

UNVEILING HER MAJESTY'S PURPOSES:
MALORY'S GUINEVERE AS STRUCTURAL CENTER

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ABSTRACT

Considering the context of Le Morte Darthur, we may find it difficult to believe that Thomas Malory could have been much of a feminist; and yet, he manages to construct some of the most powerful feminine literary characters of his time. Arrested on charges of rape, Malory spent years in and out of jail, gaining himself a reputation as a scoundrel. His magnum opus, based in the older written tales of Arthurian legend, would seem to provide Malory's fictional chauvinists a safe haven for their shenanigans. Characters like Sirs Lancelot and Palomides have free rein through Arthur's Camelot – until, of course, the fateful battle on Salisbury Plain. However, Malory gives his female characters ample room to manipulate circumstances – this is especially true of characters like Queen Guinevere, who enjoys a powerful central role, making her a key to understanding the text itself.

The thesis explores the importance of Guinevere, focusing both on the power dynamic and on the Queen's position as an intrinsic figure in understanding Malory's structural technique. In Malory's construction, the narrative structure of Le Morte Darthur reflects the shifting power structure of Camelot and the Round Table. Arthur's supremacy is superficial only; once Guinevere appears as a strong, capable woman, she becomes the power behind the throne and the force that moves the story. Since her siphoning off of power undercuts Arthur's role as king, her position produces a fatal instability in Camelot's dynamic. Guinevere's rise means that Arthur's fall is inevitable.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Ronald and Linda, whose strength, unconditional love, and unending encouragement mean more to me than they will ever know.

CHAPTER 1: RISE TO POWER: STRUCTURAL THEORIES AND “A NOBLE TALE OF SIR LAUNCELOT”

Eugene Vinaver asserts that Malory's Le Morte Darthur is not one large work, as many other scholars contend. Instead, Vinaver is convinced that Malory intended his writings to be read as a series of unconnected tales that simply happen to be a part of the Arthurian legend cycle: “Malory's romances are as separate as the various novels of a modern author; that the romances may be taken in any or no particular order; and that they have no cumulative effect” (qtd. in Brewer, 41). However, Malory's narrative is structured in such a way that the so-called fragments bleed and blend into one another, hinting that the Morte is not a series of fragments but a complexly interwoven whole. The mysterious Questing Beast may perhaps be a decent example; several of Malory's knights, including Sir Palomides, pursue the Questing Beast at different points in the work. While the Beast remains unattainable, however, there are other more tangible elements in the work that serve to link the parts together, however loose the seams.

Several critics have delved into Malory's language, determining that the words themselves work to hold things together. Since the plot of the narrative seems to splinter after Arthur's conquest of Rome, the linguistic threads are intrinsic to understanding just what Malory is playing at in the rest of the work. Arnold A. Sanders seems to have hit on a narrative strategy of importance, identifying several verbal clauses that indicate Malory's weaving together several different plotlines. While the disparate quests of the knights may seem to support Vinaver's claim at first glance, Sanders indicates that Malory actually uses specific transitions that keep the reader engaged in all plotlines at once – indicating that the tales are not in fact separated, but provide a more or less logical progression of events in a complex narrative.

Sanders maintains that “A close look at Malory’s style [...] indicates that he provides four distinct types of transitional guidance between units of narrative [...] Using these formulae to link inserted tales to the growing structure of his work, he created a multi-stage, cyclical narrative unified by his consistent attention to the relations among its parts” (27). In his study of the linguistic connections between sections, Sanders also indicates that flourished capitals in the manuscript are not necessarily indicative of authorial intent, but are more likely scribal insertions. The true test of figuring out how the different sections of the Morte fit together is to look closely at the text and discern how Malory uses his transitional phrases to shift between storylines. Sanders discovers, for example, that Malory’s use of phrases such as “and anon,” “hit befelle,” and “now leve we Sir X and turn to Sir Y” all indicate differing facets of the narrative; while each does in fact shift the reader’s attention from one storyline to another, they also each call the reader’s attention to the time of each storyline. Transitions such as “now leve we” indicate a simultaneous interweaving of narratives, while “hit befelle” and “and anon” indicate that a certain amount of time has elapsed, all the while keeping the different plot threads intertwined. Sanders writes, “Within larger episode segments, forms of the Maloryan turning jointure (“Now leve we and turn we”) suggest comparison, evaluation, and judgment of the characters who are left, those to whom we turn, and those of whom we speak” (40). It would seem that Malory’s linking of episodes is much tighter than Vinaver asserts.

In addition to Sanders’s linguistic structural study of the Malorian opus, there are those who maintain that the thematic structure is just as strong when assessing the unity of the Morte. Janet M. Cowen proposes that “the relationship between human feeling and

supernatural influence” is a driving force in the plot as well as a unifying factor. Emotions like love, hatred, and jealousy all work within the narrative in a vast array of characters, but, as Cowen states, “Malory’s usual concern is not to analyse the growth of emotions in individual characters, but to show the way in which an intricate set of human relationships issues in action. The springs of action are the powerful feelings which are revealed time and again, sometimes in an almost incidental way, in the course of the narrative” (36). Cowen certainly has a point; Malory’s character development is never particularly deep, and yet he manages to introduce the driving force of emotion throughout the narrative – all the major players endure some intense emotional experience which alters their perception of their situation or even drives their actions (Guinevere’s perception of Launcelot’s relationship with Elayne, for example). The emotional aspect of the narrative lends itself to Sanders’s characterization of the Morte as “cyclical,” since the same emotional struggles crop up over and over again and drive the characters through many similar adventures.

In addition to Malory’s transitions and emotional themes, scholars have discussed the importance of links between tales in order to promote the unity of the work. D.S. Brewer attempts to define Malory’s unity as something unique: “[...] unity here cannot mean structural unity of a kind we expect from a modern novel, or that we find in an ancient epic [...] If we assert the connectedness of the constituent works we shall be on safer ground, but there are not specific connexions everywhere [...] Perhaps the best term, of a useful elasticity, is cohesion” (42). So the structural integrity of the work is loosely cemented, perhaps. The fact that Malory’s narrative shifts focus from knight to knight (even within the tales named for specific knights) supports Brewer’s rejection of a

firm, solid unity. However, the “cohesion” that Brewer asserts is there; the individual tales follow each other in such a way as to build a progression of events – a timeline of Arthur’s reign. R.M. Lumiansky asserts that each tale has its own place in the greater context of the narrative, each serving a greater purpose: “Given our view of the unity of Malory’s work, a primary purpose in each of the chapters which follow is to show the function of the given ‘Tale’ as a part of Le Morte Darthur as a whole. Thus the initial chapter stresses preparations and foreshadowings found in ‘The Tale of King Arthur,’ and the final chapter the summarizings and retrospections found in the ‘Tale of the Death of Arthur’” (4). Charles Moorman also contends that each segment of the narrative contributes to the larger picture: “[the Morte] was also to be complete within itself: it was to contain all that was needed for its reader to understand the forces which contributed to the decay and destruction of the court and to the twisted motives of the central figures” (xi). Simple themes might not be enough to tie the tales together; however, when the themes propel a continuous plotline (accompanied by several complex subplots, as Sanders mentions), and include some biographical continuity for the characters (as Brewer suggests), and develop the realm of Camelot in all its complexity, there is a solid argument to be made for Malory’s unified Morte. To call it a disjointed series of tales is to misinterpret the complexity of the Morte; there are, in fact, points of reference in the layers of the narrative.

Adding to the complexity of the narrative is the character of Queen Guinevere, whose position as queen places her at Arthur’s side, subordinate to him – or so it would seem. However, Guinevere acts as more of a structural glue than Arthur himself does, holding Malory’s Camelot together through her very being. While her entrance into the

Morte is delayed – she does not appear until Arthur himself brings up the idea of marriage – her position in the narrative is undeniably central, for she might be seen to be the “den mother” of the knights of the Round Table. The knights of Camelot circle around Guinevere, both adoring and despising her, but they cannot pull away from her.

Arthur’s kingship is tentative at best. From the beginning, he has to struggle against outward threats to his power – first from the nobles, then from Emperor Lucius. In the respite between fights, he pauses to consolidate his shaky hold on England, proposing marriage as a viable tactic. To take a queen would be an outward sign of political stability (especially since Lodgreaunce is willing to ally himself to Arthur’s precarious kingship) and give Arthur the chance to establish his dynasty through producing a legitimate heir (hopefully one less controversial than he himself is). Arthur’s choice of mate, however, is a source of worry from the beginning. Even Merlin, the King’s most trusted advisor, warns him against the match: “But Marlyon warned the Kyng covertly that Gwentyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff, for he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne” (Malory 62)¹. Guinevere’s sway over Arthur, however, seems to be supernatural in strength even before she physically appears on the scene – perhaps an example of Cowen’s emotional theme. Arthur clings to the thought of marrying Guinevere despite the advice of his most trusted aide, and despite being warned that he would run into trouble concerning her fidelity. Knowing full well that Merlin prophesies trouble ahead, Arthur’s emotion propels him into making the match anyway.

¹ All references to Malory’s work come from the Norton Critical Edition of Le Morte Darthur, ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, 2004, and are cited by page numbers from the text.

Guinevere's rise to power starts early in the Morte. Though she is never seen as a single maiden, her influence begins before Arthur takes her as his wife. She has permeated his mind, to the point of making him more reckless than his previous experiences should dictate. Merlin's warning goes unheeded, despite the unnerving prophecy he sets forward. It is odd that Arthur should ignore Merlin's advice, especially when considering the sorcerer's track record. Merlin is the man who has orchestrated every inch of Arthur's life, from conception to kingship. In every instance that Arthur (and, even before him, Uther Pendragon) has taken the sorcerer's advice, he has come off as the successful party. Why should Arthur ignore Merlin now, in such an important choice as marriage?

The answer lies in Arthur himself. Previously, Arthur took Merlin's advice because he had no experience in war or in ruling a kingdom. Though Arthur has no experience in marriage, he actually has a plan of action in mind before appealing to Merlin for verification in the case of Guinevere. When Merlin offers a warning instead of his blessing, Arthur's decision to go ahead with the union is a testament to the strength of Guinevere's hold on the king's mind, even from a distance. Even if her appeal is purely political – a political alliance with King Lodegreaunce would prove beneficial to Arthur's tenuous hold on power – it is still strong enough to lead him to defy Merlin's unsettling prophecy.

The prophecy itself figures in an argument for narrative unity; Jane Bliss argues that "Prophecy provides structure in the Morte Darthur in that several key prophecies link together events, at the beginning and end of the book, in a way that frames and double-frames the whole" (1). The prophecy regarding Launcelot and Guinevere, delivered close

to the beginning of the narrative, serves to train the audience's eye on the Queen right away. Arthur is set on having his way – he will have Guinevere, and asking Merlin's opinion on the matter is merely a formality. However, Merlin's warning positions Guinevere as a character to watch – it is impossible for readers to read the narrative without the projected affair looming ahead. Bliss indicates that the prophecy of Guinevere's infidelity is not completely inevitable – if Arthur does not marry her, then Merlin's projection of the future will be void. The relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere is not orchestrated by any divine fate, but put into play by the characters involved: “The significance of this is emphasized by the way Malory sets up an uncompleted dialogue in which Arthur asks Merlin's advice: both know his mind is made up and that he will not heed the advice” (Bliss 11). While Bliss indicates that the whole Launcelot/Guinevere aspect of the narrative lies within Arthur's control, D.S. Brewer argues that Merlin's prophecy is important as a structural element to the narrative, for it “reveals a specific tract of experience, a history linked in cause and effect. That these references come so early in the whole historical sequence surely indicates that for Malory the various stories were bound together” (51). Had Malory intended his tales as separate works, the prophecy would not much matter in the later tales, for the later tales would simply be independent works. As it is, however, Malory does bring this aspect of the narrative up again with a vengeance, and Arthur's mind is indeed made up. He does not reconsider taking Guinevere to himself; prophecy or no prophecy, she is far too valuable as a political tool for Arthur to pass up.²

² Although some may argue that Guinevere's role in this instance is merely that of an object through which the exchange of power between men is accomplished, her role later indicates that the power is not simply exchanged. There is certainly a sense that Arthur seeks marriage in order to solidify his role as king, but Guinevere's later roles as judge and regent speak to her own power – if Arthur did not recognize her

The political advantages associated with Guinevere foreshadow the power she wields later on in person. Malory is very careful to link the legendary Round Table with Guinevere's arrival on the scene: "And so Kynge Lodgreaunce delyverd hys doughtir Gwenyver unto Merlion, and the Table Rounde with the hondred knyghtes; and so they rode freyssshly with grete royalté, what by water and by londe, tyll that they com nyghe unto London" (63). Lodegreaunce does not support Arthur in name only; the wedding gift also gives Arthur the military support he needs in order to firmly establish and consolidate his position as king of England. The irony is, of course, that Guinevere's arrival in Camelot heralds a new era; just as Arthur solidifies his hold on power, he passes it to his wife – the true leader of the Round Table. D.S. Brewer, while insisting that Arthur serves as the anchor of the knights, does concede that Arthur's starring role fades quickly: "Arthur has to be established in his own greatness before we feel the greatness of his court, his knights, and the ideals they express. On the other hand the crowning of Arthur is the climax of his personal triumph. Further adventures of his own could not effectively add to it" (47). Perhaps this is why Malory later focuses on the adventures of Arthur's knights – Arthur himself does all that he can do within the first two books of the narrative. Guinevere, however, remains an active force from the conquest of Rome to the final book of the Morte.

It could even be argued that Guinevere's appearance at all is remarkable. She is not even mentioned until Arthur decides to take a wife, and even then she is the only option he considers. Malory gives Guinevere no background, as he does other female characters like Nyneve and Morgan Le Fay – the Queen simply appears as the center of

capability to rule, she would certainly not have had the opportunity to grow beyond a figure of power exchange. Instead, she manages to carry her own responsibilities in her own right.

Arthur's attention, and her appearance is swiftly followed by her wedding, coronation, and subsequent installation in the Camelot power structure. It is important to note that the solidification of Camelot's power structure comes to fruition through Guinevere. The Round Table, symbol of the Arthurian legend itself, makes its initial appearance in Malory's tale in direct relation to Guinevere – in fact, they come on the scene together. The Table itself is a wedding gift from Guinevere's father: “[...] I [Lodgreaunce] shall sende hym [Arthur] a gyffte that shall please hym muche more, for I shall gyff hym the Table Rounde [...]” (62). Lodgreaunce is, in effect, endowing Arthur with power through Guinevere. The alliance shows Lodgreaunce's belief in Arthur – by giving the King his daughter, both men benefit from the power shift. The gift of the Round Table gives Arthur the military might he needs to make his advances against Lucius's Rome. As quick as Arthur is to settle on Guinevere as his queen, the match is not without some logical reasoning behind it. Certainly, the political advantage of the King's alliance with Lodgreaunce is a particularly large benefit; however, Guinevere herself is also a grand prize in the situation.

With Arthur's authority hanging tenuously in the midst of a civil war, and with the king relatively inexperienced in the matters of ruling a kingdom, Guinevere herself proves to be a worthy choice of ally. As the daughter of a king, she has been privy to all the ins and outs of political intrigue all her life, able to watch her father's successful reign from an advantageous position. She may not have active experience in political dealings, but she has certainly seen enough to be savvy to the ways of this man's world. As Arthur's queen, she has great potential to shape the course of the kingdom, providing guidance to a royal greenhorn a manner that Merlin simply cannot match. She is not the

demure queen to sit with her eyes lowered at Arthur's side on the dais. Instead, she is the power behind the throne; the knighthood is centered on the Table, and the Table is centered on the Queen – she is, after all, the figure responsible for bringing it to both Camelot and to the narrative.

Robert L. Kelly focuses on the nature of the Round Table as a political force binding the knights to their liege lord. He notes that Malory adapts the concept of the Round Table from his French source, and in so doing changes the dynamic of the Table: “Malory redefined the Arthurian Round Table over his French source chiefly by depicting Arthur as a royal head, but no longer a member, of the order [...] Both source and analogue point up Malory's portrayal of Arthur as strikingly detached from the military order he heads” (Kelly 44-45). Kelly is correct in asserting that Arthur is “strikingly detached” from the military order of the Table. However, his position as head instead of member is ambiguous at best. The Pentecostal Oath mentions the knights' relationship to Arthur at a slant – they must “gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordsyip of Kynge Arthure for evirmore” (77) – but the rest of the oath concerns the ideals that the order must stand for. It would seem that the knights of the Round Table swear more fealty to each other in the Oath than they do to Arthur himself (who also holds himself to the standards of the Oath).

