough to make everything right. He fights his way out, swears to protect Guinevere, and finds his way into hiding. Launcelot fully comprehends his changed situation: “now wylle kyng Arthur ever be my foo. . . . the kyng woll in thys hete and malice jouge the quene unto brennyng, and that may nat I suffir that she shulde be brente for my sake” (Malory 678.16, 680.8-9). Launcelot, a chivalric knight and

faithful lover, has to save Guinevere, no matter what the cost, for he endangered her life when he entered into an affair with the queen. Now he, like Arthur in the May Day massacre, risks the public to correct a mistake made in the private sphere. Unlike Arthur's dilemma, the rules of chivalry demand Launcelot's action in this situation, and he has no control over the circumstances of Guinevere's rescue. He cannot advise Gareth and Gaherys to wear armor, nor can he prevent the violent melee that arises in his route to Guinevere and the stake. However, even if Launcelot's actions are justifiable in some ways, he neither can excuse himself for killing Gareth and Gaherys, nor for betraying Arthur and the fellowship. Although he does not over-respond in terms of chivalric love, he does over-respond in terms of the chivalric fellowship. As it turns out, Launcelot is only human, but he cannot forgive himself for making human mistakes. Action has failed him.

Launcelot thus becomes an inactive figure in the *Morte*. On evaluation of himself and his circumstances, he concludes that the best way to atone for his actions is inaction. He, the greatest knight in the world (at least in the secular world), at first refuses to fight Arthur in the several battles following his rescue of Guinevere. Although Launcelot has broken many chivalric codes, he is not prepared to do battle against the man who knighted him, his father in chivalry. He hopes that inaction somehow will save him. Indeed, deferring action has worked for Launcelot before: a reluctant Launcelot, disheartened by the Knight of the Cart incident, has to be forced to attempt to heal Sir Urry. Launcelot denies that he will be able to help: "'Jesu defende me,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'whyle so many noble kyngis and knyghtes have fayled, that I shulde presume upon me to enchyve that all ye, my lordis, might nat enchyve'" (Malory 667:38-



40). Launcelot protests a few more times before he accedes to Arthur's command and is successful. Now, Launcelot attempts to put off battle and tries to talk out his problems with Arthur and Gawain. When Launcelot finally agrees to do battle, he "charged all hys knyghtes in ony wyse to save kynge Arthure and sir Gawayne" (Malory 690.41-42); when Bors is prepared to kill Arthur, Launcelot protests: "'uppon payne of thy hede, that thou touch hym no more! For I woll never se that moste noble kynge that made me knyght nother slayne nor shamed'" (Malory 691.16-18). Although Launcelot could have allowed Arthur's death and conceivably claimed the kingdom for himself, the ties of the Round Table family prevent him from such action.

Indeed, Launcelot has never been seen to covet the material—he has only sought honor, and Guinevere. Even although Launcelot feels wronged by Arthur and Gawain's treatment of him, and he is confident of his knightly abilities, he chooses ineffective war strategy in lieu of the action that has always defined Launcelot's persona—he gives up the public sphere. Launcelot always has fought for the right side of the cause; now he is no longer certain on which side the right resides. Launcelot's complete retirement to a life of inaction, sacrificing his public identity for the monastic life, then follows logically, as he chooses to stop acting entirely. His character transforms from a courageously active man into a courageously contemplative man of God.

The stress of balancing public concerns with the private sphere is too much for Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot. Each character ends up sacrificing something, making choices at the expense of one or more of their responsibilities. Arthur in large part stops acting, both as knightly king and as husband, once Launcelot enters the scene. Arthur chooses the Round Table and his kingdom

over his other roles. Inversely, Guinevere *starts* acting, first as Launcelot's lover and later as queen, when Elaine intrudes on her life. To do so, Guinevere gives up her role as Arthur's wife. Launcelot, the consummate actor, sacrifices his active role as knight after all he treasures—his companionship with Arthur, the Round Table fellowship, and his relationship with Guinevere—has been lost. All three hope their balancing acts will maintain the glory of the Round Table; none can succeed, however, because they miscalculate the impact of their actions upon the public and private spheres.

However, while none of them can save the kingdom or the Round Table fellowship, they can save themselves in the end. Launcelot's actions get him nowhere in life, but the choice to stop acting (combined with Guinevere's rejection of his proposal) does lead to his salvation. Guinevere, who starts out passive, becomes active, which allows first for her reclaiming her queenship, then for her rejecting marriage to Launcelot. Only then can she attain her salvation. Arthur, after the unfruitful battle with Launcelot, recovers his active side when provoked by Mordred's attempted coup. He acts until the end, killing Mordred (Malory 714.4-13) and ordering Excalibur returned to the lake (715.5-12). True to his attempts at the *Morte's* beginning, Arthur miscalculates his efforts to save his kingdom from Mordred, and the decision to fight Mordred is his death. This time, however, without any private sphere complications to confuse the matter, Arthur succeeds in doing away with the threat. Perhaps to prove the valor of this final action, Arthur's ending is ambiguous, leaving open-ended the idea that he might return. However, he could not have attained that ending without acting against Mordred, and he thus reclaims his active, kingly *and* knightly character. As Batt noted, "In the *Morte*, the search for meaning often

depends more on the exigencies of the moment than on an all-encompassing moral prescription for human behavior" ("Merlin's Narratives" 54).

Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot's struggles with the public and private spheres confuse their efforts to save the kingdom, and so the ideal of the Round Table cannot be upheld. While it is too late for the kingdom, all three characters finally locate a saving balance. Each finds peace in his/her final role: Guinevere and Launcelot as private figures committed to God; Arthur as a public figure committed to his kingdom. They find personal harmony in their final choices, and peace in forming a character of which they could be proud. Their fellow *Morte* characters and modern scholars alike have condemned each for their choices and actions. However, each, in his or her own way, attempts to uphold the Round Table and the kingdom. Although they fail, the story, and the character, is in the trying.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Malorian Women and Their Conflicts More than Pawns in King Arthur's Court

Sir Thomas Malory was a man's man. Frequent "tracing and traversing" scenes betray his affection for action and fighting. Were he alive today, he would no doubt enjoy the plethora of action films Hollywood has so generously provided us. However, Malory's tales of jousting and swordplay have more to them than many current action movies. In the midst of the men's action, Malory interjects significant roles, beyond the damsel in distress, beyond his sources, for his female characters. Too often Arthurian women are considered less than three-dimensional characters, of being mere pawns in the courtly game. While it is true that women in Malory's world usually do not engage in hand-to-hand combat, they do not sit idly by. Dorsey Armstrong notes that "the women in the *Morte Darthur* are not compelled to swear an oath parallel to that of the knights; because their actions are never perceived as needing regulation, they have the potential to become the most dangerous and disruptive members of the community" (Armstrong "Script/Print Continuum" 141). Using the tools at their disposal, primarily wit and magic, these women contend with men and even with each other, promoting their own worship and/or the worship of the knights to whom they are loyal. A number of Malory's key female characters actively take matters of worship into their own hands, even when it means a battle, of sorts, with another woman. I argue that these scenes of women's conflicts demonstrate that Malory's women are not mere spectators, but offer, indirectly,

parallels to the conflict between Arthur and Launcelot. Using their action and dialogue, Malory sheds light on the intricacies of his female characters as well as on the characters of Arthur and Launcelot.

The conflicts on which I have chosen to focus feature Morgan le Fay versus Nynyve, Ettarde versus Nynyve (again), Lyonesse versus Lyonet, and Guinevere versus Elaine of Corbenic. A brief exploration of Mary Etta Scott and Maureen Fries' analyses of Malory's female characters provides a useful introduction to my argument. Scott classifies Malory's women into "the good, the bad, and the ugly": the good being the virginal women who serve as the damsels in distress and explicators of the knights' quests; the bad being Guinevere; and the ugly being the sorceresses (Scott 21). Fries' model discusses Arthurian women in relation to the men they support or defy, breaking the women's roles into three categories: heroine, female hero, and counter-hero (Fries 61). Both scholars examine these female characters in terms of who they are to the knights; by these models they are meaningful primarily in relationship to others and the function they serve in other characters' lives. I find this intriguing when juxtaposed to Catherine Batt's comments that Launcelot's character also is dependent on others: "it is primarily others' bodies, in particular, the vulnerability of those bodies, that register his progress and define his own 'worship,' while his own body is subject to violation only in gruesome fantasy" (73). Launcelot asserts who he is by acting upon others, by winning jousting matches that we know he will win, because he is, after all, Launcelot. His identity almost becomes a "chicken and the egg" question—is he good at swordplay because he is Launcelot, or is he Launcelot because he is good at swordplay? Whatever is the case, the women are not alone in being defined by

their relationships to others and by how they act in different settings. Launcelot is Launcelot because of his actions; the women are “the good, the bad, and the ugly” and heroines, female heroes, and counter-heroes because of how their actions affect others. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Launcelot himself has something of an identity conflict in trying to reconcile one personage out of his many differing responsibilities. Certainly actions say a good deal about a character—and Malory uses this to his advantage in developing characters—but, as I will explore, actions and the characters who act them are multidimensional.

As Batt suggests, for example, Launcelot’s physical body is vulnerable only when threatened by the sorceresses (Malory 151-53).<sup>1</sup> The tournament in “The Fair Maid of Astolat,” where Bors deals Launcelot a serious wound (Malory 626: 13-15), certainly is an example of a “violation” of Launcelot’s body; however, this largely is an exception to the rule of Launcelot’s character in the *Morte*. On the other hand, Malory’s female characters are constantly vulnerable, and therefore they must depend on knights, or on their own wits, to defend their bodies from harm. They develop their characters in light of their world, molding themselves to survive peacefully, or, in the case of Scott’s Uglies or Fries’ counter-heroes, bucking social mores and making their own ways—but even then, our view of these characters develops through the eyes of chivalry and knighthood. Scott’s explanation of the “Bad” as “ordinary women men deal with every day . . . neither good nor evil, but their effect on men is nonetheless more evil than good” (24) requires further questions, for it seems to describe all of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2nd. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). All primary text citations are from this edition. Subsequent citations to the text will be made parenthetically.

women in the *Morte*. Indeed, it incriminates them, saying that women are responsible, by their mere presence, for the men's mistakes.

Malory's rendering of the guidelines of chivalry suggests otherwise. In Malory's world, actions are the only way to know someone's character or to reveal the truth—hence traditions such as trial by combat. Therefore, outside forces, like women, cannot meaningfully affect a knight's true character. While I agree that Malory's women are central to the men's actions, his male characters deserve just as much—or as little—credit for their mistakes as the female ones do. Despite my model of the men and women's conflicts as parallels for one another, the members of each sex must take responsibility for their own actions. In particular, the women's *interactions* with their fellow women, the moments when they use their observations from the sidelines of the men's actions to intelligently affect their environment, lend greater insight to understanding Malory's women, and in turn, their fellow characters who inhabit Malory's world.

Indeed, the major female characters in the *Morte* often take advantage of spectator roles to “write” their own fates by reading their situations. Roberta Davidson notes that Malory's female characters “enact the role of informed readers, interpreting and interconnecting disparate elements of plot and characterization . . . [they] are frequently in the position of spectators, and it is as spectators that they analyze the action in a way the knights cannot” (21, 24). The women can see the whole knightly game playing out, understanding how every action affects others. Geraldine Heng notes that while Arthur must always have symbols “read” to him—the greater importance of the scabbard over the sword (Malory 36.7-14), Morgan's tattle-tale shield (Malory 342.25-35), etc.—the women

never fail to be astute observers (98). As more informed characters, the women do not go blindly into *aventures* as the knights do. In Jill Mann's essay on "Knightly Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*," she notes that a good knight submits himself to chance (333). The knight sets out on a quest, trusting that the right adventure will fall into his hands, giving him the opportunity to prove his name, assert his character, and increase his worship. The women, however, leave nothing to chance. If they can improve the situation, they will, and they will use all of the tools at their disposal—a sharp contrast to Arthur and Launcelot, who avoid any confrontation with each other as the *Morte* ends. As I explore representative scenes, note the personal conflict that I find at the heart of *Le Morte Darthur*: the largely unspoken rivalry of Arthur and Launcelot.

Particularly in comparison to Arthur and Launcelot's interactions, the scenes of women's conflicts parallel and illuminate the men's rivalry in the *Morte* as a whole.

