

DON'T MAKE A SCENE: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ARTHURIAN LOVE
TRIANGLE IN THE 'ENGLISH TRADITION' OF TEXT AND FILM

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

DON'T MAKE A SCENE: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ARTHURIAN LOVE TRIANGLE IN THE 'ENGLISH TRADITION' OF TEXT AND FILM. (August 2011)

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The Arthurian legend has been part of history through different mediums ranging from art to film. Though there is no one text that can be identified as the origin of the Arthurian legend, over time, several texts have come to the forefront of the Arthurian canon. The "English tradition" consists of texts Britain and America recognize as versions of the Arthurian legend: Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Lord Alfred Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*, and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. All three texts have caused different subsequent adaptations of the Arthurian legend, as each portrays the Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot love triangle differently. As film became introduced to popular culture, Arthurian legends have been frequently presented on the silver screen. Three films in particular, Richard Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), Joshua Logan's *Camelot* (1967), and John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), have not only presented the Arthurian legend differently based on the interpretations of the director, but also focused on the love triangle in varying ways. By analyzing these select texts and films, an understanding of how, why, and to what purpose the Arthurian love triangle has been presented to audiences since the fifteenth century can be gained.

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Chapter 1

A Legend of the Ages: An Introduction

President John F. Kennedy's assassination stunned America to its core. The Kennedy administration had given America a romantic image of the Kennedy family; they appeared to be happy and the perfect family, though years later the truth would emerge from the shadows, shattering the idealized time that would come to be known as Camelot. After Kennedy's assassination, *Life* magazine published "For President Kennedy: An Epilogue" by Theodore H. White, which was an interview with Jackie Kennedy concerning her husband's death. It is in these short lines by White, heavily influenced by Mrs. Kennedy herself, that the Arthurian myth would be introduced in association with Kennedy's time in office. The final words of White's piece, "one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot," echo the popular play *Camelot*, which had been recently released prior to Kennedy's death. Though Camelot was a self-ascribed term Jackie Kennedy applied to her husband's time in office, those words she repeated in the interview with White changed the way in which this time in American history would be perceived by future generations. The original documents of her interview with White were subsequently called the "Camelot documents," and in them it is apparent that it was her wish for the Kennedy administration to be remembered as Camelot: "Most of her discussion of Camelot appeared in the *Life* article with the famous line from the song [. . .] and her point that 'it will never be that way again' repeated twice"

(Sidney 1). With the *Life* article, Jackie Kennedy set the tone to which future presidential administrations would aspire.

Nearly fifty years later, the idea of Camelot and the association with the Kennedy term reappeared on the American political stage with the presidency of Barack Obama. When Obama was running for the 2008 presidential election, many newspapers, such as the *Washington Post* with its 2008 article entitled “Barack Obama, Camelot’s New Knight: The Shining Armor of JFK’s Legacy,” caught hold of the association with Obama and Camelot, often dubbing Obama the new “knight” of Camelot, and speculated that his administration would harken back to the Kennedy legacy.¹ However, though comparisons are made, many of the new voters are of an age where the Kennedy legacy of Camelot is not even a distant memory. The lasting association with Obama and Camelot may stem from the legacy of the Kennedy administration and what the Kennedy family represented to the American people, but for younger generations the link is more likely to invoke images related to the Arthurian myth than to JFK.

It is not only in the political arena that allusions to Arthur and his Camelot make appearances, as “popular American culture is suffused by Arthurian-sounding titles and images” (Nash 36). Arthuriana is primarily found in film and literature, but explicit references are not the only means through which Arthuriana has immersed itself into popular culture. There are many implicit references as well: “Arthurian themes and symbolism continue to be widely disseminated throughout popular culture ... Although few specifically *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* movies are being made, interest in

¹ Other noteworthy articles from reputable sources: “Obama’s ‘Camelot Connection’ by Michelle Dobbs, *The Washington Post*; “Is Camelot’s Future in Obama’s Hands?” by Ted Kennedy, *CNN.com*; “Reviving Camelot?” by Eleanor Clift, *Newsweek*; and “Obama Echoes JFK’s Camelot Romance” by Nick Bryant, *BBC for America*.

Arthuriana can be detected in the themes, motifs, and symbols of many science fiction and fantasy films, from *Star Wars* to *Willow*” (Nash 36). While the general public may be familiar with only the bare minimum of knowledge concerning the Arthurian legend, its apparent frequency in popular culture speaks to the lasting qualities of King Arthur and his legend. Arthuriana has been around for centuries, long before Caxton and his press printed one of the most known versions, Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*; and rather than becoming obsolete, Arthuriana thrived, moving forward and adapting to suit the needs of its most current audience (Putter and Archibald 1).² Even in the United States, it is hard to escape King Arthur due to his vast integration into popular culture. The Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur love triangle has come to be one of the most recognizable love stories and characters along with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Jane Austen’s *Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet*. This Arthurian love triangle is one of the widely recognized elements of the legend, and film has been one of the leading mediums that have helped proliferate Arthuriana’s popularity into the current age.

The focus of this thesis is the representation of the Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur love triangle in select texts and films. I have had a fascination with King Arthur legends since I first watched Disney’s version of *The Sword in the Stone*; since first seeing this film, I have been drawn to this fantastical time that cannot be regained, when the knights were chivalrous and the ladies fair. I have been particularly intrigued by the Lancelot and Guinevere love affair and how Arthur dealt with the betrayal of his beloved wife and best friend, especially because the focus was on the love shared between the three rather than the

² Ad Putter and Elizabeth Archibald write that in 1200 a Worcestershire priest claimed Arthur would be part of stories throughout history, and such has been the case (1). In their chronology of the Arthurian legend, they place Geoffrey of Monmouth’s inclusion of Arthur in *History of the Kings of Britain* at around 455 a.d. (xv).

issue of adultery. The love triangle, one of the most popular elements of the legend, has often become the primary focus of films and other modern retellings of the legend. Since the Arthurian legend has so many renditions, it allows for a wide variety of interpretations:

“Given that there is no one version of the tale of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere, filmmakers can be granted some license in their interpretation of that legend” (Harty, “Lights!” 31).

Because of constant representation in film and literature, it is interesting to note the progression of the representation of the Arthurian love triangle from one of the early literary renditions to two of its most renowned revivals, and as we progress into the 21st century, how the emphasis on the love triangle becomes increasingly apparent, not just in texts, but in films as well. Thus, in my examination of the love triangle in these select texts and film, I will be looking at how post-medieval authors and directors choose to represent the Arthurian love triangle. These are connected by their debt to common sources, primarily Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*.

Even with many retellings and renditions of the story of King Arthur and his Round Table, the “truth” of the Arthurian legend has been somewhat of an elusive subject to track through the course of history. There are versions of King Arthur not only in the British Isles, the place with which he is most commonly associated, but also on the European continent and in the United States as well. Because King Arthur as a historical figure is hard to trace and there are myriad chronicles about him, it is difficult to determine which tales are “original.” However, in terms of literary renditions of the King Arthur legend, those that are the most influential and renowned can be identified easily. Over the years, the Arthurian legend has come to be considered British, though there is no definitive evidence to prove the historical existence of Arthur or that the legends about him are exclusively British, because

there are plenty of other European versions to disprove such a claim. In the modern age, when thinking of the most influential and recognizable versions of Arthuriana literature, more often than not three British texts come to mind: *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, *Idylls of the King* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White. These three texts have had the greatest influence on popular Arthurian texts. As they are all written by English writers, they create the “English Tradition” of Arthurian literature. The most commonly accepted elements of the Arthurian legend are derived from this “English Tradition,” which has determined the reception of later renditions of the legend. These authors also have had a large influence on the Arthurian films that occurred in their wake, albeit in varying ways. Malory’s *Le Morte D'Arthur* is the traditional work that has been most often used as the source for modern literature and film: “Since it is Malory who mediated the medieval Arthurian legacy to post-medieval English writers, his importance in shaping the Arthurian tradition can hardly be overstated” (Putter and Archibald 5). Tennyson’s contribution to the Arthurian legend is primarily the change in focus from Malory’s text to the love triangle, which consumes the majority of *Idylls of the King*. White’s popular novel led to two of the most popular film adaptations of the Arthurian legend in the form of *The Sword in the Stone* released by Disney in 1963 and in *Camelot* (1967).

While Arthurian legends may not be the most commonly read texts, the legend has thoroughly permeated popular culture, making most at least familiar with its basic elements: “The Arthurian story is so firmly established in Western, especially anglophone, culture and in the popular mind that everyone has at least a vague notion of how it is supposed to ‘go’” (Lacy 41). Film is the venue most responsible today for the fame of the Arthurian legend,

and as with literary adaptations, film adaptations change elements of the original story to suit their own purposes. However, because most people do not bother to read the texts, particularly if in Middle English, the version they absorb as “correct” is more often than not an adaptation of another adaptation.³ Even texts that are considered truly “Arthurian,” such as Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, are indeed renditions of Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, which isn’t even an “original” text itself, but rather an amalgamation of varying sources, again, to suit Malory’s needs in his retelling of the legend. Arthuriana’s permeation of popular culture, particularly with film, has allowed for specific plot elements to be remembered, even if the whole legend is not known by the masses: “Film versions of the legend of Arthur have focused on a variety of aspects of that legend, but the four most frequently filmed plots involving Arthur are the story of the Grail, the two love triangles of Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot and of Tristan-Isolde-Mark, and the promise of Arthur’s return” (Harty, “Lights!” 6).

There are myriad films that either reference or focus on King Arthur and his legend. The selection of films for this thesis³ was based on whether or not the film in question utilizes at least one of the three texts used in this thesis as a point of reference in the creation of the film, and whether or not the Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur love triangle was significantly included as well. After careful consideration, I have narrowed the films I will focus on to three: Richard Thorpe’s *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), Joshua Logan’s *Camelot* (1967), and John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981). Though there are more recent Arthurian adaptations,

³ Though primarily referencing adaptation theory regarding literature to film adaptations, Thomas Leitch in his work, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone With the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*, makes an interesting point about the issues concerning adaptations: “Over the years adaptations have been studied as translations and transformations, as selections and specifications, as reimagings and imitations of literature. It would help redress the balance between literature and literacy to think of each adaptation not in terms of what it faithfully reproduces—what it selects, emphasizes, and transforms—but of what it leaves out” (18). This thought can be readily applied to many of the literary adaptations of the Arthurian legend, as many adaptations do select certain elements from the entirety of the Arthurian legend to primarily focus on.

such as *King Arthur* (2004) and *Shrek the Third* (2007), these films take different approaches to the Arthurian legend than what my focus requires. Antoine Fuqua's 2004 version of *King Arthur* is supposed to be based on the historical figure of Arthur rather than a literary one. The main reason for excluding this film from this thesis is the lack of the love triangle apparent between the central characters. Although there are hints of one developing in the film, Lancelot's death in the final battle prevents an affair from occurring between the three. Dreamworks' 2007 *Shrek the Third* focuses more on Arthur's youth and rise to kingship than on his relationships with Lancelot and Guinevere. While they do make brief cameo appearances in the film, they are not central characters nor are they mentioned again after their brief interlude. The three films chosen for consideration in this thesis all explicitly claim to have used either Malory, Tennyson, or White as their basis. In addition, the three films were widely popular upon their release. They also largely focus on the Arthurian love triangle to help provide a context and understanding for the emphasis placed on the triangle rather than on other plot elements, and show how the texts they were based upon were altered to present the love triangle according to the vision of the directors.

The examination of these texts and films will provide insight into the ways in which the love triangle of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere were originally portrayed and altered with each new retelling of the legend, and will show why each love triangle was represented the way it was. The story of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere is one that carries across cultures and time, because the issues of the heart are relevant to all audiences. It is the way in which the story is transmuted that allows the legend to remain a part of the current culture, because it has been adapted to suit the society's values and expectations. Understanding the

representation of the love affair will show also why the love triangle and the Arthurian legend has captivated audiences since the first uttering of the legend of King Arthur.

Chapter 2

“For quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company”: Malory’s Representation

Printed in 1485, Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* is the oldest of the three texts I will be examining that comprise the “English tradition” of King Arthur tales. Although Malory’s text is one of the primary sources many authors, such as Tennyson and White, utilize later to compose their own renditions of the legend, Malory himself used a variety of sources⁴ to achieve the focus he desired in his version of the King Arthur story: “Arthurian chivalry to him was something more concrete and specific than an example of ‘noble and virtuous deeds’. He thought of it primarily as an example to a great cause, and of Arthurian Romance as a record of the heroic past of England” (Vinaver vi-vii). With this purpose in mind, many of the sections of *Le Morte D’Arthur* have other focuses than the love affair, but throughout *Le Morte D’Arthur*, it is apparent that references of the affair were added to help achieve the overall goal of Malory in showing the tale of King Arthur (Graves xi-xii). More specifically, the references of the love affair are used to achieve the narrative’s goal of showing “how Lancelot, Arthur’s most valued knight, destroys Arthur’s carefully built fellowship of other great and powerful knights, and how Arthur’s son, Mordred, assembles an army out of the remnants of Arthur’s followers and confronts him in a catastrophic battle” (Cannon 541). Although the love triangle is not a major concern in

⁴ Malory primarily used the early 13th-century French Vulgate Cycle as his primary source, specifically using the following prose romances: *Lancelot*, the *Queste del Saint Graal*, and the *Mort Artu*. He also used the *Suite du Merlin* and the prose *Tristan*. Though these were his primary sources, Malory also used some Middle English Arthurian verse narratives as well (Archibald and Edwards xv).

Malory's text, it recurs enough to be examined in his adaptation of the Arthurian legend, particularly because of his influence on later writers and adaptations of the legend. The limited use of the love triangle instead helps Malory focus on "maintaining chivalric bonds between men. Arthur would even have been willing to look over the couple's transgression in order to enjoy Lancelot's company, which he recognizes as the binding force of the Round Table" (Walters xxx). Though it may not be his primary focus, Malory often gives glimpses of the affair, which allows the love triangle to have a foundation and show how it begins to develop and affect others.

Malory treats the affair ambiguously and also presents it as a minor event in the overall scheme of *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Ambiguity is frequently present in the lack of explicit detail about the affair, particularly its type, emotionally and physically. Barry Windeatt explains this ambivalent presentation "enables the *Morte* to balance and hold together the crucial values of the chivalric society. Malory's narrative does not dwell on the experience of love for its own sake and only acknowledges any sexual intercourse between Lancelot and Guinevere when the plot demands, focusing rather on episodes that try the lovers' constancy" (98). He appears to have done so for several reasons. The first is to keep the affair out of the limelight in favor of other themes and plots in his text. Secondly, Malory's lack of specific detail about the nature of the affair keeps the affair in a more favorable light. Ultimately, Malory's ambivalence allows the reader to create his/her own interpretation of the interactions between Launcelot and Gwennyver: "The reader may understand that Lancelot is not the Queen's lover, though he does not specifically deny it; or understand that he is, because he does not specifically deny it, and because the reader knows that Lancelot *is* the Queen's lover, from the story outside this version" (D. Brewer 21).

Although the affair itself is amoral, Malory presents the love between Launcelot and Gwenyver as a true and constant love, and often physically ambiguous. His choice for such ambiguity “accords with the values and expectations of his audience, who would have found the lovers’ repeated acts of treasonable adultery, as recounted in the French version of Arthur’s reign, extremely offensive” (B. Kennedy 27). Malory’s restraint and ambiguity have often led to speculation about why he includes the love triangle at all if the effects of the love triangle on Camelot are insignificant in comparison to others. However, the affair is in some ways beneficial to Camelot as it guarantees Launcelot’s presence. Launcelot is the one who is most interesting regarding the affair as he is loyal and disloyal at the same time. Malory seems to focus more on Launcelot’s loyalty, albeit in conflicting ways, to Arthur and Gwenyver, and almost condones the affair because of it. The most defining characteristic of the love triangle is Arthur’s willingness to turn a blind eye to the affair to keep the land in peace and to avoid the loss of his best knight, Launcelot. When the affair does come to light, Arthur’s hand is forced to act, not by his own choice, but by his knights, who are outraged by the adultery and the transgression against chivalry.

