

RECOVERING MALORY'S GUENEVERE

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It has become critically commonplace to trivialize the role of Guenevere in Malory's work or even to condemn her as the object which prevents Lancelot from achieving the Grail. Critics as diverse as John Walsh, Charles Moorman, and Mary Scott, although perceptive in other areas of Malory studies, are surprisingly eager to distort the characterization of Guenevere, presenting an imperious and clinging temptress in the place of Malory's strong and just queen. Guenevere is not, of course, perfect--none of Malory's characters is except Galahad--and she frequently displays a temper that is less than even, but this is not typical enough a characteristic to be the one upon which to base an analysis. Neither should Guenevere be condemned without pardon for her adultery, although she clearly is so by other characters in the work and by most of her critics; Malory's narrator specifically praises, indeed, rewards her for her constancy to Lancelot. Malory's Guenevere is a complex and pivotal character whose position in the social and political structure of the Arthurian court exposes, to a greater extent than the primary male characters, the brutality and self-destructiveness that lie beneath the veneer of Christian morality and the chivalric code of the knights. This paper will examine, first, the code itself and the power structure of the court; second, the roles available to women within and without that structure; and, third, the development of Guenevere's character as the central female

character and the most powerful woman in the court.

Jerome Mandel has described the twin principles which underlie the structure of the Arthurian court as war and love (243-44), which comprise the primary motivations for knights in medieval romance. They are not of detached and equal importance; the desire for success in war is based on the assumption that military success will ensure success in love. Guenevere herself expresses this to Kay after the war with the five kings: "What lady that ye love and she love you nat agayne, she were gretly to blame" (79). War and love are bound up together into the social construct of honor, a code which appears to be compatible with Christian ethics, but one which, in practice, demands from men that they seek revenge for slights against self or family and from women that they reward force with love. Within this code, David Benson notes, morality becomes irrelevant (270); it is physical strength which determines right. Lancelot's three defenses of the queen make this explicit. In "The Poisoned Apple," Lancelot forces Guenevere's accuser to excuse her under the threat that "I woll nat graunte the thy lyff" (620) after Lancelot has beaten him in battle. Of course, Lancelot is on the side of right in this instance, as Nynyve tells the court later. The second accusation, however, finds Guenevere more culpable but Lancelot reacting in the same manner: "I say nay playnly, that thys nyght there lay none of thes ten knyghtes wounded with my lady, quene Gwenyver, and that woll I prove with myne hondys" (659). Lancelot is technically correct, but the defense is morally suspect. Thirdly, he claims to the knights who have trapped him in Guenevere's room, "I cam to the quene for no maner of male engyne, and that woll I preve and

make hit good uppon you with my hondys" (677), later repeating the same to Arthur: ". . . my lady, quene Gwenevere, ys as trew a lady unto youre person as ys ony lady lyvyng unto her lorde, and that woll I make good with my hondis" (688). Lancelot's obvious lies in both instances have been noted many times, but, as David Benson points out, Lancelot must defend Guenevere, regardless of the tactics required to do so, because it is through him that she has been accused and condemned (270).

Unfortunately, honor and Christian principles are often at odds, and when Christian principles of truth, sexual fidelity to one's spouse, and forgiveness come into conflict with the Arthurian principles of truth determined by force, sexual reward for physical brutality, and revenge, it is the Christian code which is rejected. Christian morality is not openly laid aside; Mandel reminds us that there are restraints placed upon the attainment of desires through the restrictions imposed by Arthur on behavior. The restraints themselves, however, finally ensure the self-destruction of the courtly tradition, because only a Galahad, "who comes late and leaves early," is perfect enough to maintain the code (246). The result is a court split by the divided loyalties of knights among the king, the queen, and their families; of the queen between the king and the knights who expect rewards for their service to her; and of the king between the queen and the knights, either of whom may decide to revolt against his authority.

The queen, then, has a clearly defined position within the court, but she is not the only woman with an important function. Mary Etta Scott has outlined three categories into which most of Malory's women fall: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (21). Scott's

categorization is useful as a starting point, if her conclusions are not altogether satisfactory. The first group, the Good, consists of those women who lead knights on adventures or who are "maidens in distress who provide an arena for the knights to prove their prowess" (21). Also included in this group are a few women who typify Christian virtue; Percival's sister is Scott's primary example. Scott is perceptive in her grouping of these characters together, but it is not their goodness (nor is it Malory's male chauvinism) which makes them so alike. It is their marginality in the story of the Round Table and the self-destruction of the court which ties them together. These women are good, for the most part, simply because they do not function in the work as fully developed characters; they may start a knight on a quest or be the object of a quest, but they rarely appear after the quest is completed.