The first conflict I examine is Morgan le Fay and Nynyve's interaction in "Arthur and Accolon." I must acknowledge that in this woman-to-woman conflict, Morgan and Nynyve never actually come face to face—Morgan is not even present at the joust between Arthur and Accolon. Rather, the women serve as puppeteers, orchestrating the action of the men. Note that the men, *not* the women, are the pawns in this scene. "It is the seemingly marginalized presence of the feminine that in fact *creates* and mediates the masculine activity of chivalry" (Armstrong "Chivalric Community" 308). Morgan brings Arthur and Accolon together in combat. She already has taken Excalibur and the scabbard from Arthur and given them to Accolon, giving him the means to kill the king. However, Nynyve learns of the plot and arrives on the scene. She does give



Arthur the chance to prove himself, to earn himself worship, only interfering when absolutely necessary:

Whan the Damesell of the Lake behelde Arthure, how full of prouesse his body was, and the false treson that was wrought for hym to have had hym slayne, she had grete peté that so good a knyght and such a man of worshyp sholde so be destroyed. And at the nexte stroke Sir Accolon stroke at hym suche a stroke that by the damesels inchauntemente the swerde Excalibur fell oute of Accalons honde to the erthe, and therewithall sir Arthure lyghtly lepe to hit and gate hit in his honde, and forthwithall he knew hit that hit was his swerde Excalyber.  
(Malory 87.6-14)

Although Nynyve has imprisoned Merlin (to protect her chastity and honor), she takes on his role as protector of Arthur, guarding not only his life but also his worship (Holbrook 184-5). Morgan, as Accolon explains it, wants to destroy Arthur because “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” (Malory 88.10-11). Two powerful women take opposing sides in this scene, one working for the Round Table fellowship and the other against it.

Of course, Heng points out that the distinction between the motives of Nynyve and Morgan is a fine one indeed. Because the women are so powerful, and as Armstrong noted, unrestrained by a code such as the Pentecostal Oath, they have the autonomy either to assist or to threaten knightly society. Because Nynyve chooses to assist the Round Table, she is perceived to be beneficent by the fellowship; because Morgan chooses to pursue her own interests, which are detrimental to the Round Table, she is malign (Heng 104). As I will discuss later, Nynyve and Morgan thus align themselves with, respectively, Arthur and Launcelot.

Like these men, these magical women have great power to affect change. “Women’s actions undermine, undercut, and usurp men’s goals, resulting in

what one might arguably call a 'feminist' trajectory that upsets the traditionally 'masculinist' course of Malory's adventures" (Kaufman "Between Women" 138). Nynve's actions are not completely innocent, since she imprisons the king's valued adviser, Merlin. (According to Kenneth Hodges, even that is utterly defensible, for it protects her against rape and Merlin against the punishment he would have received for raping [53]). However, her decision to take on Merlin's role in protecting Arthur is what sets her apart from Morgan, whose objective is to destroy Arthur. Although Nynve's magic works outside the patriarchal framework, she retains her standing as a female hero because she uses her powers for the good of the Round Table, and for the good of Arthur. I find intriguing Amy S. Kaufman's article on "The Law of the Lake," in which she asserts that Nynve actually was acting to ascend her own ladder of sovereignty (57); however, the fact remains that Nynve's actions serve not only her but also Arthur and the chivalric order.

Morgan, on the other hand, learned the dark arts, and uses them to her own advantage, thus diminishing her honor (Robeson 111). Malory consistently represents Morgan as an evil character (except when she aids the wounded Arthur at the close), reflecting the antifeminist sentiment of his era. While influential thinkers such as Ovid and St. Augustine condemned women as shallow, lustful creatures responsible for the Fall, Alcuin Blamires says medieval thought did admit that women possess a certain wit and cleverness (5). We do not see a good deal of Morgan's repartee; however, other female characters are shining examples of the verbal dexterity medieval thinkers so grudgingly acknowledged. She does exhibit the mental agility to make her own decisions

and perform her magic, however, putting her power on a level with that of a man such as Launcelot.

Armstrong notes that while Morgan's hatred of her brother and husband is unfathomable, it nevertheless provides the means to test and affirm the ideals of Arthur's community and the Pentecostal Oath (Armstrong "Chivalric Community" 307). Arguably, Morgan's testing of the Round Table backfires, at least in the beginning of the *Morte*. When the fellowship passes her tests, its worship waxes and hers wanes. Malory's Morgan perpetuates the notion that such a woman cannot be up to any good, but Launcelot likewise is up to no good in putting his devotion for Guinevere ahead of his fidelity to his king, Arthur, and indeed, to God. This dispute over power and worship between two women echoes the conflicts between the brotherhood of knights throughout the *Morte*. R. M. Lumiansky notes that in this section, Malory altered his source, the *Suite du Merlin*, adding a line emphasizing Arthur's trust for his sister (60): "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" (Malory 88.32-34). This scene of domestic conflict and betrayal, acted out between two women and their puppets, lays the groundwork for conflicts throughout the *Morte*. As he trusted Morgan, Arthur also trusted Launcelot . . . and both would betray him.

And as we learn about Nynyve and Morgan's characters as they attempt to control the activity in Arthur's realm, we see shades of Arthur and Launcelot and their coming dispute. Hodges points out that Nynyve prophetically casts judgment on Launcelot's future actions in siding with the ethical rather than literal right (59). I discussed in Chapter Two how Morgan/Accolon is technically right in the dispute, by the Oath rule that knights not take the wrong side in a

quarrel, yet Arthur's is the virtuous side that wins out in the trial by combat. Later, Launcelot takes the technically right side in saving Guinevere, in that he is her knight and therefore obligated to save her. However, she is ethically guilty, and Launcelot thus thwarts justice, by the guidelines Nynyve establishes in this scene (Hodges 59).

In standing on the side of chivalric justice, Nynyve is naturally associated with Arthur, both serving as protectors of the kingdom. Nynyve defies the classification of the Ugly that Scott places on sorceresses, but lives up to Fries' female hero type: "she com thidir for the love of kyng Arthur" (Malory 85.34-35). By continuing where Merlin left off, Nynyve becomes Arthur's wiser side, his voice of revelation and reason. Through her enchantment, Arthur gets Excalibur back and realizes that he has been tricked; through her counsel, Arthur narrowly escapes death from the cursed mantle (Malory 93-4). Because Arthur owes his life to Nynyve, their identities are thus intertwined.

Unfortunately for Accolon, he allows his life to intertwine with Morgan's—ending badly for him. Though Eugène Vinaver includes Accolon in the title of this section, his is a minor role in the central conflict. Although Arthur fights Accolon in this segment, Accolon stands in for Morgan. Accolon, one of Arthur's knights, using Arthur's sword as given him by Morgan, is an internal threat to Arthur's rule. Morgan, as Arthur's sister, is also a threat from within—mirroring what Launcelot ultimately becomes. Thus, Morgan can be seen as parallel to Launcelot. Just as Morgan works against the Round Table, so does Launcelot. His actions are not consciously malicious, but he nevertheless protects his own desires more readily than he maintains his loyalty to Arthur. In orchestrating the battle between Arthur and Accolon, Morgan acts in a

“dysworshypfull” manner, just as Launcelot will later on. In his self-serving actions, under Fries’ model, Launcelot joins Morgan as a counter-hero. Heng noted the fine line between labeling Morgan good or bad—Launcelot’s character bobbles along a similarly fine line.

Of course, after her failure in Arthur and Accolon’s joust, Morgan does not give up easily, just as Launcelot will not give up on his love for Guinevere. Less than five pages later in the Vinaver edition, Morgan tries again to kill Arthur with a cursed mantle, and again, Nynyve intervenes to protect the king/ dom (Malory 93-4). Significantly, like Arthur and Launcelot, Nynyve and Morgan never directly interact in their disputes. However, they do use other people as their vehicles. Nynyve and Morgan use Arthur and Accolon; in the siege at Joyous Garde, Arthur’s new right-hand man Gawain fights Launcelot, while Launcelot’s now-closest ally Bors battles with Arthur. Though Arthur does not know it, he similarly has Nynyve as an intervening supporter. However, Nynyve does not stop Morgan from stealing the scabbard, an act which potentially could have saved Arthur. Powerful though they are, Nynyve and Morgan, especially in their roles paralleling Arthur’s and Launcelot’s, cannot interfere with the wheels of fate.

We again see Nynyve, who seems to have her hand in everything, passing judgment in the Pelleas and Ettarde dispute. Pelleas is in love with Ettarde, who utterly rejects his courting. Hodges makes the distinction that Nynyve punishes Ettarde only for her cruelty (57), for lacking “mercy of suche a valyaunte knyght” (Malory 104.3-4); Kaufman makes the feminist argument that Nynyve in fact empowers Ettarde in her judgment, transforming her from the object of desire into the active lover (63). However, I think the reader also is

meant to see that, in rejecting the love of a good man, Ettard rejects the values of the Round Table—and for this, she must die. Ettarde, like Launcelot, relies on her own judgment rather than considering the mores of the court, and thus lowers herself to the plane of villainy with Morgan le Fay. Malory allows his characters to have their own personalities; those whose opinions conflict with the values of chivalry, however, often are disciplined. Lacking power, supernatural or otherwise, Ettarde is handily punished—by a woman—for overacting her rejection of the guidelines of knightly society.

Even Nynyve, whose magic works outside the scope of the ordinary man's world, abides by a perhaps unspoken part of the Pentecostal Oath: in exchange for the men's protection, the women must recognize the men's valor. Not one to let a good knight go unrewarded, Nynyve claims Pelleas for herself: "Malory, therefore, uses the character of Nynyve to analyze and alter the narrative on two levels. Her reading is also an act of writing within the text, she identifies the 'true' characters of the loves and arranges endings to suit their desserts" (Davidson 26). Nynyve can and does work things to her favor in the Pelleas and Ettarde scene. Malory greatly changes this scene from his source: in the *Suite du Merlin*, after Gawain and Ettarde lose their virginity to each other, Gawain redeems himself and Ettarde by convincing her to marry Pelleas (*Launcelot-Grail* 8-12). Nynyve never appears in this scene at all in the source, so Malory consciously added her in a pivotal role as the judge who further illuminates the rules of chivalric conduct for men and for women.

In the *Morte*, Malory casts Nynyve as the all-powerful judge, showing no mercy to Ettarde, the prideful woman. Conversely, Arthur does not confront Launcelot and his actions—but as the High King, he certainly had the power to

do so. Here Nynyve acts where Arthur did not. She had no relationship to Pelleas or Ettarde and no reason to be personally offended by Ettarde's transgressions, but as a representative and defender of the king, Nynyve is piqued by the blatant rejection of the chivalric code and by Ettarde's cruelty toward a good knight. Ettarde, like Launcelot, defies the rules of her society, giving no reason for her dislike of Pelleas other than "I coude never be quytte of hym" (Malory 102.15-16). If, as Robeson says, "a woman's honour is diminished when she fails to support the Round Table fellowship" (111), Ettarde chips away at her worship in her repeated rejection of Pelleas, and gives it the final death stroke when she lets Gawain into her bed. Launcelot similarly erodes his worship every time he puts his devotion to Guinevere above his devotion to God and Arthur. Having punished Ettarde, Nynyve takes the spoils of the dispute for herself. She claims Pelleas—the male center of this enchanted love triangle and very nearly the Guinevere figure—and protects him for the rest of his days—especially from Launcelot. The reader can only wish that Arthur, Launcelot, and Guinevere's difficulties in love and chivalry could have been resolved so easily.

In another instance of a happy ending arising from women's using magic and wit against each other to make things right, Lyonet intervenes when Lyonesse is about to make some bad decisions. Readers have already seen Lyonet's feisty side as she boldly speaks to Arthur at his court (Malory 179.25-44) and constantly challenges Gareth's abilities as they travel to Lyonesse's castle (182.6-201.10). Lyonet is well-suited to take care of herself and to take care of her sister. As the sister not tied to the castle, Lyonet also has more freedom in Malory's world. Despite Lyonet's greater freedom, Lyonesse, having found Gareth an acceptable suitor, conspires with him to have a premarital tryst within

the castle. However, she did not consider the conflict of interests between her desire and her honor, and Lyonesse certainly did not consider her sister:

“Wherefore the damesell Lyonett was a lytyll dyspleased; and she thought hir sister dame Lyonesse was a lytyll overhasty that she might nat abyde hir tyme of maryage, and for savyng of hir worship she thought to abate their hote lustis” (205.27-29). In scenes showing Malory’s sense of humor, Lyonet not once but twice sends a knight to interrupt Gareth and Lyonesse as they “clyppe” and “kysse.” This intervention results both times in a wounded Gareth, his destruction of the knight in retaliation, followed by Lyonet’s magical mending of the interrupting knight. The second time, Gareth and Lyonesse get the point, but Gareth cannot help but again express his displeasure in Lyonet’s way of handling things. Lyonet reminds him of the world in which they live: “‘Sir knight,’ she seyde, ‘I have nothyng done but I woll avow hit, and all that I have done shall be to your worship and to us all’” (207.27-28).