As the work that influences more Arthurian retellings than any other, Malory’s representation of the Launcelot, Gwenyver, and Arthur love triangle should be noted and examined. Despite the future influence of *Le Morte D’Arthur* on other texts, there is very little overall focus on the Launcelot, and Gwenyver, and Arthur love triangle as “Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* is about civil war” (Cannon 541). The affair is a recurring element within *Le Morte D’Arthur*, but by no means is it a central focus of the text, because Malory’s telling of the King Arthur legend is structured around the plot rather than the characters. For the most part, there is little characterization of Launcelot, Gwenyver, and Arthur; what little

development there is by Malory is done to fit the mold he set for them in terms of furthering his plot. Thus, the characterization of Arthur, Launcelot and Gwenyver is scant as “we learn nothing of King Arthur but that he had grey eyes, or of Sir Launcelot and Sir Tristram but that they were big men” (Graves xiv). The most notable is within the figure of Gwenyver, who shows development aside from being a beautiful queen as she quickly becomes jealous whenever another female character looks to take her from the spotlight of either Arthur or Launcelot’s attentions, but this particular character development of Gwenyver is necessary to help the plot progress to Malory’s desired point. Because of this lack of characterization, it is difficult at times to decipher Arthur’s intentions or thoughts in particular, but also Launcelot and Gwenyver’s as the context of the situations they find themselves in does not always shed light for the reader on how they are interpreted by the characters themselves. However, such little characterization is common in Medieval literature and only helps to support the plot-driven work.

“The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor himself through dignity of his hands” gives one brief glimpse of Arthur and Gwenyver’s relationship: their marriage. Even though Merlin gave Arthur a prior warning in the section “Torre and Pellionor” about marrying Gwenyver and what will ensue, Arthur chooses to marry her nonetheless. Until this section of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, the focus has been on Arthur’s development of his kingdom, and it seems that Arthur chooses to marry Gwenyver because of her dowry, which would help Camelot and his rule, rather than for love of her: “And so kynge Lodegreaunce delyverd hys doughtir Gwenyver unto Merlion, and the Table Rounde with the hondred knyghtes” (Malory 60). Though seemingly callous, a marriage at this time did not necessarily imply romantic feelings, and as Arthur seemingly chose his wife for political reasons, it could be

assumed that Gwenyver too had no romantic attachment to Arthur before or after they were wed (B. Kennedy 15). However, the limited exposure Malory provides about Gwenyver and Arthur's relationship "creates the impression that the King stopped loving Guenevere soon after they were married" (B. Kennedy 16). This allows for the love of Gwenyver and Launcelot to be less guilty and amoral, particularly for modern audiences of the 21st century, because of the seemingly loveless and arranged marriage of Gwenyver and Arthur.

The relationship between Launcelot and Gwenyver appears to start developing, though not in an untoward manner, in "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake," as the court at Camelot begins to develop and Launcelot's prowess and skill is shown, which garners Gwenyver's attention:

So this sir Launcelot encesed so mervaylously in worship and honoure; therefore he is the fyrste knight that the Frey[n]sh booke⁵ makyth me[n]cion of aftir kynge Arthure come 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, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her from the fyre thorow his noble chevalry.
(Malory 149)

These lines could be interpreted as a relationship of platonic love between the queen and her champion during this age of chivalry, knights often were devoted to one noblewoman of the court, frequently not their wife or betrothed, and fought in her honor, which could allow for Launcelot to have "loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes" (Barber 27; 33; Malory 149). With this type of platonic relationship well established in medieval times, it allows for their relationship to transcend from merely queen and champion: "Guenevere initially loves him *because* of his peerless prowess and virtue as a knight. Lancelot, moreover, loves the queen not only because she holds him in greater favor than any other knight, but also because

⁵ French romances of the thirteenth century. This has primarily been assumed, as Terence McCarthy explains, to be "parts of the cycle of prose romances we know as the Vulgate Cycle, and the separate but parallel romance known as the *Prose Tristan*" (75).

of her beauty and goodness” (B. Kennedy 16). Thus, this love could be an innocent love not tinged with the beginnings of adultery; however, because of Merlin’s earlier warning to Arthur, it is hard to separate the two when it has been prophesized that Launcelot and Gwennyver are destined to love one another more than just as queen and champion.

The dual implications of what “love” could mean reappear in this section, mostly from various characters, who speculate on Launcelot and Gwennyver’s relationship: “we know well there can no lady have thy love but one, and that is quene Gwennyver”; ‘But it is noysed that ye love quene Gwennyver, and that she hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that ye shall never love none other but hir” (Malory 152; 160). On both of these accounts, Launcelot proffers viable reasons why he loves Gwennyver as he is her champion, and notes that people will talk as they like, but he also says that he does not want to wed because he cannot act as he wishes since he would be too busy tending to his lady (161). The most notable response by Launcelot is “And as for my lady, dame Gwennyver, were I at my lyberté as I was, I wolde prove hit on youres that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng” (Malory 152). There are dual implications here, depending on how “treweste” is read as Launcelot could be implying there is nothing between Gwennyver and him that isn’t proper, or he could be trying to prove that although there are feelings between Gwennyver and him, there have been no improper actions as Gwennyver is still true, at least physically, to Arthur. Malory’s deliberate ambiguity about the nature of their relationship is apparent here, though some scholars, like Beverly Kennedy, argue “‘Trew’ here means much more than just ‘loyal’. In fact, Malory is referring to an ideal of ‘trew love’ which permeates late Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature” (11). This ambiguity in addition to the comments already

made in Malory's text allows for readers to choose their own interpretation of Launcelot and Gwenyver's relationship.

Despite the ambiguity on Malory's part, the relationship of Launcelot and Gwenyver in "the Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" begins to create speculation and rumor. As such, others try to bring their assumptions to light, particularly those who have an agenda against Arthur and his court like Morgan le Fay. Morgan le Fay, who loves Launcelot and hates Gwenyver for holding his love, sends a drinking horn to Arthur that has the properties of proving a woman to be adulterous: "the horne had suche a vertu that there myght no lady nothir jantyll-woman drynke of that horne but yf she were trew to her husbande; and if she were false she sholde spylle all the drynke, and if she were trew to her lorde she myght drynke thereof pesibl . And because quene Gwenyver and in the dispyte of sir Launcelot this horne was sente unto kynge Arthure" (Malory 270). Though Morgan le Fay has her own agenda for sending the drinking horn, the fact that she focuses on the relationship between Gwenyver and Launcelot has two implications for the plot: she hurts Gwenyver's reputation, and the tone of foreboding is reintroduced. Again to this point, Malory, who leaves it to the reader to decipher the meaning of this event, maintains the ambiguity of the type of affair. Even though there has been nothing explicitly untoward between Launcelot and Gwenyver, the mention of adultery is a reminder of Merlin's prophecy and the expectation of the adultery that is to come to pass between them.

Morgan le Fay again tries to bring the affair to light in "The Round Table" through covert means, though this time she does so on the shield of Sir Tristram: "Than the shyld was brought forthe, and the fylde was gouldes with a kynge and a quene therein paynted, and a knight stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge upon the kynges hede and

the othir uppon the quenys hede” (Malory 340). The use of Sir Tristram further serves to discomfit Launcelot and Gwenyver because Tristram’s illicit relationship with Queen Isode, King Mark’s wife, is well known, and echoes Launcelot’s own relationship with Gwenyver. The shield at first could be thought to describe anyone, but when asked, Morgan le Fay readily admits that ““Hit signyfieth kynge Arthure and que[ne] Gwenyver, and a knyght that holdith them bothe in bondage and in servage”” (Malory 340). The knight in question of the shield is undoubtedly Launcelot, which Gwenyver immediately recognizes and the meaning of the shield. However, while Gwenyver is quick to recognize the meaning and intent of the shield, Arthur is not, whether it is from innocence or deliberate ignorance of the meaning, though he knows of Merlin’s prophecy:

And whan kynge Arthure saw that shylde he mervayled gretly in what entent hit was made. But que[ne] Gwenyver demed hit was, wherefore she was hevvy. Than was there a damesell of quene Morgan in a chambir by kynge Arthure, and whan she harde kynge Arthure speke of that shylde, than she spake opynly unto kynge Arthure: “Sir kynge, wyte you well thys shylde was ordayned for you, to warn you of youre shame and dishonoure that longith to you and youre quene.” (342)

In hearing this, Gwenyver recognizes her relationship with Launcelot could lead to her destruction: ““I wote well thys shylde was made by Morgan le Fay in the dispite of me and sir Launcelot, wherefore I drede me sore leste I shall be destroyed”” (342). Though at this point in the text Malory has not given any explicit information about the nature of Launcelot and Gwenyver’s affair, the truth is inconsequential as the speculation and rumor alone can damage their reputations and force Arthur’s hand to act, which seems to be reason for Gwenyver’s discomfort. Although Arthur hears the intended meaning of the shield Sir Tristram bears, he does not appear to give any further thought to the idea of an affair between

Gwenyver and Launcelot until the “King Mark” subsection of “The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones”:

Whan kynge Arthure undirstode the lettir, he mused of many thynges, and thought of his systirs wordys, quene Morgan le Fay, that she had seyde betwyxte quene Gwenyver and sir Launcelot, and in this thought he studyed a grete whyle. Than he bethought hym agayne how his owne sistir was his enemy, and that she hated the quene and sir Launcelot to the deth, and so he put that all oute of his thought. (Malory 381)

Despite Merlin’s warning and evidence being proffered to him, Arthur does not give any credence to the letter, which bade Arthur to pay attention to his wife and his knights, as he knows of Morgan’s feelings towards his wife and Launcelot. The jealousy of the woman, to him, makes the information unreliable, and he has no qualms about disregarding it.

However, Gwenyver, upon reading Morgan’s letter, worries about its implications and what Arthur believes as true (381). Based on Gwenyver and Launcelot’s fears, it can be inferred they have had a physical affair or at least a deeply emotional one.

The watersheds that alter the appearance of the Launcelot and Gwenyver relationship are in “Launcelot and Elaine” of the “The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones.” Prior to this section, there had been rumors about Launcelot and Gwenyver’s relationship, but when Launcelot goes easily to Gwenyver for a secret tryst, seemingly without concern for the King or to the consequences of his actions, it is implied that Gwenyver and Launcelot have had a physical affair. However, Malory does not provide concrete information as to the nature of their affair:

Than sir Launcelot ayenst nyght rode unto the castell, and there anone he was receyved worshypfully wyth suche people, to his semynge, as were aboute quene Gwenyver secrete. So whan sir Launcelot was alyght he asked where the quene was. So dame Brusen seyde she was in her bed. And than people were avoided and sir Launcelot was lad into her chambir [...] And so he wente that mayden Elayne had bene quene Gwenyver. And wyte you well

that sir Launcelot was glad, and so was that lady Eleyne that she had gotyn sir Launcelot in her armys. (Malory 480)

Launcelot's quick response to Gwenyver's summons in such a secretive manner hints Gwenyver has already given this type of summons. Beverly Kennedy argues against Launcelot and Gwenyver having a physical affair prior to this scene, but Malory's deliberate ambiguity allows for either interpretation. I believe this quick and unquestioning response to the summons on Launcelot's part implies an assignation with sexual expectations, especially as Elaine is glad to have "gotyn Sir Launcelot in her armys" and he is not surprised by her embrace (Malory 480). However, when Launcelot discovers Elaine's trickery and that it was not Gwenyver he had lain with, "he knew hymselff that he had done amysse. 'Alas!' he seyde, 'that I have l[y]ved so longe, for now am I shamed'" (480). His distress at the deception and his betrayal of Gwenyver makes him confess to Gwenyver, who forgives him for this transgression (485). Moreover, Lancelot's distress at realizing it was not her falls in line with Malory's intent of their "true love" and his unintended betrayal of it.

Ambiguity begins to fade with Lancelot's failure in the quest for the Holy Grail, because if Launcelot and Gwenyver's love was true and chaste, he would have succeeded to some extent. With his return, more rumors spread, and he begins to act differently, much to Gwenyver's chagrin, to try and stave off these rumors. Much of this change revolves around the fact that rumors are becoming more widespread and vituperative of Launcelot and Gwenyver's relationship:

Than, as the booke seyth, sir Launcelot began to resorte unto quene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promyse and the perfeccion that he made in the queste; for, as the booke seyth, had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette inwardly to the quene as he was in semyng outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. But ever his thoughtis prevyly were on the quene, and so they loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde, and had many prevy

draughtis togydir that many in the courte spake of hit, and in especiall sir Aggravayne, sir Gawaynes brothir, for he was ever opynne-mowthed. (Malory 611)

Launcelot's attempts to stop these rumors only anger Gwenyver, making the situation far more complicated, as she is unaware of or deliberately ignores the rumors circulating.

Launcelot's convincing and logical explanation of his newfound behavior proves him to still be constant to their true love, but Gwenyver does not believe him and continues to upbraid him as a false knight who no longer loves her (Malory 612). This fickle characteristic of Gwenyver and the unwavering loyalty of Launcelot does not seem to change the nature of their relationship, but only seems to further press upon the reader the depth of their true and constant love. Launcelot's loyalty to Gwenyver is prized by Malory as a characteristic of a knight. This is reiterated by Barry Windeatt: "Malory's *Morte* implies that Lancelot's constancy to Arthur and Guinevere as knight and as lover far outweighs the sinfulness of his adulterous love, and so there is no contradiction between his loyalty and love" (99). Only once does Launcelot reprimand Gwenyver for her mercurial behavior, which is seen in "The Fair Maid of Astolat" in "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere." Launcelot directly addresses Gwenyver's irrational anger and jealousy and counters with the fact that despite her changes in mood, he has always remained loyal to her: "'Thys ys nat the firste tyme,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'that ye have ben displese with me causeles. But, madame, ever I muste suffir you, but what sorow that I endure, ye take no forse'" (Malory 642). Again, Malory reiterates Launcelot's constant nature, which he found a virtue, despite the fact Launcelot's constancy also meant a betrayal against his liege lord.

In “The Knight of the Cart” of “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere,” Malory finally provides solid evidence of the nature of the Launcelot and Gwennyver’s affair. However, before revealing the details, Malory’s opinions about courtly love are revealed:

And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, and sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stabyltyé. But the olde love was nat so. For men and women coude love togydirs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and than was love trouhte and faythefulnes. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in kynge Arthurs dayes. Wherefore I lykken love nowadayes unto sommer and wynter: for, lyke as the tone ys colde and the othir ys hote, so faryth love nowadayes. 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 therefore she had a good ende. (Malory 649)

With this revelation, Malory forthrightly expresses his belief and value in constant and true love that he shows Launcelot and Gwennyver to have. Thus, their relationship loses some of the negative light due to the adulterous aspect of their love. Malory, too, has a more positive view of Gwennyver than expected, and it is because of her love for Launcelot that he seems to make this apparent: “Malory stresses loyalty and ‘stability’ again, but as major virtues in love. Her constancy as a ‘true lover’ is, Malory tells us, the virtue that redeems that difficult woman, Queen Guinevere” (Goodman 64). Because of her faithfulness in love to Launcelot, who is her true love, not Arthur, Gwennyver is redeemed by Malory, particularly in an age in which people, as he writes, are constantly fickle about their love, turning hot and cold.

Following this recognition of Launcelot and Gwennyver’s true and constant love, Malory uncharacteristically proffers hard evidence of a physically sexual affair, not just an emotional one, when Gwennyver awaits a rescue by Launcelot instead of Arthur. However, the lovers cannot help to meet surreptitiously when Arthur is not about: “So sir Launcelot had grete chere with the quene. And than he made a promise with the quene that the same nyght he sholde com to a window outwarde towarde a gardyne, and that window was barred

with iron, and there sir Launcelot promysed to mete her whan all folkes were on slepe” (Malory 656). While seemingly a safe time to meet as Arthur is not at the castle, Launcelot and Gwenyver have their assignation:

And than he lepe into the chambir to the quene. “Make ye no noyse,” seyde the quene, “for my wounded knyghtes lye here fast by me.” So, to passé upon thys tale, sir Launcelot went to bedded with the quene and toke no force of hys hurte honde, but toke hys plesaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the dawning of the day; for wyte you well he slept nat, but wacched. And whan he saw hys tyme that he myght tary no lenger, he toke hys leve and departed at the wyndowe, and put hit togydir as well as he myght agayne, and so departed untyll hys owne chambir. (Malory 657)

Though Malory had provided instances in which a physical relationship could have occurred, this event is the only one that explicitly states such is the case. Beverly Kennedy writes, “By retaining this one possible instance of treasonable adultery, but placing it much later in the story, well after the Grail quest, Malory is able not only to show the long duration of Guenevere’s and Lancelot’s true love, but also to draw his readers’ attention to it in his discussion of ‘trew love’ preceding their one, regrettable lapse from chastity” (27). Though she says it was “possible,” Malory’s text proves otherwise, but as Kennedy points out, Malory’s continual ambiguity and choice to only give indefinite answers to the nature of the affair helps prove that their love is a true love, as Malory had written earlier in this section of *Le Morte D’Arthur*.