Scott's third category, that of the Ugly, is equally both perceptive and limited. Scott includes in this group the temptresses of both Percival and Bors, who change their "fiendish" natural appearances into beautiful forms in order to trap the good knights (26-28). Scott does not, however, include in this category Morgan le Fay, who appears to be the most malevolent "Ugly" of all. If we include Morgan in this third category (and it seems improbable that she would fit anywhere else), then we can easily rename this group. These women are Ugliers only to the knights of the court because they have willfully rejected the values of the court. As Scott notes, the Ugliers "seem to concentrate their evil wiles on the excellent knights" (26), and, in Morgan's case, on Arthur himself. The Ugliers are outside the court, and in this way are like the Good, but they are attempting actively to destroy the knights and

their king. They are not just "Uglies"; they are willful malevolents who refuse to adhere to the standards set by the court.

Scott's second category, the Bad, is the most interesting because it contains the central female character, Guenevere. The Bad, according to Scott, are "the ordinary women men deal with every day when they are not on a holy quest" (24). Scott restricts her discussion of this group to a brief outline of Guenevere's role as the temptress who prevents Lancelot from achieving the Grail, but several other female characters could easily be grouped into the Bad, including Igraine, Torre's mother, Elaine, and Isolde. These are the women, Guenevere being the most fully developed among them, whose characters reveal how the objectification of women and their subsequent status as rewards for success in battle leads to unification of males in a power structure (here the Round Table court) for a limited time, but ultimately results in destruction of that power through rivalry. Each of these women finds herself bound to a male character because he has "won" her by force or finds herself divided in loyalty between a husband who has attained her by social force and a lover who has won her by physical prowess. Scott's Bad women, whose characters she dismisses as another example of Malory's culturally unavoidable male chauvinism (21), are really the constrained women, those who adhere to the values of the court and find themselves caught up in its contradictions.

The first example of a constrained woman is Arthur's mother, Igraine. The near-adultery which results in Arthur's conception is paradigmatic in that Igraine's position illustrates first the manner in which women are passed from man to man (in this case husband to husband), second, the principle of force that

governs the morality of the male characters, and, third, the apparent justification of murder and rape, even if only by deception, if the act results in the birth of a son. The queen herself, we are told, "made grete joye whan she knewe who was the fader of her child" (6) and how the conception came about. We are not told, however, why it is that she expresses gladness: does she love her husband despite his battle with her first husband, or is she relieved that the king, who will commit murder in order to gain what he desires, has no reason to be displeased with her?

Along with Igraine, both Torre's mother and Elaine illustrate how the birth of a son mitigates any crime or deviation from Christian morality. Torre's mother leaves no doubt that she has been raped, "half be force he had my maydynhode" (62), but the rape is not only unpunished but even rewarded because Torre is the result. Merlin tells Torre that the rape of his mother "ys more for your worship than hurte, for youre fadir ys a good knyght and a kynge, and he may ryght well avaunce you and youre modir both . . ." (62). Apparently rape by a "good knyght" is an event to be hoped for by all young women, because it may lead to social advancement if they should happen to bear sons. Elaine, unlike Torre's mother, is not raped, but her willingness to deceive Lancelot is conditional; she agrees "for well she knew that that same nyght sholde be bygotyn sir Galahad uppon her, that shold preve the beste knyght of the worlde" (480). Elaine's loss of virginity, which she does not dismiss lightly, at her father's command--"by hys commaundemente to fullfyll this prophecie I have gyvyn the the grettyst ryches and the fayryst floure that ever I had, and that is my maydynhode that I shall never have agayne" (481)--is compensated for by

Lancelot's reputation as a knight and the subsequent birth of Galahad, although Elaine herself suffers Lancelot's unwillingness to marry her and Guenevere's hatred. In addition, neither of the two occupations open to Elaine, marriage and retirement to a convent, is a viable solution for her; she is left alone in her father's house to raise Galahad.

Of all the women characters, it is Isolde who most closely resembles Guenevere. She is delivered to a husband with no concern for her wishes. She engages in an adulterous relationship which causes a split within the court of which she is queen. Like Guenevere, Isolde has no children, either by her husband or by her lover; there is no son by whose birth her adultery can be forgiven or overlooked. Her lover is the best knight of the court, of whose strength she, as queen, is both rewarder and the reward, the same position in which Guenevere finds herself. In addition, she loves Tristram, as Guenevere does Lancelot, making the temptation to exploit her position in the social structure to maintain the relationship all the more difficult to withstand. Interestingly, however, Malory does not show the deaths of Isolde and Tristram, except as a wistful remembrance, nor does he reveal any hostility toward either of the lovers by the other knights, excepting King Mark, who is described as "that traytoure kynge" who killed Tristram "with treson" (666). Isolde is not a character who exactly parallels Guenevere, but she is close enough to represent the same position which Guenevere has within the Arthurian court, and she is nowhere presented as a "Bad" woman or one who has an evil influence on Tristram, although this charge will be made against Guenevere.