Lyonet, like Nynyve earlier, metes out consequences to transgressors. Lyonet also bucks the rules, but she is not punished—though Melanie McGarrah Gibson notes that Lyonet might have seen being married off in the end as a punishment, an end to her freedom (218). As a single lady, Lyonet takes advantage of her mobility and stretches her agency to its limits: “In all of her actions within the story, she has reversed expected female roles: she’s not mild or meek, she answers the king the way privileged knights answer one another, and she influences the outcome of her tale...Her unusual, carnivalesque behavior makes the happy outcome of the story possible” (Gibson 218). Lyonet fits the female hero mold: though she defies Arthur in her refusal to give her name (Malory 179.30-44), she aligns herself with him because she works with the



Round Table rules. However, while her rebellious actions, including some magical skills, ultimately benefit Gareth's honor, she also acts to protect her own and her sister Lyonesse's worship. Lyonet knows the rules: in order to preserve both her sister's and her own honor, remaining chaste is a must. Despite Lyonet's knowledge of magic, she still very much lives and abides by the rules of the Round Table fellowship, in which good worship is the greatest asset a man or woman can have.

Indeed, because worship increases through association with worshipful companions, Gareth would not have been the great knight he was without the the goals to work toward that Lyonet and Lyonesse provide him. In her article on "Single Ladies in Malory," Armstrong asserts that single women are powerful forces in shaping a developing knight (53). When Gareth finally wins Lyonet's approval, through a series of knightly trials, she then passes him on to her sister, Lyonesse, who puts him through her own series of tests. As the damsel in distress being pursued by another knight, indicating her desirability, Lyonesse provides the real challenge. In the battle to win her, Lyonesse, like the sword-challenges Arthur and Balin face earlier in the *Morte*, provides the means for Gareth to prove his worship as a great knight (Armstrong "Single Ladies" 53). As a heroine, Lyonesse herself does not have much to do—she wins honor for Gareth by being his objective.

However, Lyonesse does recognize her position of power, and, although Lyonet has to save the honor that is almost swept away in a wave of passion for Gareth, Lyonesse asserts herself by assuring that Gareth is of noble birth before she commits to anything (Malory 203.1-8), and insists that she will become his wife—not his paramour (223.27-35). While Lyonesse at first behaves like

Launcelot in her eagerness to get what she wants, she does not share with him the desire to be an unattached paramour for the rest of her days. She can thank her sister for helping her to maintain her marriageable status.

Comparably, Launcelot and Arthur, who share a brotherly relationship, have much to thank each other for throughout the *Morte*, at least before the affair with Guinevere is forced into the open. That fraternal bond interestingly parallels the relationship of sisters Lyonet and Lyonesse, who want different things from Gareth: Lyonet wants a savior; Lyonesse wants a husband. Arthur and Launcelot similarly want different aspects of Guinevere: Arthur seeks the political benefits she brings; Launcelot wants the romantic love. In the case of the sisters, Lyonet takes care of business, while Lyonesse is derailed from maintaining her virtue by desire. Lyonet, however, embarked on a journey to bring a champion to defend her sister's honor, and, having succeeded in that quest, is not about to let her sister's night of lust destroy her hard work. "Lynet collapses public and private to ensure that the notion of sexual desire and consummation as private space yields to social control" (Batt 99). She, like Arthur, works hard to protect the political aspect—an honorable reputation—of her personal kingdom, her family. Arthur, too, does his best to take care of his kingdom, and he does a good job. Everybody knows that the Round Table has the best knights, which is what brings Lyonet to his court in the first place.

Lyonesse, while she does later defend her honor handily, in this section acts as the naughty sister. Blinded by "hoote lustis," she and Gareth do their best to undermine their honor. Like Launcelot, Lyonesse thinks first about what she wants and second about the consequences. Fortunately for Lyonesse and Gareth, there is a watchful sister with a few tricks up her sleeve to keep them from

making their mistake. Both pairs—Arthur and Launcelot and Lyonet and Lyonesse—share a familial closeness, a trusting relationship. However, Lyonesse’s attempts at dishonorable deeds are not nearly the betrayal of trust and worship that Launcelot commits, and unfortunately, Bors lacks charmed knights to interrupt Launcelot and Guinevere. Nobody intervenes in Launcelot and Guinevere’s affair—until Mordred and Aggravayne force the issue into the open.

In the above scenes, we see women using magic, with a little wit mixed in, to affect men’s actions in their conflict. Guinevere and Elaine, lacking magical means, engage in verbal combat. Guinevere already was upset to hear that Launcelot had conceived a child with Elaine, but excused him when he explained “how he was made to lye by her, ‘in the lyknes of you, my lady the quene’” (Malory 485.18-19). However, this explanation loses its credibility for Guinevere when he is bewitched once again into believing Elaine is Guinevere, and his tendency to talk in his sleep—which Guinevere can hear coming from Elaine’s bedchamber—betrays his misstep (486.36-487.30). With Guinevere’s rebuke of Launcelot upsetting him so much that he jumps out of the window, “as wyld [woode] as ever was man” (487.37), the women quarrel. Elaine has the nerve to talk to Guinevere as she has probably never been spoken to before:

And therefore, alas! madame, ye have done grete synne and youreselff grete dyshonoure, for ye have a lorde royall of youre owne, and therefore hit were youre parte for to love hym; for there ys no quene in this worlde that hath suche another kynge as ye have. And yf ye were nat, I might have getyn the love of my lorde sir Launcelot; and a grete cause I have to love hym, for he hadde my maydynhode and by hym I have borne a fayre sonne whose [name] ys sir Galahad. And he shall be in hys tyme the beste knyght of the worlde. (Malory 488.1-8)

Elaine attacks Guinevere's honor and even brags that Elaine's claim to Launcelot is far stronger and more legitimate than Guinevere's (setting aside the illegitimacy of Galahad's conception). Though Guinevere has little she can say in reply to these truthful accusations, she can rebut with what power she possesses: she throws Elaine out. According to Carol Hart, Malory is largely faithful to the Prose *Tristan* in "Launcelot and Elaine"; however, he does manipulate the tone of the conversations in Guinevere's favor. Although she does not come away with our sympathy, Malory's Guinevere is motivated not by wounded vanity but by jealous insecurity in her unstable relationship (11). She yells and throws Elaine out from a guilty sense of responsibility.

Jealousy and insecurity over losing the best knight in the world are more justifiable than mere vanity, and thus Malory seems to ask for at least a little empathy with the first lady of the Round Table. Guinevere retorts to Elaine's accusations: "And for the love ye owghe unto sir Launcelot discover not hys conceyle, for and ye do, hit woll be hys deth!" (Malory 488.10-12). Although on first reading, her exclamation sounds like Guinevere threatens Launcelot, D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., points out that "Guinevere simply recognizes here that if Launcelot's involvement with her becomes known, he will be condemned for treason. Using the only appeal open to her—which, bitterly, is Elaine's own love for Launcelot—she begs Elaine not to tell what has happened" (29). However, the damage has been done: the reader can trace to this moment the beginnings of Guinevere's jealous behavior that reaches its height in "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere." Elaine makes it clear that, were it not for Guinevere, Launcelot could be married happily to another woman. Arguably, the ensuing jealousy, transforming Guinevere from the judge of proper chivalric behavior

that Hart notes into Martin B. Shichtman's manipulative wench (267), is the catalyst for the queen's reckless actions—including inviting Launcelot to her chamber—that ultimately lead to the betrayal of Launcelot and Guinevere's affair.

Guinevere—the woman acting as both wife and paramour—can be seen in parallel to both Arthur and Launcelot, in her corresponding relationships. Guinevere does not possess any supernatural power that one is aware of, nor does she impress the reader with verbal fireworks, and yet she wields more power over the Round Table fellowship than most. Hart (6) notes that in "The Book of King Arthur," Malory moves away from his sources by establishing Guinevere as a moral authority, the judge of knightly behavior, when Gawain and Pellinore violate the chivalric code (Malory 66.31-42, 75.12-13). Ironically, in the end she herself is put on trial and is held up as anything but a moral authority. Many critics attribute Guinevere's later actions to a dark, jealous, and petty character. Shichtman calls her "manipulating rather than manipulated," one who "exerts power to her own ends" (267). This is the woman whose adulterous affair, depending on the reader's perspective, may be partly responsible for the fall of the Round Table.

However, Guinevere is more than a one-note character: while her loyalties to both Arthur and Launcelot do result in devastating conflict and in the loss of worship for all, in her refusal to marry Launcelot at the end she is also responsible for his salvation. In a work replete with battle scenes and focused on a masculine fellowship, it is ironic that Guinevere achieves what Galahad could not (Kennedy 41). In the grail quest, Galahad could not help Launcelot reach salvation. Guinevere, the much-maligned, non-virgin, bringer-down of the

Round Table, and a woman, accomplishes salvation not only for herself but also for Launcelot. She is anything but manipulative at the end, as she explains her reasons for staying at the abbey and offers Launcelot the option to take a wife (Malory 720.15-33). Yet because of her example, “sythen ye have taken you to perfeccion, I must nedys take me to perfection, of ryght” (721.5-6). Launcelot completes his life in complete penance.

This brings us to Elaine of Corbenic, whose son, Galahad, despite his inability to help his father, does achieve the Grail. However, Elaine is not merely the vessel for the most holy knight. In her essay “Malory’s Other(ed) Elaine,” Elizabeth Sklar suggests that Elaine’s simultaneous role as victim and manipulator of the patriarchal system makes her one of the most powerful women in the *Morte*. Elaine is the “quintessential Malorian woman, subversive and disruptive, a threat to the status quo and to the stability of the realm: in effect, she manages to do more actual damage to the kingdom’s well-being than Morgan le Fey does” (Sklar 65). It is Elaine, after all, who first instigates Guinevere’s jealousy, thus giving public voice to Guinevere and Launcelot’s adultery and setting into action the downhill slide (Sklar 67). Elaine has little choice in her role in the story, since she must abide by the prophecy set out for her. However, she does not just let the prophecy that she will bear Galahad act upon her, but acts in response to the prophecy. Elaine goes a step further than fate calls for and truly loves Launcelot, thus forever changing his relationship with Guinevere. Her active involvement in the text initiates the conflict between herself and Guinevere. This conflict ultimately reveals to the court the relationship between Guinevere and Launcelot, as I will address later. Rumors about Guinevere and Launcelot may have been in the air before, but there is

nothing like a big argument that provokes Launcelot to flee the kingdom temporarily to make rumors really fly.

Guinevere and Elaine thus find themselves in conflict. Here, aligning the women with Arthur and Launcelot becomes more complicated, but this very complexity is appropriate to the ambiguity of Arthur and Launcelot's conflict. First, we must ask if Arthur and Launcelot ever actually see themselves as competitors. We never see Arthur make any grand gestures on Guinevere's behalf: he makes no attempts to woo her away from Launcelot, and he notes that he is sadder to lose the fellowship of Launcelot and his knights than he is to lose his wife (Malory 685.29-32). Indeed, Launcelot's task of winning Guinevere seems simple: he requires the many losers of his jousts to pledge fealty to her. Despite the lack of direct competition, however, Arthur and Launcelot certainly have a conflict: both want the same woman. Guinevere is only one woman, however, and Arthur and Launcelot never really vocalize or act out their dispute.

Guinevere and Elaine, however, do enact a version of the argument the men could have had. In response to the ruin of the Round Table, at least partially caused by Guinevere and Launcelot's affair, surely Arthur would have liked to have adapted Elaine's speech, especially the part of her tirade in which she notes, "'for ye have a lorde royall of youre owne, and therefore hit were youre parte for to love hym; for there ys no quene in this worlde that hath suche another kynge as ye have'" (Malory 488.2-4). Where Arthur lacks words to argue with Launcelot in "The Vengeance of Sir Gawain," Elaine has already provided them, 200 pages earlier. While perhaps Elaine's words are more directly applicable to the confrontation with Guinevere that Arthur never has (another subject), they also apply to Launcelot. Like Guinevere, Launcelot has a "lorde

royall" of his own and, as a member of the Round Table, it was his "parte for to love hym." In the grail quest, Launcelot confessed that his motivation for his great deeds did not stem only from glorifying God, but primarily came from his desire to win worship for Guinevere's sake (539.5-11). In so doing, Launcelot not only dishonors God, but also Arthur and his fellowship. Elaine, too, has been wronged by the affair, and she stands up for herself when challenged by Guinevere. Despite Arthur's speechlessness in the end, Elaine already has defended not only her own honor and worship but also that of Arthur.