Since the Pentecostal Oath closes the section on the “Wedding of King Arthur,” the relation of the Table to the Oath and the King remains stranger still. With the feasting and the celebratory quests accomplished (and the proper rewards and punishments meted out in due course), the knights finally take the Oath that links them (in one way or another) to Arthur. Guinevere's face does not appear in the swearing of the Oath, but the

clause about the knights' responsibilities towards women – “allwayes to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour], strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe” (77) – perhaps hints at the importance of her presence in the new court. No other offense as stated in the Oath brings the penalty of death. Felicia Ackerman even goes so far as to insist that all women hold power in the post-Oath Arthurian universe, since the chivalric code places special emphasis on the feminine: “It might even be argued that in this respect, women are more powerful than men in Malory’s world, as the Round Table Oath does not require stronger knights to provide succor to lesser knights” (4). Dorsey Armstrong also reinforces this notion of the instability of gender modes surrounding the power structure of the Round Table, indicating that “[t]he masculine knightly dependence and *insistence* on the powerlessness of women paradoxically renders women powerful” (66). If women hold power over the menfolk in this respect, then Guinevere’s position as the highest woman in the land certainly lends her some serious status when it comes to knightly respect.

Guinevere’s rise begins not long after her marriage to Arthur. He is quick to make her his queen – there are only a few lines separating the arrival of the Round Table in Camelot and Guinevere’s coronation – and he is even quicker to leave her as ruler of the country in his absence. “The Noble Tale Betwixt King Arthur and Lucius the Emperor of Rome” finds Arthur defending his honor not against domestic forces, but against the very emperor of Rome. To combat the threat of Lucius, Arthur leaves England to lead his knights in battle, leaving his wife in command of the civilian homefront: “And there in the presence of all the lordis, the Kynge resyned all the rule unto thes two lordis and Quene Gwenyvere” (119). After the battles in Rome, however,

Arthur's status as high king of England never recovers the centrality it had before. Once the power shifts from Arthur to Guinevere, the die is cast for the fate of Camelot.

Kenneth Hodges in particular looks at Guinevere's political prowess, asserting that reading her character in a romantic light does her a disservice (55). In the light of Arthur's leaving her to rule in his absence, it would seem that Hodges is right; Guinevere is not only a romantic figure, but also a political figure in her own right. She manages to hold down the homefront while Arthur conquers Rome, and through this important charge she catapults to a starring role in the rest of Malory's narrative. Her connections to the Round Table provide plenty of room for her to maneuver in the text, both as a respected lady and as a more conflicted figure; Hodges specifically discusses the problems she faces later in the text as the Round Table divides into differing coalitions, stating that Guinevere is "embroiled in the rivalries surrounding Launcelot's affinity, and a number of her actions that readers often attribute to jealousy may instead be prompted by politics. After the Grail quest, Launcelot and Guinevere become increasingly aware that they are not supported by the whole country but only by Launcelot's affinity, and they do their best to avoid being tied only to that one affinity" (54). Despite her political cunning, Guinevere's relationship with the members of the Round Table remains rocky. Hodges states that "[a]ssessing Guinevere's queenship is complicated by the fact that queens had no official role in national government but worked instead by influence, counsel, and affinity" (55); however, despite this fact of queens holding little official power, Guinevere's power of influence appears throughout the text. Her very public role both puffs her up and leaves her open to attack from all quarters as the members of the Round Table begin to look at each other with suspicion instead of camaraderie.

While Hodges discusses the implications of the Round Table's social shift for Guinevere, this shift also holds implications for the structure of Malory's narrative. Just as Guinevere becomes a lightning rod for the tensions swirling amongst the knights, so she becomes a center for the seemingly splintered narrative of the Morte. It could even be said that she is both the destroyer and the redeemer of Camelot, since she serves both as the impetus for the shaky political factions exemplified in the tales of the knights' individual quests and as the ruler they return to. Her spoken lines are few and far between, and yet her influence in the narrative persists. Even when she is not physically present, the knights often invoke her name in their quests and quarrels, sometimes remarking on her as the loveliest, noblest lady in the land, and sometimes mentioning the dubiousness of her relationship with Launcelot. Whether grand dame or suspected harlot, though, she is very present in all branches of the story.

The very next chapter of the Morte after the Roman campaign presents the so-called splintering of Malory's narrative. With Guinevere in command of Arthur (and thus the country), the stage is set for the tragedy of Merlin's prophecy. The focus of the narrative shifts from king to knights, but it is worth noting who exactly receives the spoils of the quests in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot." Starting with Sir Launcelot, the queen's affiliation with the military forces of Camelot are made clear: "[...] seyde Sir Launcelot, 'on Whytsonday nexte commynge go unto the courte of Kynge Arthure, and there shall ye yelde you unto Quene Gwentyvere and putte you all three in hir grace and mercy [...]" (167). Launcelot sends his conquests to submit to the queen instead of the king he supposedly serves. Arthur sees fit to leave his queen in charge of the kingdom during the Roman campaign – her first official taste of political power – and then allows her the

authority to pass judgment on cases that come to court on behalf of the questing knights. More accurately, Guinevere passes judgment without having to ask Arthur's permission. The court may belong to Arthur, but the homage here goes to the Queen. Guinevere's connection with the Round Table, in these instances, grows stronger – and, perhaps, more blatant. In the tale named for him, Lancelot sends his conquests home to Camelot, specifically instructing them to submit to Queen Guinevere, and she proves both a severe but just judge.

Her first words in the narrative comprise a short two-line speech just after her wedding feast, in which she expresses regret over King Pellinore's sorrowful quest: “‘A, Kynge Pellynor,’ seyde Quene Gwenyver, ‘ye were gretly to blame that ye saved nat thys ladyes lyff’” (76). While she does pass a judgment on Pellinore, he waves off her concern, arguing that he does indeed regret the outcome, but that he was justified in ardently pursuing his quest. In later episodes, however, Guinevere's words carry more weight in the court. When Launcelot makes Sir Bedivere carry the body of a lady he wrongfully killed back to court, Bedivere does not plead his case in front of Arthur. Instead, the focus of judgment in the courtroom is shifted to the queen: “‘So Sir Pedyvere departed with the lady dede and the hede togydir, and founde the Quene with Kynge Arthure at Wynchestir; and there he tolde all the trouthe’” (175). Instead of finding Arthur at Winchester, Bedivere finds Guinevere first, and Arthur second. And in the face of such a violent crime, in direct violation of the Pentecostal Oath that Arthur and his knights have vowed to uphold, Arthur says nothing. Instead, Guinevere does all the talking in this case: “‘Sir knyght,’ seyde the Quene, ‘this is an horrible dede and a shamefull, [...] But this shall I gyff you in penaunce – make ye as good skyffte as ye can:

ye shall bere this lady with you on horsebak unto the Pope of Rome, and of hym resseyve youre penaunce for your foule dedis” (175). Instead of simply expressing displeasure in the case of Bedivere, as she did with Pellinore, Guinevere takes charge and rebukes the offending Bedivere much more strongly.

After receiving homage from Launcelot’s conquests, Guinevere has achieved a certain level of power (and perhaps even more practice and ease in dealing with the issues presented in ruling the kingdom) that allows her to speak so strongly in response to Bedivere’s crime. In receiving the spoils of the quests, Guinevere demonstrates her capability in handling the political and judicial duties that accompany the role of a strong militaristic ruler. It is worth noting that not only does she express her displeasure and disgust with Bedivere’s actions, but that she also sentences him to make penance directly in Rome – to take his sin to the highest spiritual level possible. In so doing, Guinevere establishes herself not only as a secular force to be reckoned with, but also as the preserver of the spiritual doings of Camelot.

Guinevere’s judgment in the case of the conquests of Camelot’s knights is proof of what both Mary Etta Scott and Edward Donald Kennedy discuss in their analyses of the queen’s character. Scott in particular describes Guinevere as a “good secular queen” (25), especially taking into account the fact that the knights (especially Lancelot) perform feats of chivalry for her sake. Kennedy agrees with Scott’s claim that Guinevere’s secular face is the most prominent portrait of the lady Malory gives us. In fact, Malory presents Guinevere always in a public role – that of queen and judge. Concurring with Thelma Fenster and Terence McCarthy, Kennedy states that “[...]throughout most of *Morte Darthur* the portrait of Guenevere is primarily a public one, with little emphasis on

her character as wife and mistress (Fenster xxiv; McCarthy 121-24). Just as Lancelot in Malory is always ‘Sir Lancelot,’ she is always ‘Queen Guenevere’ or the Queen” (37). Guinevere retains her title from the moment of her coronation; her position is that of queen, and not of wife and mistress – it would seem that Malory has cast her as a queen who just happens to be Arthur’s wife on the side. There are no private scenes for Guinevere to provide her with an inner character or develop her relationship with either of the men in her life. When she appears in the narrative, she is either at Arthur’s side (presumably serving her figurehead role as the feminine counterpart to the king) or in the midst of some political issue that calls for her attention (whether it’s passing judgment as in the case of Sir Bedivere, attending a tournament, or defending her honor as in the case of the poisoned apple later in the narrative). Her main role, however, always features her in some form of the political spotlight.

Since Guinevere is so firmly placed in the center of the Round Table (whether she really wants to be or not), it is interesting to draw a parallel between the fractioning of the Table and the fractioning of the narrative. Ultimately, the knights of the Round Table break themselves off into political parties based on personal relationships and on personal vendettas. The Table cannot hold together while the individual members are more concerned with their own pride and personal revenge than they are with the good of Camelot. This parallels the narrative structure of the Morte in the sense that after Arthur’s conquest of Rome, the individual knights see fit to (or are free to) pursue their personal quests. After these quests, the tension between families makes itself more evident, but the Table still holds together through the thin veil of honor and chivalry – just as Guinevere’s position holds the Table together through her veiled manipulation of

the knights themselves (and even perhaps of King Arthur). She manages to keep herself out of trouble with the knights as long as she treads a fine line of honor with them – the fact that she is both a lady and the Queen demands that they pay her a certain level of respect. Her feminine power is not something to be taken lightly, though. The Oath (and the atmosphere that spawns it) holds the knights to uphold it; however, as time progresses, the social atmosphere changes to shift the balance. Ackerman writes: “What makes women powerful in Malory’s world is not just the knightly understanding of women as powerless, but this understanding in conjunction with the moral imperative that knights of the Round Table do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succor. Without this imperative, the knightly understanding of women as powerless could be a basis for overpowering and taking advantage of women rather than for protecting and serving them” (4-5). Later in the narrative, Guinevere will find herself in trouble with the very knights who currently support her. The morality of Camelot, once it shifts, will not favor the Queen, no matter what her degree of political prowess. With the differing factions of the Table later growing bitterer, Guinevere’s feminine diplomacy (which depends both on keeping her personal life secret and on the damsel’s clause of the Pentecostal Oath) falls flat. Her own downfall is linked to the downfall of the Oath’s declaration of chivalry as well as the personal conflicts that arise between her knights – especially where Launcelot is concerned.

The first indication of any relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere – that oh-so-salacious aspect of the story that remains infamous – appears for the first time in “The Book of Sir Launcelot Du Lake.” Immediately after Malory’s narrator sings Launcelot’s praises, he notes the knight’s relationship with the royal couple: “[...] he is

the fyrste knyght that the Freynsh booke makyth mencion of aftir Kynge Arthure com frome Rome. Wherefore Quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the Quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff” (152). With this indication that there is some mutual attraction (whether it is romantic or otherwise) between Launcelot and Guinevere also comes the insinuation that Guinevere holds two men in her orbit. As Arthur’s queen, she holds the power behind the throne, both through the power of subtle suggestion and as a judge of erring knights (often Arthur hands jurisdiction over to her, especially when crimes concern knights’ dishonoring ladies in direct violation of the Oath). As Launcelot’s lady fair, she also holds power over the acknowledged greatest knight in the land – through the power of influence, Guinevere swiftly accumulates power that leaves her a very strong force to be reckoned with, as well as the figure that bridges the gap between King and knights.

Early on in the Tale, Launcelot defends himself against several charges of an adulterous relationship with the Queen. The first charge of impropriety comes from the four queens who seek to lure Launcelot into a romantic liaison (it might be worth noting that one of the queens is Morgan le Fay, who does not necessarily have the best interests of Camelot at heart): “And because that we undirstonde youre worthynesse, that thou art the noblest knyght lyvyng, and also we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is Quene Gwenyvere – and now thou shalt her love lose for ever, and she thyne” (155). Morgan le Fay, who makes this initial charge, perhaps knows that the adulterous implications may not even be true at this point. Malory’s narrator simply indicates at the start of the tale that there is a mutual respect, and rightly so. Since Guinevere is the number one First Lady in Camelot, and the Pentecostal Oath calls for

respect and aid for women, Launcelot, as the finest knight in the land, could very well dedicate his career to do her honor as a sign of respect both for the woman and for her position. However, with Morgan le Fay making the charge of a more amorous relationship, Guinevere becomes more of a danger to her favored knight than she ever was before. He defiantly denies both the charge and the advances of the queens: “And therefore ye be answeyrd: I woll none of you, for ye be false enchaunters. And as for my lady, Dame Gwenyvere, were I at my lyberté as I was, I wolde prove hit on youres that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng” (155). In defending Guinevere’s honor, he also defends his own; however, Morgan le Fay is not one to be denied lightly.

The next intimation of an inappropriate affair between Launcelot and Guinevere appears later in the same tale, from the mouth of a damsel Launcelot finds himself bound to in the course of a quest: “But hit is noysed that ye love Quene Gwenyvere, and that she hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that ye shall never love none other but hir, nother none other damesell ne lady shall rejoice you – wherefore there be many in this londe, of hyghe astate and lowe, that make grete sorow” (164). It is interesting to note that this second insinuation of impropriety (to the extent of even accusing Guinevere of witchcraft) comes after Morgan disappears, leaving her words behind her. The “noyse” that the damsel speaks of might very well come from the mouth of Arthur’s jealous sister – a rumor dispatched in an attempt to draw dishonor on the rulers of the kingdom and make the work ahead that much more difficult. The allegation of romantic involvement between the knight and his queen is mentioned a third and final time by yet another damsel, this one so desperate for Launcelot’s love that she admits to a more violent form of trapping his attentions:

“And, Sir Launcelot, now I telle the, I have loved the this seven yere; but there may no woman have thy love but Quene Gwennyver – and sytthen I might nat rejoyse the nother thy body on lyve, I had kepte no more joy in this worlde but to have thy body dede: Than wolde I have bawmed hit and sered hit, and so to have kepte hit my lyve dayes – and dayly I sholde have clypped the and kyssed the, dispyte of Quene Gwentyvere.” (172)

Morgan’s subtle accusation has swelled from a mild insinuation against Launcelot to a young maiden’s confession of contemplated murder and spiteful anger against her queen. While there may not have been any intention of impropriety in the beginning of Launcelot’s tale, the seeds of a very powerful attachment are certainly planted in his mind by the end of the tale. This may speak to Morgan’s power through the power of suggestion; however, it also speaks to Guinevere’s position. Morgan le Fay, as Arthur’s exclusive enemy, would have no reason to attack Guinevere in this manner unless the Queen held some sort of power over the King – and if the Queen holds the power, then she is perhaps more dangerous to Morgan than Arthur himself is.

CHAPTER 2: DOPPELGANGER LOVE TRIANGLES: PARALLELS IN THE TRISTRAM SECTION

The insinuations made in “The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot” are not the last attempts Morgan makes to humiliate Guinevere. “The Tale of Sir Tristram” leads into more explicit revelations of the supposed affair between Queen and knight – on two fronts. The affair between Tristram and Isode serves to parallel the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere; while Guinevere’s relationship with her favored knight remains more veiled, discussed in shades of grey, the relations between Tristram and Isode are far more blatant. D. Thomas Hanks states that “What Malory did was to present the Tristram-Isode affair as a great love, to be sure, but as a great love distinctly tarnished at the edges. He removed virtually all the tarnish from the Lancelot-Guinevere affair [...] but in showing us the parallel love as stained, he comments subtly about the nature of the Lancelot-Guinevere relationship” (25). There are parallels between the two sets of lovers, but Malory’s adaptation favors Launcelot and Guinevere as the fairer pair; they are not perfect by any means, but their affair is certainly a durable one. At the same time, the shadow of Morgan le Fay’s slanderous accusations color Guinevere’s relationship with all the men in her life, threatening both her professional and personal power.