Although Launcelot took great pains to leave no trace, the blood from his hand when he pulled the iron bars from her window remains upon Gwenyver’s sheets, causing her captor to cry foul play and call her a traitor to the king:

And than was he ware where she lay, and all the hede-sheete, pylow, and over-shyte was all bebled 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 kyng and that som of the wounded knyghtes had lyene by her all that nyght. “A ha, madame!” seyde sir Mellyagaunte, “not 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 calle you of tresoun afore my lorde kynge Arthure. And now I have proved you, madame, wyth a shamefull dede; and that they bene all false, or som of them, I woll make hit good, for a wounded knyght thys nyght hath layne by you.” (Malory 658)

A challenge is raised between Mellyagaunt and Launcelot, but Launcelot is tricked by Mellyagaunt and held hostage. His caretaker, a young woman, asks Launcelot to be her lover in exchange for his freedom, which he refuses, again reiterating his loyalty in love only to Gwennyver. While thinking Launcelot is not a threat, Mellyagaunt rides to the king and accuses Gwennyver of treason; Launcelot comes to her rescue, challenges Mellyagaunt again, and is victorious. However, despite accusations of infidelity on Gwennyver’s part, Arthur does not seem to ask many questions to determine the truth of the matter. He seems content not to address the issue himself, but to let his knights do the decision making for him, and as Launcelot is the greatest knight in Camelot, until he is defeated, Gwennyver cannot be successfully accused of adultery and therefore treason against the king.

In the final section of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, “The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon,” many questions concerning the Launcelot, Gwennyver, Arthur love triangle are finally answered and directly addressed by Malory. In “Slander and Strife,” it becomes apparent that many at the court know of the affair between Launcelot and Gwennyver, and that it is the catalyst to which some would use to destroy the kingdom (Malory 673). Those who would use the affair to their advantage bring it to Arthur’s attention, and finally, Malory reveals how much Arthur was aware of the affair and why he chose inaction despite his knowledge: “For, as they 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 demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereoff, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and

for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kyng loved hym passyngly well” (674). Here, and again later, Malory makes it apparent that it is because of Launcelot’s prowess as a knight that Arthur chooses to turn a blind eye to their affair.

When Arthur is forced to acknowledge the affair, his concern lies with the loss of Launcelot and his abilities as a knight, not with the adultery of his queen and his best knight: “Jesu mercy! [. . .] he ys a mervaylous knyght of proues. And alas, [. . .] me sore repentith that ever sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever, for wyth hym woll many a noble knyght holde” (Malory 682). In addition to Launcelot’s loss as a knight, Arthur’s other concern revolves around his beloved Round Table, as he recognizes that without Launcelot, other knights will leave and lose faith. The most telling of this sentiment by Arthur is when he minimizes Gwenyver, in terms of importance, saying: “And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I might have inow, but such a felyshyp of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company” (685). It is apparent here, as Edward Donald Kennedy writes, “Arthur as a king [. . .] has more love for his knights than for his wife and [. . .] is more concerned with his role as monarch than his role as husband” (152). Because his concern lies with Launcelot and the Round Table’s loss, Arthur quickly determines Gwenyver’s fate from the exposure of her adultery, and it is not dwelt upon overly much. “The Vengeance of Sir Gawain” reiterates Arthur’s thoughts about what has occurred with his focus again on Launcelot rather than Gwenyver. Arthur again laments his broken Round Table and that the loyalty of his knights has become split between Launcelot and himself (Malory 685). In this section, Launcelot directly addresses his affair with Gwenyver to Arthur, and while Launcelot raises good points in defending it to Arthur,

Arthur's lack of concern further proves that the actual affair is not the cause for his grief, but rather its effects on his kingdom, which is rapidly declining because of the effects of the affair (688).

Though Malory deliberately chose to be ambiguous about the nature of Launcelot and Gwenyver's relationship, he deems them to have been constant and true lovers, regardless of their adultery against Arthur. This representation is acceptable during Malory's time, partially from the expectations of audiences for romances, but also because of Arthur's distinct lack of interest in the affair, or even in Gwenyver aside from her dowry. Arthur's concern is more with Launcelot, and how the exposure of his relationship with Gwenyver will affect his presence in Camelot, the Round Table, the other Knights, and ultimately his hold on the throne. His most telling words about this sentiment are: ““And much more I am sorryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I might have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company”” (Malory 685). While Malory chose to represent the love triangle in this way, Alfred Tennyson's choices in presenting the love triangle are drastically different despite using *Le Morte D'Arthur* to structure his *Idylls of the King*.

Chapter 3

The King is Pure, the Queen a Whore: Tennyson's Representation

Idylls of the King, written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, presents a retelling of the Arthurian legend from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Comprising of twelve idylls, *Idylls of the King* focus primarily on Arthur's court, the figures within it, and different iconic events, such as the quest for the Holy Grail. Contrary to his source, Tennyson's text focuses far more on the Arthurian love triangle than Malory's, and he drastically alters the perception readers have of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. This change can be attributed to the highly moralistic Victorian audience Tennyson was writing for, and thus, "he was uneasy about the languorous seductiveness of the Arthurian 'dying fall', anxious that he ought to be more relevant, more positive, more attuned to the developing Victorian public morality" (Pearsall 120-121). While Malory was mostly ambiguous about the relationship, and even at times praised the fidelity and true love Guinevere and Lancelot had for one another, Tennyson is forthright in his representation of the love triangle: "From the start the impetus of the story derives from the obsessive theme and fear of sexual pollution" (124). In *Idylls of the King*, he completely removes any redeeming factor from the love affair and focuses on how Guinevere, by loving Lancelot, betrayed her husband, who remained true to her, and with her actions caused the destruction of Camelot.

Written during the Victorian era, Tennyson's alterations from Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* were done to suit the needs and expectations of his audience, particularly in the

way he addresses “notions of the ideal political leader, addresses questions of religious faith, and presents various sexual and moral codes, especially on the part of his female characters” (Umland and Umland 7). At the heart of Tennyson’s work, the love triangle and its effects on Camelot take precedence. For Tennyson, “the sins that are the undoing of Camelot and the Table are those of Lancelot, Tristram, Isolt, and all the others, but mostly that of Guinevere” (Everett xv). It is unsurprising then that the central cause of Camelot’s fall is directly attributed to the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot, and to a lesser extent, the loss of morality in Arthur’s court. *Idylls of the King* clearly mirrors Tennyson’s concern for the “growing materialism and sensuality of Victorian society” (Walters xli). However, while both Lancelot and Guinevere were equal and willing participants in their illicit relationship, blame is placed solely on Guinevere’s shoulders. For Tennyson, this is done to present the stark contrast of the blameless and pure Arthur against his fallen and immoral queen. Thus, Tennyson consistently presents Arthur as virtuous, and so “Guinevere’s sexual transgression is countered by Arthur’s purity and faithfulness” (McCracken 200). From the beginning, Arthur is shown to be “too far above average women and men for them to live up to his standards” (Lupack 152).

The love triangle’s beginnings are first introduced in “The Coming of Arthur.” Though the majority of the idyll focuses on Arthur’s establishment of rule, uniting all of Britain, and creating his Round Table, it also shows Arthur’s desire to wed Guinevere, daughter of Leodogran of Cameliard. When Leodogran assents, of all the knights in Camelot, it is Lancelot who is trusted most by Arthur to escort Guinevere to Camelot: “Then Arthur charged his warrior whom he loved / And honor’d most, Sir Lancelot, to ride forth / And bring the Queen, and watch’d him from the gates; / And Lancelot past away among the

flowers—/ For then was latter April—and return'd / Among the flowers, in May, with Guinevere” (Tennyson 446-451). At this point, Lancelot’s escorting Guinevere seems to have no bearing on their relationship, only later is it revealed it was then Guinevere fell in love with him. The court of Camelot loves Guinevere and is struck by her beauty during her wedding to Arthur. Their wedding is idyllic, as Arthur is dressed in “stainless white,” symbolizing his own pure ideals and character, and the two exchange their vows (455; 466-469). However, although Guinevere vows to love Arthur to the death, it is only Arthur who claims, “thy doom is mine,” implying whatever fate Guinevere has, chosen or not, shall be his and, by extension, Camelot’s (466). This brief instance is one of the few scenes of their marriage provided by Tennyson. Later throughout *Idylls of the King*, because “Arthur and Guinevere are rarely presented together,” the lack of a happy marriage results from the fact it was merely a political arrangement (Mancoff, “To Take Excalibur” 266).

Tennyson’s commentary on Arthur and Guinevere’s relationship is lacking, but “The Marriage of Geraint” shows rumors of a relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere have begun to surface through Geraint addressing the rumor he has heard about Lancelot and Guinevere:

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

The mentioning of a possible affair here is abrupt, with no indication of how a romance could have started. Within these lines, it is apparent that there is no tangible evidence such an

affair exists, though later Guinevere lends some credence to these rumors: “But Guinevere lay late into the morn, / Lost in sweet dreams, and dreaming of her love / For Lancelot” (157-159). Although these lines do nothing more than to simply restate Guinevere has an improper emotional attachment to Lancelot, Tennyson implies this emotional love on Guinevere’s part is leading to a physical one, and that she is the one on whom blame be will placed, not Lancelot. Additionally, for Tennyson, it appears emotional infidelity alone on Guinevere’s part is enough to condemn her, as Geraint takes his wife away from court, fearing Guinevere’s influence on her in “Geraint and Enid” (Tennyson 750-761).

While “The Marriage of Geraint” mentions rumors, the affair transcends to fact with “Balin and Balan” as a tryst between Lancelot and Guinevere is witnessed (Tennyson 235-275). In addition to providing evidence of Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair, Tennyson shows the depth of the consequences the affair can have on others should it be discovered. After Balin witnesses a tryst between Lancelot and Guinevere in the garden, the knowledge of it torments him as he is torn between keeping this knowledge and being a virtuous knight of Arthur’s court, which would cause him to reveal all: “Queen? Subject? but I see not what I see. / Damsel and lover? hear not what I hear [...] I suffer from the things before me, know, / Learn nothing; am not worth to be knight” (276-280). Though Balin witnesses merely a meeting with nothing untoward occurring, the tryst is enough for Tennyson to condemn them through Balin’s reactions. With this idyll, “the theme as always is the spreading taint of the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guenevere. The honest knight Balin is driven frantic by anguish and loathing at the hint of their impurity as he discovers it when eavesdropping upon their conversation in the garden” (Pearsall 133-134). For Balin, the issue seems to be that Guinevere is involved with Lancelot and what her actions imply for the Round Table, and

because he is unsure of the correct action in response to the affair, Balin chooses to leave Camelot, leaving the affair still a secret. At the core of Balin's turmoil is the knowledge that the actions of Lancelot and Guinevere contradict the values of the Round Table.

While "The Marriage of Geraint" only contained rumors and "Balin and Balan" witnessed a tryst, both accounts came from within Camelot, and both were also kept quiet. "Merlin and Vivien" proffers rumors of the love affair that begin to circulate outside of Camelot, an indication the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is becoming an open secret. However, the commentary comes primarily from Vivien and occasionally Mark, neither a friend of Camelot or Arthur, and it is implied their words are to be taken with a grain of salt. Mark's main source of proof is that Lancelot only worships the Queen and no other unmarried maiden (Tennyson 11-16). On account of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship as Queen and Queen's champion, they can use the appearance of closeness implied by that relationship to hide their illicit love. Mark's words accuse Lancelot and Guinevere of using their public relationship to cover a potentially more private and intimate one. However, being close to one another as queen and champion is acceptable publicly. Though Lancelot is Guinevere's champion, he is not restricted from pursuing other ladies at court, and since he does not, those who are suspicious interpret this as an admission of guilt. Vivien seems to believe that the glamour surrounding Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere has blinded those at court from the truth, primarily because of their pride in Lancelot's prowess and of Guinevere as queen of Arthur's idealistic court (25-28). Although the depth of their relationship is not commonly known because of Lancelot and Guinevere's efforts to conceal their love, upon closer examination with a keenly observant eye, as Vivien points out, it is apparent:

Beheld the Queen and Lancelot get to horse.
 Is that the Lancelot? goodly—ay, but gaunt;
 Courteous—amends for gauntness—takes her hand—
 That glance of theirs, but for the street, had been
 A clinging kiss—how hand lingers in hand!
 Let go at last! [...]
 Touch flax with flame—a glance will serve—the liars! (Tennyson 100-120)

According to Derek Pearsall, Vivien's statement to Merlin shows the love between Lancelot and Guinevere transcends the merely inappropriate to the fully sexual: "She is scornful of the notion that the love of Lancelot and Guenevere is anything but a sexual liaison [. . .] It may be called a 'super sensual love' but it's nothing but sex" (126).

Later in this idyll, Vivien broaches the topic of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair to Merlin, whose response does not have promising implications for the outcome of the affair. Merlin's response that is most telling about how the affair started reveals it began as a simple case of mistaken identity: "'Sir Lancelot went ambassador, at first / To fetch her, and she watch'd him from her walls. / A rumor runs, she took him for the King, / So fixt her fancy on him; let them be'" (Tennyson 772-775). Guinevere is the only one who is described in the act of falling in love, which implies it was her fault she couldn't contain her emotions, and to some extent, she was the one to bring Lancelot down from his more "pure" state. Lancelot is not mentioned, and with this lack, it is reiterated that Guinevere is the one to blame for this affair. Merlin asks if Vivien has no praise for Arthur, and her response is one of scorn as she presupposes that Arthur is aware of the affair, and almost blames Arthur for the affair itself:

Man! is he man at all, who knows and winks?
 Sees what his fair bride is and does, and winks?
 By which the good King means to blind himself,
 And blinds himself and all the Table Round
 To all the foulness that they work. Myself
 Could call him—were it not for womanhood—
 The pretty, popular name such manhood earns,
 Could call him the main cause of all their crime,

Yea, were he not crown'd king, coward and fool. (779-787)

Vivien's unflattering account of Arthur partly blames him for Guinevere's transgression as he has no eyes for anything but the Round Table and Camelot. Thus, for Vivien, her implicit question with this accusation is if Guinevere receives no love from Arthur and is the one who blame is placed on, why should she not seek love elsewhere. It is with these words that Merlin's heavy emotions set the tone for the remaining idylls, as Lancelot and Guinevere continue their affair, to Merlin's distress, and do not appear to want to stop their illicit love, despite the burgeoning concern of its effects on the kingdom for those residing both in and outside of Camelot.

As rumors begin to develop, Tennyson alters the readers' perception of the Lancelot, Arthur, Guinevere love triangle through a variety of means. It is within "Lancelot and Elaine" that the pivotal point in the Lancelot, Guinevere, Arthur love triangle is made apparent. In this idyll, for the first time Guinevere's personality is truly seen as are her reasons for continuing her affair with Lancelot and her seeming lack of concern of whether or not the affair becomes known. She is extremely selfish in her desires, beginning with her wanting Lancelot to forego a joust to stay with her when she is sick, even though his absence would be noticeable and questioned. Because of his love for her, Lancelot pleads with the King to let him forego the joust because of an old wound. Though it has been unclear whether Arthur is aware of the affair between his Queen and his best knight, lines 94-95 suggest otherwise: "the King / Glanced at him first, then her, and went this way" (Tennyson). Although the lines themselves are not explicit, Guinevere's response to them is indicative of both her selfishness and that their affair is becoming more than rumors, which makes her uneasy: "To blame, my lord Sir Lancelot, much to blame! / Why go ye not to these fair

jousts? the knights / Are half of them our enemies, and the crowd / Will murmur, ‘Lo the shameless ones, who take / Their pastime now the trustful King is gone?’” (Tennyson 96-101). Though these lines contradict her request to Lancelot, it seems even a suspicious glance from Arthur is enough to cause her concern, which seems to be Tennyson’s attempt to give Guinevere a sense of morality and a conscience, despite her actions. Lancelot retorts to Guinevere’s fears about their reputations by reminding her that at the beginning of their affair Guinevere cared not about who saw, pointing out that many bards linked their names together because of their status in court, and most importantly, Arthur has not said anything to imply his knowledge of their love (103-116). With Arthur’s highly idealized values and morals, he would be essentially breaking his own moral code by knowingly ignoring their affair. Thus, if he has not brought attention to it, in Lancelot’s eyes, it is a firm indication Arthur is not aware.