In defending herself and Arthur, Elaine forces Guinevere to consider the situation from Arthur's view, and therein lies the complexity. In her outburst against the queen, Elaine demands a role reversal. Though she defends Arthur's point of view, Elaine loves Launcelot. Her speech to Guinevere delivered in the castle is quite similar in tone to Launcelot's speech to Arthur and Gawain over the walls of Joyous Garde. Both Launcelot and Elaine take the offensive side, despite knowledge that they each have some fault in their situations; both enumerate how they have been wronged for trying to do the right thing. They both attack someone who just as easily could be berating them. Elaine also represents Launcelot's interests, pointing out that he could be in an acceptable relationship with her if not for the illicit affair with Guinevere. Through Elaine's speech, Guinevere, possibly for the first time, looks at her actions from Arthur's point of view. On one level, Guinevere takes Launcelot's stance, as their affair identifies one with the other. In this respect, Guinevere, like Launcelot and Morgan, becomes a counter-hero. She has only her own interests in mind, to the later detriment of the fellowship of the Round Table. However, Elaine's remarks hit home, and, like Arthur, Guinevere is rendered impotent in her meager



response. Perhaps her inability to give a reciprocal reply to Elaine's accusations gives a sneak peek at the Guinevere who understands that her actions have hurt others—the Guinevere we see just before her and Launcelot's deaths. When others accurately point out our biggest mistakes, and we are incapable of justifying those actions, we often lash out. Guinevere has an affair she cannot justify, so she throws Elaine out. Arthur failed to do anything about the affair, so he throws Launcelot out. Through these parallel characters, the reader can better understand different facets of all of them.

Of course, better understanding of these characters does nothing for the end result of *Le Morte Darthur*. Because these characters are who they are and act as dictated by fate, they must carry the story out to its tragic conclusion. Be that as it may, I find it intriguing that Malory uses his female characters to act and speak in scenes paralleling the failed men's interactions, in ways not seen in his sources. Like the men, women can be "both manipulator and victim, both competitor and prize, and both lover and beloved" (Kaufman "Between Women" 142). His characters reveal many sides, layers, and interior conflicts through their actions. Malory not only adds a new, more feminist dimension to the antifeminist sentiment of his time, but also demonstrates his authorial skills in these parallel conflicts. Nynyve and Morgan (through their male puppets) act out the fight Arthur and Launcelot never have. Nynyve and Ettarde perform a dispute over the demands of worship, a central facet of Arthur and Launcelot's conflict. Lyonet and Lyonesse's conflict demonstrates the consequences of knights and ladies acting lustfully (like Launcelot and Guinevere) without considering their worship and that of those surrounding them (namely Arthur).

Guinevere and Elaine voice the argument about betrayal that Arthur and Launcelot never have.

Indeed, the men do come close to actually having these conflicts themselves. Arthur does besiege Launcelot at Joyous Garde, and in “The Vengeance of Sir Gawain,” Arthur and Launcelot do exchange words, albeit in a limited fashion, over pride, worship, and betrayal. Nynyve and Ettarde and Lyonet and Lyonesse are fairly successful in their arguments: right prevails over wrong, and chivalric order is restored. However, just as Arthur and Launcelot fail to resolve anything from their stilted interactions, Nynyve and Morgan and Guinevere and Elaine similarly fall short—but the women do *act* where the men primarily talk through intermediaries. Knowing that Malory purposefully chose to include these scenes of women’s conflicts, and in some cases altered his sources to emphasize key themes, suggests that they featured something he wanted to highlight. Arthur and Launcelot’s conflicts conclude with Arthur’s death. In an enlightening twist, the end of their conflicts also marks the uniting of Morgan le Fay and Nynyve:

But thus was he lad away in a shyp wherein were three quenys; that one was kynge Arthur syster, quene Morgan le Fay, the tother was the quene of North Galis, and the thirde was he quene of the Waste Londis. Also there was dame Nynyve, the chyff lady of the laake, whych had wedded sir Pellyas, the good knight; and thys lady had done muche fo[r] kynge Arthure. (Malory 717.14-19)

Nynyve and Morgan have never been on the same side before in the *Morte*, but here they come together for the common cause of tending to the dying king. Malory takes care to note that Nynyve had done a great deal for Arthur, but does not explain the significance of this combination of women. As the men’s conflict ends, so does that of the women.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Desperately Seeking Dinadan Understanding Malory's Use of an Unconventional Knight

If *Le Morte Darthur* had been written today, we would get the background story on how Dinadan came to be Dinadan—and with it, a new version of the tale. As a young knight, he would have attempted jousting and suffered an utterly humiliating failure, one that cost him the hand of his betrothed as well as his dignity. He would then have gone home, a disillusioned knight who swore off romantic love and declared the idiosyncrasies of knighthood utterly ridiculous. Although a member of the Round Table fellowship, he would have used humor as a defense mechanism and become the class clown, rather than the valiant knight. However, Dinadan would not have completely believed what he espoused, and one evening, Tristram (recently exiled) would have happened upon this knight as he practiced in the moonlight, in desperate need of direction. Under the tutelage of Tristram—the stereotypically disenfranchised mentor—Dinadan would have practiced day and night to improve at his craft. The young knight then would have returned to fight at a major tournament, disguised, of course, and would have enjoyed several decisive victories—perhaps he would even have done surprisingly well (but not win—let's not take this too far) in a fight with a knight of the caliber of Lamerok or Palomides. Dinadan and Tristram would have been celebrated and welcomed to the Round Table fellowship, and the values of knighthood would once more be affirmed.

However, Sir Thomas Malory wrote the *Morte Darthur* in the fifteenth century, not the twenty-first, and the tale I have woven above answers to the values and concerns of contemporary society, not to those of the chivalric code and early modern England. The notion of the underdog is not unknown to Malory; indeed, the concept is inherent in “fair unknown” characters such as Arthur and Gareth. However, it is clear that Arthur and Gareth’s knightly abilities were innately present all along, as befits their noble standing and noble characters. As I have discussed in previous chapters, action defines character in the *Morte*: for example, Launcelot is a great fighter because he is a great man; he is a great man because he is a great fighter, and he is Launcelot because of all of these things. Once established, nothing he does can change who he is, even his occasional violent actions toward the court. How a knight acts and jousts is an expression of his character. For a character’s actions to change, to become a better knight, without reverting to his “true” self, would be to change utterly his character, and this largely is not acceptable in Malory’s storytelling.

Indeed, although the knights get a good deal of practice in jousting, from fighting with every knight they encounter in their travels to fairly regular tournaments, it seems to be a foregone conclusion that someone like Kay always will be a mediocre knight—and a mediocre character, given to taunting those he deems to be lesser characters (i.e., ones he thinks cannot trounce him in battle). Likewise, Dinadan would seem to be a perfect character to be cast in the role of the knight who comes to see the light of the values of knighthood. He is a good, not great, knight, and this defines the shape of his character. As a lesser knight, he perhaps has had the time to ponder the notions of chivalry . . . and to decide

that some of them are a little silly. What an opportunity for Malory to reconstruct his sources to make Dinadan have an epiphany of the glories of knighthood! While Malory's conventions of characterization would not allow the inspiring little *bildungsroman* I have concocted for Dinadan, Malory had another choice in redacting his sources. He could have developed Dinadan as a character more like Kay, one who resents his betters and provides simple comic relief in his cowardice. Characters such as Tristram and Launcelot would not have given much attention to this version of Dinadan, and there would be little need to examine this character. However, Malory does not take that option: Malory lets Dinadan talk, act, and directly interact with his most important characters, and while Dinadan sometimes acts the fool, he often seems to be the wise fool. I argue that as Malory develops even a minor character such as Dinadan through his unconventional dialogue and actions, Malory exercises his authorial prerogative to interrogate an alternative view of knighthood, a hint at what chivalry and indeed Camelot would be without the restrictions that shape the actions and outcome of *Le Morte Darthur*.

Indeed, Dinadan is uniquely positioned to offer commentary on the Arthurian world. Perhaps because of his position on the perimeter of Camelot—his surprising actions and words place him there—Dinadan's actions and dialogue exchanges are unusually clear in developing his character. We do not meet Dinadan until the Tristram section, and we do not meet him in the context of Camelot, but rather in Tristram's travels during his exile. I have shown in Chapter Two how Malory uses action and dialogue to develop his central characters; in comparison, Dinadan has fewer responsibilities and dilemmas than

Arthur, Guinevere, Launcelot, and he is thus able to speak and act more freely. His decisions are simpler and affect fewer people, so, while Dinadan is devoted to good knights (Malory 379.29-32),<sup>1</sup> his actions are a pure representation of *his* ideals and *his* best interests—of who Dinadan is. Much like the women I discussed in Chapter Three, Dinadan is very much a part of Round Table society, but his unconventional beliefs place him on the outside of the circle. As Roberta Davidson comments in “Reading Like a Woman in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” female characters in the *Morte* “read” the text and subtext of goings-on in the court and shape their responses accordingly; Dinadan does the same. From his vantage point with one leg on either side of the fence, Dinadan is free to offer alternatives to conventional knightly rules by compromising chivalry with another perspective.

For example, when he rides up to Tristram in Cornwall as Tristram begins his exile, Dinadan immediately requests to joust with him, by way of introduction (Malory 310.1-2); this follows the standard rules that we have seen knights following throughout the *Morte*. Yet farther down the page, we see Bors rejecting the notion of a fight with Tristram, saying “he wolde nat juste with no Cornyssh knyghtes, for they ar nat called men of worship” (Malory 310.39-40). Here we learn that it *is* indeed acceptable to reject a fight with an opponent one deems to be unworthy; if the joust will not provide worship, it simply is not worth the time and effort. This will become significant later as Dinadan often refuses to fight. In this episode, however, Dinadan seeks out Tristram and must

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2nd. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). All primary text citations are from this edition. Subsequent citations to the text will be made parenthetically.

know of his origins (Malory 309.42); we do not know if he is unaware of the unworshipful reputation of Cornish knights or if he simply does not care. As Malory develops Dinadan's character, we begin to suspect the latter. In the parallel incident that follows, Bleoberys offers to fight Tristram, and Tristram wins, prompting Bors to reconsider his prior judgment: "I wyste never Cornysh knyght of so grete a valure nor so valyaunte as that knyght that beryth the trappours enbrowdred with crownys" (311.1-2). One wonders if even Bleoberys would have declined to joust with Tristram had he not been accompanied by Dinadan, a knight whose background he knows (and knows to be a knight he might be able to beat). Perhaps because of his companionship with Dinadan, the unknown Tristram gains his first introduction to respected knights of the Round Table.

At this point, Dinadan still is a fairly typical Malorian character. He transgresses a bit in disregarding prejudice against Cornish knights, but he seeks out a knight of worship, offers to joust with him, immediately recognizes Tristram's prowess, and asks to join his fellowship. However, Dinadan quickly comes to rue joining that fellowship when called to a two-against-thirty fight alongside Tristram. After Tristram and Dinadan part company with Bors, Bleoberys, and Dryaunte, they meet a damsel who seeks knights to save Launcelot from an ambush Morgan le Fay has planned (Malory 311.3-11). Here the sequence of actions becomes a bit unclear: the narrator tells us the damsel meets Tristram and Dinadan and the reader learns the background story of her quest (311.3-11); the narrator then tells us the damsel meets with Bors, Ector, and Dryaunte and tells them of Launcelot's danger (311.12-17); we then actually

“hear” her dialogue with Tristram and Dinadan as she encounters them and relates her story (311.18-20). Regardless of whether Tristram and Dinadan or Bors and company receives the news first, Tristram immediately acts and requests that the damsel take them to the intended battleground (Malory 311.21-22). (Bors and company do promise to help as well, saying “they wolde be nyghe her whan sir Launcelot shold mete with the thirty knyghtes” [Malory 311.14-15], but Tristram apparently is more eager to fight). Dinadan is not so eager to take on this battle, and he protests: ““What woll ye do? Hit ys nat for us to fyght with thirty knyghtes, and wyte you well I woll nat thereof! As to macche o knyght, two or three ys inow and they be men, but for to matche fiftene knyghtes, that I woll never undirtake”” (Malory 311.24-27). Dinadan then attempts to bargain with Tristram, saying he will fight if he can use Tristram’s Cornish shield, for the poor reputation of Cornish knights would trick Dinadan’s opponents into thinking he is a lesser knight; however, Tristram will not be separated from his shield (Malory 311.29-32).