Morgan must know something that Malory does not reveal directly to his audience, because the first mention of Guinevere in the “Tale of Sir Tristram” comes with a subversive plan to reveal the intimacy between Guinevere and Lancelot; Morgan attempts to send a magic drinking horn to Arthur, hoping to expose Guinevere’s indiscretions. Instead, the horn takes a detour to King Mark’s court – finding its way into the path of another pair of secretive lovers. Instead of directly exposing the illicit affair in Arthur’s court, Malory hints at the relationship through the tale of Tristram and Isode;

somehow, each woman knows and understands the situation of the other, and both women live in fear of detection. Since Guinevere and Isode are in positions of power, married to powerful men, the secret is all the more important. For Guinevere, especially, the secret is important. If her relationship with Lancelot (however serious it may be at this point) were to be discovered and exposed as outright adultery, her position as the highest-ranking woman in the land would be in serious jeopardy. Guinevere holds her power as long as Arthur trusts her integrity – up to this point, Guinevere has been able to manipulate Arthur’s perception of her enough to maintain her status. Isode, however, is not in Guinevere’s solid position as King Mark’s wife. Through Isode, Malory foreshadows the ultimate breakdown of Guinevere’s Camelot.

Both Isode and Guinevere are aware of each other’s situation and romantic involvements; Isode even manages to send a letter to Guinevere about Tristram’s supposed unfaithfulness:

So Quene Gwenyver sent hir [Isode] another letter and bade her be of goode comferte, for she sholde have joy aftir sorow; for Sir Trystrames was so noble a knyght called, that by craftes of sorsery ladyes wolde make suche noble men to wedde them – “but the ende,” Quene Gwenyver seyde, “shulde be thus: that he shall hate her and love you bettir than ever he dud.” (272)

Guinevere’s response is meant to console her sister-in-spirit, but it rings eerily in the face of some of her own reactions to Launcelot’s wayward romantic adventures. It would seem that both Isode and Guinevere cannot stand to have their favored knights manipulated by other women; but if the queens are the ones doing the manipulation, then

Tristram and Launcelot are saved from their disfavor. Later, when Launcelot is deceived into lying with Elayne, Guinevere seems to forget her own words, chastising Launcelot as an untrue, untrustworthy scalawag, even going so far as to say that she never wants to see him again. Her reaction parallels the anger of Isode in similar circumstances, and while each queen looks to the other for emotional support, neither learns anything from the words and actions of the other. Instead, they only serve to cover for each other's lies.

Isode uses Guinevere in several instances to cover up for her illicit affair with Tristram; there is even an instance where Brangwyn, Isode's maidservant, attends a tournament for the sake of Sir Tristram and covers up the true reason for her being there by paying her respects to Queen Guinevere and delivering a message of Isode's warm tidings. While Brangwyn tries to cover up the truth of the matter, Morgan once again tries to expose the illicit love triangle of Camelot – this time to Sir Tristram. If Morgan cannot get the rumor to gather enough energy by attacking Launcelot directly, then revealing the secret to Tristram is simply another avenue to pursue in attempting to afflict Camelot. Morgan may reason that if Guinevere is disgraced in the eyes of another great lover, her power over the rest of the knights may dissipate. Malory, however, reveals Morgan's own secret here, referring to his French source:

But, as the Freynshe booke seyde, Quene Morgan loved Sir Launcelot beste, and ever she desired hym; and he wolde never love her nor do nothyng at her rekeyste, and therefore she hylde many knyghtes togydir to have takyn hym by strenghte. And bycause that she demed that Sir Launcelot loved Quene Gwennyver paramour, and she hym agayne, therefore Dame Morgan ordained that shylde to put Sir Launcelot to a

rebuke, to that entente that Kynge Arthure myght undirstonde the love
betwene them. (334)

As Malory states, Morgan le Fay's incentive to antagonize Guinevere stems from an even more personal threat than just Guinevere's power over Arthur; the power that Guinevere holds over the greatest living knight is even more important, according to Malory and his "Freynshe booke." Guinevere holds Launcelot in her service, keeping him not only as a member of the court, but also in her own personal circle. Malory notes in several instances before "The Book of Sir Tristram" that Launcelot is held high in Guinevere's favor, and even that the two have a mutual admiration and respect for one another. However, it is only with the advent of Morgan le Fay's jealous nature that Malory hints that the relationship is more than professional or platonic. Guinevere presents a threat to Morgan's adulterous heart (let us not forget that the infamous le Fay is a married queen in her own right), and Morgan actually presents the first real threat to Guinevere's hold on Camelot. The incident with the misdirected drinking horn is the first active deceit on Morgan's part to expose her jealous suspicions. It would seem that mere rumors (such as those started in "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot") are not enough to serve her diabolical purposes – Guinevere's status in the court is simply too strong for jealous words to destroy. The Queen's status is directly connected to her influence in the court – influence over both the Round Table and over Arthur himself. Kenneth Hodges mentions that her queenship is intertwined with her personal power: "While her judgment is often merciful, it is not a result of intercession: Arthur grants her authority without her begging. [...] Guinevere is more independent than late medieval queens were often presented as being. Since Guinevere does not often intercede with Arthur, she does not

often take on this visibly inferior role” (55-56). Since she is not often “visibly inferior,” her position bespeaks a stronger woman than perhaps Morgan had first anticipated.

However, Guinevere is not completely indestructible. As strong as she outwardly appears, her own insecurities give fuel to the smoking fire of guilt. Early in Tristram’s book, Morgan gives him a shield to carry into a tournament: “Than the shyld was brought forthe, and the fylde was gouldes with a kyng and a queen therein paynted, and a knyght stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge upon the kynges hede and the other upon the quenys hede” (334). Guinevere’s reaction to the shield bespeaks a paranoid, guilty conscience, one afraid of discovery perhaps, but perhaps more afraid of the gossiping tongues of others. Keeping in mind that Arthur’s Queen is the daughter of another king, and has probably spent her whole life observing the ins and outs of politics – including the more secretive aspects of political intrigues and pillow talk – Guinevere should be highly aware of the damage that gossip and rumors can do to even a strong ruler. Guinevere’s reaction to the shield, however, betrays her insistence on secrecy. Angela Gibson states that “the Morte questions the motives behind uncovering faithlessness because of its potential for social destruction” (64). Immediately upon seeing the shield, she launches into self-defense mode, making her complaint to the nearest authority who will listen: “Than Quene Gwenyvere called to Sir Ector de Marys, and there she made hyr complaynte to hym and seyde, ‘I wote well thys shyld was made by Morgan le Fay in the dispite of me and of Sir Launcelot, wherefore I drede me sore leste I shall be distroyed’” (336). To have called out to Launcelot in this circumstance might have looked suspicious; instead, she calls to Sir Ector, and accuses Morgan le Fay of treachery.

Guinevere's fear is certainly justified in this case; if anyone, especially Arthur, were to suspect that a knight of Camelot held the royal couple underfoot, there would certainly be trouble. Guinevere forgets, however, that the shield does not expressly portray Arthur or Launcelot. The figures could very well symbolize another love triangle that causes nothing but trouble for the members involved – Tristram, King Mark, and La Belle Isode. Tristram, as nephew and knight to Mark's Cornwall, holds the same privileged position as Launcelot does in his respective court. Tristram is also quite obviously the favorite of Isode (in that the two are condemned to a fatal mutual attraction) and manages to balance his duties to both liege lord and queen – keeping both parties under his control until Mark labels him as a traitor for loving the Queen Isode. It would seem, at least in this instance, that Mark is much more perceptive than Arthur when it comes to his queen's heart and actions. Perhaps Isode is not as artful at manipulation and political diplomacy as her "sister-in-love," but it is Mark's outward manifestations of his own insane jealousy that finally push the narrative forward. As Kennedy observes, "Tristram's loyalty to Mark does not waver in Malory's book until such time as Mark dishonors himself by openly committing treason against his nephew" (Kennedy "Adultery" 68). Later, Arthur will be presented with a similar choice; his decision (whether to follow Mark's example) will bear strongly on the outcome for Camelot itself.

If Tristram is Launcelot's counterpart in this tale, then Isode is certainly Guinevere's. Malory does not give much information on the inner workings of Arthur's queen until "The Book of Sir Trystram," and when he does finally give her lines and development, they are usually intertwined with the characters of Isode and Launcelot.

While her entanglement with Launcelot remains veiled in hints and suspicions (such as the poisonous suspicions of Morgan le Fay), Guinevere's link to Isode remains a more solid connection – the material of the letter Isode sends to her spiritual sister is revealed directly: “And so in this meanewhyle La Beale Isode made a lettir unto Quene Gwenyvere complaynyng her of the untrouthe of Sir Trystames, how he had wedded the kynges doughter of Bretayne” (272). As previously stated, Guinevere's reply to Isode is meant to comfort, reassuring the angry and heartbroken woman of Tristram's love – only witchcraft could possibly pull him away from Isode. When Guinevere finds herself in the same situation, however, her temper gets the best of her, and she forgets her own sagacious advice.

Lancelot's sexual adventures with Lady Elayne are never purposeful betrayals – he is instead tricked into lying with her through the magical arts of Dame Brusen – much along the same lines as Guinevere's dismissal of Tristram's perceived betrayal. In fact, Launcelot is bewitched into thinking he is sleeping with Guinevere herself. If Malory avoids directly addressing the extent of Launcelot and Guinevere's relationship before, the truth of the matter is certainly out now. In fact, he “forecasts that consummation [of the relationship] in the Tristram-book, where he twice arranges what Lancelot thinks are to be sexual liaisons between himself and Guinevere” (Hanks 24). Guinevere, on the other hand, is not amused. Nor should she be – after pledging his life and his service to Queen Guinevere, Launcelot has sexual relations with another woman (albeit accidentally) not once, but twice, and he conceives a child as a result of that liaison. Guinevere, in her position as a disgraced lover, accepts his story the first time:

And so the noyse sprange in Kynge Arthurs courte that Sir Launcelot had gotyn a chylde upon Elayne, the daughter of Kynge Pelles – wherefore Quene Gwenyver was wrothe, and she gaff many rebukes to Sir Launcelot and called hym false knyght. And than Sir Launcelot told the Quene all, and how he was made to lye by her ‘in the lyknes of you, my lady the Quene.’ And so the Quene hylde Sir Launcelot exkused. (470)

However, the second time is Launcelot’s fatal mistake. To be fooled once is bad enough, but forgivable. The second case of intercourse with Elayne translates betrayal not just on a personal level, but also on a political level. The second incident concerning Launcelot and Elayne is the last straw; Guinevere must take action before things get out of hand.

Launcelot lies the second time with Elayne in Guinevere’s form within the walls of Camelot itself, right under Arthur’s nose. Should the form of the glamour that clouds Launcelot’s vision be discovered, explaining himself to the King would certainly put Launcelot in a sticky situation. Launcelot has not been the most judicious lover, either. He cries out for Guinevere in his sleep, broadcasting his conscious and subconscious desire for the Queen to any and all who may pass by his chambers. Guinevere has no choice in her anger – she must expel him not only out of the grief of heartache, but also because Launcelot’s indiscretions are a threat to the illusion she works to hold together: “And anone the Quene mette hym [Launcelot] in the floure, and thus she sayde: ‘A, thou false traytoure knyght, loke thou never abyde in my courte, and lyghtly that thou voyde my chambir! And nat so hardy, thou false traytoure knyght, that evermore thou com in my sight.’ [...] And therewythall Quene Gwenyver departed” (472). While Launcelot’s affections may be genuine, talking in his sleep is not the wisest thing to do when his

sleeptalking betrays his real lust for Guinevere, especially if the King might be sleeping mere rooms away.

The threat does not come solely from Launcelot's quarter, either. While his lust is certainly a liability, and he must be sent away to preserve Guinevere's position in Arthur's eyes, Elayne herself presents another, more personal challenge to Guinevere's power. The first meeting between the women is cold: "So whan Dame Eleyne was brought unto the Quene, aythir made other goode chere as by countenance, but nothyng with there hartes. But all men and women spake of the beauté of Dame Elayne" (471). Their relationship does not warm up after spending time together, either. As a result of Elayne having slept with Launcelot and conceived his child, Guinevere is confronted with her own limitations, and the truth the Queen sees is painful. From her position, she cannot love Launcelot the way Elayne has – body and soul – and she certainly cannot give him children, whether she wants to or not. She has not presented Arthur with an heir – to even consider bearing Launcelot children herself is treasonous. And yet, to see Elayne in the flesh sends Guinevere boiling over with guilt and jealousy, as she realizes that her own status as a powerful player in the world of politics has left her powerless as a woman – meaning that the domestic role of mother remains unfulfilled. Guinevere's inability to produce an heir of any sort is an obvious gap in her expected role, and yet she manages to navigate her female power more aptly than Elayne seems able to. While Elayne is carrying Launcelot's child, she is unable to secure his heart and loyalties; Guinevere, on the other hand, seems to be driving the fates of all the lovers involved in the tale as she banishes both Launcelot and Elayne from her presence and projects an easy-going façade in order to charm the public at large.

Ultimately, Guinevere cannot give either of the men in her life all that they need or desire, because she treads a thin line between them. Her jealousy, however, leads her to be more reckless than she has been previously: “Than the Quene sente for Sir Launcelot and bade hym com to her chamber that nyght – ‘Other ellys,’ seyde the Quene, ‘I am sure that ye woll go to youre ladyes bedde, Dame Elayne, by whome ye gate Galahad’” (471). Malory never shows Launcelot and Guinevere together after nightfall – but Guinevere’s jealousy over the possibility of losing Launcelot to another woman causes her to behave a little more recklessly. She risks getting caught by demanding he come to her bedchamber after hours, and she certainly leaves herself open to gossip when she finally expels Launcelot in her fury over his second trespass. Once Launcelot is gone, expelling one threat, there only remains the expulsion of Launcelot’s pregnant lover to get rid of both threats and seal the deal:

“Well, Dame Elayne,” seyde the Quene, “as sone as hit ys daylight I charge you to avoyde my courte. And for the love ye owghe unto Sir Launcelot, discover not hys counceyle, for and ye do, hit woll be hys deth.” “As for that,” seyde Dame Elayne, “I dare undirtake he ys marred for ever – and that have you made” [...]. So on the morne Dame Elayne toke her leve to departe and wolde no lenger abyde. (472-473)

Elayne’s last words to Guinevere are particularly prophetic; because of witchcraft, confusion, and Guinevere’s own rabid jealousy, Launcelot the great knight will not return. The Launcelot that returns to Camelot after his period of madness is a much changed, sadder version of himself. Now Guinevere’s guilt does not disappear, as she

may have anticipated, but deepens. This deep and painful guilt may perhaps explain her too-eager approval of Galahad in “The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal”:

What [Guinevere] avysed [Galahad] she seyde, ‘I dare well sey sothely that Sir Launcelot begate hym, for never two men resembled more in lyknesse. [...] “Ye, forsothe,” seyde the Quene, “for he ys of all parties comyn of the beste knyghtes of the worlde, and of the highest lynage; for Sir Launcelot ys com but of the eighth degree frome Oure Lorde Jesu Cryst, and thys Sir Galahad ys the nyneth degree frome Oure Lorde Jesu Cryst: Therefore I dare sey they be the grettist jantillmen of the worlde.”

(502)

In apprising Galahad a good knight and a worthy man, she is making some small atonement for her wildly jealous treatment of Launcelot; perhaps she even sees something in Galahad that that she cannot find in her lover – Galahad is, after all, the perfect knight.

CHAPTER 3: FALSE PIETY AND REAL STRUGGLES:
“THE NOBLE TALE OF THE SANKGREAL”

Despite Galahad's being “the grettist jantillmen of the worlde,” Guinevere's thoughts are more consumed by his noble father. Sirs Percival and Ector even make note of the Queen's extravagance in seeking to find the lost Launcelot. When he returns to court, not so much disgraced as chastened, Guinevere bursts into tears: “And ever as Sir Ector and Sir Percyvale tolde thes talys of Sir Launcelot, Quene Gwentyver wepte as she shulde have dyed” (489). Her tears betray her affections, her guilty conscience, and her relief. While she may have dismissed him in anger and in fear for her own skin, it would seem that the Queen simply cannot do without Launcelot. Her guilty tears come at such a time when the fate of Tristram and Isode remains uncertain; the relief she feels at Launcelot's restoration to the court is tantamount to providing the queen with a closure that Malory does not give Sir Tristram at this time.³ While Launcelot wanders mad in the woods, his fate (and the fate of their adultery) is unclear to Guinevere, as she waits from a distance unable to see him; when he returns, her guilty conscience (guilty, perhaps, for having driven him away despite their unwritten understanding) can breathe easier. At least now she knows where he is, and she can keep an eye on his response to other too-eager maidens.