It is clear, then, that most, although not all, of Malory's women fit into one of these three rough categories and that Guenevere is neither marginal to nor politically isolated from the court and so easily fits into the group of ordinary women who accept and adhere to the values of the Arthurian court. Even within this group, however, Guenevere occupies a unique position. She is the only one who is condemned for the adultery and not only for her own immorality but for Lancelot's as well; a gathering of knights tells Bors that "as for quene Gwenyver, we love hir nat, because she ys a destroyer of good knyghtes" (617). We cannot simply dismiss her infidelity to Arthur as inconsequential to her character, but we can examine how Malory has created a social setting, unperceived by the knights with the exception of Bors, in which the adultery is both fateful, that is, a predestined occurrence which Guenevere cannot avoid, and a forgivable, if not inevitable, result of Guenevere's arranged marriage to an unlovable husband and the Round Table code.

It is the king, all characters acknowledge, who is the center of power in the court. As Peter Korrel discusses at length, however, Arthur is not only lacking in the virtues of a king but also in those which are respected in knights. He succeeds in only one test, the pulling of the sword from the stone, and is almost always about evenly matched, if not actually beaten, in tournaments. The king's lechery, before and after his marriage, is one of his least attractive characteristics (although it is clearly de-emphasized by Malory); it is only outweighed by his cruelty in the massacre of the innocents (255-61).

Arthur's cruelty, at least, can be attributed to his dependency upon advice from

Merlin; indeed, Malory's "lordys and barownes" hold Merlin responsible: ". . . many putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthur" (37). Arthur, however, only follows Merlin's instructions when they happen to coincide with his own desires. Merlin tells Arthur explicitly "that Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne . . ." (59), but Arthur disregards the prophecy, thus making the affair inevitable. Arthur's knowledge of the prophecy, as Korrel notes, makes him "fully responsible for the future downfall" of the court (269), not just because he acts against Merlin's advice, but because his action is indicative of a character whose behavior reflects a willingness to set aside good moral and practical considerations when he is tempted by physical desire. And this is the king who creates the court, who is the model for action, and the husband to whom Guenevere's father turns her over.

Because Arthur is her husband, Guenevere, like other queens, does wield a certain amount of power, although her power is circumscribed by what Arthur allows to her. To suggest, however, that she uses her position only to control Lancelot is a misrepresentation of her character. Guenevere is not, as John Walsh states, consistently characterized as "difficult" and "changeable" (205); nor is it the case that "Malory highlights the queen's temperamental nature, her insecurity, and her desire to assert authority over Lancelot" (206). Malory includes much more material which vindicates Guenevere than he does that which condemns her. Her primary role in the early books of Malory's work, in fact, is, as Lindsay Holichuk phrases it, to "confirm and uphold the same values and standards as the Round Table

knights" (114). Guenevere is an active member of the court. Her role is not created by her affair with Lancelot; the affair is a virtually inevitable outcome of her role as queen.

Peter Korrel has outlined the "good" qualities in Guenevere's character. He first explains that she is a good wife who fulfills her duties to Arthur (269), a characterization which is consistent throughout the work. As early as Book IV, she is portrayed as willing to die to avoid bringing public shame to Arthur (78). She expresses "grete sorrow" at the departure of Arthur for Rome (118) but is willing to undertake at least partial responsibility for governing the country. As late as Book XXI, she refuses to align herself with Mordred against Arthur, again preferring to die than to marry him (708), even though it was Arthur himself who abandoned her to Mordred's care.

Guenevere also functions, according to Korrel, as a moral teacher (269). In "Torre and Pellinor" she chides Pellinor for his unwillingness to interrupt his quest to aid a woman: "A, kynge Pellinor, . . . ye were gretly to blame that ye saved not thys ladyes lyff" (75). He challenges her authority to judge him, but Guenevere is supported by Merlin ("Truly ye ought sore to repente hit"), which lends aid to her role as a judge who rightly reflects Arthurian morality. Guenevere explains the results of envy to a group of knights (466), clearly in the role of a respected teacher, and she praises Kay for appropriate behavior and assures him of eventual reward: "What lady that ye love and she love you nat agayne, she were gretly to blame" (79). Guenevere expresses here her adherence to the Arthurian code and the contradiction which will allow her to carry on

an affair and still be within the prescribed code of conduct.