As Donald L. Hoffman points out, Dinadan’s objections seem humorous because the reader has been subsumed into Malory’s world, where knights seize the adventure and disregard the potential costs; however, Dinadan’s reluctance and efforts to make the battle easier for himself actually is good sense: “It is Dinadan who expresses our own suspicions about the value of chivalry” (4). Why, indeed, should it fall only to Tristram and Dinadan to save Launcelot from the knights sent by Morgan le Fay? In a moment of dramatic irony, Tristram and Dinadan do not know that the damsel also has told Bors and company (a foursome, as we learn on 312.8) about the planned ambush, and that they also



have agreed to rescue Launcelot (Malory 311.12-17). Launcelot would not have faced all thirty knights by himself. There is no need for Dinadan and Tristram to take Morgan's knights on by themselves, except to gain worship, and from Dinadan's perspective, worship is worthless if you might not live to enjoy it. Even if Dinadan knows something of Tristram's reputation as a knight of prowess, the odds seem poor, and Dinadan is aware of his own limitations as a knight. As a knight of the Round Table, Dinadan is bound to the Pentecostal Oath, and nowhere in the oath does it require seemingly impossible battles. It is only under threat of death by Tristram that Dinadan agrees to stay "and to do what I may to save myself, but I wolde I had nat mette with you" (Malory 311.39).

The reader perhaps does not expect, then, for Dinadan to perform as well as he does. The reader may infer from the information given that, even if only in self-defense, Dinadan dispatches eight knights, and, in collaboration with Tristram, drives ten away (Malory 312.5-7). For a knight who claimed that "two or three ys inow and they be men" (Malory 311.25-26), Dinadan's actions actually are larger than his words. However, we quickly see Dinadan repeat his protest against what he perceives to be excessive and unnecessary fighting. Shortly after this scene, Tristram and Dinadan seek lodging and find a place where they have to joust their way into harbor. Again, Dinadan rejects this notion, and again, Tristram shames Dinadan into acting, and again, Dinadan performs fairly well (Malory 312.17-37). This pattern repeats itself throughout the Tristram section. Malory could easily have placed Dinadan cowering behind a tree while Tristram took care of every battle, had he wanted Dinadan to provide only comic relief or

to be the ultimate example of what *not* to do as a knight. Rather, as Andrew Lynch points out, Dinadan is *not* the coward he is in Malory's French sources (Lynch 99). That Malory allows Dinadan to be at least capable on the battlefield suggests that Dinadan has a larger role than that of the humorously incapable knight.

That role is to be not only an alternative knight but also to offer an alternative future. Because Dinadan does not bind himself so tightly to the rules of chivalry, he allows much more room for interpretation than do his comrades. This starts with his view on alliances and bloodline loyalties. Dinadan hears about Tristram and, regardless of his nationality, offers to joust with him. Although Brewnys sanz Pit  is Dinadan's cousin, Dinadan does not pledge fealty to his family group, as do the Orkney brothers (save Gareth). Indeed, Dinadan does not restrict himself to any one person or group when he considers his actions. As Hoffman points out for the Berluse and King Mark scenes, Dinadan first will not let Berluse kill Mark; he later will not allow Mark to kill Berluse (Malory 357.8-32). Dinadan certainly has enjoyed sport with King Mark, tricking him into fighting Lamerok by telling Mark that Lamerok is Kay (Malory 355.27-356.2), but he takes seriously his charge to deliver Mark to King Arthur's court. When Berluse pursues Mark to avenge his father's death, Dinadan valiantly fights Berluse and his men (Malory 356.36-357.26). However, the melee of the battle nearly allows Mark to kill Berluse, which Dinadan prevents (Malory 357.27-32). Loyal to neither Berluse nor Mark, Dinadan evaluates each situation on its own merits and acts accordingly. He does not side with Berluse, even though Dinadan knows Mark to be a murderer, and Dinadan's profound sense of

right and wrong certainly will not allow him to permit Mark to kill again. The closest affinity Dinadan has is to the Round Table, and even then he largely operates using his personal guidelines. This freedom is unusual in the *Morte*, where family and fellowship affinity usually override any practical considerations (Hoffman 5-6). However, such freedom would have opened endless opportunities for action to characters throughout the *Morte*, were they to embrace it as Dinadan does.

If, for example, the Orkney brothers were not a tight-knit posse but a group of individuals pursuing their own interests, they might have not been the trouble-causing force they become for the kingdom. (Actually, they might have killed each other, at least Aggravaine and Mordred, which would have spared many lives and could have saved Camelot a lot of problems.) Indeed, comparing Dinadan to Gareth opens an interesting viewpoint: Gareth also opts not to live by the Orkney family loyalty but to be closer to Launcelot. In doing so, Gareth frees himself from the family reputation and the life of vengeance that the Orkneys seem to embrace. Unfortunately, he does not cut all ties from his family and does not free himself from sharing a doomed fate with an Orkney brother. Likewise, Dinadan, although free from association with Brewnys sanz Pité and his reputation as a “grete dystroyer of all good knyghtes” (Malory 379.21), is not free from the troubles of the larger Round Table fellowship that becomes his family, and he will die at the hands of Aggravaine and Mordred, his brothers in knighthood (Malory 379.41-44).

Indeed, Helen Cooper points out that Dinadan is the first to point out the dangers of Aggravaine and Mordred’s hatred of Launcelot (Malory 428.18-24);

his death at their hands is predicted even before the men kill Lamerok (Malory 379.41-44). This is, according to Cooper, “apart from Merlin’s early prophecies, the first premonition of the collapse of the chivalric order” (195-6). We learn here of Dinadan’s custom: “he loved all good knyghtes that were valyaunte, and he hated all tho that were destroyers of good knyghtes. And there was none that hated sir Dynadan but tho that ever were called murtherers” (Malory 379.29-32). Significantly, Dinadan is able to smite down Brewnys sanz Pit , Aggravaine, and Mordred in this encounter, all of whom are knights who seem to be of good prowess (Malory 379). For Malory to cast Dinadan in such an important role only underscores this character’s role in the development of the action in Camelot. If character is determined by your actions, only a good knight—good in heart as well as physical ability—could strike down all three of these dastardly characters in one scene. Malory could not be clearer in depicting Dinadan as a worthy knight. Although Dinadan crosses over family lines and bends the basic expectations of a knight, he always stands on the side of good.

For all that Dinadan breaks the rules, however, I do not think he argues for a lawless existence. As demonstrated by Gawain and Pellinor’s poor behavior in “Torre and Pellinor,” these knights clearly require regulation, which they receive in the form of the Pentecostal Oath (Malory 75.33-76.2). I cannot find an instance where Dinadan breaks the rules of the Oath, while other knights in the *Morte* do. In addition, it would appear that knights perhaps extend this code too far and live by other unspoken codes of conduct that, though unspoken, they believe to be hard and fast rules. As I mentioned earlier, nowhere in the Oath do the knights pledge to take on seemingly hopeless battles, such as a two-

against-thirty encounter. Certainly acts of bravery and loyalty to a knight of Launcelot's caliber of are encouraged, but as Dinadan sees it, his participation in a battle that likely will not deter Morgan's knights, a battle with an opponent he knows to be undefeatable by a knight like him, accomplishes nothing. This sort of knightly conundrum often is what Dinadan objects to—those battles that clearly will not offer him any worship if he accepts them, and that may well result in his demise. After all, Bors can deny battle with Tristram because he is a Cornish and therefore unworshipful knight—if he can resist on such grounds, then why then can Dinadan not politely desist from participating in a battle he knows he cannot win, that will not bring him worship?

As Beverly Kennedy points out, Dinadan has his own rules: never challenge or accept a challenge from a vastly superior knight; never fight against great odds for trivial reasons; and never fight in anger (182-3). All of these rules originate from Dinadan's prudence rather than from an outside system of rules. As Dinadan explains his philosophy to King Mark, "Nay, sir, hit is ever worshyp to a knyght to refuse that thyng that he may nat attayne" (Malory 356.8-9). A "passyng good knyght," rather than an outstanding one, Dinadan must put more consideration into choosing his battles; letting the *aventure* seize him might be to allow death to claim him. Perhaps more in touch with his own mortality than the other knights, Dinadan opts to save body rather than face. He may be mocked, but he at least survives until the next scene.

Of course, Dinadan's humor is a matter of contention for scholars: is his humor Malory's commentary on the idiosyncrasies of knighthood, or is Dinadan's brand of humor meant to be ridiculous to a reader who will

understand that chivalry is the last great convention of a previous age? I believe his humor simply offers another alternative in the world of the *Morte*. We have not seen much humor in the tale until Dinadan arrives. Certainly, scenes such as Launcelot's accidentally kissing a man (Malory 153.25-35), Lyonet's reassembling her magical knight (Malory 206.24-31, 207.21-24), and others might make us chuckle a bit. In comparison, however, Dinadan is a stand-up comedian. While his actions sometimes make us smile, Dinadan's words are his real power. Kenneth Hodges points out that Dinadan is the first male character after Merlin to be known more for his words than his actions (105). Everyone knows about Dinadan's gift of wit, and since everyone is a target as he parries with words, most do not seem insulted. As Lynch points out, Dinadan often reserves his jests for the best knights, so to be the subject of one of Dinadan's joke can be an acknowledgement of prowess and worship (100). Of course, he also uses humor to poke fun at the worst knights and people as well, such as King Mark, such as his Lamerok-is-Kay practical joke. While Dinadan offers an alternate way of approaching life, and while he is unusually able to switch sides in conflicts, as the reader sees with Dinadan's mediation of King Mark and Bersules' clash, his jests still are bound to the black and white system of good knights and bad knights.

Indeed, Dinadan uses his wits for laughs, but also to defend the good knights. When he, Palomides, and Tristram are imprisoned together, Dinadan brokers the peace with something of a humorous analogy: "I mervayle of the, sir Palomydes, whether, and thou haddyst sir Trystram here, thou woldist do none harme. For and a wolf and a sheepe were togydir in a preson, the wolf wolde

suffir the sheepe to be in pees'' (Malory 338.1-4). By comparing Palomides' behavior to that of an ill-behaved wolf, Dinadan encourages Palomides to see an alternative to his action. While the image is humorous, it also incites Palomides' shame. The peace is not permanent between Palomides and Tristram, but Dinadan at least keeps them all alive long enough to get out of prison.

Of course, Dinadan also uses his gift of humor against King Mark, on one instance in service to Launcelot. As Launcelot himself says, Dinadan has earned the trust of the knights (Malory 381.43-44)—for, as Dinadan says, "though I be nat of worship myself, I love all tho that bene of worship" (Malory 381.41-42). King Mark, who Dinadan does *not* find to be of worship, writes letters to Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot that "spake shame by her and by sir Launcelot" (Malory 381.9-30). Arthur, as I discussed in Chapter Two, chooses to disregard Mark's letter (Malory 381.18-23), but Guinevere and Launcelot are "wrothe oute of mesure" (Malory 381.28-29). Knowing something is wrong, Dinadan steals the letter from the sleeping Launcelot and makes "grete sorow for angir" upon reading it (Malory 381.35). After Dinadan and Launcelot discuss the matter, the reader learns where Dinadan's true gifting is: he composes "the worste lay that ever harper songe with harpe or with any other instrument" (Malory 382.10-12). As he renders Mark "wondirly wrothe" (Malory 387.44) with this song (via a traveling minstrel, so as to protect himself and others), Dinadan strikes Mark at a weak point, setting to verse and song the many villainous deeds Mark has executed, and "displaying" them to Mark's court, to boot. Unfortunately, Mark does not connect Dinadan's revenge with the accusatory letters concerning Launcelot and Guinevere that he has sent to Arthur, and he directs his wrath to

his usual scapegoat, Tristram: “he demed that the lay that was songe afore hym was made by sir Trystrams counceyle, wherefore he thought to sle hym and all his well-wyllers in that contrey (Malory 388.14-16). Here, perhaps, is a weakness to Dinadan’s brand of fighting: he certainly compromises King Mark’s integrity in front of his court, but he also renews Mark’s hatred of Tristram. The lay does not incite Mark even to think of the other villainous irons he has in the fire, like interfering with Launcelot and Guinevere’s relationship. In hand-to-hand combat, your enemy and purpose are clear; a battle of the wits does not always achieve the desired goal—especially if one of the battlers is not so witty, like Mark. A lay sung by a minstrel can, literally, be lost in translation. Although the lay episode clearly illustrates Dinadan’s character, the song falls short of shaming a wicked character like King Mark; words fall flat when the audience is not able or willing to hear them.