That reluctance to let him out of her sight extends into the next tale – that of the Sankgreal. At first, when Launcelot is called away on behalf of King Pelles (Elayne's father), Guinevere only allows him to leave her after making her misgivings very clear: “‘If I wyste,’ seyde the Quene, ‘that he sholde nat be here with us tomorne, he sholde nat

³ Malory's attention to Sir Tristram wavers as the tales focus on the adventures of Arthur's court at Camelot. As the narrative progresses, Tristram's fate remains in limbo, and only much later does Malory reveal that Tristram has died off-stage.

go with you be my goodwyll” (496). Guinevere’s ambivalence towards Launcelot’s journey is clearly self-motivated. The summons of King Pelles, specifically, is a thorn in her side – Launcelot, who once only answered to her, is now at the beck and call of Elayne’s family due to the chain of events that bind him to that lady. Pelles, then, is practically Launcelot’s father-in-law (in spirit, if not in name), and Launcelot’s position obligates him to a certain extent. Guinevere is understandably jealous, and her words make certain that Launcelot knows it. She is letting him travel out of her sphere of influence, directly into the home of her nearest rival, and it makes her uneasy. Her begrudging allowance of Launcelot’s visit to Pelles is only the beginning, though; he is about to take off on a much longer, harder journey. Even though the Quest for the Sankgreal is intertwined with the spiritual and religious lives of Camelot, the possibility of the dispersal of the Round Table for the sake of the quest leaves Guinevere at a loss. If the military force of the Round Table gives her power in Camelot, the disbanding of the table to seek the Grail might cut her influence, leaving her vulnerable. The departure of Launcelot and the rest of the knights leaves Guinevere and her ladies beside themselves:

Whan the Quene, ladyes, and jantillwomen knew of thys tydynges, they had such sorow and hevynes that there myght no tunge telle, for tho knyghtes had holde them in honoure and charité. But aboven all other, Quene Gwenyver made grete sorow: “I mervayle,” seyde she, “that my lorde wolle suffir hem to departte fro hym.” Thus was all the courte trowbled for the love of the departyng of these knyghtes. (504)

Not only do the ladies show great sorrow over the knights’ departure, but Guinevere herself seems to channel the devastation left in the wake of the quest. When she states

that she marvels at Arthur's allowance of the knights' quest, her control over the situation is questionable – the issue would not be a problem if she were the true head of state. However, one particular part of keeping control is making sure she hides in Arthur's shadow – to outright forbid the soldiers' departure would pull her out into the open as a powerful figure,⁴ leaving Arthur (and thus herself) open to potshots from enemies all around (like the ever-suspicious Morgan le Fay).

Instead of exerting a weightier power, Guinevere shows her feelings about the quest in such a manner that her disappointment is crystal clear. As the knights depart, she retires to her chamber to mourn the loss – but also to consider the options and possibilities of the new situation. Of course, her pouting recalls an episode that just passed – when Launcelot comes to her chambers to pay his respects before leaving, her reaction parallels the words she uttered as he left in banishment: “Whan Sir Launcelot myssed the Quene he wente tyll hir chambir, and whan she saw hym she cryed alowde and seyde, ‘A, Sir Launcelot, Launcelot, ye have betrayde me and putte me to the deth, for to leve thus my lorde!’” (505). The threat Launcelot posed to Guinevere in the Elayne affair crops up once again – in coming directly to her chambers (uninvited this time), he betrays their intimacy. This is not what Guinevere is concerned about at the moment, though; instead, Guinevere accuses Launcelot of killing her through sorrow by leaving Camelot with the rest of the knights to pursue the quest for the Sankgreal. In this instance, she refuses to see the spiritual side of the quest to focus on her own personal,

⁴ Dorsey Armstrong posits that women in the *Morte* are capable of manipulating their circumstances within the chivalric conventions, indicating that the gender relationships in Malory's narrative are shaky at best: “[Morgan le Fay] is a warped reflection of the knightly devotion to the feminine that drives the project of chivalry forward in Malory's text, and her remarkably free movement between gender identities – performing masculinity or femininity when it suits her – reveals the instability of the gender model on which the community depends” (65). Guinevere's shifting power also parallels Armstrong's hypothesis, as she moves from property (in the marriage negotiations) to co-regent to adulterous Queen.

internal problem. Even when she commends Launcelot to God as he travels, her statement is refocused not on Launcelot's safety or on the power of Providence, but on her own disappointment: "'Alas,' seyde she, 'that ever I syghe you! But He that suffird dethe uppon the Crosse for all menkynde, He be unto you good conduyte and saufté, and all the hole felyshyp'" (505). While she is indeed calling for Launcelot's safe passage while on the quest, she also laments their relationship, thereby connecting her grief over the intimacy she and Launcelot share with the reference to Christ on the Cross, which indicates the notion that the affair between Guinevere and her favored knight has come to reach spiritual proportions, perhaps even replacing Christian faith in importance relative to their own relationship. It also foreshadows the importance Guinevere will play later as a spiritual entity after Arthur's demise.

Just as Mary Etta Scott states that Guinevere makes a "good secular queen," so Guinevere at this point makes a rather poor spiritual guide. While Sir Kay asks his Queen to pray for his soul in "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot," the weight of Guinevere's prayers may seem negligible. Perhaps it is the power that she wields behind the scenes in Camelot that leave her as an unnatural entity in the spiritual realm; perhaps it is the possibility of adultery. Kenneth Hodges observes that queens at the time held little official power (55), hence, most of Guinevere's political power comes through the more subtle force of influence; however, she has in the past exercised a more direct role in governance, sitting as judge and jury as well as serving as her husband's steward in times of trouble. In Malory, Guinevere's degree of political expertise and authority, however veiled, is an anomaly, placing her more on a level with the men of the narrative. Her relationship with Launcelot has been touted as evidence of the troubled nature of her

personal spiritual state (and directly correlates to her lover's spirit, as well). The adultery has not been made explicit as of yet: "Throughout the Morte Darthur the true nature of their relationship has been kept ambiguous, consistent with Malory's tendencies to downplay courtly adultery and to elevate the character of Lancelot" (MacBain 60); however, both knight and Queen are playing a dangerous high-stakes game. Both parties are suffering the effects of the temptation, and Guinevere's continued acceptance of Launcelot's attentions has left his obligations – both secular and spiritual – in ambiguous territory. Launcelot himself is particularly vulnerable to the Queen's charms, leaving him open to attacks on his spirit. The Hermit in the tale of the Sankgreal sees through the great knight's bravado and even manages to get a confession from Launcelot:

And than he tolde there the good man all hys lyff, and how he had loved a queen unmesurably and oute of mesure longe. "And all my grete dedis of armys that I have done, for the moste party was for the Quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle were hit right other wronge; and never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wynne worship and to cause me the bettir to be beloved – and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit." (519)

The truth of the matter is that Launcelot's great deeds of arms were never for the sake of good works and glory for his King, nor were they for the glory of God's kingdom – two pillars that support the Pentecostal Oath itself. Instead, Launcelot's knighthood focuses more intimately on the women's clause, the very clause that lends Guinevere a good deal of influence in the court. He forfeited the "worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure" (77) for the worship and lordship of Queen Guinevere, and it has placed him in a spiritual

quandary of which he is fully aware. The fact that Launcelot is even struggling with the issue indicates a progression of his character, as noted by Beverly Kennedy: “In the first book devoted to Launcelot and his adventures, Malory shows that his love for Guinevere has not yet affected either his humility or his devotion to chastity ‘for drede of God’” (“Adultery” 12). And yet, the quest for the Sankgreal is about to problematize Launcelot’s seemingly comfortable position. Scott notes, “He never did battle only for God’s sake, but to win worship (vanity) and to be better beloved by the queen” (26). Launcelot’s love of the Queen has put his love of God in question, thus putting his very soul in jeopardy as he allows Guinevere’s influence to fly in the face of God Himself.

Understanding his difficult situation, Launcelot asks the hermit for counsel, fearing for his eternity. The hermit’s condition, however, is less than satisfactory to the Guinevere-addicted knight: “‘Sir, I woll counceyle you,’ seyde the ermyte, ‘[yf] ye shall ensure me by youre knyghthode ye shall no more com in that quenys felyship as much as ye may forbere.’ And than Sir Launcelot promised hym that he nolde, by the faythe of hys body” (520). Launcelot’s oath is, of course unsatisfactory, as well. The “faith of his body” is not a reliable vow, especially since Malory has previously revealed that Launcelot’s body has been an unfaithful vessel. It is Launcelot’s body that got him into trouble with Guinevere in the Elayne affair – by being “unfaithful” to his Queen; it is his body that has caused him to be unfaithful to his King by lusting after the Queen herself. It would seem that Launcelot, by the very nature of his promise to the hermit, is doomed to failure. And he is, in this sense at least, for he soon finds himself drawn back to Guinevere as her defender, protector, and savior.

Launcelot's story of sin, repentance, and relapse in the "Tale of the Sankgreal" reveals the seriousness of the moral nature of Camelot. D.S. Brewer especially notes how Launcelot's struggle with the sinful nature of his love for Guinevere reflects the overall moral tone of the civilization: "In the Grail story, therefore, success is largely thought of in terms of the possible success of secular Christian knighthood, and failure again is seen in terms of failure to maintain normal Christian morality. Success and failure are summed up in the achievements of Lancelot" (58). Launcelot's success on the battlefield has won him much honor – his failure lies in conquering his own lust and pride. Malory's focus on the sin with Guinevere as the clincher to his failure to achieve the Grail once again places the Queen in a contradictory position: she is a good secular queen, but a moral destroyer of good knights.

Launcelot has much to be proud of in his secular life: "Launcelot's earthly joys have included the best worldly life can offer – passionate love with a beautiful queen, Round Table fellowship, and being the knight of most worship" (Ackerman "Spiritual Sloth"). His infatuation with the Queen was never a "good" thing, per se, but to have his wrong so pointedly revealed to him by the hermit certainly knocks him down a few pegs, and this humiliation sticks with him: "Though Lancelot slips back into his sin with Guinevere, he never wavers in devotion to his God. The humility scratched into him by the hair shirt is not forgettable; neither can he completely lose the awareness of God's grace and power for which he toiled so painfully in the Grail Quest" (Falcetta 30). Perhaps Launcelot gains a degree of humility in learning his spiritual limitation, but he is virtually incapable of separating himself from Guinevere; his return to the affair is marked by greater trouble and more indiscretion than before – signs of Launcelot's

uncertainty about himself. If Launcelot doubts himself, this above all must remain secret, like the affair itself.

Malory deflects the secretiveness of the affair through his “source,” as if to defend himself against criticism of sensationalism: “Than, as the booke seyth, Sir Launcelot began to resorte unto Quene Guenivere agayne, and forgate the promyse and 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 semyng outwarde to God, there had no knyghte passed him in the Queste of the Sankgreal” (588). Hodges challenges the narrator’s sense of authority:

Since the transmission of the story from the time of Arthur is obscured, the authority of the French book is unclear, and thus so is that of Malory’s text; it is neither the word of God nor a direct eyewitness account. Readers are denied direct access to the deeds of Arthur’s knights, and while the narrator never uses this lack of direct authority openly to challenge the tale’s accuracy, it is clear that Malory’s work does not have the only or last word on morality. (156)

While Hodges certainly presents a valid point, Malory’s purpose in mentioning his source book is not always to endow his own text with authority; instead, he skillfully makes note of the French book to absolve himself of any mistakes – if the information is wrong, then it is the fault of his sources, and not his own. Since the mysterious source says that Launcelot returned to Guinevere and resumed a far more passionate relationship than would have been appropriate for their status, then Malory’s narrator is cleared of any suspicion of writing dirty slander. (The “source” also records Morgan le Fay’s jealousy,

perhaps documenting the slander at its roots and absolving Malory's narrator of obscenity on that front as well.) The affair between Launcelot and Guinevere, though, remains a dangerous liability, however thinly veiled.

“The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere” opens with the assertion that Malory's nameless source material indicates not just a continuance, but an escalation of the affair between Launcelot and Guinevere; however, it is important to note that though Guinevere has previously been so careful concerning her reputation in court, it is Launcelot who attempts to assume some measure of conscience in this instance. Once he gets wind of the rumors flying around court, and especially recognizing some of the sources of the rumors, Launcelot exercises a degree of caution that Guinevere finds confusing: “[...]and ever as much as he myght he withdrew hym fro the company of Quene Gwentyvere for to eschew the sclawndir and noyse – wherefore the Quene waxed wrothe with Sir Launcelot” (587). Launcelot pulls away from his lady in part for his own sake – the episode of the Sankgreal has really convicted him of his own personal shortcomings, though Guinevere proves a very difficult temptation for him – but also for the queen's sake. Launcelot knows the danger posed by salacious characters such as Aggravayne and Mordred, and he knows that if they attack the queen's honor because of him, King Arthur himself – and the very society of Camelot itself – will be affected because of it: “Also, madame, wyte you well that there be many men spekith of oure love in thys courte and have you and me gretely in awayte, as thes Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred. And, madam, wyte you well I drede them more for youre sake than for ony feare I have of them myselffe, for I may happyn to ascape and ryde myself in a grete nede, where, madame, ye muste abyde all that woll be seyde unto you” (589). He

(finally) understands the difficult position Guinevere is in due to her status in the community, and begins he taking it seriously. If something were to happen, and the rumors were to become a matter of public record instead of whispers and shadows, Launcelot himself would be free to ride and attempt to escape, while Guinevere would be left behind, trapped into explaining the situation to her husband and the court, and having to accept any judgment the community heaped upon her.

The queen, however, does not recognize Launcelot's concern as legitimate; yet the very fact that he takes the time to address this matter in her presence lends it credence, which is something she had been hoping to avoid all this time. To discuss the rumors would be to give power to the outsiders who do not understand the emotion involved, and, in a sense, to betray her. Her reaction parallels the words she had used to banish Launcelot from court after he sleeps with Elayne the second time:

All thys whyle the Quene stode style and lete Sir Launcelot sey what he wolde. And whan he had all seyde, she braste oute on wepyng; and so she sobbed and a-wepte a grete whyle. And whan she myght speke, she seyde, "Sir Launcelot, now I well understonde that thou arte a false, recrayed knyght and I comon lechourere, and lovyste and holdiste othir ladyes, and of me thou haste dysdayne and scorne [...]." (589)

Not only is Launcelot a traitor for listening to the rumors, but he is also a traitor for using others' hurtful words to attempt to free himself from her company – or so Guinevere thinks. She may not hear the words of Aggravayne or Mordred now, but she is certainly painfully aware of the ladies who pay Launcelot various attentions in court; just as in the case of Elayne, her jealousy gets the best of her. In calling Launcelot a "false knyght,"

Guinevere also projects her own guilt onto him – it takes two willing people to have an affair, and yet she places all the blame for the situation at hand squarely on his shoulders. Her guilt leads her to evict him from court yet again, just as in the Elayne affair: “For wyte thou well, now I undirstonde thy falsehede, I shall never love the more, and loke thou be never so hardy to com in my sight; and right here I discharge the thys courte, that thou never com within hit, and I forfende the my felyship, and uppon payne of thy hede that thou se me nevermore” (589). This time, Guinevere does not need Sir Bors to tell her that it is her own pride getting in the way of a judicious, diplomatic plan.

However, in this instance, Guinevere’s emotions seem to be more in control; her jealousy and pride may perhaps lead her to banish Launcelot a second time, but after the initial outlash she manages to pull herself together in order to squelch the outsiders: “So whan Sir Launcelot was departed, the Quene outwarde made no maner of sorow in shewyng to none of his bloode nor to none other; but wyte ye well, inwardely, as the booke seythe, she toke grete thought – but she bare hit oute with a proude countenance, as thoughe she felte no thought nother daungere” (590). Instead of retiring to her chambers in a fit of depression, as she did in the initial pages of the “Tale of the Sankgreal,” Guinevere exerts a great deal of self-control and manages to proceed with her duties as if nothing had happened. The tactic might perhaps go a long way towards killing any discussion of illicit activity on her part, considering that much of the basis of the rumors is based on her reactions to Launcelot and to the frequency of his personal visits to her. If her brave façade does not kill the rumors altogether, it might perhaps give the suspicious members of court the idea that there has been a final break between the lovers, thus ending the danger to Arthur’s lineage. Of course, it is the pride behind the

façade that she tries so hard to present that lands Guinevere into trouble with the very men for whom she tries to create a sense of normalcy.