Again, in “Lancelot and Elaine,” Tennyson reiterates his stance on Guinevere as the person to blame for the effects of the love triangle on Camelot; Lancelot is less scrutinized by both Arthur’s court and by Tennyson, even though he is an active part of the adultery against the king. Arthur is perceived as the victim, who is presented as the blameless and virtuous king. In Lancelot and Guinevere’s continued discussion about the knowledge of their affair, her true feelings about Arthur are revealed, as are her reasons for being with Lancelot:

She broke into a little scornful laugh:
 “Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King,
 That passionate perfection, my good lord—
 But who can gaze upon the sun in heaven?
 He never spake a word of reproach to me,
 He never had a glimpse of mine untruth,
 He cares not for me. Only here today
 There gleamed a vague suspicion in his eyes;
 Some meddling rogue has tamper’d with him—else
 Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round,

And swearing men to vows impossible,
 To make them like himself; by, friend, to me
 He is all fault who hath no fault at all.
 For who loves me must have a touch of earth;
 The low sun makes the color. I am yours,
 Not Arthur's, as ye know, save by the bond.” (Tennyson 120-135)

Tennyson casts Guinevere in a very negative light with her apparent scorn in these lines, and consequently the blame is again placed on Guinevere: “As usual all the responsibility for the polluting nature of the relationship is placed on the woman” (Pearsall 127). However, she does give reasons for her inability to love Arthur as he is like “the sun in heaven” and she needs someone with “a touch of earth” (Tennyson 122; 133). A modern reading (one not confined by Victorian era ideals) may read these lines more sympathetically to Guinevere, as one cannot love a person who is so faultless as Arthur. For Tennyson, however, because of Guinevere’s reasoning, whatever sympathy she could have gathered for accidentally falling in love with the wrong man is lost as she scorns her faultless husband, who is the embodiment of all that is good and virtuous in Camelot. The lines are also telling of Guinevere’s motives for choosing Lancelot over the seemingly more desirable Arthur. For her, the choice was based on reality versus an idealized perfection, with Lancelot being considered “real” because he has flaws, whereas Arthur’s idealism is a detriment, in Guinevere’s eyes, in a relationship, as she can never live up to his ideals and expectations; rather than trying to live up to Arthur’s standards, Guinevere chooses to fall because it does not require her to change.

“Lancelot and Elaine” additionally reveals the extent to which the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere has become known in Camelot. This idyll introduces Elaine, who falls deeply in love with Lancelot. Her love transcends infatuation and borders on obsession as she tries in vain to be loved by him. However, as she fails to garner Lancelot’s love, she

begins to waste away (Tennyson 1020-1054). In an attempt to save his daughter, Elaine's father callously tells Elaine about Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship to try to break her idealized love for him: "But this I know, for all the people know it, / He loves the Queen, and in an open shame, / And she returns his love in open shame; / If this be high, what is it to be low?" (1074-1077). However, the desperate attempt fails as Elaine's love for Lancelot persists and she dies from it. With her father's blatant declaration, it becomes quite clear how much of an open secret the love affair has become in Camelot. When Guinevere discovers Elaine's love for Lancelot, she becomes irrationally jealous of Elaine (603-610; 720-739). This causes Lancelot to ponder the differences between Elaine and Guinevere, but despite knowing of Guinevere's often irrational nature, he cannot stop loving her. Since it is apparent Lancelot cannot love another woman, he grapples with his conscience. He is torn by his duty to Arthur and by his feelings for Guinevere, and he cannot find an answer to appease his conflicting feelings.

Finally in "Guinevere," light is shed on the reception of the love affair when it has finally been exposed. It is interesting that the title of the idyll given by Tennyson is "Guinevere," a reiteration and a strong implication she is the primary cause of the destruction of Camelot. In the beginning of "Guinevere," Lancelot and Guinevere have become overly paranoid about their affair coming to light in court and decide to leave, with Lancelot returning to his home country and Guinevere going to Almesbury convent (Tennyson 52-91). Despite their fears and promises to leave one another, they continue their affair until they are finally caught, and both barely flee the castle with their lives (91-130). At Almesbury, Guinevere learns of the impending destruction of Camelot by Modred's forces due to the split of the court caused by the revelation of her affair with Lancelot. While many of the

people sympathize with Arthur, Guinevere is not looked upon kindly, even by those of her sex. Even though Lancelot too was part of the adultery, it is because Guinevere betrayed Arthur, both emotionally and sexually, that his hand has been forced to act against Lancelot, with Guinevere at fault. She learns this from a young novice at Almesbury, who is innocent of Guinevere's identity and freely relays the feelings of others, which are negative towards the queen:

for gone is he
 To wage grim war against Sir Lancelot there,
 Round that strong castle where he holds the Queen;
 And Modred whom he left in charge of all,
 The traitor—Ah, sweet lady, the King's grief
 For his own self, and his own Queen, and realm,
 Must needs be thrice as great as any of ours! [...]
 As even here they talk at Almesbury
 About the good King and his wicked Queen,
 And were I such a King with such a Queen,
 Well might I wish to veil her wickedness,
 But were I such a King it could not be. (190-210)

In these lines, Guinevere finally sees what the people think of her, much to her anger and dismay, again revealing her depth of selfishness and lack of ability to put duty above personal desires. Despite her initial reaction to the novice's innocent criticism of her actions and Lancelot's, once she hears of Arthur's approach and entrance into the convent, Guinevere is immediately remorseful, but it is unclear what made this switch in feeling occur: "She sat / self-stricken, listening; but when armed feet / Thro' the long gallery from the outer doors / Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell, / And grovell'd with her face against the floor. / There with her milk-white arms and shadowy hair / She made her face a darkness from the King" (Tennyson 409-414). This uncharacteristic action of Guinevere's seems to be Tennyson's means of forcing Guinevere to accept all the blame and guilt for what has happened from her betrayal of Arthur.

Guinevere's repentant actions only garner a tirade from Arthur in which he makes explicit the grievances against her and that she has caused Camelot's downfall, but ultimately, he does forgive her (Tennyson 419-577). Arthur's words not only condemn Guinevere for her actions, but also show that Guinevere has ruined what Arthur built: "Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies / Have err'd not, that I march to meet my doom / Thou has not made my life so sweet to me / That I the King should greatly care to live; / For thou has spoilt the purpose of my life" (445-450). These lines also hearken back to Arthur's vow during their marriage ceremony, "thy doom is mine," showing that with their marriage, his fate has been tied to Guinevere's, and her actions and their consequences are his as well (466). With this, Tennyson also reiterates Arthur's constancy to his inconstant wife, coming full circle from beginning to end. During his tirade to Guinevere, he does attribute the downfall of Camelot in part to others besides Guinevere, but still lays the majority of blame on her because it was her example that caused others to become immoral:

"Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot;
Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;
Then others, following these my mightiest knights,
And drawing from foul ensample from fair names
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,
And all thro' thee!" (484-480)

To Arthur, Guinevere's example with Lancelot led to the adultery of Tristram and Isolt, and because Lancelot and Tristram were such great knights, other knights followed their example, leading to the amorality of the court. Though Arthur does ultimately forgive Guinevere, he still thinks her to be polluted from her adultery:

"Lo, I forgive thee, as Eternal God
Forgives! do thou for thine own soul the rest.
But how to take last leave of all I loved? [. . .]
I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine,

But Lancelot's; nay, they never were the King's.
 I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh,
 And in the flesh thou has't sinn'd; and my own flesh,
 Here looking down on thine polluted, cries,
 'I loathe thee;' yet not less, O Guinevere,
 For I was ever virgin save for thee,
 My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my life
 So far that my doom is, I love thee still." (Tennyson 541-556)

His refusal to touch her, because to him she belongs to Lancelot despite being married to him, is quickly contrasted to his declaration that he ever remained constant to her, and despite what has come to pass, he still remains loyal in his love to her, an interesting declaration, particularly since their marriage did not seem to be a loving one. With his speech, Arthur leaves a guilt-ridden Guinevere, who in receiving his magnanimous forgiveness, finally recognizes his value, and she is repentant of her actions and sins against him:

"Gone—my lord!
 Gone thro' my sin to slay and to be slain!
 And he forgave me, and I could not speak.
 Farewell? I should have answer'd his farewell.
 His mercy choked me. Gone, my lord the King,
 My own true lord! how dare I call him mine?
 The shadow of another cleaves to me,
 And makes me one pollution. He, the King,
 What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,
 If soul be soul, nor can I kill my shame;
 No, nor by living can I live it down." (607-619)

Although she regrets her choices, it is too late for Guinevere and her reputation to be redeemed, but her concern has changed from a selfish one as she tries to salvage Arthur's reputation rather than hers by shouldering the blame so Arthur's name in the future may not be looked upon with scorn or mocked (622-633). It is only when Guinevere is repentant of her actions and the consequences ensued, that she for "the first time recognizes Arthur's true value. Although her understanding comes too late for this world, it nevertheless represents

her first step toward redemption” (Everett xiv). Ultimately, Guinevere realizes that although in her youth she yearned for the “warmth and color” which she found in Lancelot, it was Arthur, in his forgiveness and loyalty to her, who is deserving of her love (642-646). She looks for forgiveness from the nuns in the convent, but realizes she must find it herself, which she eventually does in her convent life (684-692).

Compared to his primary source, Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Tennyson focused much more on the representation of the love triangle. Where Malory was ambiguous, there was no ambiguity in Tennyson’s focus on Guinevere’s being solely at fault for the effects of the love triangle on Camelot. By consistently representing Arthur as a blameless king who embodies all the ideals and values of a utopian society, and by showing Guinevere as scornful and willing to fall from loving such a highly moral person, Tennyson clearly marks the love triangle as a detriment to Camelot. While writing for a specific audience with certain expectations of morality, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* has remained a mainstay in the “English Tradition” of the Arthurian legend, and has been a major influence in later adaptations of the legend, like T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*.

Chapter 4

What is Best for Camelot: White's Representation

The most recent of the three texts I focus on to create the “English tradition” of the King Arthur legend is T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. In his novel, White utilizes both Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* as primary sources, but chooses to alter or exclude certain plot details from these sources to make the love triangle a major focus of the novel (Goodman 99). However, although this love triangle is included by White, it drastically varies from the one presented by either Malory or Tennyson. There is a noticeable focus on the psychological characterization of the characters, and the effect their decisions and actions have on their consciences and the overall plot of the novel: “By such psychological exploration of the upbringing and circumstances of his characters, White endeavours to prepare and account for the eventual downfall of the Round Table” (Taylor and Brewer 292). White's psychological examination of the characters creates more complex figures than the ones cast by his predecessors, “since the main characters are individuals rather than types, and the patten of the quest for love, concluding in the happy union of the lovers, does not really apply here” (E. Brewer, *T.H. White's* 77). White also shows the emotional complexity for these characters instead of solely showing the effects of their actions on Camelot as Malory and Tennyson had.

By doing so, White writes a retelling of the Arthurian legend with more human characters who are less archetypal because of the careful development and characterization

applied to Lancelot, Guenever, and Arthur: “White’s characters are meant to be real people and not quasi-allegorical figures” (E. Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 114). In *The Once and Future King*, Lancelot, Arthur, and Guenever are not simply iconic figures from a renowned legend, but people with conflicting emotions, predicaments, and obligations: “Lancelot and Arthur share a love for each other that is almost as strong as their love for Guenever. Arthur is very much aware of the affair between his wife and his champion; and yet he chooses to overlook it because he puts the good of the kingdom and of his friend above his own pride” (Lupack 190). White presents the love triangle as a tragic series of events that were preordained by Merlyn, and despite attempts to prevent the affair from happening, it still occurred. This is done by White’s characterization of the main characters and the depth of their relationships: “Lancelot is at first jealous of Guenever, because he has to share Arthur with her, then attracted to her when he realises that, in a moment of exasperation, he has ‘hurt a real person.’ Arthur perceives at once that Lancelot and Guenever are in love: from the beginning White sets out the complexity of the situation, and accounts for everything” (E. Brewer, “The Figure” 283). Additionally, White’s characterization of Arthur causes the love triangle to be tied to Camelot; when the triangle begins to fall apart from internal and external corruption, so does Camelot: “The emphasis therefore falls upon the love of Lancelot and Guenever as the cause of the disaster” (E. Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 48).

Due to the depth of White’s characterization of Lancelot, Guenever, and Arthur, there is a deep sense of tragedy and desolation associated with the love triangle: “The sterility of the guilt-ridden relationship turns the third book away from romance and towards tragedy” (E. Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 85). This tone is established from the onset of *The Once and Future King* by Merlyn’s warnings to Arthur about Lancelot and Guenever: “I have told you about

Guenever, haven't I?' 'I don't believe it.' 'No matter. And I have warned you about her and Lancelot.' 'That warning,' said the King, 'would be a base one anyway, whether it was true or false'" (White 285). Despite having this prior knowledge about the potential problems caused by Guenever and Lancelot, the love triangle's representation is further set in that hopeless feeling when Arthur chooses to ignore Merlyn's warning and embraces both when they do come into his life and to Camelot. Thus, armed with this information, the progression into the remainder of the novel is tainted by the foreboding feeling that only ill will come of his marriage to Guenever and friendship to Lancelot, no matter how happy they all are initially.

The Ill-Made Knight embodies the majority of *The Once and Future King*, and primarily focuses on Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever's lives, on the love between them, and the consequences their love has for not only them, but also Camelot. The title is also a direct reference to Lancelot and makes him one of the primary focuses of the section, often on how he grapples with his love and relationships to both Arthur and Guenever. The title can be interpreted in two ways: first, it refers to his physical appearance, which is far from appealing, and second, he is "ill-made" to be a knight because of his love for Guenever, which betrays his standards of knighthood. White's Lancelot is different than previous Lancelots, because he comes to Camelot infatuated and fascinated by Arthur and Arthur's idealism. Upon his arrival at Camelot he is not a knight, because he wanted be knighted only by Arthur, and he becomes jealous of Guenever's close relationship with Arthur; but on account of his desire to follow Arthur's principles of virtue and "right," he is ashamed of his uncharitable feelings toward her (White 328). When he is knighted, he actually meets Guenever, but despite his efforts, he cannot see past his first impression of her:

He might have been knighted at any time during the past two years, but he had refused to be done by anybody except Arthur—and he was introduced to Guenever the same evening. There is a story that her hair was yellow, but it was not. It was so black that it was startling, and her blue eyes, deep and clear, had a sort of fearlessness which was startling too. She was surprised by the young man's twisted face, but not frightened. "Now," said the King, putting their hands together. "This is Lancelot, the one I have told you about. He is going to be the best knight I have [...] I want you to be kind to him, Gwen" [...] He kissed the Queen's hand coldly. He did not notice anything particular about her, because his mind was filled with previous pictures which he had made for himself. There was no room for pictures of what she was really like. He thought of her only as the person who had robbed him, and, since robbers are deceitful, designing, and heartless people, he thought of her as these. (White 331)

These lines are more revealing than they may initially seem as they show the extent of Lancelot's "unknightly" behavior, despite his ideals, that Guenever is more than a trophy queen for Arthur, and she is unaffected by Lancelot's "twisted" face. White provides a glimpse of Guenever and Lancelot's looks; the description of Guenever adds a layer of complexity to her character as she is clearly not just a pretty face or a beauty won by the King. Lancelot's looks are given from another's perspective, which lends truth to his prior words about his own looks: "So far as he could see—and he felt that there must be some reason for it somewhere—the boy's face was as ugly as a monster's in the King's menagerie. He looked like an African ape" (317). By seeing his physical attributes from a perspective other than his own, truth is lent to his words, rather than his being cast as an overly modest young man. However, Lancelot's ugliness does not appear to disconcert Guenever or deter her from his presence. But his unrelenting and unkind first impression of Guenever does not change, making his piety and idealism almost a flaw rather than an attribute. Closely following Lancelot and Guenever's introduction to one another, Arthur reflects on Merlyn's prophecy that Lancelot is to become the greatest knight at Camelot, but he seems to conveniently forget or deliberately chooses to ignore Merlyn's other warning that Lancelot

and Guenever will betray him. With this, White defines Arthur as a person as Arthur's character is established in his very optimistic belief that he can change the fate set before him: "White makes explicit Arthur's problems, presenting him as man rather than king" (Taylor and Brewer 293).