In this way, Dinadan’s dry sense of humor can be compared to that of a twenty-first century female comedian joking about motherhood. She is not necessarily saying that motherhood is bad, but her jests are successful because they resonate with a certain audience who can identify with her experience. The jokes become a community-building effort. Comparably, Dinadan’s jabs at the curses of chivalry bring the knightly community together in understanding the good of chivalry as well (Lynch 100). Even as Dinadan rejects the notion of fighting every knight he meets, he can and does use the convention to trick King Mark into fighting with Lamerok (Malory 355.27-356.2). Hodges extends this premise and introduces another troublesome aspect of Dinadan’s character, stating that Dinadan’s humor lies in pairing things that do not match: “common



sense and love, prudence with knight errantry, his own words with his own actions" (105). How, indeed, does love fit into the equation of a society largely centered on knightly swordplay? Dinadan interrogates this question with his argument against the notion of love.

Before delving into Dinadan's famous rejections of love, I do want to note Helen Cooper's excellent observation that Dinadan is not the only one in the *Morte* who does not place much stock in love. As Cooper points out (191), sir Dynas, upon losing his paramour to another knight, is "more wrother for hys brachettis, more than for hys lady" (Malory 337.25-6); neither Elaine of Corbenic nor Elaine of Ascolat are able to achieve Launcelot's heart, a crushing blow to both; and I would add that Arthur is sadder for the loss of his fellowship than for the loss of his wife (Malory 685.29-32). As Cooper says, "Malory gives almost as much narrative emphasis to dismissals of love as to assertions of its power or value. . . . Dinadan is not going against the tenor of the narrative when he prays God to defend him from love" (191). Why then, do scholars give so much attention to Dinadan's rejection of love? Perhaps it is because we never see him love, whereas Dynas did have his paramour, and both Elaines love desperately. We do not *see* Dinadan losing a beloved, so his rejection of love without any evidence of experience in it seems odd. Indeed, Tristram's defense of love seems to be upheld in Dinadan's battle with Elynogrys, which Tristram declares will "preve whether a lover be bettir knyght or ye that woll nat love no lady" (Malory 421.17-18). Dinadan has been laughing at Elynogrys, having pegged him as a "lovear," and he challenges him to a joust with the intent of proving that one can be a good knight without having a lady (Malory 420.28-421.28). Dinadan loses,

and Tristram enjoys the last laugh: “How now? Mesemyth the lover hath well sped” (Malory 421.30). As Hoffman points out, Dinadan’s drive to prove this point of his philosophy drives him to his only real loss, for this may be the first time he enters into a joust with no prior knowledge of the opposing knight’s prowess (13). It seems that Dinadan’s true passion is to prove that a life without passion is the best way to survive in one piece!

However, Dinadan does not need to fall in love to prove his point. The troubles in love going on all around him are evidence enough. While his lack of great prowess may be due to his lack of love, as Tristram argues (Malory 420.34-5), Dinadan has enough knightly ability to get by, and he is wise enough to ally himself with knights such as Tristram and Launcelot, who can help him get through tight spots. Yet in these alliances, Dinadan is privy to the innermost problems of chivalric love. He meets Tristram upon his exile from Cornwall, an exile that is born out of King Mark’s jealousy of Tristram over Isode. Dinadan reads King Mark’s letter that shames Launcelot and Guinevere for their relationship. From his perspective, love causes these perfectly good knights nothing but trouble, as he explains in a conversation with Isode:

‘Madame,’ seyde sir Dynadan, ‘I mervayle at sir Trystram and mo other suche lovers. What aylyth them to be so madde and so asoted upon women?’

‘Why,’ seyde La Beall Isode, ‘ar ye a knyght and ar no lovear? For soothe, hit is grete shame to you, wherefore ye may nat be called a good knyght by reson but yf ye make a quarell for a lady.’

‘God deffende me!’ seyde sir Dynadan, ‘for the joy of love is to shorte, and the sorrow thereof [and what cometh thereof] is duras over longe.’ (Malory 424.5-13)

Dinadan is, if nothing else, a practical man. He chooses his actions carefully and is not willing to enjoy a few moments of pleasure in exchange for a life of pain; to

him, this is how love works. Hoffman notes that Guinevere and Isode are more aggressive than the men in mocking Dinadan, since they are threatened by such comments (12). After all, part of women's value in chivalric society comes from the knights with whom they are associated, the knights who are obligated to defend their ladies, and if all were to take Dinadan's stance, the women might be left unprotected. However, the Pentecostal Oath clause requiring knights "allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe" (Malory 75.41-43) addresses this concern, and Dinadan does abide by the Oath. In the aforementioned scene, Dinadan rejects the opportunity to joust in a tournament against three knights who Isode says have wronged her; he does not wish to participate in the theatrics of chivalry (424.22-29). Earlier, he already has fought with Brewnys sanz Pit , a knight known to be an enemy to women, so Dinadan is more than willing to fight when it is necessary. He has no problems with defending women; it is loving them that raises his objections.

In fact, one of Dinadan's greatest gifts is his ability to read situations, to assess something like love and consider its consequences. Cooper says: "Dinadan is the only one of Malory's male characters who consistently understands how to relate to people other than by combat or kinship; he operates by intelligence and sympathy rather than brute force" (194). As D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., points out, Dinadan initially is a puzzle, for he is funny in a text not given to comedy, he is not a lover, and he is very inconsistent in his courage (167). However, there is method to the madness: Dinadan's humor always is well placed and has a point; he has his reasons for not being a lover—and they are not unwarranted; and he

thoughtfully considers which fights to fight and which to turn down. Dinadan is a master of balance, an accomplishment that other Malorian characters, such as Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot, do not attain. He makes people angry when necessary, as with the insulting lay he composes for King Mark's court, but, as Lynch points out, he also can offer comforting words to Palomides (99). He can hold his own on the battlefield, perhaps more so than he gives himself credit, but he also knows his limitations and does his best not to push his luck. And where love is concerned, he recognizes the trials and tribulations his friends are subjected to and decides to protect himself by not becoming involved with any woman, ever.

Perhaps Dinadan can be accused of not caring about anything: he does not strive to be a better knight, nor does he wish to develop a close relationship with any woman. A balanced life is easier to maintain when one does not have as many conflicting responsibilities. But Dinadan does care: he cares about the value of good knights, and he cares enough about the people he does build relationships with, such as Tristram and Launcelot, to defend them in his own way, by rebuking Palomides for his misbehavior and writing a lay against King Mark. He cares enough about humanity to be able to switch sides and judge a dispute without bias based upon friends or family, as in the Berluse and King Mark episode. He cares enough to provide commentary, to share his controversial opinions, and although no one takes action against Aggravaine and Mordred after Dinadan's warning, he voices his concern: "'For sir Gawayne and his bretherne, excepte you, sir Gareth, hatyth all good knyghtes of the Rounde Table for the moste party. For well I wote, <as> they might, prevably they hate

my lorde sir Launcelot and all his kyn, and grete pryvay dispyte they have at hym" (Malory 428.18-24). Unlike Merlin, Dinadan has no supernatural gifts of prophecy; however, Malory uses Dinadan's understanding of human nature to plant an early hint of the story's conclusion. If someone had acted against Aggravaine and Mordred, we would be reading an alternate version of *Le Morte Darthur's* conclusion. Malory uses Dinadan to offer an alternative: it may not be the best way, and of course, Dinadan's is not the chosen path, but the hint of it is intertwined throughout the Tristram section, asking that the reader consider what could have been.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Malory Does “A New Thing” with the Deaths of Arthur, Launcelot, and Guinevere: Remembering To Move Forward

Perhaps Sir Thomas Malory had Isaiah’s prophecy in mind as he composed his version of the conclusion to the Arthuriad: “Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19). Scholars consider two sources Malory used in adapting his vision of the deaths of Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot: the Old French *La Mort le Roi Artu* and the Middle English stanzaic poem, *Le Morte Arthur* (Guerin 237). Compared to his sources, Malory maintains the expected storyline—no one unexpectedly survives his tale, and no one gets married. A tragedy this epic remains. However, he does “do a new thing,” carefully constructing his ending such that new paths are forged in the wilderness of a world without Arthur. Malory’s order of deaths is different from the stanzaic poem and the same as the French; however, in both sources, Guinevere’s death is something of a side note or afterthought. For Malory, on the other hand, Guinevere and her death are very important cogs in the mechanisms of his conclusion. As I have already shown, Malory develops his characters through their actions throughout the *Morte*; by doing so he lays the groundwork for his specific vision for the ending, and in this epic, death is a significant action. Arthur dies on the battlefield, having protected the future of his kingdom (Malory 714-717); Guinevere passes away at the nunnery, remembering her earthly love but embracing her hopes for salvation (Malory

718-723); and, per the bishop's dream, "angellys heve up syr Launcelot unto heven" (Malory 724.26-27) after he has returned Guinevere to Arthur's side and commended his followers to a Crusade (Malory 723-726). Malory develops his characters using their actions and dialogue; he does not neglect this final opportunity to develop his characters and tie together the pieces of his story. By ordering the deaths from first Arthur, next Guinevere, and finally Launcelot, Malory brings the action of the *Morte* and his unique interpretation of the Arthuriad to its most satisfactory conclusion.

All three sources follow Launcelot and Guinevere's journeys to the holy life, yet Malory emphasizes much more than they the holiness his favorite knight and "good lady" achieve. In light of the original-to-Malory May passage, the reader finally understands why Malory deems that Guinevere has "a good ende" (Malory 649.35). The May passage emphasizes the remembrance of "olde jantylnes and olde servyse, and many kynde dedes that was forgotyn by neclygence" (645.5-6). At the nunnery, even as Guinevere refuses Launcelot's marriage proposal, she calls him to remembrance. As Malory declares, she "was a trew lover" (Malory 649.34). Certainly she forces Launcelot to ruminate upon the ruin their love has caused; however, Guinevere does not take their love out of the conversation (720. 25-33). While she is "vertuously...chaunged" (718.3), Guinevere resists complete separation from her earthly existence, from her very human errors and joys. To do so would be to deny her role in the story; indeed, to do so would be to deny the story.

For Malory, this appears to be the proper religious life, especially from someone who had the honor of living in Camelot: not to forget all that was in

their earthly community, but to remember those days, to honor them, and to lift them up to God in making a way for the future. The May passage assures readers that Guinevere is a “trew lover,” and to that aspect of her personage she must remain “trew,” even as she now dedicates herself to God. As Kenneth Hodges eloquently notes, “While it proved to be impossible to love God and king and queen and all the worthy knights, it is to the glory of Launcelot and Guinevere that they tried. To love only God or only each other or only the kingdom would have been more stable, but it would have made them smaller, less glorious” (151). Guinevere does not forsake her attempt to love two men, knights, and God, but she cherishes all of them to the very end. I argue that Guinevere finds her “good ende” because she not only remembers Arthur, but because she also facilitates Launcelot’s memory of Arthur. In addition, her death shapes Launcelot’s remembrance of her. Finally, as Launcelot’s “trew lover” to her death and as the inspiration of his final great quest—becoming a man of God—Guinevere, with Launcelot, makes ways in the wilderness for the manner in which the remaining knights commemorate Launcelot’s legacy.

Because Guinevere sets remembrance in motion, Malory’s work can end with a promise of a new beginning. Arthur must die first so Launcelot and Guinevere can remember his glories. Guinevere must die second, allowing Launcelot to mourn her, to remember the love they shared, and to be inspired by her holiness. Launcelot must die last, allowing the remaining knights of the fellowship to remember the greatest knight in the world, and his almost-successful bid at having it all. After Arthur’s death, Launcelot and Guinevere do not marry, yet they do initiate a new beginning by continuing the call to knightly



service in a new way. Launcelot's followers embark on another religious quest, this time to the Holy Land, in remembrance not only of the chivalric heyday of Camelot but also of Launcelot and Guinevere's newfound holiness. Launcelot and Guinevere, through their deaths and the accompanying remembrance, indeed make ways in the wilderness and find rivers in the desert: they, and Malory, do a new thing.