CHAPTER 4: SPLINTERED CIRCLE: AFTERMATH OF THE POISONED APPLE

To prove to everyone that she has moved beyond the Launcelot issue, Guinevere is determined to exercise all her powers of diplomacy and prove that there was never any sort of favoritism in the first place – a tall order indeed, since the rest of the Round Table has already heard and perpetuated the rumor mill. However, she seems determined to gather her knights to her as in the old days of previous pages: “So the Quene lete make a privy dynere in London unto the knyghtes of the Rownde Table and all was for to shew outwarde that she had as grete joy in all other knyghtes of the Rounde Table as she had in Sir Launcelot” (590). At first glance, it would seem that Guinevere’s scheme has worked, and that the Round Table is united once more, the feast channeling the goodwill and camaraderie of the Queen’s wedding feast. The situation, however, is not the same – Guinevere’s knights are much changed, just as she herself is, and pretending otherwise only invites trouble.

As part of Guinevere’s plan to make up with her knights, she plans to shower them with dainties, attempting to show her favor and affection through the feast she provides. She even makes a special point to provide a few of Gawain’s favorites: “But Sir Gawayne [...] that he loved well all maner of fruyte, and in especiall appyls and pearys. And therefore whosomever dyned other fested Sir Gawayne wolde commonly purvey for good fruyte for hym. And so ded the Quene: for to please Sir Gawain she lette purvey for hym all maner of fruyte, for Sir Gawayne was a passing hote knyght of nature” (590). Since Gawain is member of Aggravayne and Mordred’s clan, Guinevere probably intends to use the feast not only to cover up her guilty tracks in the eyes of the larger community, but also to quiet those men who spoke most vehemently about her

suspected indiscretions. The surface of the dinner party may be innocent enough, but the motives behind it prove more convoluted – in order to keep her position, the Queen must backtrack and submit a little to the men who keep her there in the first place. Little does she know that her good intentions will backfire on her with the insidious development of the poisoned apple.

Kenneth Hodges acknowledges Guinevere's difficult position, as well as the danger she puts herself in just through holding the feast in the first place. She may be trying to cover her own tracks due to the Launcelot issue, but there is also more to it: "The guest list makes it clear that this is a dinner party with the serious political purpose of bridging factional divides. [...] Even without poison, the result could hardly have been pleasant conversation; but Guinevere is asserting her role as a queen not tied to any one faction in particular. She is being a 'good lady,' working to create peace among the knights and promote their well being" (Hodges, "Guinevere's Politics" 64-65). The different loyalties among the knights do not make her job here easy; because of Guinevere's relationship with Launcelot, the rest of the Round Table is suspicious and leery of getting too close to her, even if she is the Queen. She is trying, as Hodges says, to be a "good lady," showing favor to all, but luck is just not with her. Before the end of the feast, the knights she seeks to pacify will ignore (and even demolish) her attempts to be a good lady.

While Guinevere's stance has changed, becoming more precarious, it is also important to note that the Round Table is not the same community of brotherhood that it was under the first Pentecostal Oath. The knights have followed Guinevere's example of secrecy, and the covert sins committed amongst them (like the killing of kinfolk) have

created a different picture of the Table's knighthood, no matter how much Guinevere may want to pretend otherwise. The knights certainly began their adventurous careers with the best of intentions – just as their Queen began her own political career as an honored maiden – but the less-than-noble results of knighthood have divided them: “And thys Sir Pyonell hated Sir Gawayne bycase of hys kynnesman Sir Lamorakes dethe; and therefore, fore pure envy and hate, Sir Pyonell enpoysonde sertayne appylls for to enpoyssen Sir Gawayne” (590-591). The knights may have endured a thousand injustices together – until, in the end, they decide to turn on one another, professing loyalty to their smaller clans instead of to each other, to their Oath, and to their King and Queen. The emotion here certainly factors into Janet Cowen's idea of emotion in the Morte providing a driving force; the hatred among the factions is about to burst the Table's divisions wide open and make the Queen a focus of the knights' ire. Guinevere's secret treason is about to turn on her and wreck the very foundations of Camelot. In fact, the suspicion surrounding her falls swifter than she might expect: “[...] and there Sir Patryse felle downe suddeynly dede amonge hem” (591). When Patryse falls, the Queen finds herself in serious trouble – and the circle suddenly closes in on her.

Sir Patryse is not a famous knight. He has no tale of his own, is not remembered for valiant deeds, and does not appear in the Morte at all before the Queen's dinner. Patryse *is*, however, pivotal in what he does do, however unwittingly. His death rings the first of Camelot's death knells. With the end of Patryse, Guinevere is painfully aware that everything she has done up until now must be answered for, in drastic terms. Her conduct had not directly caused anyone any great danger as of yet, but the incident of the poisoned apple alerts everyone to a shift in the rules of the game. If a knight can die

through treachery in the presence of a treacherous queen, the rules of proper knighthood no longer apply:

[...] for they all had grete suspeccion unto the Quene bycause she lete make that dyner. And the Quene was so abaysshed that she cowed none otherwayes do but wepte so hartely that she felle on a swowghe. So with thys noyse and crye cam to them Kynge Arthure, and whan he wyste of the trowble he was a passyng hevny man. And ever Sir Madore stood style before the Kynge and appeled the Quene of treson; for the custom was such at that tyme that all maner of shamefull deth was called treson. (591)

At this point, the honor to women in the Pentecostal Oath disappears like so much smoke when Guinevere's public character is no longer so squeaky clean as it had originally been, and her involvement with Launcelot has negatively effected her reputation among the men.

The knights of the Round Table are so quick to assume Guinevere's guilt on the charge of murder that any investigation into other possibilities (a treacherous knight, perhaps) is not even considered. It even comes down to the point where none of her former retainers will volunteer to do battle on her behalf as Sir Madore demands justice for his wrongly slain brother: "Well, seyde the Kynge, 'thys day fifteen dayes, loke thou be redy armed on horseback in the medow besides Wynchestir; and if hit so falle that there be ony knyght to encounter ayenste you, there may you do youre beste, and God spede the right – and if so befalle that there be no knyght redy at that day, than muste my queen be brente; and there she shall be redy to have hir jugemente'" (592). Even Arthur himself delivers the punishment of burning so nonchalantly that it looks as if he's siding

with the rest of his posse on this one. Guinevere may have pulled away from her royal husband in her relations with Launcelot so much that the King does not see her as his wife anymore – she is simply a woman who happens to be in his court (and caught in a very sticky situation). Either way, Guinevere cannot depend on her husband to defend her honor; he simply chastises her and refers her to another man for help:

“Well, than I woll counceyle you,” seyde the Kyng, “that ye go unto Sir Bors and pray hym for to do batayle for you for Sir Launcelottis sake; and uppon my lyff he woll nat refuse you. For well I se,” seyde the Kynge, “that none of the four and twenty knyghtes that were at your dyner [...] wol do batayle for you, nother none of hem woll sey well of you, and that shall be grete sclaundir to you in thys courte.” (592)

Of course, in saying this he has told Guinevere nothing that she does not already know, and everything she had feared in throwing the party in the first place. The knights of the Round Table are so caught up in their personal quarrels – each assuming that someone is out to destroy their kinsmen – that they neglect the idea of the greater picture of the community. Even Sir Pyonell remains mysteriously silent when Guinevere is falsely accused of murder; in saving his own skin, he betrays his Queen. In betraying his Queen, Pyonell neglects the Pentecostal Oath that binds the knighthood together. Since he neglects the Oath, he puts the Queen in danger – reflecting the deterioration of the kingdom’s system of order.

The possibility of being burned at the stake for a crime Malory’s narrator clearly states she did not commit shows how Guinevere’s position is connected with the fate of Camelot. The Queen’s initial connection with the Round Table has crumbled around her.

Whereas she once had liberty to bestow her favor (and have it mean something) on knights at tournaments, and whereas she had once welcomed new knights (like Tristram and Galahad) to the community, her relationship with the menfolk has deteriorated considerably. She is no longer the beneficent Queen, patroness of the knighthood; now she is labeled a traitor by the knights, condemned by her own soldiers (even her own king!) to be burned. Her situation speaks to the tension present amongst the knights themselves – the notion that none of them can be trusted based solely on their family connections and their desire for revenge. Guinevere cannot be trusted because she is connected with Launcelot behind Arthur’s back; Launcelot cannot be trusted because he is a traitor to Arthur; Gawain, as Arthur’s kinsman, can not be trusted because he killed Sir Lamerok, and so forth. The unity that characterized the Table at the swearing of the first Pentecostal Oath has fractioned off into smaller, petty political factions. There is no consideration of the greater good of the community, but only suspicions and personal vendettas – which Sirs Aggravayne and Mordred will capitalize on later to destroy Guinevere and Arthur’s world.

Guinevere’s status is closely linked with the Round Table throughout the narrative. However, although she does serve as a centering point for the quests, she is not a member of the Table’s fellowship, which leaves her in a precarious position when dealing with a roomful of angry knights. Armstrong’s insistence upon the instability of gender models in the Morte (based upon the constraints of the knights’ Pentecostal Oath) is reinforced here as Guinevere is singled out for attack. Her manipulation of the circumstances is based upon the Pentecostal Oath, as Armstrong indicates:

The inextricability of the ladies clause from the other articles of the code – its embedded position in the center of the Oath – imbricates gender in the construction and negotiation of individual and communal identity. In their absolute dependence upon a feminine presence that is marginalized and sublimated, the masculine agents of the chivalric community cannot allow or conceive of any resistance to gender categories as constructed by the Arthurian society. The lack of a parallel code of conduct for ladies similar to that articulated in the Pentecostal Oath demonstrates this. Ironically, the very inability to admit to the possibility of female agency permits such agency to exist, and indeed to flourish, at the heart of the masculine chivalric enterprise (65).

Guinevere's position in the episode concerning the poisoned apple reflects the deterioration of the Pentecostal Oath itself – since the fellowship is falling apart, then certainly their view of women in general (and Guinevere specifically) has changed. Guinevere's power took advantage of the leeway given in the Oath, but once the Oath's importance in the kingdom begins to crumble, her own power begins to shift. Whereas she could once hide in the folds of the rules governing the community, she must now change her role or risk losing her head; as the knights begin to recognize feminine agency, Guinevere's previously unassuming role becomes more conspicuous to the knights around her.

The fact that Arthur notes the conspicuous lack of support for Guinevere's case in the poisoned apple episode is disconcerting. He notices the drastic plunge of the Queen's reputation among the military forces, yet he asks no questions either of her or of the

knights themselves. Perhaps he does not need to ask; he does, after all, suggest that Guinevere enlist Sir Bors's help, since Bors is Launcelot's kinsman: "“What aylith you,’ seyde the Kyng, ‘that ye can nat kepe Sir Launcelot uppon youre side? For wyte you well,’ seyde the Kyng, ‘who that hath Sir Launcelot uppon his party hath the moste man of worship in thys worlde uppon hys syde. Now go youre way,’ seyde the Kyng unto the Quene, ‘and require Sir Bors to do batayle for you for Sir Launcelottis sake’” (592). Arthur may not have heard the rumors, and he may not be able to shake the ominous feeling that the suspicious circumstances give him, but he also still recognizes Launcelot as the greatest knight in the land – and thus, Launcelot's family must be enlisted to try to save the day.

Arthur's question, though, speaks volumes: "“What aylith you,’ seyde the Kyng, ‘that ye can nat kepe Sir Launcelot uppon youre side?’” (592). Guinevere's ailment is not simply her own; it is the ailment of a sick institution – one that has already outlived its prime. Guinevere cannot keep Launcelot physically by her side because his very presence is a political liability – and yet his absence puts her in even more danger. Her waffling on the Launcelot issue – first accepting him, then banishing him in jealousy, then taking him back – parallels the way Guinevere's own knights perceive her. She has been a beloved figure, riding into battle at the king's side, attending tournaments and bestowing favor on knights for the sake of honor; she has been asked to pray for knights as they leave on quests of great danger; and she has also experienced the pain of gossip and rumors that speak ill of her and her position as Queen. Now, of course, in the tale of the poisoned apple, Guinevere has to endure some of the harshest criticism the knights of the Round Table can mete out: she has been charged with murder based on

circumstantial evidence, the charges fueled in part by the suspicions and rumors that have circulated through the court.

Guinevere has to plead at Sir Bors's feet in order to convince him to defend her – he knows that the Queen is no longer the beloved lady of the court: “[...] ye require me the grettist thyng that ony man may require me – And wyte you well, if I graunte to do batayle for the Quene I shall wretth may of my felyship of the Table Rounde” (593). Not only is Guinevere under the gun of suspicion on all sides, but the knights drop all sense of responsibility towards her. Bors, despite being Launcelot's kinsman, must be talked into defending the lady's cause. It would seem that Guinevere's problem of being unable to keep Launcelot on her side (as Arthur notes) is only a smaller symptom of her losing control of the rest of the Round Table, bit by bit. If the knighthood will not support the rulers of the realm, then Camelot is ultimately doomed.

The knighthood is only crumbling thus far. The knights of the Round Table, though they may have lost sight of their purpose as stated in the Pentecostal Oath's mission statement, still have some shred of honor. Regrettably, that honor is more self-centered than it has been previously; many of the knights admit to loving Arthur, but not Guinevere: “Many answerd hym agayne: ‘As for oure moste noble Kynge Arthure, we love hym and honoure hym as well as ye do; but as for Quene Gwennyver, we love hir nat, because she ys a destroyer of good knyghtes’” (594). While Bors verbally defends the Queen against this charge, the phrase “destroyer of good knyghtes” recalls the very chastisement he himself brings against her in the Elayne affair, when Guinevere banishes Launcelot for the first time. While the knights of the Round Table may be thinking specifically of the murdered Patryse as the destroyed knight, this is actually the second

time Guinevere has been accused of this particular crime. It will not be the last time she is linked with the notion of destroying worthy knights – or the kingdom itself.

Camelot stands on the edge of a knife, but it is not yet broken. Just as before, Launcelot rides in to save the day just in the nick of time, not only saving Guinevere but also working to salvage her reputation in the case at hand. The defeated Sir Madore promises never to mention the matter again; however, Launcelot goes one step further in his defense of the Queen. The story of the incident is not dredged up by Madore, but Guinevere's innocence is also inscribed on the tomb of the murdered Patryse: "Also there was wrytyn upon the tombe that Quene Gwentyvere was appeled of treson of the deth of Sir Patryse by Sir Madore de la Porte; and there was made mencion how Sir Launcelot fought with hym for Quene Gwentyvere and overcom hym in playne batayle. All thys was wretyn upon the tombe of Sir Patryse in excusing of the Quene" (598). To put the matter in writing on a public monument attests to the severity of the situation – Guinevere's trial as well as her acquittal is a permanent matter of public record. Not only is the Queen's trial recorded, but so are the actions of Sir Madore and Launcelot, her accuser and defender. The matter of the knights' involvement is irrevocably set in stone, providing examples of Camelot's chivalric development at this stage in the narrative.

Kenneth Tiller sees Malory's use of monuments as a method of organizing the Morte's violence as well as recording and tracing the evolution of chivalry in the work: "[...] they serve to commemorate past deeds and to predict future ones; they further provide a context for interpreting violent action. In the latter function, these tombs and engravings assume the task of writing history, specifically, a history of the evolution of chivalry or the code of knighthood" (41). The monument marking the death of Sir

Patryse, in particular, marks a change in chivalry – from knights sworn to honor women and the weak to men who would stoop to murdering one another and allowing the Queen herself to take the rap for it. Tiller’s argument is not limited to simple chronicles of plot, but also provides a supplement to Merlin’s long-forgotten prophecy. Tiller states that “tombs and monuments not only commemorate the emulatable elements of chivalry, but also dramatize its antithesis, hence conveying cautionary messages” (46). While the narrator’s accounts of Patryse’s epitaph may not necessarily seem like a cautionary message, the story it tells is indeed a cautionary tale. Since it conveys the notion that the nature of chivalry has changed (especially chivalry as concerns the Queen herself), the tomb presents a warning of more danger to come. Guinevere is not safe yet, though at this point she thinks she is. Patryse’s marker points to more struggles ahead for both Launcelot and Guinevere, as Launcelot fights to defend the Queen.