Closely related to her function as moral teacher is Guenevere's role as a punitive judge (Korrel 269). The most striking example occurs in the "Tale of Lancelot" in Guenevere's condemnation of Pedyvere to carry the dead body of his wife to Rome: ". . . ye shall bere this lady with you on horsebak unto the Pope of Rome . . . [a]nd ye shall nevir reste one nyght thereas ye do another, and ye go to ony bedde the dede body shall lye with you" (172). Malory's inclusion of the result of this harsh judgment--"And after thys knyght sir Pedyvere fell to grete goodnesse and was an holy man and an hermyte" (172)--suggests that Guenevere is a righteous judge whose decisions cause improvement in vicious characters.

In addition to public responsibility and good moral judgment, Malory's Guenevere is endowed with a remarkable amount of courage (Korrel 270). We have already examined two instances when she embraces the possibility of death when the alternative is shame, during the crossing of the "Humbir"--"Yet were me lever to dey in this watir than to falle in youre enemyes handis" (78)--and during Mordred's siege of the Tower of London--". . . she answerd hym . . . that she had levir sle herself than to be maryed with hym" (708). Guenevere's reaction to Mellygaunt's abduction of her and her knights reveals her courage a third time: "I had levir kut myne owne throte in twayne rather than thou sholde dishonoure me!" (651). If, as Walsh asserts, Malory's intention is to present a queen whose desire is simply "to assert authority over Lancelot" (206), then he has made a serious error in presenting a queen who asserts authority wherever and whenever the courtly code demands that she do so.

Guenevere's is not a meek, retiring character, to be sure. We have already seen, however, that in the clash between the Christian and courtly code, it is the latter which predominates. Guenevere asserts her authority in accordance with her position as queen; she does not, in Malory, arbitrarily mete out punishments only to Lancelot.

Walsh contends, however, that Guenevere does single Lancelot out for punishment and that the abduction and Lancelot's attempt at rescue create the perfect setting for highlighting the queen's "temperamental nature" (206). Guenevere's reaction, on the contrary, reveals the same nature she has displayed throughout the work. She acts as judge to Mellygaunt although she is his prisoner: "Traytoure knyght . . . wolt thou shame thyselff? . . . Thou shamest all knyghthode and thyselffe and me" (651). She is prepared to take whatever action the chivalric code demands of her, to the point of suicide (651). Guenevere is conscious of and concerned for the safety of her knights: "Sle nat my noble knyghtes and I woll go with the . . ." (651). This responsible attitude is emphasized by Malory. She demands from Mellygaunt that she be allowed to keep them in her sight with a second threat of suicide and later keeps them in her room for their protection:

And whan season was they wente into their chambirs, but in no wyse the quene wold suffir her wounded knyghtes to be fro her, but that they were layde inwyth draughtes by h[i]r chambir, uppon beddis and paylattes, that she myght herself se unto them that they wanted nothyng. (657)

Guenevere is by no means the "difficult" and "changeable" queen that Walsh describes, nor does her character change when Lancelot appears. Guenevere's unwillingness to allow Lancelot to fight Mellygaunt is not an example of her imperiousness; her reason for ending the battle is made clear in her response to her captor's pleading: ". . . bettir ys pees than evermore warre" (655). Certainly Lancelot is irritated by her decision, but Guenevere reprimands him as she has corrected other misguided or overly eager knights throughout the work. Her question, "Do ye forthynke yourselff of youre good dedis?" (655-56), is a reminder that, ideally, knights should act according to their code of honor simply for the sake of the code's moral base, not for the joy of killing or the prospect of material or sexual reward.

An idealistic interpretation of the code is clearly not operative in the Arthurian court, however. Lancelot simply assumes that he will be rewarded for his obedience to Guenevere, "so ye be pleased! As for my parte, ye shall sone please me" (656). That sexual reward for physical prowess is the functional rule is made explicit by Lancelot when he comes to Guenevere's window: "Than shall I prove my myght . . . for your love" (657). It is not, then, that Guenevere is changeable. She is the same character she has been throughout, upholding the same values as the Round Table knights. It is the code itself which is contradictory, demanding of Guenevere that she play the roles both of rewarder and reward.