Of course, before Launcelot and Guinevere can facilitate a new world order, the old order must first die—literally. *Le Morte Darthur* does not end with the death of Arthur; the Arthuriad extends for quite a few more pages after Arthur's death before the tale comes to its final conclusion. This choice *not* to end with the death of Arthur highlights Malory's purposeful decision to end with something more than the demise of a king and his kingdom, to do a new thing with his ending. The alliterative *Morte Arthure* is not a direct source for Malory's conclusion; however, examining the work highlights Malory's editorial choices in constructing his own ending, for the alliterative *Morte Arthure* does conclude with the death of Arthur. The fate of Waynor (as Guinevere is known here) is unknown. Launcelot is simply one of a list of men whom Arthur finds dead after he receives Mordred's mortal blow (*Morte Arthure* 236.4266)<sup>1</sup>; indeed, in the alliterative poem, Launcelot is scarcely more than one of a list of knights battling for Arthur. The key point of this Arthuriad *is* the downfall of a king: "thus endes King Arthur" (238.4342). Thus "endes" the story.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the alliterative *Mort Arthure* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, I use Larry D. Benson's 1974 edition, *King Arthur's Death*. Hereafter I will refer to them in parenthetical notations as, respectively, *Mort Arthure* and *Morte Arthur*.

Other renditions of the Arthuriad would add the love triangle plotline that comes between Arthur and Launcelot. Of course, they also had to build upon the scanty relationship between Arthur and his bride. Although Malory is not the author to add the love story to *Le Morte Darthur*, he is the one to carry it through to the end. In the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, Launcelot goes to Gaynor (as Guinevere is called in this version) after Arthur's death, but he does not propose marriage to her (*Morte Arthur* 103). Gaynor instructs him, "That never in thy life after this/Ne come to me for no soking,/Nor send me sonde" (103.3673-75). They appear to cut all ties, for we have no hints that Launcelot disregards her instructions, and he receives no premonition of her death as Malory's Launcelot does. Rather, we learn of Gaynor's death after we learn of Launcelot's, so it is unclear who dies first. After an extended mourning period for Launcelot, his men rather anticlimactically travel to Aumsbury and find Gaynor dead. They take her to Glastonbury for burial with Arthur, the monks sing, and "Explicit le Morte Arthur" (*Morte Arthur* 111), once again. This tale ends with the conclusion of the love story, rather than directly with the death of Arthur, but this appears to be more for the purpose of wrapping up loose ends.

Of course, Malory also desires to wrap up loose ends with his conclusion, but he does even more than that. Arthur's death brings his own story to the completion of its circle. In the beginning pages of *Le Morte Darthur*, we read about his achievement of the sword in the anvil, with the people crying, "'we all see that it is Goddes wille that he shalle be our kynge, and who that holdeth ageynst it, we wille slee hym'" (Malory 10.23-24). Unfortunately, the people do not abide by that promise, turning against him to stand with Mordred (708.24-

33), and it is Arthur himself who must slay the usurper. The sources agree on this matter and that the usurper is of Arthur's own line, his own blood. This fact carries the implicit understanding that in killing Mordred, his natural heir-apparent, Arthur truly brings his story, his name, his legacy to an end. The near-chiasmus of the French text puts it movingly: "Einsi ocist li peres le fill, et li filz navra le pere a mort" (*Mort Artu* 220.11). [Thus did the father kill the son, and the son mortally wounded the father.]<sup>2</sup>

Arthur has work to do before he can die, however. As king, and now the last of his line, Arthur must return the king's sword, Excalibur. With the help of Bedwere (after a few misfires of Bedwere's attempts to save the sword), Excalibur is reclaimed by the lake (Malory 715.8-716.3). Now Arthur can surrender himself to the ladies on the barge for healing, and now he can die, or at least, be taken to "another place" (Malory 717.30). Compared to the *Mort Artu* Arthur's religiosity is reduced; the French version has Arthur praying for mercy for his men all day, and "Toute la nuit fu li rois Artus en proieres et en oroisons" (*Mort Artu* 222.6). [King Arthur continued to pray throughout the night.] Malory's Arthur is of a different ilk than the French variant of the king, and the charge of praying for the knights of Camelot will fall to his queen and his best knight. With his tomb inscribed, "Rex quondam rexque futurus" (Malory 717.35), Arthur may yet have another time of leadership in England; this Malory is not willing to affirm or deny (717.29-33). For the time being, however, Arthur's life as king of England is complete. Once he surrenders Excalibur and returns

---

<sup>2</sup> For French citations, I use Jean Frappier's 1936 edition of *La Mort le Roi Artu*. Hereafter I will refer to the work as *Mort Artu*. For translation, I use Norris J. Lacy's text, *The Lancelot-Grail Reader* (2000).

himself to Avalon, his responsibilities are done. Someone else must lead England and indeed, Arthur's empire, into its next phase.

Ready to take up that banner are Guinevere and Launcelot, although they likely would not have thought of their role in that manner. However, Malory wastes no time in laying the groundwork for Guinevere's death and the leadership she exhibits before she can die. Her beginnings as a leader are inauspicious: she "stale away" to "lete make herself a nunne," and "never creure coude make her myry" (Malory 717.41, 42, 718.1-2). Yet it soon becomes clear that Guinevere is unwaveringly committed to her new life. In Launcelot and Guinevere's exchange at the nunnery, their first conversation without the complication of Arthur and their last conversation ever, things perhaps do not go as Launcelot wished. He is prepared to be her comfort, for "she hath had grete payne and muche disease" (719.36-37). Yet when he arrives she swoons three times, and it soon becomes clear that her swooning is not born of pure joy. I find interesting Malory's note that her ladies manage to keep her from the earth (Malory 720.6-8): he adds this language to his version of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, from which this episode is pulled nearly word for word. Perhaps Malory is making a point here about the almost unbearable pull of earthly pleasures, even their remembrances, upon us?

Of course, while Guinevere will adhere to her vows and overcome any earthly temptations that Launcelot might represent, Malory does not admonish her for her earthly love. Toward Malory's desire to maintain Guinevere as a "trew lover" to the end, he alters his source just a bit. While Guinevere's speech to Launcelot is almost exactly the same as that in the stanzaic poem, telling her

fellow nuns and reminding Launcelot of the havoc they wrought for their love, Malory omits a full stanza of Guinevere's speech in the *Morte Arthur* from his Guinevere's oration:

“When I him see, the sooth to say,  
All my herte began to colde;  
That ever I sholde abide this day,  
To see so many barons bold  
Sholde for us be slain away!  
Our will hath be too sore bought sold;  
But God, That all mightes may,  
Now hath me set where I will hold. (*Morte Arthur* 102.3646-53)

While Malory's Guinevere does remind Launcelot of the damage they have done, Guinevere vilifies herself and Launcelot more in the Middle English stanzaic source, and she tells her companions that her heart runs cold at the sight of Launcelot. In the *Morte Darthur*, Guinevere's heart certainly does not turn cold because of Launcelot's presence; rather, the reader can presume that she swoons because of the flood of emotion—good and bad—his presence brings.

Indeed, Malory's Guinevere mentions the love she and Launcelot had once more than the stanzaic Guinevere does, and it is arguably her most ardent expression of love in the passage: “for as well as I have loved the heretofore, myne [har]te woll nat serve now to se the; for thorow the and me ys the f[lou]re of kyngis and [knyghtes] destroyed” (Malory 720.27-30). Guinevere sends Launcelot away not because she does not love him, and not because “we have delited in [love] ere” (*Morte Arthur* 104.3719). Guinevere sends Launcelot away so that she “may have a syght of the blyss[ed] face of Cryste Jesu, and on Doomesday to sytte on Hys ryght syde” (Malory 720.20-22). She has a new life in sight and is prepared for Launcelot to begin a new life as well.

The reader does wonder whether Guinevere is genuine in her urging that Launcelot take a wife and “lyff with [hir wyth] joy and blys” (Malory 720.30-31). This new, “vertuous” Guinevere is, of course, well-adjusted and perhaps beyond jealousy, but one wonders whether she anticipated Launcelot’s rejection of her suggestion with a bit of earthly, rather than holy, gladness! Whatever the case, Launcelot does immediately deny the new life she suggests for him, choosing instead to model himself after Guinevere’s “perfeccion.” Again, Malory uses much of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as his model for Launcelot’s side of the conversation, but Malory’s Launcelot adds two major points. First, he recalls his failure to fully attain the Sankgreal: “For in the queste of the Sankgreal I had that tyme forsakyn the vanytees of the worlde, had nat youre love bene” (721.1-3). This comment almost seems to be a jab at Guinevere, reminding her that she was responsible for his earlier aborted attempt at holiness. However, he goes on to recall their love and their new shared path: “in you I have had myn erthly joye, and yf I had founden you now so disposed, I had caste me to have had you into myn owne royaume. But sythen I fynde you thus desposed, I assure you faithfully, I wyl ever take me to penaunce and praye whyle my lyf lasteth” (721.7-11). Launcelot would have preferred living a traditional “happily ever after” ending with Guinevere; however, she will not permit it. Denied even a kiss to commemorate that “erthly joye” and inspired by Guinevere’s commitment to penance, Launcelot will follow the path of God, his new joy in life.

Indirectly, Guinevere also can be credited for several other new monks. While Launcelot had put to rest his action as a knight and true lover, he does

continue to inspire his knightly brethren, now to holy service. As if he emits a beacon call, eight knights find their way to Launcelot and, “whan they sawe syr Launcelot had taken hym to suche perfeccion they had no lust to departe but toke such an habyte as he had” (Malory 722.9-11). While maintaining her role as Launcelot’s “trew lover,” Guinevere’s transformation into a religious figure also transforms her from being complicit in Launcelot’s sin to becoming an intercessor.

Having established the new form of their relationship, Guinevere and Launcelot are prepared for their respective deaths. Launcelot, now a priest, receives a vision, “in remysson of his synnes,” that he is to take his men with him to Aumsbury, where he will find Guinevere dead; he and his fellows are to take her corpse and bury her with Arthur (Malory 722.21-26). A reader might wonder whether, had Launcelot not taken up the holy life, his remission of sins would have occurred, and if he would have been worthy of taking Guinevere to her grave. Be that as it may, Launcelot is forgiven of his sins, and, after consulting with the hermit, does as his vision instructs; he finds everything as his vision foretold (722.27-35). Even more than that, Launcelot learns that Guinevere also had a vision that he had become a priest and would come to convey her to Arthur’s side. Additionally, Malory reminds us with her deathbed prayer that Guinevere has perhaps not forsaken her love of Launcelot: “I beseche Almyghty God that I may never have power to see syr Launcelot with my worldly eyen!” (722.41-42). In the context of Malory’s May passage, this cannot be interpreted as Guinevere’s disgust at the thought of seeing Launcelot again; rather, she does not want to be distracted by her earthly love from her heavenly goal. That Launcelot

is “called” to Guinevere’s death implies a certain approval from above of their everlasting love; as such, Launcelot is the only person who can return Guinevere to her rightful place at Arthur’s side.

So it is fitting that at seeing Guinevere’s corpse, Launcelot “wepte not gretelye, but sighed,” then falls to the business of preparing for her funeral procession (Malory 723.1-7). It is not until she is laid in the ground that Launcelot swoons and then must defend his sorrow to the hermit. By doing so, Launcelot again asserts the propriety of remembering and commending earthly joys to the heavens:

“For whan I remembre of hir beaulté and of hir noblesse, that was bothe wyth hyr kyng and wyth hyr, so whan I sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders, truly myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body. And whan I remembre me how by my defaute and myn orgule and my pryde that they were bothe layed ful lowe, that were pereles that ever was lyvyng of Cristen people, wyt you well,” sayd syr Launcelot, “this remembred, of their kyndenes and myn unkyndenes, sanke so to myn herte that I myght not susteyne myself.” (723.23-31).