There is no marker, however, for Elayne of Ascolat. For all of Guinevere’s passionate anger over Launcelot’s touch-and-go relationship with her rival, the lady finally succumbs to brokenhearted despair. The sudden appearance of her black funeral barge takes the court by surprise, as does her final grieving letter:

“Most noble knight, my lorde Sir Launcelot, now hath dethe made us two at debate for youre love. And I was youre lover, that men called the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolate – therefore unto all ladyes I make my mone – yet for my soule ye pray and bury me at the leste, and offir ye my masse-peny: thys ys my laste requeste. And a clene maydyn I dyed, I take God to wytnesse, And pray for my soule, Sir Launcelot, as thou arte pereles.”
(617)

Elayne's passing is another chink in the kingdom's armor – that no matter what, the noble knights could not be spared for the maiden's service, though she had done nothing to deserve the harsh treatment she suffered at the hands of Launcelot and Guinevere. Guinevere probably realizes this now, as she presents a much subdued persona in discussing the matter with the accused Launcelot: "Than the Quene sent for Sir Launcelot and prayde hym of mercy for why she had ben wrothe with hym causeles" (617-618). Perhaps she feels that her apology can help to heal the wounds both in their personal relationship and in the larger community; if the knights can see fit to leave their Queen to be burned at the stake and also leave the maiden Elayne to die brokenhearted, the fate of the kingdom looks dark indeed. Guinevere can see this, and she makes a last-ditch effort to revive the knightly honor of the Round Table. Launcelot seems to be the only one left who takes his job seriously, and even his gallantry left Elayne out in the cold.

Part of Guinevere's effort to rebuild the morale of Camelot starts with Launcelot himself, since he is still (despite the scandal) reputed to be the greatest knight of the realm. In an innocent exchange, she asks him to wear her sleeve when riding in tournaments:

Than Quene Gwennyver sent for Sir Launcelot, and seyde thus: "I warne you that ye ryde no more in no justis, nor turnementis but that youre kynnesmen may know you, and at thys justis that shall be ye shall have of me a slyeve of golde. And I pray you for my sake to force yourselff there, that men may speke you worship. But I charge you, as ye woll have my

love, that ye warne your kynnesmen that ye woll beare that day the slyve
of golde uppon your helmet.” (618)

Again, the request is innocent enough: Launcelot will bear the Queen’s favor when riding in tournaments as a sign of honor to the lady. While this public gesture will almost certainly set tongues wagging again over their relationship, it could very well be explained away, since Launcelot has been close to Guinevere from his first appearance in Camelot. The second part of the Queen’s request, though, sounds odd when considering Launcelot’s track record as a warrior. Charging Launcelot to do his utmost to win honor in tournaments, though, might very well be Guinevere’s way of trying to use him as a role model for the rest of the knights – a figure for the Round Table to rally around and rebuild themselves in the fashion of the old days.

Even though she thinks she is reviving a new era of chivalry through Launcelot, the Queen inadvertently undermines her own efforts. Launcelot has always done his fighting incognito; in the guise of Sir Kay he managed to win many battles for the Queen’s honor, and even in the latest battle for the Queen’s sake, he remains in disguise to fight the good fight. (This tactic of Launcelot’s gained honor for Sir Kay, since he got all the credit for Launcelot’s conquests, and in turn furthered the good reputation of the Round Table.) Other knights have also quested in anonymity; Sir Tristram keeps his identity hidden and yet manages to win honor, as does Sir La Cote Mayle Tale. Guinevere’s directive regarding the unmasking of the knights has the potential to unravel her own intentions; for Launcelot to bear her sleeve in tournaments is to proclaim not only his loyalties, but to announce himself to everyone in presence. As Guinevere so aptly states, it would in fact serve as a warning of his presence in the crowd, thus alerting

any and all parties (those who would take him on in spite and those who would turn tail and run) of Launcelot's prowess. His stature as a knight is not diminished by any means; however, announcing his position at every joust and battle certainly makes him less flexible.

Part of Launcelot's success lies in his surprise attacks; hiding his identity lends him a level of mysteriousness that keeps his opponents uncertain and perhaps even afraid of him, giving him an edge over the competition. However, Guinevere's present request limits Launcelot's mobility – he will either be deliberately challenged because he is the famous Sir Launcelot, or the knights he attempts to fight will flee before him. He is almost certainly guaranteed a more difficult situation in battles (or even quests), since his reputation precedes him. The request cannot be ignored, though, because of Launcelot's deep connection to the Queen. Edward Donald Kennedy discusses the problematic nature of Launcelot's loyalty to Guinevere: “[...] Launcelot's loyalty to Guenevere leads to instability in the kingdom because that loyalty to Guenevere leads to Launcelot's disloyalty to Arthur and to Launcelot's own instability, his forgetting the promise he had made on the Grail quest to renounce the world and Guenevere” (41). Despite the fact that what Guinevere asks goes against the nature of, and interferes with, his own personal fighting style, Launcelot will obey. His obeisance is a matter of loyalty – somehow, Guinevere keeps drawing him back to her; he may have promised to forsake her in the Grail quest, but Guinevere is so deeply ingrained in him that it is impossible for him to deny her. Mary Etta Scott, when commenting on the relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere, states that “this relationship, even if it were not carnal (and it is) constitutes an unholy love since the queen is married to Arthur” (25). Launcelot had received a

moral warning in his quest for the Sankgreal. Yet, it has not deterred him from this love (which he knows to be wrong, despite any kind of rationalization he may try to give it). Now, he is compelled to be the Queen's example of a (secularly speaking) true, loyal knight. Of course, Launcelot falls short of the shining warrior model when he has to inform both King and Queen of his encounter with a huntress while on his quest: "Than Sir Launcelot told the Kynge and Quene how the lady hunteras shotte hym in the foreysete of Wyndesore, in the buttoke, with a brode arow [...]" (623). Guinevere's seemingly brilliant plan for rallying the troops does not quite hit the mark she intended.

Despite the Queen's best intentions, there is no real rejuvenation of the nobility of Camelot; the season of the great knights like Tristram and Galahad has passed.

Guinevere is left to love and lead a society that is only a shell of its former self, but she loves it nonetheless. Malory's narrator uses Launcelot's wounds from the huntress episode to serve as a segue into the final stages of the narrative – and his segue focuses on the changing tides Guinevere faces as the Queen of a dying community. The narrator focuses on the romantic nature of the month of May, recalling the audience to a simpler, more carefree era: "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" (624). The spring may turn a young man's fancy to thoughts of love, but it also (in the terms of Malory's narrator, at least) turns a reader's fancy to the good old days of gentle chivalry – the times past when Launcelot was a valiant knight and the members of the Round Table were not splintered in their bitterness. Such memories throw the narrator into a brief fit of nostalgia, just long enough to find a way into the next installment of the tumultuous present: "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 thereof she had a good ende” (625). Guinevere remembers the days of old – has even implemented last-ditch efforts to try to reclaim the shining honor of those days. For the narrator to name her a “true lover” is not ironic; while critics often apply this phrase to Guinevere’s relationship with Launcelot, signaling a new phase in the romance (one in which she does not banish him from the court every few pages or so), the “true lover” clause can also apply to a greater picture.

The name of “true lover,” as applied to Guinevere, also applies to her attitude towards the nostalgic side of the narrator’s segue. Since the narrator makes certain to point out this particular characterization of Guinevere, it can be assumed that nothing good can follow. The Queen is a true lover of the old days of Camelot, when she held the reins of power, men were men, knights quested without threatening to burn her alive, and she had little to no competition in the form of other maidens like Elayne. Perhaps this statement can even apply to a sense of patriotism: Guinevere as a true lover of her country, taking a positive (perhaps unrealistic) view of the realm. Either way, the narrator’s vague reference evokes a sense of both the glory of the past and the ominous future. While the Queen lived she was a true lover; what others may make of her after her “good ende” is perhaps something completely different.

What others make of her during her lifetime is also something a little different; Malory’s narrator certainly wants to make sure that the audience gets the Queen’s best face in this last segment of “The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Guinevere.” It would seem that the setting of May (complete with the happy knights accompanying the Queen into

the woods for Maying festivities) presents the last hurrah of the nobility of Camelot. Once this tale ends, the narrative takes a last, sharp turn for the worse; the worst, however, is difficult to imagine in Malory's springtime setting of carefree celebration: "[...] and so upon the morne or hit were day, in a May mornynge, they toke their horsys wyth the Quene and rode on mayinge in wodis and medowis as hit pleased hem, in grete joy and delytes" (625). It would seem that Guinevere's attempts to restore order and chivalry to Camelot just when it seemed falling apart have worked – the sun is shining, she has her retinue of soldiers peacefully assembled, Arthur is none the wiser about her plans for the day. Unfortunately for Guinevere and the rest, the seeming order is only a short-lived façade. Despite all her best efforts to fix things, the Queen's enemies simply will not let her smooth things over.

Guinevere, accustomed to wielding power over knights who would follow her orders (or at least pretend to), becomes a pawn in the game of politics she thought she had mastered. Where once she was the one calling the shots, manipulating Arthur and Launcelot, now she is the one held in captivity: "Ryght so there cam oute of a wood Sir Mellyagaunte with an eyght score men, all harneyst as they shulde fight in a batayle of areste, and bade the Quene and her knyghtis abyde, for magré their hedis they shulde abyde" (626). This is not the first time Guinevere has been cornered (the episode with the poisoned apple showed her cornered pretty well), but it is the first time that a knight has had the nerve to physically hold the Quene captive; the honor of the Pentecostal Oath, with its clause to always do ladies and damsels honor, does not seem to apply anymore, despite Guinevere's desperate attempts to reinstate it.

Mallagaunt's motivation for the crime also sounds familiar: "And thys knyght Sir Mellyyagaunce loved passyngly well Quene Gwenyver – and so had he done longe and many yerys – and the booke seyth he had layne in awayte for to stele away the Quene; but evermore he forbare for bycause of Sir Launcelot [...]" (626). If nothing else, this motivation echoes a similar passage the narrator drops when discussing Morgan le Fay's obsession with Launcelot – that she also loved him "passing well" and had an intense jealousy of Guinevere's status in his emotional life. However, while Morgan is slippery enough to negotiate her deeds through deception and magic, Malory's narrator paints Mallagaunt at this juncture as a coward of sorts. He waits until Guinevere is out of the jurisdiction of Arthur's and Launcelot's protection and makes his attack just when he knows that she is in the company of unarmed knights and their ladies – people simply out in the beauty of a spring day. While her men try to defend her, the Queen allows herself to be taken so that her retainer will not be killed: "So whan the Quene saw her knyghtes thus dolefully wounded, and nedys muste be slayne at the laste, than for verry pyté and sorow she cryed and seyde, 'Sir Mellyyagaunte, sle nat my noble knyghtes and I will go with the, upon this covenante: that thou save them and suffir hem no more to be hurte [...]" (627). Thus does she make a decision that sorely chafes her own pride; in order to preserve the knights with her, she must surrender. However, in surrendering, she is conceding that the old order of chivalry no longer has a place in Camelot. The world (the one she loved, no matter the reason) has changed, and she must either learn to play by the new rules or find herself in even deeper trouble.

Guinevere does not allow herself to be taken without a fight; even though she surrenders to avoid watching her unarmed retinue murdered before her eyes, she still

manages to send a messenger with a cry for help. Once again, Launcelot must ride forth to save the day – only this time, things are a bit trickier. Due to the Queen’s charge, he cannot ride in anonymity; everyone sees him coming. Guinevere anticipates his arrival and finally echoes Arthur’s words to her during the poisoned apple incident: “‘Alas,’ seyde the Quene, ‘now I may preve and se that well ys that creature that hath a trusty frynde’” (630). Since Launcelot rides in with his shield in plain view, Guinevere knows without a doubt who has come to her rescue – which gives her piece of mind. For Malagaunt, however, Launcelot’s arrival is a different story. The arrival of an anonymous nobody would perhaps have led to a battle and eventual honor-win for Launcelot in disguise. Since Malagaunt is fully aware of who approaches, however, he has time to panic in his own cowardice – the kidnapper falls at the mercy of his victim: “Whan Sir Mellyagaunce harde that Sir Launcelot was comyn, he ranne unto the Quene and felle uppon hys kne, and seyde, ‘Mercy, madame, for now I putte me hole in your good grace’” (630). In his fear of facing Launcelot, Malagaunt is quick to surrender all to Guinevere, giving her the power to redeem the error of his ways. Perhaps to the aching Queen, this smacks of the old days of glory and honor, when she passed judgment on errant knights and was obeyed implicitly. Malagaunt’s acquiescence has lulled her into a false sense of security; she is still operating under the old rules of chivalry and honor, while Malagaunt is playing a game of deceit (he seems to be most comfortable when his purposes are veiled).

Guinevere, believing that the danger has passed, takes the opportunity to exercise her newly-restored power over her most faithful knight. Out of sight of both Arthur and the members of the Round Table, Guinevere is confident enough to take the initiative:

“Ryght so the Quene toke Sir Launcelot by the bare honed, for he had put of hys gauntelot, and so she wente wyth hym tyll her chambir; and than she commaunded hym to be unarmed” (632). That Guinevere commands Launcelot to unarm himself is significant; Elizabeth Scala notes that “Lancelot’s arms, paradoxically, are involved in the production of his identity precisely at the moment that he believes them to be most insignificant because they have been removed” (383). Feeling comfortable that Malagaunt is stymied, Launcelot lets down his guard and gives in to his desire for the Queen. As for Guinevere, her conduct may be questionable, but Malagaunt has already soiled his honor by kidnapping her in the first place. This detail allows Guinevere to discount the seriousness of the situation. A “disarmed” Launcelot even accepts her invitation to her bedchamber in the dead of night, heaving himself through the window. Finally, it is here that Malory’s narrator describes a full-fledged sexual encounter between them: “So, to passe uppon thys tale, Sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the Quene and toke no force of hys hurte honde, but toke hys pleasaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawning of the day” (633). Before this incident, all encounters are described in veiled terms, with no decipherable proof of physical improprieties. Even in Guinevere’s jealousy over Elayne, Launcelot never entered the Queen’s actual bedchamber since he had been led astray. The relationship (and honor of Camelot) remained physically pure – until the narrator uses the words “Sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the Quene” (633). Guinevere was capable of holding the situation over Malagaunt’s head until now. The liaison gives Malagaunt definite ammunition for his ulterior motives.

While the romantic nature of Guinevere and Launcelot's relationship remained a topic of gossip instead of a solid fact, the Queen's enemies had little to go on. Even when Sir Madore was certain of his stance against Guinevere with the poisoned apple, the evidence against her was slim if not nonexistent. Now that Guinevere has physically wronged her community (since she is a member of the royal family, any wrong-doing on her part could be construed as a wrong against Camelot), Malagaunt has proof. His discovery of blood on the Queen's sheets leaves him almost gleeful as he plans his next course of action: "A-ha, madame!' seyde Sir Mellyagaunte, 'now I have founde you a false traytouras unto my lorde Arthur, for now I preve well hit was nat for nought that ye layde thes wounded knyghtis within the bondys of youre chambir. Therefore I [wille] calle you of treson afore my lorde Kynge Arthure. And now I have proved you, madame, wyth a shamefull dede'" (633). The fact that Malagaunt is so excited to discover Guinevere's indiscretions is, in itself, a testament to the state of things in Camelot. Instead of shock or shame at the knowledge of the Queen's treason, he happily plans handing her over to some fierce justice – revealing the matter to a cuckolded king. This is only part of his wiliness, though; in not directly accusing Launcelot of anything, he sets the pair of them up for failure.

Malagaunt's physical evidence comes in the form of blood; it might therefore be logical to conclude that any of Guinevere's wounded retinue might have been in her bedchamber over the course of the evening: "[...] all the hede-sheete, pylow, and over-sythe was all be-bled of the bloode of Sir Launcelot and of hys hurte honde. Whan Sir Mellyagaunt aspyed that blood, than he demed in her that she was false to the Kynge and that som of the wounded knyghtes had lyene by her all that nyght" (633). However,

Malagaunt is not deaf to the rumors circulating within the court, and he is highly aware of Launcelot's connection to the Queen. Malory's narrator has already noted Malagaunt's tendency to avoid direct confrontation with Launcelot; in this instance, Malagaunt instigates a more subtle tactic in fighting Launcelot. In charging the wounded, innocent men, Malagaunt is drawing Launcelot out; knowing that Launcelot is obsessive about defending Guinevere's honor, he baits the knight into agreeing to fight: "'Thus I say,' seyde Sir Mellyagaunce: 'here ys my glove that she ys a traytours unto my lorde Kynge Arthur, and that thys nyght one of the wounded knyghtes lay with her'" (Malory 634). Launcelot is quick to defend Guinevere, though, asserting that none of the wounded knights of the Queen's retinue is guilty – and, of course, he is right. In defending Guinevere, Launcelot falls into the trap of dealing in half-truths: it is true that none of the wounded knights lay with the Queen, but he artfully leaves himself out of that particular company. A wounded knight did spend the night at Guinevere's side; he is the one who defends her out of guilt – and it is guilt that fuels the battles to come.