As Lancelot becomes part of the court and subsequently the Round Table, Arthur requests that Guenever be at least kind to the newcomer, and because of his request she tries to be kind to Lancelot as she does not want to come between the budding friendship of the King and his new knight: "King Arthur had asked his wife to be kind to the young man. She was fond of her husband, and she realized that she had come between him and his friend. She was not such a fool as to try to atone to Lancelot for this, but she had taken a fancy for him as himself. She liked his broken face, however hideous it was, and Arthur asked her to be kind" (White 333-334). Guenever's choice to follow Arthur's wishes shows a respect she apparently holds for him, and her consideration and willingness to try to please Arthur reveals the differences between her predecessors and her. However, despite Guenever's attempts at a tentative friendship, Lancelot does not seem to have the same sentiments that Guenever holds for him. He actively tries to ignore her, but when she causes more harm than good when trying to help with the hawks, Lancelot's rudeness hurts Guenever, and Lancelot realizes his fault in his treatment of her and begins to feel remorseful:

He did not take much notice of the woman. "Here comes that woman," he would remark to himself or "There goes that woman" [...] His jealousy had turned into unconsciousness of her existence [...] There was a moment in which everything stood still. Guenever stood, hurt in her heart [...] The young man knew, in this moment, that he had hurt a real person of his own age. He saw in her eyes that she thought he was hateful, and that he had surprised her badly. She had been giving kindness, and he had returned it with unkindness. But the main thing was that she was a real person. Not a minx, not deceitful, not designing and heartless. She was pretty Jenny, who could think and feel. (334)

Despite his humility from his poor looks, Lancelot fails to follow the code of chivalry as set by Arthur's court, making him more human rather than a great knight. It is only when he has violated this code that he finally sees her as a person for herself, and not as a person to be jealous of because of Arthur's love for her; he sees her as Jenny, through a more intimate and personal lens. In fact, had he not hurt her, he "might never have noticed her as a person, if he had not seen the pain in her eyes" (White 339), which Lancelot also later claims to be one of the reasons he fell in love with Guenever.

White does not provide more information about how Lancelot and Guenever begin to fall in love, but rather immediately examines Arthur's recognition of their newly changed relationship: "The first two people to notice that Lancelot and Guenever were falling in love with each other were Uncle Dap and King Arthur himself. Arthur had been warned about this earlier by Merlyn [...] and he had been fearing it subconsciously. But he always hated knowing the future and had managed to dismiss it from his mind" (White 335). Arthur's actions present a quandary as he is aware and mindful of Merlyn's prophecy, and although he hates knowing the future and proof of Merlyn's warning is developing in front of him, he still actively chooses to try and disregard it. In fact, his earlier action of asking Guenever to act kindly to Lancelot is what pushed them closer together and caused the spark between them. Instead of trying to change what appears to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, Arthur seems to push them closer to a fate he does not want.

Uncle Dap, who acts as a fatherly figure to Arthur, has no qualms about directly asking Lancelot about the issue at hand in an attempt to nip the problem in the bud. However, Lancelot's response appears innocent enough of any foreboding danger to his having an affair with the Queen:

“I can’t help it if we are fond of each other, and there is nothing wrong in being fond of people, is there? It is not as if the Queen and I were villains. When you begin lecturing me about her, you are making it seem as if there was something wrong between us. It is as if you thought ill of me, or did not believe in my honour. Please do not mention the subject again.” Uncle Dap rolled his eyes, disarrayed his hair, cracked his knuckles, kissed his fingertips, and made other gestures calculated to express his point of view. But he did not refer to the love affair afterwards. (White 336)

Lancelot appears to be unaware of his own feelings toward Guenever, and even if he was, he is relying on his highly prized honor and virtue to see him through temptation. However, while Lancelot does not think there is anything improper about having a closer relationship with the Queen, Uncle Dap thinks otherwise. His gestures in response to Lancelot could be interpreted as what he believes will come of their budding feelings toward one another: a fully sexual and emotional affair.

Arthur’s reaction to the realization of Lancelot and Guenever’s budding love is different. He chooses to keep his own counsel, and decides to remove temptation by bodily removing Lancelot from Camelot, albeit discreetly:

Arthur’s reaction to the problem was complicated. Merlyn’s warning about his lady and his best friend had contained within itself the seeds of its own contradiction, for your friend can hardly be your friend if he is going to be your betrayer. Arthur adored his rose-petalled Guenever for her dash, and had an instinctive respect for Lancelot, which was soon to become affection. This made it difficult either to suspect them or not to suspect. The conclusion which he came to was that it would be best to solve the problem by taking Lancelot with him to the Roman War. That, at any rate, would separate the boy from Guenever and it would be pleasant to have his disciple with him—a fine soldier—whether Merlyn’s warning were true or not. (White 336)

Arthur’s conflict is between his role as king and as husband, but his optimistic nature is prevalent in his hopes that Merlyn’s warning will not be fulfilled: “Arthur is seen under two distinct aspects, as king, and as friend and husband” (E. Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 94). Despite his unwillingness to fully accept Merlyn’s warning, Arthur does at least, at this point, try to

change the future even though his earlier actions are what had led him to his current predicament. Arthur attempts to prevent any deeper feelings between Lancelot and Guenever from developing by whisking Lancelot off to war, which results in Lancelot seeing smoke where there is no fire:

During the first weeks of Lancelot's infatuation for Guenever, it became time for Arthur to cross the Channel to meet his enemy in France—and it was on this war that he decided to carry the young man with him [. . .] Lancelot was angry at being taken from Guenever, because he felt that it implied a lack of trust. Besides, he knew that Sir Tristram had been left with King Mark's wife of Cornwall on a similar occasion. He did not see why he should not be left with Guenever in the same way. (White 337)

Lancelot's belief that Arthur was taking him to war because Arthur did not trust him implies guilt with his feelings running deeper than he is willing to admit or is aware of. His choice to compare the situation to Sir Tristram's only proffers a sense of ill-boding, since while Lancelot and Guenever are presumably innocent, such is not the case with Sir Tristram and Isoud, King Mark's wife. It appears that Lancelot is not aware of all the details surrounding the Mark, Tristram, and Isoud triangle, despite using Sir Tristram as a point of comparison, adding an air of innocence to his seemingly suspicious claim.

While at war, Lancelot and Arthur's friendship deepens and both tacitly acknowledge that Guenever could cause a rift between them, but they endeavor to not let such a rift occur because of their fondness for one another: "During this warfare Arthur became genuinely fond of Lancelot, and, by the time they came home, he no longer believed in Merlyn's prophecy at all. He had put it at the back of his mind [...] Both of them were determined that Guenever could not come between them, and the first few years were safely past" (White 338). This begins to further complicate the love triangle as both recognize the change in their relationships, not only with one another, but also with Guenever, and they try to move

past this for their friendship, only adding to the feeling of tragedy surrounding them all. Perhaps due to his optimism, Arthur's decision to still reject Merlyn's warning concerning Lancelot and Guenever is interesting as his noticing of their falling in love was his reason for bringing Lancelot to France with him, and additionally other warnings of Merlyn, such as Lancelot's prowess as a knight, have come to pass. For Lancelot, it appears he has accepted his feelings for Guenever go beyond fondness, and because of his respect and friendship with Arthur, his feelings for her will not become a point of contention in their friendship.

Although Lancelot decided he would not let Guenever come between Arthur and himself, when he actually sees her upon his return to England, he realizes the promise was all for naught: "Queen Guenever was on the beach to meet them, and the first thing Lancelot knew after she kissed the King, was that she was able to come between them after all" (White 339). Because of the friendship Arthur and he created, it is disheartening to see Lancelot fall, especially after his resolve not to let Guenever interfere in his relationship with Arthur. Despite his strong feelings for Guenever, his honor directs him to request to leave Camelot for quests. When Arthur questions his abrupt decision, Lancelot is angered because he felt Arthur was being suspicious at his failure to put his feelings aside for the good of Camelot, and for still harboring his illicit love for Guenever, even after their tacit agreement: "I want to go on a quest. I want to find an adventure [...] It is what the Round Table is for, isn't it? [...] The knights are to go on quests, aren't they, to fight against Might? What are you trying to stop me for? It's the whole point of the idea" (340). To reinforce that Lancelot's impetus for questing was solely due to his "unknightly" feelings for Guenever, White makes it explicit by stating so: "This was the beginning of the famous quests. They were not made

to win him fame or recreation. They were an attempt to escape from Guenever. They were his struggles to save his honour, not to establish it” (White 340).

While his quests were meant to help assuage his feelings, more often than not they failed, and instead of escaping his love for the Queen, he often found himself confronting it: “Lancelot was so worn out by the struggle inside him about the Queen . . . that he felt he could not go further” (White 342). However, even away from Guenever, Lancelot cannot rid himself of his dishonorable love for his friend and liege’s wife: “Lancelot had kept himself away for a whole year, but there was a limit to his endurance. Thinking of her all the time and longing to be back with her, he had allowed himself this one indulgence. He had sent his captives to kneel at her feet. It was a fatal course of action” (362). It appears this action of sending his captives to Guenever rather than Arthur, a perceived expression of his love and devotion to her, is what lent itself to rumor of their alleged affair. While away on his quests, Guenever’s love for Lancelot does not diminish either, but only grows, and in doing so, it complicates matters for her:

It is difficult to explain about Guenever, unless it is possible to love two people at the same time. Probably it is not possible to love two people in the same way, but there are different kinds of love [...] In some such way as this Guenever did come to love the Frenchman without losing her affection for Arthur [...] She and Lancelot were hardly more than children when it began, and the King was about eight years their senior. At twenty-two, the age of thirty seems to be on the verge of senility. The marriage between her and Arthur had been what they call a “made” marriage. That is to say, it had been fixed by treaty with King Leodegrance, without consulting her. It had been a successful union, as “made” marriages generally are, and before Lancelot came on the scene the young girl had adored her famous husband, even if he was so old. She had felt respect for him, with gratitude, kindness, love, and a sense of protection. She had felt more than this—you might say that she had felt everything except the passion of romance. (362-363)

White’s explication of Guenever’s feelings makes her into a sympathetic figure, and it is apparent the love she bears for Lancelot is accidental as she was seemingly content with

Arthur, even if there was no passion in their marriage. Although their marriage was politically motivated, Guenever appeared happy enough; her falling in love with Lancelot was simply bad luck. However, while unfortunate, Guenever does not appear to attempt to stop her love for Lancelot as he did in his tacit agreement with Arthur during the Roman Wars, though when he returns to court, they both walk a fine line of keeping their love secret: “The Queen and he did not look at each other. They had done so with the click of two magnets coming together, the moment that he crossed the threshold” (363). While their illicit love can be viewed sympathetically, by this point it seems Lancelot and Guenever no longer try to stop loving each other.

Despite deciding to put Merlyn’s warning concerning the love affair from his mind, Arthur sees that there is in fact something between Lancelot and Guenever with Lancelot’s return to court: “Arthur, whose head was still in his hands, raised his eyes. He saw that his friend and his wife were looking at each other with the wide pupils of madness, so he quickly attended to his plate” (White 366). This causes Arthur to question Guenever’s love for him, potentially for the first time: “‘Uncle Dap,’ he said, ‘do you remember how I asked you not to talk about something?’ ‘I do.’ ‘Is Guenever in love with me?’ ‘You should ask her,’ replied his uncle, with French logic. ‘What must I do?’ he cried. ‘What must I do?’ ‘It seems to me,’ said Uncle Dap, ‘that it depends very largely on what the Queen wants to do’” (367-368). While Arthur struggles with his feelings, Lancelot’s predicament is brought to light as well:

If it is difficult to explain about Guenever’s love for two men at the same time, it is almost impossible to explain about Lancelot [...] Why did not Lancelot make love to Guenever, or run away with his hero’s wife altogether, as any enlightened man would do today? One reason for his dilemma was that he was a Christian [...] His Church [...] directly forbade him to seduce his best friend’s wife. Another stumbling block to doing as he pleased was the

very idea of chivalry or of civilization which Arthur had first invented and then introduced into his own young mind [...] He loved Arthur and he loved Guenever and he hated himself. (White 367-368)

Because of his inner turmoil, Lancelot continues to quest, but he returns more often.

However, one quest in particular changes everything for the members of the love triangle.

The quest deals with the rescue of a maiden, Elaine; after her rescue, he remains with her family, mostly out of boredom, but as Lancelot remains idle, the hopelessness of his love for the queen begins to weigh on him:

He felt such feelings in his breast because of Guenever—the frightful pang of hopeless love—that he was drained of effort [...] At the beginning of his love for her there had been restlessness, so that he had felt if only he kept moving and doing new things every moment there might be hope of escape. Now his power to be busy was gone. He felt [...] he was only waiting to see whether his heart would break or not. (372-373)

What he fails to see is that Elaine is caught in youthful fancy and believes she has fallen in love with Lancelot. In her desire for him, she intoxicates and tricks him into believing Guenever is in a castle nearby without Arthur, and uncharacteristically, Lancelot rushes to be with her (374-375). The next morning reveals the truth: Lancelot had been tricked and as such he lost his much prized virginity, and not even to the woman he loves:

The thing which Elaine had stolen from him was his might [...] “When I was little,” he said, “I prayed to God that he would let me work a miracle. Only virgins can work miracles. I wanted to be the best knight in the world. I was ugly and lonely. The people of your village said that I was the best knight of the world, and I did work my Miracle [...] I did not know it would be my last as well as my first.” (376)

Understanding why Lancelot prized his virginity sheds light on why he refrained from a sexual affair with Guenever: “Lancelot’s honor is one aspect of an integrity which includes chastity as well as loyalty to Arthur and Guenever” (Taylor and Brewer 293). It appears that once fallen, Lancelot no longer seeks to avoid Guenever after Elaine’s deception:

Straight from her robbery, Lancelot came like an arrow to the heart of love. He had slept with Guenever already in deceit, already had been cheated of his tenfold might. He was a lie now, in God's eyes as he saw them, so he felt that he might as well be a lie in earnest. No more to be the best knight in the world, no more to work miracles against magic, not more to have compensation for ugliness and emptiness in his soul, the young man sped to his sweetheart for consolation. There was the clatter of his iron-shod horse on the cobbles, which made the Queen drop her needlework to see whether it was Arthur back from his hunting— [...] and then, before she was quite certain of what had happened, Guenever was laughing or weeping, unfaithful to her husband, as she had always known she would be. (White 379-380)

It is here that it could be said that Lancelot and Guenever's affair begins in earnest, though for Lancelot, it is not done of lust for Guenever, but rather regret for what he had lost, and as it is their first physical encounter, real consequences can now come of their affair. Guenever, putting no defense against Lancelot, falls quickly into his embrace, but her reaction of either "laughing or weeping" gives an unclear image of her true feelings about the consummation of their illicit love. Guilt begins to build, though in a different way as now their relationship has transcended to the physical; there is more at stake for not only Guenever and Lancelot, but also Arthur, should this affair be discovered.