This is not to suggest that Guenevere does not have flaws in her character; her anger and "impulsive jealousy" (Korrel 272) have been noted often, usually as the key to understanding her. Guenevere's anger or jealousy, however, does not appear at all until Book XI, and when

it does appear she is not entirely unjustified. The first two examples of Guenevere's anger occur because of Lancelot's affair with Elaine. In the first instance the anger hardly overwhelms Guenevere's character; she becomes angry, hears Lancelot's explanation, that he "was made to lye by her, 'in the lyknes of you, my lady the quene'" (485), and forgives him entirely within the course of five lines.

The second display of anger by Guenevere is more serious and consequential. It is her banishment of Lancelot because of a second encounter with Elaine which is the immediate cause of his temporary madness. But, as Holichek points out, Guenevere's reaction to discovering Lancelot in bed with Elaine a second time is understandable even if we accept that he simply cannot tell the two apart in the dark (120). After all, Lancelot is aware that Brusen fooled him once into sleeping with Elaine; he even threatens to kill her for it: ". . . and I may fynde her, that same lady dame Brusen shall lose her hede for her wycchecraftys" (481). He willingly, however, goes with her again to Elaine's bedroom. In addition, notwithstanding the fact that the bedrooms of Guenevere and Elaine are adjacent to one another, it seems unlikely that Lancelot would be unaware, first, that it was not Guenevere's bedroom, and, second, that this was the room assigned to Elaine by the king. Lancelot is guilty, if not of willful infidelity to the queen, then, at the least, of unfaithfulness through gullibility and indiscretion. (One wonders how often he talks in his sleep about Guenevere loudly enough to be heard through a wall.)

Guenevere's outburst at Lancelot after his return from the Grail quest is less justifiable, even by the courtly code of fidelity to one's lady. Lancelot, the narrator states, is only

avoiding Guenevere "to eschew the sclawndir and noyse" (611). The unfairness and inaccuracy of her attack is paralleled, we should notice, by Lancelot's reply. He accuses her of being the reason he was unable to achieve the Grail, when, in fact, it is his own inability, as Joan Ferrante phrases it, to "put aside his courtly code for religious teaching" ("Conflict" 171) that caused his failure in the Grail quest. The narrator reinforces this in the opening of "The Poisoned Apple":

Than, as the booke seyth, sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste; for, as the booke seyth, had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the quene as he was in semynge outwarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the quest of the Sankgreall. (611)

Lancelot is not, with Guenevere, under an enchantment as he was with Elaine; he carries on the affair with her knowingly and willingly. Ferrante's description of medieval biblical exegesis applies as well to Lancelot: ". . . the object of man's temptation becomes the cause of it; in other words, he projects his own weakness onto its object" (Woman as Image 21). The two are equally responsible for their conduct, and to condemn Guenevere as the figure who forces Lancelot to forsake his religious vows (Moorman 165) or as "consistently difficult" (Walsh 205) without an equal condemnation of Lancelot is reductive and inaccurate. Indeed, to ignore how uncharacteristic is the pettiness displayed by

both Guenevere and Lancelot is to ignore how the divisive social pressures on both of them are reflective of the impending self-destruction of the Arthurian court.

We should not, moreover, discount the assessment by the narrator of Guenevere's character, especially because this judgment is consistent with the dramatic conclusion of her life. The narrator's comment, ". . . whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (649) is borne out by the text. Guenevere does reach the point at which she can embrace a Christian code of conduct instead of a courtly code, and in her penance she is confident of eventual salvation: ". . . and yet I truste . . . that aftir my deth I may have a syght of the blyss[ed] face of Cryste Jesu, and on Doomesday to sytte on Hys right syde; fo[r] as synfull as ever I was, now ar seyntes in heven" (720). We should note that Guenevere is able to achieve this adherence to Christian morality only within a community of women; that is, she has rejected the inconsistent roles demanded of her by the court, and she prevents the possibility of the creation of another court by refusing to go with Lancelot, although it is perfectly clear that he is eager to take her away: ". . . yf I had founden you now so dysposed, I had caste me to have had you into myn owne royame" (721). Lancelot is still governed by the courtly code, but Guenevere, in rejecting him, rejects an inherently self-destructive political system and regains her position as moral teacher, no longer a "maynteyner of good knyghtes" (617), but a maintainer of a consistent Christian morality.

It is clear, then, that many readers of Malory would benefit from a second look at his Guenevere. She is not the imperious queen whose temptation of Lancelot brings down the noble

court of King Arthur. She is a complex character whose position in the court reflects the constraints on all women within the structure and finally reveals its inherent self-destructiveness. Guenevere does not destroy Lancelot and the Round Table court; she is the character who saves Lancelot by her example and restores the ideal of the court in her maintenance of Christian behavior after the actual court, corrupted by its contradictions, has fallen.

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