Guinevere herself shows no guilt as she rides back to Westminster – and Arthur shows relatively little concern, considering the charges: "And there the knyghtes tolde how Sir Mellyagaunce had appeled the Quene of hyghe treson, and how Sir Launcelot resceyved the glove of hym [...] 'Be my hede,' seyde Kynge Arthure, 'I am aferde Sir Mellyagaunce hath charged hymselff with a grete charge'" (635). Instead, Guinevere's influence over Arthur remains intact, though it stands on shaky ground. Perhaps the multiple attempts to discredit Guinevere in Arthur's eyes have caused him to take the accusations less seriously – after all, the Queen has been acquitted in every other instance; thus this latest charge carries no merit until proven through traditional Trial by

Combat. Launcelot's delayed arrival, however (due to Malagaunt's sneaky treacherous planning), proves problematic – Guinevere has only ever been successfully defended by her lover.⁵

Launcelot's delay echoes the instance in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake" when he is cornered by the three queens; though his warden in this case is only a single woman (albeit a woman in Malagaunt's service), her demands are pretty much the same: "[...] and every day there cam a lady and brought hys mete and hys drynke – and wowed hym every day to have layne by her" (635). Once again, he denies another lady for the sake of his loyalty to Guinevere; however, he also runs the risk (according to the maiden) of condemning his lover to death. A compromise between Launcelot and the maiden, then, will release him (though if Guinevere finds out he has kissed another woman, she may very well be wrathful with him): "[...] and ye wolde by onys kysse me, I shulde delyver you and your armour' [...]. And than he kyssed hir; and anone she gate hym up untyll hys armour, and whan he was armed she brought hym tylle a stable where stode twelve good coursers" (636). Launcelot gives the kiss with innocent intentions (to free himself from Malagaunt's trap), but the kiss is accompanied by a promise, leaving Launcelot in the service of two women and in a somewhat compromising position.

In the meantime, Malagaunt's treachery progresses. Confident that Launcelot will be trapped with the iron-willed maiden by virtue of his loyalties, he works to finish the

⁵ The nature of truth (and guilt) in Malory's narrative is complicated, at best; the ethical implications of the Trial by Combat feature are especially sticky in relation to Launcelot's defense of Guinevere. The value of "face culture" (a culture based on public/private facades) is a prominent feature here. While their personal affair remains secret, the outward appearance of truth is clear; however, the personal spiritual implications are more problematic, as Malory recognizes in episodes like the quest for the Sankgreal, Launcelot's healing of Sir Urry, and Guinevere's retreat to the convent at Amesbury. For more on the importance of face culture in the *Morte*, see Angela Gibson's "Malory's Reformulation of Shame" in *Arthuriana* 11.4 (2001). For more on Trial by Combat, see JaquelineStuhmiller's "*Iudicium Dei, iudicium fortunae*: Trial by Combat in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" in *Speculum* 81.2 (2006).

game he started: “[...] for Sir Mellyagaunce was sure, hym thought, that Sir Launcelotte sholde nat be at that batayle, and therefore he ever cryed uppon Sir Arthur to do hym justyse, other ellys brynge forte Sir Launcelot” (636). When Sir Lavayne agrees to take Launcelot’s place in the joust, Malagaunt is confident in his ability to see things done; Launcelot’s arrival just in the nick of time leaves him at a loss both for words and courage. Once Launcelot reveals Malagaunt’s treachery (namely kidnapping the Queen), Malagaunt himself loses his nerve: “And than was Sir Launcelot called tofore Kynge Arthur, and there he tolde opynly tofor the Kynge all how that Sir Mellyagaunce had served hym firste and laste. And whan the Kynge and Quene and all the lordis knew off the treson of Sir Mellyagante, they were all ashamed on hys behalffe” (637). Launcelot does indeed ride in and save the day once again, but the battle of words turns confusing, with the two parties throwing accusations back and forth. The only way for this to end is for one to die, and that is exactly what happens when Launcelot slays Malagaunt.

With Malagaunt’s death at Launcelot’s hands, the direct threat to the scandalous relationship dies as well. Since he was the only “witness” to the carnal relation, if you will, it is absolutely necessary to kill Malagaunt in order to maintain secrecy. Even Guinevere realizes this, as she gives Launcelot the equivalent of a Roman emperor’s “thumbs down”: “So Sir Launcelot loked uppon the Quene, gyff he myght aspye by ony sygne or countenance what she wolde have done: and anone the Quene wagged hir hede uppon Sir Launcelot, as ho seyth ‘sle hym’” (637). Guinevere was innocent of the death of Sir Patryse, but she is certainly guilty of Malagaunt’s death; she essentially has him killed in order to keep the peace and save her skin. What she doesn’t realize is that this act will fuel the ultimate downfall of her beloved Camelot – there are those who would

avenge Malagaunt, or at least endeavor to finish the fight he started, and there are those who still despise the Queen for her own dubious agenda. Since Malagaunt is killed basically on her order, Guinevere is the instigator of the beginning of the end of things.

CHAPTER 5: HER MAJESTY'S WORSHIP: "THE DETH OF ARTHUR" AND FINAL RECKONINGS

After the duel with Sir Malagaunt, Malory's narrator carefully glosses over a stretch of one year, citing the "Freynshe booke" as a source of more of Launcelot's adventures; Launcelot's knightly career has evidently lost its importance in the face of things ahead: "[...] lytill aftir that he had slayne Sir Mellyyagaunte in the Quenys quarell, he never of a twelvemoneth com on horsebak – and, as the Freynshe booke sayth, he ded that twelvemoneth more than fourty batayles" (645). Forty battles is plenty of material for Malory to gloss over. While Launcelot gallivants off to perform more derring-do, the narrator focuses instead on the anger and hatred of more dangerous forces. Aggravayne and Mordred, kinsmen to Arthur, lie in wait for Launcelot's next misstep, hoping to utilize Guinevere's favor in order to wreak havoc. Cowen sees the hatred that Aggravayne and Mordred bear for Launcelot as a particularly destructive force: "It is through the hatred of his fellow knights towards him that Launcelot's obligations to his fellows become irreconcilable with his obligations to the queen" (39). Eventually, the actions of Aggravayne and Mordred will force Launcelot to choose between his King and his Queen, and there is no turning back from either path.

Following in Malagaunt's footsteps, Aggravayne is very vocal in denouncing the Queen as a traitor to Arthur: "Sir Aggravayne seyde thus opynly, and nat in no counceyle, that manye knyghtis myght here, 'I mervayle that we all be nat ashamed bothe to se and to know how Sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the Quene'" (646). Not only does Aggravayne spread his slander openly amongst the knights of the Round Table, but he brings his charges directly to the king himself, despite Gawain's misgivings: "Here ys I and my brother Sir Mordred brake unto my brother Sir Gawayne, Sir Gaherys

and to Sir Gareth – for thys ys all, to make hit shorte: we know all that Sir Launcelot holdith youre Quene, and hath done longe [...] therefore we woll preve hit that he his a traytoure to youre person” (647). Whereas Malagaunt waited until he had physical evidence to take the situation to the court (in order to save his own skin), Aggravayne strikes first, making his case before accumulating evidence. In letting Arthur in on the plot, he is reinforcing the first allegations of Sir Malagaunt in the king’s head, thus making sure that he cannot ignore the situation.

While the charges cannot be ignored, Arthur is still disbelieving when it comes to Guinevere’s perceived treason: “For, as the Freynshe booke seyth, the Kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon Sir Launcelot and his Quene; for the Kynge had a demynge of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for Sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the Quene so many tymes that, wyte you well, the Kynge loved hym passyngly well” (647). Despite being presented with several instances to the contrary, Arthur still refuses to believe in the darker side of Launcelot’s service. To accept the rumors is to admit that he is not fully in control of either his knights or his Queen; and even though Launcelot is the greatest knight living, it is still a great dishonor for Arthur to lose his wife to the knight. Nor can he really afford to lose Launcelot, the greatest knight in the land, since Launcelot is Arthur’s greatest military asset; however, the moment that the truth comes out, either Launcelot or Guinevere – or both – must be lost to him forever. His reluctance to believe the rumors, even when Aggravayne confronts him, bespeaks a nervousness about his position. If Arthur cannot control his wife and his best knight, then his entire reign is called into question. Instead of relying on Trial by Combat to settle the matter, which has worked before, “Arthur demands that they

produce an entirely different sort of proof: that is, they must secure evidence that would persuade a human judge that Launcelot and Gwenyver are guilty as charged, not provide confirmation that God favors one cause or the other. There is no precedent for such a demand. The rule has always been trial by combat rather than trial by judge or jury” (Stuhmiller 457). This new rule recalls the fact that most of the knights of the Round Table are guilty of something. Launcelot’s failed quest for the Sankgreal should have been a sign of God’s (dis)favor; most of the knights of the Round Table, in fact, failed to achieve the Grail, thus problematizing God’s place in this case.⁶ Arthur’s asking for proof serves two purposes: it keeps the semblance of order in place (since wild accusations are not accepted as fact), and it buys Arthur some time before he is forced to take some form of action.

Aggravayne is more than happy to stake out Launcelot, though. He even makes a proposition to include the king in the plans to expose Launcelot and Guinevere: “‘My lorde,’ seyde Sir Aggravayne, ‘ye shall ryde tomorne an-huntyng [...] and so whan hit drawith toward nyght, ye may sende the Quene worde that ye woll ly oute all that nyght, and so may ye sende for your cookis. And than, uppon payne of deth, that nyght we shall take [Launcelot] wyth the Quene, and we shall brynge hym unto you, quycke or dede’” (648). Arthur’s participation in the plot is vital; to not participate would be to send a message of weakness to the public at large. But by going hunting instead of participating directly, Arthur ensures that he cannot be directly accused of treachery against Launcelot;

⁶ The nature of public guilt and private shame marks a spiritual quandary that Malory never fully resolves, but discusses in complexity. The fact that Galahad, Launcelot’s bastard son, is the only member of the Round Table to achieve the Grail seems to have implications in relation to the concept of Original Sin (since he is not condemned by the sins of his father); however, Launcelot’s ability to heal Sir Urry despite his private guilt also speaks to face culture. See Angela Gibson’s “Malory’s Reformulation of Shame” in *Arthuriana* 11.4 (2001) and Felicia Ackerman’s “‘I may do no penaunce’: Spiritual Sloth in Malory’s *Morte*” in *Arthuriana* 16.1 (2006).

thus, fully aware of Mordred and Aggravayne's ambush plans, he allows them to take place. Arthur is not an active agent in the collection of "proof," indicating a certain sense of impartiality despite his misgivings, but he also warns the knights that the plan may be more difficult than they anticipate: "[...] I counceyle you to take with you sure felyshyp [...] Beware,' seyde Kynge Arthure, 'for I warne you, ye shall fynde hym wyght⁷'" (648). He knows something is up, and he is getting his kinsmen to do the dirty work for him.

His words of warning prove true, however. Launcelot is trapped unarmed in the Queen's chamber, yet he still manages to kill thirteen knights of Mordred's company and wounds several others. The plan might seem to be a failure – they do not manage to bring Launcelot into custody – but Launcelot's actions are not those of an innocent man. His hurried exchange with Guinevere before his dramatic escape even indicates panic, and a realization that whatever happens, this is the end of the Camelot he has known: "And than Sir Launcelot returned agayne unto the Quene and seyde, 'Madame, now wyte you well, all oure trew love ys brought to an ende, for now wyll Kyng Arthur ever be my foo. And therefore, madam, and hit lyke you that I may have you with me, I shall save you frome all maner adventures daungers'" (651). In offering to take Guinevere with him, Launcelot utterly betrays Arthur – knowing, perhaps, that Mordred and Aggravayne will stop at nothing to ruin his reputation with the king. He does not offer Guinevere all the power that she held as Queen of Camelot, but what he does offer speaks treason. To serve the Queen is noble and honorable, and Launcelot has done the honorable thing in the past. To sleep with the Queen is dangerous, especially as it carries the possibility of disrupting the line of succession (a reminder of Arthur's own struggle to ascend to the

⁷ The Norton edition defines this term as "strong" (648).

throne). To propose to steal the Queen, take her away to his own personal lands, is ultimate, irreversible betrayal. Malagaunt attempted something similar when he kidnapped Guinevere on her May Day celebration, and he wound up losing his head in the end. To go this route is for Launcelot to permanently write off his service to Camelot and abandon all that he has achieved. Instead, he would be setting himself up as an independent nation and calling everyone's attention to the conflict between him and Arthur.

Guinevere realizes this; she probably also realizes that all of this urgency now revolves around her and her reactions. The irony of being called Launcelot's "nobelest Crysten Quene" (649) after she has cheated on her husband sinks in as she declines her lover's entreaty to escape: "'Sir, that ys nat beste,' seyde the Quene, 'mesemyth, for now ye have don so much harme hit woll be beste that ye holde you styll with this. And if ye se that as tomorne they woll putte me unto dethe, than may ye rescowe me as ye thynke beste'" (651). Like Isode before her, Guinevere chooses to stay with her king in order to protect her lover. In Launcelot's eyes, then, she is perhaps performing as a good Christian queen by aiding an honored knight. The men on the other side of the door, however, would take the opposite view. By calling Guinevere his "nobelest Crysten Quene" (649), Launcelot foreshadows the spiritual nature of Guinevere's future at Amesbury, where she will figure significantly into his own redemption (and perhaps even the redemption of Camelot itself).

In confiding in Sir Bors after his great escape, Launcelot lays out the full weaknesses of the realm with regard to the Guinevere situation. He is convinced that this

latest development will lead to war, and that this new war will destroy the old organization of things:

“[...] I am sure there nys buy warre unto me and to myne, and for cause I have slayne thys nyght Sir Aggravayne, Sir Gawaynes brother, and at the leste twelve of hys felowis. And for thys cuase now am I sure of mortall warre, for thes knyghtes were sente by Kynge Arthur to betray me [...] For and I may be harde and suffirde and so takyn, I woll feyght for the Quene, that she ys a trew lady untyll her lorde.” (652-653)

Despite the impending trouble, Launcelot's declaration of loyalty (that he will still fight for the Queen's honor) marks a final return to the Pentecostal Oath of the Round Table. Though the knights have fallen away from the Oath over the course of the narrative, even to the point of calling for Guinevere's execution, Launcelot implements Guinevere's last-ditch efforts to mend the rifts in the society. Bors agrees that it is Launcelot's duty to rescue the Queen if she winds up in danger. Though it is perhaps Arthur's duty to protect his Queen first, instead of working against her or simply leaving her rescue up to knights, Launcelot quickly lets the king off the hook: “ [...] my lorde Kynge Arthure, by evyll counceile, woll tomorn in hys hete put my lady the Quene unto the fyre and there to be brente” (653). It is not Arthur's fault, then, that this whole situation has come about, but the fault of Arthur's advisors, who have turned his head completely against both Launcelot and Guinevere. Mere moments later, of course, Malory's narrator relates a conversation between Mordred and Arthur, in which Mordred plants the seeds of doubt in the King's mind; and since Mordred comes before the King wounded by Sir Launcelot, his story has a certain credibility.

Despite all the evidence stacked up against the Queen, and despite his kinsman's death at the hands of the Queen's reputed lover, Sir Gawain still defends Guinevere. Gawain even maintains his view that Launcelot's visits to Guinevere's chambers are purely innocent – a view that is discounted by the wounded Mordred's reports. The defense, however, is too late; Arthur has been led by Mordred's words, and finds himself steeled against the greatest knight in the land: “[...] I woll nat that way worke with Sir Launcelot, for he trustyth no man; and therefore for my Quene he shall nevermore fight, for she shall have the law [...]” (655). In forbidding Launcelot to fight for the Queen ever again, Arthur essentially puts the kiss of death on his own kingdom; time and again Launcelot has shown his honor and his faithfulness in defending the Queen through combat, and he has up until this time been sincere in his battles on her behalf. At least outwardly Launcelot has treated the king with the utmost respect in getting Guinevere out of the threatening straits she has been in – especially since Arthur himself has had his hands tied by his position as King and judge. However, the freedom of the knighthood to fight for the honor of ladies (as stated in the Pentecostal Oath) has become severely limited; first Guinevere demands that Launcelot no longer ride in jousts without her sleeve on his helmet, thus depriving him of his liberty to fight anonymously. Now that the king has denied him the right to fight for the honor of the lady period, he has undermined the very Oath that Camelot has, however precariously, balanced on. Arthur has abandoned both his Queen and his own rules.