Arthur is again taken to France by war, and he chooses and trusts to leave Lancelot in England, which makes Lancelot's guilt "heightened by comparison to Arthur's nobility" (Walters xlii). Again, Arthur seems to deliberately ignore the situation by leaving Lancelot and Guenever together. While he seems unconcerned, Lancelot is wary of Arthur's decision, and even suggests, "it would be better to trust somebody else," in an attempt to assuage his guilt and to not be tempted with Guenever during Arthur's absence (White 381). Arthur disregards Lancelot's suggestion and goes to France, leaving Lancelot and Guenever behind for a year, a clear act of faith, since he knows of their feelings. During that time, Lancelot and Guenever's love flourishes, but is occasionally tinged with guilt: "At other times, they

were in terror [...] Guenever did not feel remorse on her own account, but she caught it from her lover” (White 381). It is in this year Guenever discovers the truth of Lancelot’s decision to sleep with her. In learning Lancelot had accidentally betrayed her with Elaine, their love is altered by doubt and suspicion: “They thought that they understood each other once more—but their doubt had been planted. Now, in their love, which was stronger, there were the seeds of hatred and fear and confusion growing at the same time: for love can exist with hatred, each preying on the other, and this is what gives it its greatest fury” (386). While he enjoyed his year with Guenever, the conflict Lancelot feels within himself is only deepened with Arthur’s return:

In the King’s absence he had been able to drown himself in the passing minute—but Arthur was perpetually at his elbow now, as a comment on his treachery. He had not buried his love for Arthur in his passion for Guenever [...] He could not bear to be made to feel that sentiment for Guenever was an ignoble sentiment, for it was the profound feeling of his life—yet every circumstance now conspired to make it seem ignoble. The hasty moments together, the locked doors and base contrivances the guilty manoeuvres which the husband’s presence forced on the lovers—these had the effect of soiling what had no excuse unless it was beautiful. On top of this stain there was the torture of knowing that Arthur was king, simple and upright—of knowing that he was always on the edge of hurting Arthur dreadfully, although he loved him. Then there was pain about Guenever herself, the tiny plant of bitterness which they had sown, or seen sown, in each other’s eyes, on the occasion of their first quarrel of suspicion. It was a pain to him to be in love with a jealous and suspicious woman [...] Yet he was unable not to love her. Finally there were the revolted elements of his own character—his strange desire for purity and honour and spiritual excellence. (387)

The love between Lancelot and Guenever begins to change them as the guilt and suspicion wears on them and invades what was once a pure love, and the slow decay of their love begins to show in the slow decay of Camelot, which affects Arthur too: “Arthur’s feelings completed the misery of the court [...] He was sadly unfitted for hating his best friend or for torturing his wife” (388-389). Though affected by Lancelot and Guenever’s love, Arthur still

has no proof that they are having a sexual affair or merely have feelings for one another, but despite his instincts that they were, Arthur seems to prefer ignorance and bliss than have to deal with the consequences if he ever obtained proof:

Arthur did not know that Lancelot and Guenever were lovers. He had never actually found them together or unearthed proofs of their guilt. It was in the nature of his bold mind to hope, in these circumstances, that he would not find them together—rather than to lay a trap by which to wreck the situation. This is not to say that he was a conniving husband. It is simply that he was hoping to weather the trouble by refusing to become conscious of it. Unconsciously, of course, he knew perfectly well that they were sleeping together—knew too, unconsciously, that if he were to ask his wife, she would admit it. Her three great virtues were courage, generosity, and honesty. So he could not ask her. (White 309)

His lack of pursuit for proof also helps keep life in Camelot “stable”; knowledge of the affair would break the Round Table, and Arthur is willing to put the needs of the state above his own. Based on his personality, Arthur is not the type to force things, rather, it was his hope that Lancelot and Guenever would put things to right themselves by ending the affair:

“Arthur was strong and gentle enough to hope that, if he trusted Lancelot and Guenever, things would come right in the end. It seemed to him that this was better than trying to bring them right at once by such courses as, for instance, by cutting off the lovers’ heads for treason” (389). Despite his optimistic nature, the truth bears down on Arthur as with Lancelot and Guenever, ultimately changing the tone of the court and Camelot as well.

Lancelot’s principles become twisted as he tries to keep Guenever and his honor as they become more consumed with their illicit love: “He felt that if he could only persuade his Guenever to make a clean break with the King, so that everything was in the open, there might still be a possibility of honor” (White 394). He begins to believe that by being honest about their adultery, they can still maintain their honor, but such could never be the case. As the greatest knight, his twisted perception begins to affect Camelot, which Arthur starts to see

in the cracking of his idealism and morality in Camelot, but he still takes no action to end Lancelot and Guenever's amoral affair, though he recognizes the potential strife that could occur from the consequences seen of Tristram's affair with King Mark's wife:

“If something is not done [. . .] the whole Table will go to ruin [...] Look at the Tristram business with King Mark's wife. People seem to side with Tristram. Morals are difficult things to talk about, but what has happened is that we have invented a moral sense, which is rotting now that we can't give it employment. And when a moral sense begins to rot it is worse than when you had none. I suppose that all endeavors which are directed to a purely worldly end, as my famous Civilization was, contain within themselves their germs of their own corruption [...] what I mean is, that the ideal of my Round Table was a temporal ideal. If we are to save it, it must be made into a spiritual one.” (White 434)

Despite being aware that moral corruption has already taken root in Camelot through the effects of the long standing affair of Lancelot and Guenever, Arthur chooses to utilize religious quests as a means to divert attention from the affair that duplicates the Mark and Tristram debacle, rather than directly deal with the consequences of bringing it to light (434).

The quests for the Holy Grail work for a time to reestablish Arthur's Camelot and his Round Table. During the time of his quest, Lancelot repents all his sins as he tells the King and Queen upon his return, but guilt wears on Lancelot, who tries to tell Arthur of his affair with Guenever, but is stopped by her (White 464). With his newfound penitence, he chooses to remain chaste, but regardless of Lancelot's renewed devotion to God, Guenever believes that eventually he will return to her: “The knowledge had revived her like a watered flower too long left unwatered” (473). Though Lancelot proffers reasons why he cannot resume his part of their affair—

(1) that they could not very well go back to the old way, after the Grail; (2) that, had it not been for their guilty love, he might have been allowed to achieve the Grail; (3) that it would be dangerous in any case, because the Orkney faction was beginning to watch them unpleasantly, particularly

Agravaine and Mordred; and (4) that it would be a great shame to themselves and also to Arthur— (White 474)

Guenever holds on to her belief he will return to her. However, as it slowly becomes apparent to her that Lancelot will not, she asks him to leave Camelot again, because being near him is too hard on her (476).

With Lancelot's repeated sudden departure, people become bolder in their suspicions: "It was said that she had sent Lancelot away after a terrible quarrel, during which she had accused him of loving another woman. She was supposed to have cried out: 'I see and feel daily that thy love beginneth to slake'" (White 479). Though this was not the case, the tone of Camelot turns more negative, which is reflected in Arthur. When Lancelot returns, it becomes apparent that Camelot and the Round Table have begun to crumble, and Guenever's statement that he will remain marks the first steps towards its demise. Arthur does start to be more assertive when it comes to Lancelot and Guenever's relationship, adding to Camelot's change in nature:

The true tension at court—which was apparent to everybody except Lancelot, who was too innocent to be conscious of such things—began to show itself clearly at the Westminster jousts. For one thing, Arthur began to assert his position in their wretched triangle. He did this, poor fellow, by suddenly taking the opposite side to Lancelot in the *grand mêlée*. He set upon his best friend, and tried to hurt him, and lost his temper. He did nothing unknighly, and, as it happened, did no harm to Lancelot. But the strange turn of felling was there all the same. Before and afterward they were friends. But just for that one moment of anger Arthur was the cuckold and Lancelot his betrayer. (495-496)

Aside from this one instance, Arthur chose to act with his strong conviction of morals, which is particularly exemplified in his belief of "right over might." However, this belief and his subsequent actions at the Westminster jousts skew the perception of his role in the triangle, and adds another dimensional layer to Arthur's character as he is a "true" person with

realistic conflicts. He's more than just an idealistic King, but a man who is torn between personal desires and the good of the realm:

Arthur, whose corner of the triangle was the least fortunate from a personal point of view, was not entirely wretched. Merlyn had not intended him for private happiness. He had been made for royal joys, for the fortunes of a nation [...] He had kept himself aloof from the pains of Guenever and Lancelot, unconsciously trusting them not to bring the matter to his consciousness, not from motives of fear or of weak connivance, but from the noblest of motives. The power had been in the King's hands. He had been in the position of a husband who could, but a single command, solve the problem of the eternal triangles by reference to the headsman's block or to the stake. His wife and her lover had been at his mercy—and that was the reason, not any reason of cowardice, why his generous heart had been determined to remain unconscious. (White 509)

Ultimately, the happiness of the triangle is dependent on all three people; Lancelot is unhappy without Guenever and Arthur, just as Guenever is unhappy without Lancelot and Arthur, and as Arthur is without Guenever and Lancelot.

The final book, *The Candle in the Wind*, looks at the last days of Camelot, and makes it clear that the Lancelot and Guenever affair is well known by this point in *The Once and Future King*. However, while people know of the affair, it was not publicly acknowledged, which is seen in the rumors of knights who are unfriendly to Camelot: “‘And our noble knight has been the Queen of England's lover all the time.’ ‘Everybody knows that Gwen has been Lancelot's mistress since before the deluge, but what good is that? The King knows it himself. He has been told so three times, to my certain knowledge’” (White 521). As Lancelot and Guenever grow into middle age, and presumably guilt, Lancelot begs Guenever to leave Camelot and go to his castle, Joyous Gard, with him (542). However, it is Guenever who has become more rational. Her argument is based around their assumption that Arthur knows about the affair, and if they publicly leave, Camelot would fall, which wasn't something she would risk.

“I don’t want to have two husbands, and I am just as uncomfortable as you are: but what is the good of being in the open? As we are now it is horrible, but at least Arthur knows about it inside himself, and we still love each other and are safe. If I were to run away with you, the result would be that everything would be broken. Arthur would have to declare war on you and lay siege to Joyous Gard, and then one or other of you would be killed, and nobody would be better off. I promised to stay with him, and he has always been kind to me, and I am fond of him. The least I can do is go on giving him a home, and helping him, even if I do love you too. I can’t see the point of being in the open. Why should we make Arthur publicly miserable?” (White 543).

Guenever’s rational and remarkably considerate reasoning makes White’s construction of a full person in Guenever clear; she has wants and desires that are manifested in Lancelot, but also has a strong sense of duty and “right,” which is manifested in Arthur.

As time passes, it becomes apparent to Arthur that he has to address the affair, albeit privately, to Lancelot and Guenever in an attempt to save Camelot. His direct approach to Lancelot and Guenever about his duty as king shows where his loyalties lie, to Camelot:

“Far from being willing to execute his enemies, a real king must be willing to execute his friends.” “And his wife?” asked Guenever. “And his wife,” he said gravely. Lancelot moved uncomfortably on the settle, remarking with an attempt at humour: “I hope you won’t be cutting off the Queen’s head very soon?” The King still held his hand, still looked upon him. “If Guenever or you, Lancelot, were proved to be guilty of a wrong in my Kingdom, I should have to cut off both your heads.” “Goodness me,” she exclaimed. “I hope nobody is going to prove that!” “I hope so too.” (White 550)

With his address, Arthur makes it clear that he will put Camelot before the two people he loves most. However, despite Arthur’s attempts to save not only them and himself, but also Camelot, Lancelot and Guenever are caught, which forces Arthur’s hand to react. Not only has Merlyn’s warning come full circle, but also the sense of desolation as the revelation of the love affair becomes public knowledge, and the destruction of Camelot comes about as well.

Whereas Malory was primarily ambiguous about the representation of the love triangle, White takes a different stance from his source. In *The Once and Future King*, White, as Elisabeth Brewer writes, “sees the love of Lancelot and Guenever as unfortunate rather than intrinsically virtuous. His main interest is in trying to understand and to explain the motivation and the relationships of the three participants in the love-triangle” (*T.H. White’s* 221). As the most recent of the three texts, White’s *The Once and Future King* has utilized elements from both Tennyson and Malory that best suit the desired representation. Despite the distinct variations between Malory, Tennyson, and White’s works, each of these texts have portrayed the Lancelot, Arthur, and Guinevere love triangle in striking ways that have influenced later adaptations of the legend, particularly in their focus on the love triangle, which has not always been the case for different versions of the Arthurian legend. As film takes the Arthurian legend for its own, the works of Malory, Tennyson, and White are all primary sources for directors and scriptwriters to use and adapt to their own purposes.

Chapter 5

Duty Over Love: The Love Triangle of *Knights of the Round Table* (1953)

The 1953 film, *Knights of the Round Table*, directed by Richard Thorpe and featuring Robert Taylor, Ava Gardner, and Mel Ferrer, follows rather closely to the Lancelot and Guinevere element as presented by the literary versions of the Arthurian legend, particularly those of Malory and Tennyson.⁶ MGM claimed “its researchers in Hollywood and England had ‘stuck close to the facts,’ basing their script on Malory’s ‘studious work’” (Harty, “Lights!” 15-16). Despite this claim, the focus of the film is not the same as Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*; the focus is on the Lancelot, Guinevere, Arthur love triangle, making the film more indicative of Tennyson’s or White’s rendition of the Arthurian legend than Malory’s:

Despite [the] loose “Malorian outline,” however, *Knights of the Round Table* features prominently the love triangle while ignoring other elements associated with the story. Moreover, it freely conflates or alters characters and events in order to adapt the legend to the tight constraints dictated by the filmic medium, it draws upon the contributions of writers other than Malory (primarily Tennyson and White) to do so. (Umland and Umland 77)

The deliberate changes of plot and characters in *Knights of the Round Table* help keep the focus on the love triangle rather than on other aspects of the Arthurian legend. In fact, the change of making the love triangle the center of the film is in keeping with the genre to which *Knights of the Round Table* belongs: “*Knights of the Round Table* is a typical

⁶ According to Kathleen C. Kelly, *Knights of the Round Table* depends on the “audience’s knowledge of the story of Guinevere and Lancelot as it was told in the Middle Ages” (279). This allowed for MGM to alter the legend to suit its purposes and also adhere to the requirements of the Production Code regarding sexuality and adultery.

Hollywood melodrama that focuses almost to the exclusion of all else, on the ‘love-angle’—the doomed triangle between Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere” (Aberth 20). Though other recognizable elements do appear in the film, such as the pulling of Excalibur from the stone and the quest for the Holy Grail, the love triangle and its effects on the characters take a prominent role in the film. However, the title of the film, *Knights of the Round Table*, is misleading because the film shows very little of the other knights of the Round Table, and more on the effects an illicit love between a queen and a knight has on a kingdom.

Knights of the Round Table presents the love triangle between Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur as an emotional one rather than a physical one, as there are no sexual encounters between Lancelot and Guinevere (the most titillating event is a chaste kiss in Lancelot’s chambers):⁷ “In *Knights*, we do not get a full-blown story of adultery [...] instead, we watch as Guinevere and Lancelot exchange longing looks. Fetishized tokens of love substitute for illicit desire” (Kelly 274). The subdued nature of the love triangle alters its presentation from the adultery to the effect of rumor and how an innocent love is manipulated to the detriment of Camelot. While there is some interest between Lancelot and Guinevere, they ultimately decide to put duty above love, but other forces work against them to make their relationship appear as an illicit affair. These outside forces are Morgan le Fay and Modred, who want Arthur’s throne, and push to create an affair between Lancelot and Guinevere in public view. This representation in *Knights of the Round Table* gives the clear implication that rumor of adultery is enough to create the same type of devastation as an affair:

⁷ This was done primarily because of the Hays Code, or the Production code, which had strict guidelines about the presentation of sex and sexual behavior: “The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sexual relationships are the accepted or common thing. 1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively. 2. Scenes of passion a. They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot. b. Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown. c. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element. [...] 4. Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden” (Kelly 273).

The love triangle here is one of the heart, a radical departure from Malory's text [...] Nonetheless, its effect is as devastating as if the actual adultery had been committed by Lancelot and Guinevere. As we have seen, the film establishes at the outset the love and esteem between Lancelot and Arthur. It also avers that Arthur has known and loved Guinevere from childhood, a detail that serves, once again, to heighten the effects of betrayal later on. (Umland and Umland 79)

This particular representation is done through changes in the presentation of the main characters; the film recasts characters into new roles or alters original ones to better suit its goals for the film. Most notable of these changes are in the figures of Modred and Morgan le Fay, who believe themselves to be the rightful king and queen of England, and are looking for a means to break Arthur's hold on the throne. They are the driving force and initiators of the rumors of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, and seek anything that might suit their claim of infidelity on Guinevere's part. Guinevere is the main focus of the affair as the one on whom blame is mostly placed, but who also has the responsibility to end it. Merlin's intervention with Guinevere in the early stages of her romance with Lancelot is indicative of her role as the one who needs to end the affair; she is approached, not Lancelot, about what is at risk should rumor start to circulate. Arthur's lack of presence in the film is noteworthy as well;⁸ the film's version of Arthur seems to have no prior knowledge or inkling of a romance between Lancelot and Guinevere, though at times implies otherwise, and discovers the affair with the same quiet acceptance, only speaking about the matter when Lancelot pleads for him to spare Guinevere at the trial. Only Lancelot is cast as expected as a knight who happens to fall in love with the wrong person, and despite his efforts to deter a relationship, ultimately fails and falls to temptation.