Launcelot remembers Guinevere’s beauty and nobility, and Arthur’s beauty and nobility. He also remembers his role in their downfall; filled with the thought of both, his earthly legs cannot bear him up. In exquisite irony, the actions of the most active of knights come crashing down upon him in one instant, rendering him action-less and bringing him to the earth, just as Guinevere fell before. For Launcelot’s actions he has great responsibility to bear, not only to himself but also to others, and, now, to his God. Interestingly, Malory tells us this passage is as “the Frensshe book maketh mencyon” (723.31-32); however, the *Mort Artu* dedicates comparatively little space to depicting Launcelot’s sorrow and remorse at Guinevere or Arthur’s deaths; certainly the reader of that text does not have the benefit of Launcelot’s revealing monologue (*Mort Artu* 231.21-31). Rather,



Guinevere's death in the French book is recounted, mourned, and got over by Launcelot in little more than a paragraph. For Malory, Guinevere's death inspires remembrance of a king and a queen, of Launcelot's friend and lover. His prior actions are perhaps buried in the tomb with Arthur and Guinevere; now, Launcelot moves on to the final phase of his life.

Although Launcelot maintains his vigil lying on Arthur and Guinevere's grave, not to be comforted and always in prayer and remembrance of his past (Malory 723.33-41), he does become almost a new person in this last short phase, for his fasting reduces him so "that peple coude not knowe hym" (723.37). He takes to bed (the most active knight reduced to inaction indeed), then requests his last rites, knowing his death is imminent (724.1-8). Guerin points out that Malory again increases Launcelot's holiness here: Launcelot asks for his last rites, then requests to be buried at Joyous Gard; in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, the order is reversed (247). Launcelot dies in his sleep, discovered because of the bishop's dream of Launcelot being taken to heaven (724.25-34). Taken to Joyous Gard in the same bier used for Guinevere's corpse and buried with much singing, weeping, wringing of hands, and swooning, Malory makes clear that Launcelot dies a man "of worshyp," allowing all people who wish to see him one last time.

Sir Ector's eulogy summarizes Malory's final view of Launcelot:

"A Launcelot!" he sayd, 'thou were hede of al Crysten knyghtes! And now dare say,' sayd syr Ector, 'thou sir Launcelot, there thou lvest, that thou were never matched of erthely knyghtes hande. And thou were the curtest knyght that ever bare shelde! And thou were the truest frende to any lovar that ever bestrade hors, and thou were the trewest lover, of a synful man, that ever loved woman, and thou were the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde. And thou were the godelyst persone that ever cam emonge prees of knyghtes, and thou was the mekest man and the jentylllest that ever ete in hall emonge ladyes, and thou were the sternest knyght to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the reeste.' (725.16-26)

Courteous, godly, kind, meek, gentle, stern—and true friend, and true lover. Despite Launcelot's failings—Ector acknowledges him as a “synful man”—he is extolled at his burial as a great man, full of worship. Launcelot dies last, as the epitome of all that Camelot and chivalry was. And as great men do, Launcelot inspires his followers to future action. The eight who became monks remain so, now with Ector joining them (Malory 725.38-43), but then they extend their religious service to knightly efforts once more. Interestingly, Malory again credits his French source for a detail that is not present there, the Crusades of Bors, Ector, Blamour, and Bleoberis (Malory 726.2-4). According to Malory, Launcelot has given them one last order: “syr Launcelot commaunded them for to do or ever he passyd oute of thys worlde, <there> these foure knyghtes dyd many bataylles upon the myscreantes, or Turkes. And there they <dyed> upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake” (726.6-9). Launcelot commends to them a new kind of knightly quest, still to battle for right and good, but now not simply for a king but for “Goddes sake.” Through Arthur's death, then Guinevere's, and then Launcelot's, new ways are forged. Guinevere and Launcelot discover new sides of themselves; by so doing, they inspire others to service, while always remembering those who went before.

For Malory, each death is integral to tying up the ends of his tale, and his conclusion is about more than literally concluding each character's life. The conclusion is indeed his opportunity to complete the characters of Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot, by narrating their final words and actions. He accomplishes this by allowing them to finish their lives, but this is a journey to finding out who they can become and how they have shaped their world.

Throughout the book, Malory gives his personages character and dimensionality through his telling of their actions and words. Therefore, the deaths of his three main characters—their final actions, their most meaningful actions, per Christian theology—must complete not only their stories but also their characters. Malory, committed as he is to developing his characters, especially *these* characters, cannot give short shrift to any of them. As a result, he must forge out on his own, beyond his sources, to explore his characters' final days and inner depths. These characters must remember the past in order to move forward, to death and to inspiring new action. As an author, Malory does a “new thing”; as a storyteller of the birth and death of a dynasty, he creates characters who will live forever.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

In May, whan every harte floryshyth and burgenyth (for, as the season ys lusty to beholde and comfortable, so man and woman rejoysyth and gladith of somer commynge with his freyshe floures, for winter wyth hys rowghe wyndis and blastis causyth lusty men and women to cowre and to syt by fyres), so thys season hit befelle in the moneth of May a grete angur and unhappy<e> that stynted nat tulle the floure of chyvalry of [alle] the worlde was destroyed and slayne. (Malory 673.2-8)

Just as Sir Thomas Malory uses his first May passage to reinforce the themes and motivations that provide the structural basis for *Le Morte Darthur*, so he uses a second May passage to prepare readers for the inevitable downfall of Camelot. This time, even as hearts “floryshyth and burgenyth,” the troublesome aspects of chivalry and the tensions within King Arthur’s court have reached the tipping point. Even as some hearts flourish, other hearts (namely, those of Aggravaine and Mordred) harbor “a grete angur.” As a result, Arthur, “the floure of chyvalry of [alle] the worlde,” falls. Yet, as I have shown, it is in the conclusion that Arthur fully blossoms into the “floure of chyvalry,” that Malory’s central characters finally are able to assemble their true selves, as molded by their experiences throughout the *Morte*.

To give justice to the full range of individuals who populate Camelot would require a much longer study. There are many other characters in *Le Morte Darthur* who would easily bear further inspection, ranging from major characters such as Gawain and Tristram, to those with smaller roles, like Morgause and Alexander the Orphan. It is my hope that in bringing together the community of characters I have discussed, I have demonstrated Malory’s keen authorial ability

as a writer not only of action but also of character. Because Launcelot and Guinevere uphold the ideals of love and remembrance set forth in the first May passage, their love lives forever in the Western imagination. Although the “floure of chyvalry” is “destroyed and slayne,” Arthur fully claims his role as the epitome of chivalry, of the character who will live forever in inspiring Tudors, World War II soldiers, a nation mourning the loss of a beloved president, and many more. These are much more than one-dimensional reflections of the characters set out in Malory’s sources. In his hands, through their actions, they are universal, enduring characters.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Dorsey. "Gender and the Chivalric Community: The Pentecostal Oath in Malory's 'Tale of King Arthur.'" *Bulletin bibliographique de la Société internationale arthurienne* 51 (1999): 293-312.
- . "Gender and the Script/Print Continuum: Caxton's *Morte Darthur*." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 21 (2004): 133-150.
- . "Gender, Marriage, and Knighthood: Single Ladies in Malory." *The Single Woman in Medieval and Early Modern England: Her Life and Representation*. Edited by Laurel Amtower and Dorothea Kehler. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003. 41-61.
- Batt, Catherine. "Desire, History, Violence: Merlin's Narratives." *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 37-70.
- . "Narrative, Form, and Heroic Expectation: *The Tale of Arthur and Lucius*, *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake*, and *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney*." *Malory's Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition*. NY: Palgrave, 2002. 71-101.
- Blamires, Alcuin. "Introduction." *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Edited by Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. 1-15.
- Cooper, Helen. "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones." *A Companion to Malory*. Eds. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996. 183-114.
- Davidson, Roberta. "Reading Like a Woman in Malory's *Morte Darthur*." *Arthuriana* 16.1 (2006): 21-33.
- Dichmann, Mary E. "'The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius': The Rise of Lancelot." *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur*. Ed. R.M. Lumiansky. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964. 67-90.
- Fries, Maureen. "Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Edited by Thelma S. Fenster. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996. 59-73.
- Gibson, Angela. "Malory's Reformation of Shame." *Arthuriana* 11.4 (2001): 64-76.

- Gibson, Melanie McGarrahan. "Lyonet, Lunete, and Laudine: Carnavalesque Arthurian Women." *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. Edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001. 213-227.
- Guerin, Wilfred L. "'The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution." *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur*. Ed. R.M. Lumiansky. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964. 233-274.
- Hanks, D. Thomas, Jr. "Characterization or Jumble? Sir Dinadan in Malory." *Medieval Perspectives* 2.1 (1987): 167-76.
- . "Malory, Dialogue, and Style." *Quondam et Futurus: A Journal of Arthurian Interpretation* 3.1 (1993): 24-35.
- Hart, Carol. "Newly Ancient: Reinventing Guenevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*." *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature*. Edited by Muriel Whitaker. Garland Medieval Casebooks. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995. 3-20.
- Heng, Geraldine. "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Edited by Thelma S. Fenster. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996. 97-113.
- Hill, Sarah J. "Recovering Malory's Guenevere." *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*. Ed. Lori J. Walters. New York: Garland, 1996. 267-77.
- Hodges, Kenneth. "The Death of Guinevere." *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. 129-153.
- . *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- . "Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nyneve." *Arthuriana* 12.2 (2002): 78-96.
- Hoffman, Donald L. "Dinadan: The Excluded Middle." *Tristania: A Journal Devoted to Tristan Studies* 10.1-2 (1984-85): 3-16.
- Holbrook, Sue Ellen. "Nymue, The Chief Lady of the Lake, in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Edited by Thelma S. Fenster. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996. 171-190.
- Jesmok, Janet. "Comedic Preludes to Lancelot's 'Unhappy' Life in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*." *Arthuriana* 14.4 (2004): 26-44.

- Kaufman, Amy S. "Between Women: Desire and Its Object in Malory's 'Alexander the Orphan.'" *Parergon: Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 24.1 (2007): 137-54.
- . "The Law of the Lake: Malory's Sovereign Lady." *Arthuriana* 17.3 (2007): 56-73.
- Kennedy, Beverly. *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 2nd edn. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992.
- Kennedy, Edward Donald. "Malory's Guenevere: 'A Woman Who Had Grown a Soul.'" *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. Edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001. 35-43.
- King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1974.
- Korrel, Peter. "Arthur, Modred and Guinevere in medieval English romances dealing with the death of Arthur." *An Arthurian Triangle: A Study of the Origin, Development, and Characterization of Arthur, Guinevere and Modred*. Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1984. 173-283.
- La Mort le Roi Artu*. Ed. Jean Frappier. Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1936.
- The Lancelot-Grail Reader*. Ed. Norris J. Lacy. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000.
- Launcelot-Grail: the Old French Arthurian Vulgate and post-Vulgate in translation*, vol. V. Edited by Norris J. Lacy. New York: Garland Publishing, 1993-1995. 3-13.
- Lumiansky, R. M. "'The Tale of King Arthur': Beginnings and Foreshadowings." *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur*. Edited by Thomas L. Wright. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964. 9-66.
- Lynch, Andrew. *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997.
- Malory, Thomas. *Works*. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Mann, Jill. "Malory: Knightly Combat in *Le Morte D'Arthur*." *New Pelican Guide to English Literature: Vol.1 Medieval Literature*. Ed. B. Ford. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983. 331-39.
- Margolin, Uri. "Character." *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. Ed. David Herman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 66-79.



- McCarthy, Terence. "Malory and His Sources." *A Companion to Malory*. Eds. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000. 75-95.
- Prendergast, Thomas A. "The Invisible Spouse: Henry VI, Arthur, and the Fifteenth-Century Subject." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.2 (2002): 305-26.
- Robeson, Lisa. "Women's Worship: Female Versions of Chivalric Honour." *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*. Eds. K.S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005. 107-18.
- Scott, Mary Etta. "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Study of Malory's Women." *Mid-Hudson Language Studies* 5 (1982): 21-29.
- Shichtman, Martin B. "Elaine and Guinevere: Gender and Historical Consciousness in the Middle Ages." *New Images of Medieval Women: Essays Toward a Cultural Anthropology*. Edited by Edelgard E. DuBruck. *Medieval Studies*, vol. 1. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989. 255-271.
- Sklar, Elizabeth S. "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine." *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. Edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001. 59-70.
- Waldron, Peter. "'Vertuose Love' and Adulterous Lovers: Coming to Terms with Malory." *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-Views*. Ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. New York: AMS Press, 1992. 54-62.
- Wright, Thomas L. "'The Tale of King Arthur': Beginnings and Foreshadowings." *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur*. Ed. R.M. Lumiansky. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1964. 9-66.