Arthur may have forgotten the rules (and perhaps even his duty to his wife), but that does not mean that Launcelot has thrown the old ways out the window just yet. In fact, it is Launcelot himself who preserves the old ways by riding in (yet again) to save

the day, saving Guinevere from execution just as he did in the case of the poisoned apple and in the case of Sir Malagaunt's treason. The difference this time, though, is that Launcelot has become more of a Tristram figure. He loves the Queen to the point of taking her away from what the rest of the court deems to be her rightful punishment, and (on the advice of Sir Bors) he takes her to Joyous Garde: "[...] seyde Sir Bors, 'for how ded the moste noble knyght Sir Trystram? By youre good wyll, kept nat he with hym La Beall Isode nere three yere in Joyous Garde [...] take the Quene knightly away with you if so be that the Kynge woll jouge her to be brente. And in Joyous Garde may ye kepe her longe inowe untyll the hete be paste of the Kynge[...]'"' (653-654). Tristram took Isode to Joyous Garde – a property of Launcelot's. Bors's suggestion allows for the affair at hand to follow the pattern already set by another pair of famous lovers. Of course, if Launcelot and Guinevere parallel Tristram and Isode here, then it falls to Arthur to play the part of treacherous King Mark – or does it?

The fact that Launcelot and Guinevere parallel the tale of Tristram and Isode so strongly would seem to leave Arthur no choice, pulling the narrative in a direction that would not bode well for any party of the love triangle. Mark's treachery leads him to deceit vile enough that he would kill his own kinsman in order to satisfy his wounded ego. Arthur does exhibit mild deceit in allowing Mordred to stake out Launcelot as proof of the affair, but he ultimately does not stoop to Mark's level – history does not repeat itself, and the narrative ends on a very different note. As Beverly Kennedy states, the "primary function" of the allegations against Launcelot and Guinevere "is to make Arthur look good as a husband and king by comparison with Mark. Mark was so irrationally jealous of Tristram and Isode that he was willing to kill his nephew merely because he

spoke to her privately ‘in a wyndowe’ [...] By comparison, Arthur seems the epitome of reason and royal justice when he carefully considers the source of the three allegations” (73). Mordred here is more of a threat to the Queen than Arthur is; after all, Launcelot himself maintains that Arthur has been misled by bad counsel. When Arthur ignored the wise counsel of Merlin just before his wedding to Guinevere, then he left himself vulnerable to other, more sinister minds.

Mordred’s role here is indeed of a sinister nature. Instead of challenging the King outright, he undermines the kingdom by way of the Queen (thus indicating Guinevere’s status as a major power player in Camelot). Even after Launcelot rides off with the Queen – thus leaving Arthur without wife and without the greatest knight in the land – Mordred continues to pursue this particular thread, and Arthur is obligated to wage war on his once best man: “And so unto Kynge Arthure drew many knyghtes, deukes, and erlis, that he had a grete oste; and whan they were assembeled, the Kynge enfoumed hem how Sir Launcelot had beraffte hym hys Quene. Than the Kynge and all hys oste made hem redy to ley siege aboute Sir Launcelot, where he lay within Joyus Garde” (659). Mordred is the figure who both planned and survived the initial ambush at the Queen’s chambers, and he also delivered his reports to Arthur while wounded; since Mordred is also kin to the King, Arthur is trapped into pursuing this course of action. If he did not, Mordred, as a very vocal member of the Round Table, would certainly make Arthur’s weakness widely known. Perhaps Arthur thought that allowing Mordred and Aggravayne to ambush Launcelot was a good idea at first – he was getting other men to do his dirty work; in this instance, however, Mordred is the more clever manipulator, getting the king to fight his own battle so that Mordred can make his own advances out of plain sight.

In the meantime, Launcelot maintains that he has never had anything but good intentions; several times he attempts to remind the King of his good deeds, and of how Arthur has previously only ever thanked him for his works: “[...] hit fortunede me to do batayle for her, and or I departed from her adversary they confessed there untrouthe, and she full worsshypfully excused. And at suche tymes, my lorde Arthur, seyde Sir Launcelot, ‘ye loved me and thanked me what I saved your Quene frome the fyre, and than ye promised me for ever to be my good lorde’” (660-661). Angela Gibson links this tactic to the tale of Tristram, as well: “[...] Tristram also suggests that his good deeds in some way outweigh his adultery with Isolde, that a knight somehow accrues interest against such recriminations. The hero voices his own defense based upon the merits of the social good he has performed. And this presents a striking parallel to Lancelot’s final defensive gestures” (68). Even in the heat of combat, under siege, Launcelot calls Arthur to think about the situation with a spot of reason. He maintains the Queen’s innocence, and even at the trade-off, when he restores Guinevere to Arthur’s hands, he proclaims her truthfulness to all present: “And therewithal Sir Launcelot kyssed the Quene, and than he seyde all opynly, ‘Now lat se whosomever he be in thys place that dare sey the Quene ys nat trew unto my lorde Arthur, lat se who woll speke and he dare speke.’ And therewith he brought the Quene to the Kynge” (670). The kiss, perhaps, is a bit much for Arthur to endure; it is an imprudent metaphorical slap in the face to a man who feels as if he is losing control of both his personal and public lives. In order to save face, he must fight Launcelot now, if only in revenge for shaming him before all the knights of the Round Table.

When Arthur leaves to take on Launcelot in his home country of France, he unwittingly gives Mordred the chance he's been waiting for since this convoluted strife began: "[...] there Kynge Arthur made Sir Mordred chyeff ruler of all Ingelonde, and also he put the Quene undir hys governaunce: by cause Sir Mordred was Kynge Arthurs son, he gaff hym the rule off hys londe and off hys wyff" (672). All of Mordred's surreptitious dealings have worked to drive Arthur away from Camelot; while the King is fighting with his former greatest knight across the sea, Mordred is able to do as he pleases at home, with all the semblance of legitimacy that Arthur's charge gives him. When Arthur left to fight the Emperor Lucius, he left Guinevere in charge of the realm. Now, he leaves Mordred in charge of Guinevere, feeling that he cannot trust her. However, it seems that Launcelot's insistence on Guinevere's truthfulness is about to ring ironically true. Her adultery with Launcelot certainly justifies Arthur's suspicion and distrust; however, she is loyal to him while he is away – a loyalty that Arthur will never know the full extent of.

Arthur leaves Mordred in charge of Camelot because Mordred has made himself to appear trustworthy; he has taken Arthur's part in this struggle over the Queen and even made a point of coming to Arthur wounded in order to deliver his message about Launcelot's escape from Guinevere's chambers. However, Arthur's trust proves misplaced as he is away fighting a war ultimately orchestrated by Mordred: "As Sir Mordred was rular of all Ingelonde, he lete make lettirs as thoughe that they had com frome beyonde the see, and the lettirs specified that Kynge Arthur was slayne in batayle with Sir Launcelot. [...] so was he crowned at Caunturbyry" (679). Not only does Mordred get the King out of the way; he also fakes his father's death and steals his

crown. The only thing left would be to also steal his wife. Since he has proclaimed himself King, Mordred's next act is indeed to take a Queen: "And aftirwarde he drew hym unto Wynchester, and there he toke Quene Gwenyver, and seyde plainly that he wolde wedde her – which was hys unclys wyff and hys fadirs wyff. [...] wherefore Quene Gwenyver was passyng hevvy; but she durst nat discover her harte, but spake faayre, and agreed to Sir Mordredys wyll" (679). In setting his sights on Guinevere, he proves that his treason is aimed at all three of the members of Malory's great love triangle. He has stolen Arthur's crown and betrayed his trust; he has ruined Launcelot's reputation in the King's eyes and in the eyes of his colleagues; and now he seeks to own Guinevere, who knows all the while that Mordred was involved in running Launcelot out of town. Mordred underestimates Guinevere, however, and she is able to make a fool of him as she ensconces herself in the Tower of London: "And so whan she cam to London, she toke the Towre of London, and sudeynly in all haste possible she stuffed hit with all maner of vytayle, and well garnyssed hit with men, and so kepte hit. [...] But all myght nat prevayle, for Quene Gwenyver wolde never – for fayre speache nother for foule – never to truste unto Sir Mordred to com in hys hondis agayne" (679). Guinevere has done her duty to Arthur by refusing Mordred and forcefully denying him. She is too wily for the cunning traitor, and she thus remains true to both her lords.

Even though Camelot is bursting apart at the seams (to say it is "falling apart" would be too passive a term given the way events transpire), Guinevere still clings to Arthur and Launcelot as the ruling forces of her emotions, never giving in to Mordred's guile. While perhaps it is too late to save the kingdom, her loyalty is important – she still holds to the dream of the Camelot that was; when Arthur dies, she is not one of the

queens who bear his body to the Isle of Avalon – she remains where she is to carry the memory of the Golden Age of Camelot. The inscription on Arthur’s tomb, proclaiming him “once and future king,” reflects Guinevere’s purpose here; she supported Arthur in his heyday, and her intent is to preserve his memory (even if only in her own mind) as the king he once was.

It is interesting that the last installment of the Morte is titled “The Deth of Arthur,” even though the tale does not end with Arthur’s death in combat. Certainly, Arthur is a great figure in the work; his name in the title points to that. However, if he were the sole focal point, it would stand to reason that the work would begin with his own beginning and end with his death. Instead, it begins with his conception and ends after the death of Guinevere. If the tales of the Morte are indeed parts of one cohesive work, then it makes sense for Malory to extend the last tale beyond the death of Arthur himself in order to tie up the loose ends of the narrative left behind the king. Guinevere and Launcelot are still alive, and since they are central figures of the narrative, Malory’s narrator must finish their tales as well.

Guinevere’s escape to Amesbury is not much of an escape; in the convent, she gives herself to remembrance of the world as it was, and perhaps even stews in her own guilt for her part in the downfall of Camelot: “And there she lete make herself a nunne, and wered whyght clothys and blak, and grete penaunce she toke uppon her as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe” (689). Recalling her former role as a moral center of Camelot – always being called upon by knights to pray for them in peril – Guinevere takes her new role very seriously. By withdrawing into the convent and making a great effort to live a clean life, she attempts to rebuild that morality which she should have

upheld in Camelot at all times. With her husband dead, she separates herself both physically and spiritually from her lover. It is not that she does not still have feelings for Launcelot – she faints three times in anticipation before he even enters her presence at the convent. However, in the aftermath of the battle between Arthur and Mordred at Salisbury Plain, she decides that her relationship with Launcelot is not worth all the strife that the kingdom endured: “Than Sir Launcelot was brought before her; than the Quene seyde to all tho ladyes, ‘Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste noblest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne” (691-692). Her energies, exercised quite efficiently as a secular queen, are now directed towards redeeming the spiritual identity of Camelot, and her every action from here to the end of the narrative attempts to build a holier legacy for the kingdom. Falcetta states that Guinevere “expels her former lover from her presence for the last time, not in this case for jealousy but in the name of redemption” (32), indicating that while the lovers’ last meeting echoes every time that Guinevere has banished Launcelot in jealousy, the intentions this time are far less self-motivated. In commanding Launcelot to leave her in peace, she also commands him to assume a more spiritual approach to his life and work: ““And I commaunde the, on Goddis behalff, that thou forsake my company, and to thy kyngedom loke thou turne agayne, and kepe well thy realme frome warre and wrake”” (692). In remembering the past, Guinevere has deep regrets, and a deep-running guilt for the destruction of good men – good knights – who had supported her and looked to her as a great lady. Her own mismanagement of power brought about an end to a whole way of life; to see Launcelot

again would be to ignore her role in the destruction of Camelot as well as to refuse him any spiritual or emotional healing in the matter.

In the end, Guinevere's deathbed prayer indicates that she takes her guilt and her memories to her grave: "I beseche Almyghty God that I may never have power to see Syr Launcelot wyth my worldly eyen" (694). She trusts Launcelot to take her to her final resting place and to bury her beside Arthur; Launcelot upheld her honor in life, and she knows that he will do so in death. Launcelot's feelings, though, do not prevent him from mourning the Queen in true dramatic style: "For evermore, day and nyght, he prayed, but somtyme he slombred a broken slepe: ever he was lying groveling on the tombe of Kyng Arthur and Quene Guenever, and there was no comferte that the Byssshop, nor Syr Bors, nor none of his felowes coude make hym – it avaylled not" (695). Not only does he mourn Guinevere to the point of ignoring all living men, but he also acknowledges her effect on his views of the whole story of Camelot: "For whan I remember of hir beaulté and of hir noblesse, that was bothe wyth hyr kyng and wyth hyr, so whatn I sawe his corps and hir corps to lye togyders, truly myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body Also 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 lyving of Cristen people" (695). Whereas Launcelot was once a prideful man, driven to secure honor only for himself through his knightly quests, he now realizes the gravity of his sin – again, it is too late for Arthur and the kingdom, but enough for Launcelot himself to attain spiritual salvation. Edward Donald Kennedy notes the irony behind Launcelot's new holiness: "there is a major irony in the presentation of Guenevere as the one who is able to lead Lancelot to salvation. Galahad was the perfect knight [...] who saw the

wonders of the Grail. Yet the Galahad who performed miracles and saved so many was unable to cause his father to turn permanently from the world and was thus incapable of saving him” (42). Ultimately, it takes Guinevere’s complete and final rejection of Launcelot to awaken him to his own spiritual state: “When Lancelot removes himself from her [Guinevere] and takes holy orders, he continues the working out of salvation he began on the Quest [for the Sankgreal]” (Falcetta 32). With the death of the Queen, the ideals of Camelot will live on – the surviving knights, according to Malory’s narrator, even participate in Crusades: “Syr Bors, Syr Ector, Syr Blamour, and Syr Bleoberis wente into the Holy Lande [...] these foure knyghtes dyd many bataylles upon the myscreantes or Turkes; and there they died upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake” (Malory 697). The remnants of Camelot finally engage in efforts not for the glory of man, but for the glory of God – and the glory of God is exactly what Guinevere had hoped for by locking herself away in the convent. Thus ends “The Deth of Arthur” and the legacy of Guinevere’s Camelot.

While Guinevere’s reputation has waffled in history – from Queen to harlot and back again – the fact remains that her position in the narrative serves both as a center for the tales of Camelot and as a signal to the complexity of the text itself. Guinevere’s struggle to establish herself as a “good” queen, with all the secular and spiritual implications thereof, reflects the struggle of Camelot itself to reconcile the secular glory (and violence) of the quests with the higher spiritual ground exemplified through the quest for the Sankgreal. While Guinevere ultimately cannot save the civilization her life so depends upon, she manages to preserve it in a different manner, by abandoning the secular half altogether at Amesbury. Her stay in the convent is an effort to pull

something good from the whole story, despite its flaws. In the end, Camelot is redeemed for the ages. The survivors of the last battle die in a crusade for the glory of God (an honorable death for good knights), and Malory himself ends the book with a plea for divine mercy: “I praye you all, jentylmen and jentylwymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and his knyghtes from the begynnyng to the endynge, praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce; and whan I am deed, I praye you all praye for my soule” (Malory 697-698). Guinevere’s influence extends beyond her own legend into Malory’s very plea for preservation; so too does it extend beyond Malory’s book into the current conversations in Malorian studies. The heavily conflicted, very human issues addressed in the work could not have created the impact they have unless there is some method in the madness; Malory’s narrative treats the different branches of disparate legends as parts of a whole, thus underlining the complexity of the ethical, social, and political issues that surround both the characters of the Morte and Malory’s own world.

The complexity of Malory’s narrative structure follows the cyclical nature of the legend. D.S. Brewer has called the Morte a literary example of the medieval concept of Fortune’s Wheel – a narrative that follows the rise and fall of Arthur’s reign. At the same time, though, the turning Fortunes also radiate circles out from a general center. At the center of the narrative is Camelot, and at the center of Camelot is the Round Table. The center of the Round Table, however, is not Arthur so much as it is Guinevere; her actions and reactions to the events that envelop her influence the text in such a way that her personal drive is also the drive that moves the text forward (or around, if we take Brewer’s wheel image into account). Her Majesty worships the past, looking backward,

as her influence propels her into the future; Guinevere, no matter what light she is cast in, lives to serve as both instigator and as memorial.

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