⁸ This lack of presence could be attributed to the casting of Arthur by Mel Ferrer and Lancelot by Robert Taylor. Taylor's previous film *Ivanhoe* (1952) was met with wide success, thus his casting as Lancelot is unsurprising as *Knights of the Round Table* focuses on Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship rather than on Arthur (Umland and Umland 76).

To show the extent to which Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur are manipulated by Morgan le Fay and Modred, the characters' relationships are clearly defined early in the film. The first relationship defined is of Arthur and Guinevere. Arthur announces his intention to marry Guinevere, an old childhood friend, saying to Merlin: "Guinevere is here with me now, Merlin. Here in my heart as she ever has been since the day we met as children. And as she always will be, till the day this heart no longer beats [. . .] And I shall make her Queen of all this island. Queen of all England" (*Knights*).⁹ Though Guinevere is not introduced physically in the film at this point, she is made expressly known to be Arthur's intended wife as is the history and depth of their relationship. In presenting Guinevere as a beloved childhood friend rather than simply an eligible lady to wed, the attachment between Arthur and Guinevere is given substantial depth, as there is clearly an obligation and friendship between the two.

Lancelot and Arthur's friendship too is established early in an effort to show their camaraderie outside of Guinevere's presence. Their relationship is set before any other, even Arthur's marriage to Guinevere, in an attempt to exhibit the depth of their friendship. By doing so, their friendship is placed above the romantic interests of both for Guinevere: "It is instructive to note that in order to augment Arthur's sense of betrayal later, the film establishes the friendship and mutual respect between Arthur and Lancelot before it even introduces Guinevere" (Umland and Umland 78). During the war to secure Arthur's throne, Arthur tells Lancelot, "I esteem thee more than any other man," and gives Lancelot a gift on which is inscribed, "Friend shall I be. Call me not other. This is a pledging 'twixt brother and brother" (*Knights*). Though a later disagreement over Modred's acceptance in Arthur's

⁹ All quotations quoted in this chapter are from the production *Knights of the Round Table* (1953).

court after the war causes a rift between Arthur and Lancelot, Lancelot eventually requests forgiveness and to be the first to pay homage at the reception of Arthur and Guinevere's wedding, causing Arthur to say, "Guinevere, this knight is my banner, sword, and shield" (*Knights*). From there, the relationship between Arthur and Lancelot appears to remain strong. The emphasis of the friendship between Lancelot and Arthur placed so early in the film creates a sense of foreboding when Lancelot and Guinevere do begin to fall in love with one another: "the union between Arthur and Lancelot—and with it, England—is vulnerable to private desire, a vulnerability that can be exploited by the enemy within" (Aronstein 70).

Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship is shown last; they are introduced to one another without any inkling of the other's identity and without Arthur's presence. Lancelot encounters Guinevere by chance, who is being held captive by an errant knight, and he asks her if he can champion her, but refuses to give Guinevere his name. When Guinevere's lady-in-waiting tries to reveal Guinevere's identity due to Lancelot's forwardness, Guinevere silences her and keeps her anonymity as well, loaning a sense of suspense to the film. After Lancelot succeeds in rescuing her, he leaves Guinevere, and it appears this will be the end of their interactions with one another, but each feels a sense of attraction for the other. When Lancelot attends the reception to pay homage to Arthur and is formally introduced to Guinevere, each recognizes the other and their gazes linger on one another, until Guinevere tells Arthur it was Lancelot who rescued her, and Arthur immediately makes Lancelot the Queen's Champion. While nothing untoward is done or said, the tone of attraction between the two is reiterated again, but it is joined by guilt due to the realization of who the other is and their individual relationships with Arthur. However, later when Arthur swears in his oath of kingship to be "faithful in love," Lancelot steals a glance at Guinevere, who looks

down immediately as soon as she catches Lancelot's gaze, implying that they already love each other (*Knights*).

The reception of the wedding is the time in which all three characters meet each other and establish a relationship. However, more important is Modred and Morgan le Fay's comments and decisions during the reception:

Modred: They are ill-matched.

Morgan le Fay: If they are not, we will make it so. (*Knights*)

Arthur's making Lancelot Guinevere's Champion unwittingly proffers Modred and Morgan le Fay a specific way to break his rule: an affair between Guinevere and Lancelot. As Lancelot swears his oath to Guinevere, Modred and Morgan le Fay give one another pointed looks that imply an affair between Lancelot and Guinevere could provide the necessary means for their plan. When the film moves to show that time has passed, pointedly mentioning while Arthur and Lancelot remained friends, England knew peace, Lancelot and Guinevere are seen at Court seated closely together and holding hands. Though none of the other court members seem to think this behavior is inappropriate, Modred and Morgan le Fay are seen observing the exchange as well, with Modred saying, "Am I deceived or do I scent a pair of royal turtledoves?" (*Knights*). As Modred and Morgan le Fay are watching the pair, Merlin is watching them, and while they see Lancelot give Guinevere an old coin on a chain, Morgan le Fay comments, "You are not deceived. We must set a trap to catch our turtledoves," causing Merlin to turn his attention to Lancelot and Guinevere as well, and he recognizes the implications of their close relationship (*Knights*).

While Morgan le Fay and Modred plot against Arthur, Merlin, recognizing the budding relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere and the potential devastating effects it could induce, quickly seeks out Guinevere for a private word:

Merlin: But its walls not only have ears, they have eyes, and they have lips. No one is safe from them, my lady, not even the King himself, and not even you [. . .] If the Queen's [enemies] could make a lie of her that men believed, it would break the Round Table and destroy the kingdom.

Guinevere: What lie could they make of me?

Merlin: One that would involve Lancelot. (*Knights*)

To stave off any potential situations that could produce rumors to fuel Morgan le Fay and Modred's plans, Merlin suggests to Guinevere that Lancelot marry: "And Lancelot is too vulnerable to be out of reach of this mischief. He should be safely married" (*Knights*).

Although up to this point it had been unclear whether or not Guinevere and Lancelot truly did have feelings for one another, Merlin's next comment regarding his suggestion gives credence to Modred and Morgan le Fay's plan and choice in players of an affair:

Merlin: I am glad it is I who sit watching your face at this moment and not Morgan le Fay, my lady.

Guinevere: Do you suspect me too?

Merlin: No, my lady. But I am just as artful as she at weaving guilt out of innocence if it be for my cause. Lancelot should marry. It is not too cruel a sacrifice for the throne he serves. (*Knights*)

Ultimately, the downfall of Camelot and the security of Arthur's rule comes down to the appearance of Guinevere's reputation, lest it be besmirched, instead of the preventative actions Lancelot could take; it is only Guinevere who is approached by Merlin, not Lancelot, which seems to imply there is some credence to the rumor and it is only in Guinevere's power to end the illicit romance.

Heeding Merlin's advice, Guinevere seeks out Lancelot to urge him to marry another woman, and to do what is best for Camelot: "Lancelot, there is something I must tell you. I know that you love me. You would never tell me so, but I know that you do. While it was our secret, no harm or shame could come of it. But it's no longer a secret, and we have enemies. Those enemies would be silenced if you wed" (*Knights*). Lancelot acquiesces to

her request, saying, “All through the war, Arthur would speak of you. I fought beside him shoulder to shoulder, and you were ever in his heart. You must not be in mine too” (*Knights*). In his mentioning of this, Lancelot is reiterating not only his love for Arthur, but also his choice and beliefs in honor and duty to his King: “At this point both queen and knight fulfill their public duty” (Aronstein 70). However, despite his agreement to Guinevere to marry another, he seems to choose a sort of self-exile by soliciting Arthur to go to the North to protect the kingdom’s borders with his would-be wife. During this scene, Merlin looks on and nods approvingly, while simultaneously Modred and Morgan le Fay exchange confused and annoyed looks at the interference in their plans by Lancelot’s sudden desire to leave court.

While Lancelot is in the North, it is implied Arthur finally realizes or recognizes there is something between Lancelot and Guinevere that goes beyond Queen and Queen’s Champion. During a private moment between Arthur and Guinevere, Guinevere expresses her feelings about Arthur and her regret that Arthur deserves a better Queen than she: “My lord, I honor you above all men. I watch with wonder how you bring justice and mercy to your people. And I long to serve you better. With far more love and far more understanding than I possess. But a King such as you stands in need of a greater Queen than I” (*Knights*). At this same moment, Guinevere drops the old coin Lancelot had given her, which Arthur notices and picks up; his lingering look at the coin implies he understands the situation more than he has expressed as he only says, “I love him also, Guinevere” (*Knights*). Although “love” can have many meanings, it seems Arthur does realize and recognize Guinevere romantically loves Lancelot. The film then moves to Lancelot, who is doing the same thing as Guinevere, holding the scarf she gave him when he rescued her, but when footsteps

approach, he quickly hides it. During these events, Modred holds a secret meeting with other kings who would go against Arthur's rule. They say they will not plot against Arthur until the country is divided, to which Modred responds, "What will divide it quicker than a clash between Lancelot and Arthur? [. . .] Lancelot is the Queen's lover" (*Knights*). Modred plots with the others to have Lancelot returned to Camelot because "Once at Camelot, Lancelot and the Queen will betray themselves. I put my oath upon it" (*Knights*).

The rapid succession of these events in this sequence lends some truth to the rumor of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship, but it also shows Modred and Morgan le Fay have not ceased plotting against Arthur. As Modred's meeting is last of the scenes, the implications of the lingering feelings between Lancelot and Guinevere bring a sense of foreboding to the film as if a self-fulfilling prophecy that Modred claimed will come to pass because the two cannot move past their feelings. Thus, when the fighting in the North has ceased, no longer providing Lancelot with an excuse to remain there, Morgan le Fay immediately solicits his return. Though Arthur agrees with this request, Merlin quickly recognizes the ill-will behind Morgan le Fay's suggestion and disagrees with her suggestion. However, there is more to his remark that "Lancelot still serves England best from the marches and would not come, save by command. Therefore command him not" (*Knights*). It is apparent, though only to those who know the truth, that Lancelot serves Camelot best by being in the North, not only to defend the border, but also to stay away from the temptation that is Guinevere. Merlin succeeds for a small time in Arthur's not recalling Lancelot to court, making Morgan le Fay and Modred recognize as a threat to their plans and plot his death. Merlin's death brings Lancelot's return to Camelot, but he is much changed upon his return as he is flirtatious with different ladies, causing Modred and Morgan le Fay to closely watch Guinevere, who does

go to Lancelot's chambers later that night. Though Modred and Morgan le Fay are the instigators, they are careful to not appear so, especially when it comes to the revealing of Lancelot and Guinevere's alleged affair:

Modred: This time we shall not fail. The King shall have proof absolute.

Morgan le Fay: You must not be there when they are taken. Arthur must think we are innocent in this affair. (*Knights*)

In doing so, the affair, though this time there is actual proof with Guinevere's actions, is forced and manipulated, as is the way it will be perceived by Arthur, rather than organically developing.

Lancelot is immediately concerned with the implications of Guinevere's presence in his chambers when she seeks him out: "But it's high treason for you to come. You dishonor us both. You cannot stay, nor come here again, nor speak to me beyond my duty" (*Knights*). While Lancelot is more concerned with their reputations, Guinevere is persistent to understand Lancelot's changed nature, and Lancelot reminds her she was the one who warned him about Modred watching their actions: "Instead of accepting that Lancelot merely follows the course she recommended for the safety of the kingdom, Guinevere abandons all thoughts of the kingdom and all discretion" (Aronstein 71). Guinevere turns to leave, but it is too late as Modred's men are blocking their exit, but upon seeing the token she gave him when he rescued her, she realizes the truth. Following this revelation, Lancelot and Guinevere chastely kiss, which is "the sole extent of their betrayal of Arthur, but it is enough to create havoc in the kingdom" (Umland and Umland 83). With both the manipulation of Morgan le Fay and Modred and the kiss between Lancelot and Guinevere, some truth is lent to their accusation, and its desired result of destroying Arthur's kingdom has been achieved, as Lancelot remarks, "If we're lost, all is lost. King, kingdom, England" (*Knights*).

At the heart of *Knights of the Round Table* is the idea of “personal sacrifice maintain[ing] the community ideal,” which is predominantly exhibited in the representation of the love triangle (Aronstein 94). Both Lancelot and Guinevere are willing to put aside their feelings for the betterment of Camelot, though it is at Merlin’s behest rather than their own willpower. When they fail to maintain the “community ideal,” Camelot is destroyed by their actions or perceived actions by Modred and Morgan le Fay. Although the adultery aspect of the film is radically diminished from the textual adaptations used of the Arthurian legend, its prominence in *Knights of the Round Table* is still felt and understood. The film marks one of the many film adaptations of the Arthurian legend that utilized the literary texts of the Arthurian legend to formulate their plots, which is later followed by *Camelot* (1967) and *Excalibur* (1981).

Chapter 6

King Before Husband and Friend: The Love Triangle of *Camelot* (1967)

Based on T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, *Camelot*, Joshua Logan's 1967 film featuring Richard Harris, Vanessa Redgrave, and Franco Nero, has the Arthur, Guenevere, Lancelot love triangle as the central plot of the film: "The film explores a wide range of ideas with mixed success: the frailty of romantic love, marital infidelity, the betrayal of friendship, the destruction of ideals, and the triumph of right over might. As in the original stage musical, the downfall of Camelot is clearly caused by tension created in Arthur's court by the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle" (Harty, "Lights!" 18). *Camelot* provides a specific representation of the love triangle as the primary cause of Camelot's destruction: "In placing the guilt squarely on the shoulders of the illicit lovers, Lancelot and Guinevere, the film shares more with the Tennysonian tradition than with White's work" (Umland and Umland 92). However, the love triangle is complicated due to the relationships between Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot, who love and respect one another. For the most part, each is characterized as an archetypal versus a dimensional character, primarily because how they feel for one another complicates their relationships and the choices they make with no apparent change in characterization. While Lancelot and Guenevere grapple with their illicit love, Arthur lies and is forced to be hypocritical to his own ideals. He does this in an attempt to keep Guenevere and Lancelot appearing innocent, and to keep Camelot appearing as a representation of his ideals. Although both are also self-

centered in different ways, because of Arthur's forgiving and idealistic nature, they are concerned with the consequences of their affair on not only Camelot, but also Arthur, and are willing to try to put aside their feelings for the good of all: "In *Camelot* the dream they serve is more important than their personal failings" (Aronstein 95). Ultimately they fail, and the love triangle becomes the primary decaying force in Camelot.

The film is told as a flashback to emphasize and provide a context for the development and the destruction of Camelot by the love triangle. The film begins at night, with Arthur looking tired, sad, and regretful of the impending battle on Lancelot's castle, and he contemplates how things have arrived to their present state, rhetorically asking: "Why is Jenny in that castle behind walls I cannot enter? How did I blunder into this agonizing absurdity? When did I stumble? Where did I go wrong? Should I not have loved her? Then I should not have been born [. . .] how did it happen?" (*Camelot*).¹⁰ What is most notable in Arthur's contemplation is his self-blaming and deprecating manner as he waits for dawn. Even though at this point it is unclear why Arthur is attacking this castle, it is obvious it is an undertaking he does not want. He believes the situation is as it is because of a folly and misstep he took in the past, particularly concerning Guenevere. He implies that perhaps he should not have loved her, but had he not, he would have been denying fate, and perhaps what he was born to do. Arthur, in an attempt to discover what caused his current circumstances, thinks back to when he met Guenevere, and the film flashes back to the "beginning."

Guenevere and Arthur develop a close and supportive marriage before Lancelot arrives in Camelot or is introduced. Arthur and Guenevere have four years to themselves and

¹⁰ All quotations quoted in this chapter are from the production *Camelot* (1967).

it is apparent both love each other and that Guenevere is supportive of his dreams and ideas. In fact, it is with Guenevere that Arthur comes up with the idea of the Round Table instead of an advisor or another prominent individual at court, exhibiting his trust in Guenevere. The idea of the Round Table emerges during this time, as Arthur still has not been able to unite England, and when Guenevere says he is “the greatest warrior the land,” he responds, “For what purpose? Might doesn’t always mean right” (*Camelot*). As Arthur and Guenevere contemplate might and right, the closeness of their relationship is seen as Arthur affectionately refers to Guenevere as Jenny, indicating a very personal and supportive marriage between them, as Guenevere lounges in only bed sheets and helps Arthur in his bath. During their exchange of ideas, Arthur uses ‘we’ instead of ‘I,’ indicating he views her as his partner in ruling England, just as he includes her in creating the Round Table and what it represents.

Word is spread about the Round Table and knights come to join, and it seems peace is finally being achieved. Arthur’s ideology of might and right plays a large role in this peace as it brings knights from around England to Camelot, and also brings Lancelot from France. Lancelot is introduced in France, planning and traveling to go to Camelot to join the Round Table and to be the best knight there. His reasoning for wanting to be at Camelot and part of Arthur’s court comes across as rather vain:

“I’ve never lost a battle or game.
I’m simply the best by far [. . .]

And here I am with valor untold.
Exceptionally brave, amazingly bold.
To serve at the table round [. . .]

The soul of a knight should be a thing remarkable.
His heart and his mind as pure as morning dew.

With a will and a self-restraint that's the envy of every saint,
 he could easily work a miracle or two.
 To love and desire he ought to be unsparkable.
 The ways of the flesh should offer no allure.

But where in the world,
 is there in the world a man so untouched and pure? [. . .]

I've never strayed from all I believe.
 I'm blessed with an iron will [. . .]

And here am I as pure as a prayer, incredibly clean,
 with virtue to spare, the godliest man I know." (*Camelot*)

By establishing Lancelot's beliefs about what a knight should embody and that he prides himself on his ideals and his purity, his character is seen as impregnable to temptation of any kind. This early establishment defines not only his interactions with the court of Camelot, but also how he grapples with his feelings for Guenevere when they develop, and also adds to the overall tragedy of his choice to put aside his beliefs for the illicit love he has for the Queen.

When Lancelot arrives in Camelot, it is apparent the esteem he holds for Arthur because of the creation of the Round Table: "Oh, King Arthur. What caliber of man you must be to have envisioned a new order of life. I worship you before knowing you" (*Camelot*). This is important because it shows the depth of reverence Lancelot has for Arthur, his personal values and beliefs, and adds to the tragedy when he does fall from his virtuous state with his illicit love. However, their initial meeting is not as idealistic; Arthur accidentally runs over Lancelot, who in turn challenges him to a joust. Lancelot is victorious and says, "The next time you traffic with me, remember, you challenge the right arm of King Arthur," a self-appointed position he grants himself without even knowingly meeting Arthur (*Camelot*). Once Arthur and Lancelot's identities have been revealed to one another, much

to Lancelot's dismay, it seems that with Lancelot's arrival, things are falling into their predetermined place, presumably for the best:

Arthur: You're Lancelot? I was told you were coming [. . .] "Arthur, keep your eye out for a Frenchman called Lancelot du Lac. He will come to the court of Camelot, and he will be..." What was it now?

Lancelot: Your ally, if you'll take me. Your friend, who asks no friendship. Your defender when you need one, whose body is your sword to brandish.

Arthur: He said you would be the greatest knight ever to sit at my Table. But that was long before I thought of a table. So he knew it would exist.

(Camelot)

Arthur says he will arrange for Lancelot's knighthood because of this predestined fate

Lancelot has with Arthur and the Round Table, but Lancelot wants to be knighted for his actions, not just his words. Due to their shared idealism, Arthur and Lancelot fast become friends.

While Lancelot and Arthur meet and bond, Guenevere is with the rest of the court, and Arthur cannot wait for Lancelot to meet her. However, though they meet and interact cordially for the first time with Arthur, it quickly seems to become a competition for Arthur's attention, a far cry from the sweeping passion that is supposed to take hold of them. Again, Arthur shows his esteem and confidence in Guenevere by asking Lancelot to tell her the plans they have been making. Showing Guenevere as the person Arthur discussed his plans with in a private as well as a public manner, reveals their relationship as more of a partnership than simply a political marriage. Lancelot does not seem to understand Arthur's inclusion of Guenevere, "Would not Madame find it tedious?" which offends Guenevere, "I have never found chivalry tedious. So far" *(Camelot)*. She cannot seem to help but to take a superior manner to him as she points out, "May I remind you that the Round Table happens to be the idea of my husband. My husband's idea" *(Camelot)*. Her use of 'husband' implies familiarity and an intimate relationship with Arthur, which in some ways exerts her more

dominant position or her desire to exert dominance, over Lancelot's imposing presence. Based on the tone of the conversation between the two, Arthur deliberately interjects to divert attention from the mocking tone, though outwardly polite, Guenevere used towards Lancelot. Clearly, she is not in favor of Lancelot's already apparent influence with Arthur and his high-minded manner, despite Lancelot's seemingly genuine and earnest beliefs. It seems Guenevere must get the upper hand and continues to mock, though subtly, Lancelot, who does not seem to realize, as he appears to have answered in earnest and looks confused when Arthur quickly stands and pulls him to leave. Once they leave, the courtiers present for the exchange between Lancelot and Guenevere remark, "Mon dieu, he's unpleasant." "And so poisonously good." "He probably walked across the Channel" (*Camelot*). Still wanting to put Lancelot in his place, Guenevere plots to have him humiliated and humbled by being defeated at the next tournament, despite his doubt of a defeat in the near future.

The tournament proves to be the watershed that changes the relationship of the love triangle as after it the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere begins. Lancelot is victorious at the tournament, defeating not only the knights who challenged him, but also Guenevere's plans. However, Lancelot accidentally kills one of the knights, but miraculously brings him back to life. Guenevere, after seeing this, kneels to Lancelot to seemingly make amends. That night, the three of them grapple with their feelings: Guenevere and Lancelot contemplate their burgeoning feelings, and Arthur questions if he is seeing shadows where there are none:

Arthur: You've never been in love, have you, Pelly?

Pellinore: Once. But not lately. Now, I'm not young enough. Or not old enough.

Arthur: And I'm too young and too old. Too old not to know that fears can be imaginary. And too young not to be tormented by them" (*Camelot*).

Lancelot in particular is troubled by these new feelings as because of them, he believes to have fallen from his ideals: “I’m trembling with fear. And the strength has left my arms. And terrible feelings burn with in me” (*Camelot*). Lancelot’s contemplation seems to imply he had not considered himself part of the earthly world because of his high-minded values beliefs, and his physical and mental purity have put him above earthly desires. However, his love for Guenevere—perhaps it is carnal and ‘unknightly’ or because it’s amoral because she is married or a combination of both—has brought Lancelot to the level of mere mortals. The reiteration of his high beliefs and qualities sets the stage for his fall, the depth of it, and how it will affect Camelot as Camelot and the Round Table are based on virtue.

Later, when Guenevere and Lancelot have an unexpected private moment together, things are tense between them as they awkwardly try not to give any indication of their changed feelings. However, it is Lancelot who reveals them first: “Jenny, I...I love you. God forgive me” (*Camelot*). Her response of “Then God forgive us both, Lance,” adds to the sense of impending tragedy, since their relationship was clearly accidental, and both established their own love for Arthur (*Camelot*). It is interesting that Lancelot was the first to admit his love, seemingly abandoning all his beliefs and values with no apparent remorse. Soon after, Arthur rushes in, announcing that Lancelot would be knighted this day, adding, “Unfortunately, sainthood is not in my power. Before the ceremony, we three will have a nice quiet drink together,” but when Arthur notices a lingering gaze between them, as they toast to the Round Table no less, it confirms his fears about a relationship developing between them (*Camelot*). Arthur’s excitement and his claims of sainthood only add to the tone of guilt between Lancelot and Guenevere, and the realization of the change in Lancelot and Guenevere’s relationship turns his excitement to sadness.

Lancelot is knighted with no complications in the ceremony, which marks the beginning of Arthur's resolve not to let his knowledge of their love affect Camelot.

However, after the ceremony Arthur privately contemplates what has come between Lancelot and Guenevere, and ultimately decides to put the needs of Camelot above his own desires:

“I love them and they answer me with pain and torment. Be it sin or not sin, they have betrayed me in their hearts, and that's far sin enough. I can see it in their eyes. I can feel it when they speak [...] I'm a king, not a man. And a very civilized king. Could it possibly be civilized to destroy the thing I love? Could it possibly be civilized to love myself above all? What about their pain and their torment? Did they ask for this calamity? Can passion be selected? Is there any doubt of their devotion to me, and to our Table? By God, I shall be a king. [...] We shall live through this together!” (*Camelot*)

Thus, Arthur reveals how much he cares for Lancelot and Guenevere, and how much their feelings, whether they have acted on them or not, have hurt and betrayed him. He also realizes they too must be tormented because of who they are and what they believe in.

Arthur loves Camelot and its ideals far more than to satisfy his need for revenge and bring about its ruin. Thus, he actively decides to put aside his pride and feelings and places the welfare of Camelot before his own personal gain and desires.

Time passes and England has achieved the peace Arthur sought, but at a price: “The peace of the kingdom is built on the silence that covers the barren hypocrisy of its leaders' lives and the unjust banishment of any knight who accuses Lancelot and the queen”

(Aronstein 95). The love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere has become an open secret as the scene changes to Lancelot and a knight dueling over the accusation of Lancelot being the Queen's lover:

Knight: You have been the queen's lover for years.
Lancelot: Get on your feet and defend your slander!
Knight: Does killing me kill the truth? There's a poison in this court that will kill us all!” (*Camelot*).

As Lancelot is the best knight, he always wins the duels, regardless of the truth. This undermines Arthur's basic ideology of the Round Table: Might for Right rather than Might is Right. Because Lancelot has the might, he is always right. Arthur is present for the duel, and he grants clemency to the knight, which means banishment for him, but he gives no indication of whether he "believes" the accusation or not. Shortly after the duel, Guenevere and Lancelot meet secretly, and the first question asked is about the duel's outcome, and it is discovered that this is not the first accusation and that Arthur may not be as innocent as Guenevere thinks:

Guenevere: What an agony for him. Seven of his knights banished [. . .] At least he's still spared the anguish of the truth.

Lancelot: Jenny, he knows [. . .] I'm certain.

Guenevere: He couldn't. Arthur would never banish the knights so unjustly. It's your conscience talking. It's impatient for you to be punished.

Lancelot: He knows. Well, why else would he change the law? Rule out the use of swords to settle disputes, and replace it with a court and judge? [. . .] And if no evidence can be produced, then the matter cannot be disputed at all. And there will be no evidence. He'll see to that [. . .] He will never leave this castle unless one of us is with him. He will never leave us alone again. Never!

Guenevere: What will become of us? What will become of me? Oh, Lance. How long can I go on asking the same questions and not lose my mind? Or is my mind gone from me now? [. . .] What shall we do?

Lancelot: I know what I should do. Leave and never come back. Today. This minute. But to leave so abruptly, it would seem a confession. No, better in a week or two. Or a month. How can I go, Jenny? (*Camelot*).

Although Arthur knows, he has kept up a façade of ignorance, keeping Lancelot still in his close confidence, and even convincing Guenevere of his ignorance, especially as she believes him to still hold true to his ideology. However, though he chooses to banish those knights unjustly, he has been planning and will soon implement a new law in which accusations cannot be determined by might—as Lancelot has proven his "innocence" through his might. To save the reputation of Lancelot, Guenevere, and his own, Arthur is willing to sacrifice his

beliefs and be hypocritical, so the rest of Camelot will remain true to its founding in the Round Table and the peace Arthur has achieved will remain in England.

While Lancelot and Guenevere try to determine an outcome to solve their dilemma, Arthur cannot seem to escape the rumors of the affair, as one of his trusted friends, Pellinore, brings it up to him again in private: “Arthur, the uglier the truth, the truer the friend that tells you, and unless you are told the truth, your Round Table is doomed. Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot have betrayed you. And because you don’t know it, innocent men are being punished” (*Camelot*). Angered, Arthur commands Pellinore to be ready to defend his words, but readily changes the conversation to explain his new law that he sees as an answer to the problem of the affair: “Under this new civil law of mine, you can make that accusation without fear of your life, if there is evidence, which there is not, of course. Repetition, Pelly, is not evidence” (*Camelot*). When Pellinore and Arthur are talking about the future, a piece of Arthur’s past has come to Camelot to cause strife, his illegitimate son Mordred. Mordred’s presence is important to the love affair as it is the final force that causes the affair to be brought to public light and causes the downfall of Camelot: “this *ménage à trois* is held in delicate balance until Mordred upsets it” (Grellner 125). As Arthur and Mordred talk, he makes a comment about Lancelot’s place, “And where is the famous Lancelot? Or does he stand in between?” (*Camelot*). This seemingly innocent question on the part of Mordred implies he knows about the love affair, and will use it to his advantage to take Arthur’s crown. Up until this point in *Camelot*, the love triangle has had no real threat that Lancelot or Arthur could not manage, but has been marked by “the pain of three good people, each in love with the other two” (Grellner 125).

Although Arthur knows of Guenevere and Lancelot's feelings for one another, he has been successful in maintaining his relationship with both of them, fooling them to think him ignorant. Guenevere and Arthur still converse with ease as they did before her affair with Lancelot, and she still shows an interest in his endeavors. Lancelot, still close in Arthur's confidence, appeals to Arthur to banish Mordred, and Arthur reveals to them who he really is and why he can't:

“I should have officially recognized him when I took the throne [...] I couldn't. I hadn't counted on caring for Jenny as much, and I had hoped that one day our child would sit on the throne of England [...] We have been through much together, we three. And by the sword, Excalibur, we will go through this. Mordred is filled with hatred, trying to destroy the people I love, and trying to make his inheritance come fast. But we must not give him the opportunity. We must not let our passions destroy our dreams.” (*Camelot*)

This is the first time Arthur comes close to revealing the depth of his knowledge of the affair, and it is not missed by Lancelot and Guenevere and his warning resonates with them in a later secret tryst. The feeling of impending doom also begins to dominate the film, as the Round Table is disintegrating as a result of Mordred's influence. Arthur sees this and goes into the forest for solace; Mordred follows and asks,

Mordred: Are you happy, Your Majesty? [...] And the Queen? [...] And Sir Lancelot?

Arthur: What are you implying?

Mordred: Nothing, Your Majesty. Simply that I did not realize that deception and infidelity were candidates for the badge of virtue.

Arthur: Whom are you accusing? And of what crime? And with what proof?

Mordred: Isn't your Civil Law marvelous? No proof, no crime. Ergo: virtue and happiness. You want me to be your son no more than I. Then prove to me that I'm wrong. Stay in the forest tonight. Give your son the lesson of this life. Show him how virtue can triumph without the help of fear?

(*Camelot*)

Pushed into a corner, Arthur tells Mordred to return to Camelot and announce he will not return until the morning, but though he put a confident face to Mordred, it is quickly realized Arthur does not have the same confidence he showed.

Once Lancelot and Guenevere discover that Arthur won't be returning, they meet:

Lancelot: Jenny, come away with me. To Joyous Gard. Let's have it open and overboard. I cannot live like this another day.

Guenevere: And this man we both love, what would you have us do? Force him to declare war on you? Where either you or he or both would be killed? And hundreds of others? I never wanted to love you. Your God arranged it. Your God must solve it. Arthur is my husband. I must stay with him as long as he wants me.

Lancelot: Then so be it, Jenny. I will never ask you again. Nor shall I come to you again. I swear it. (*Camelot*)

Even though they decide this, it is too late as Mordred and his men catch them, and Mordred formally accuses them of treason. Lancelot, through Guenevere's help, manages to escape, and Arthur comes back too late, only to see Guenevere arrested and Lancelot fleeing Camelot. Guenevere is tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be burned at the stake. And though it is his own law he must abide by, Arthur is torn between love and duty, as he desperately wants Lancelot to rescue her, which he does. With his rescue, the final dissolution of the Round Table occurs as the remaining knights want revenge against Lancelot, which Mordred gleefully points out to the King, "Your Table has cracked, Arthur" (*Camelot*). And so Arthur must ride to attack Joyous Gard, and although Lancelot asks to meet him, the end of Camelot has already begun: "*Camelot* thus ends with the battle of Joyous Garde in order to implicate the destructive power of guilty love" (Umland and Umland 94).

Camelot's representation of the love triangle is decided by the characterization of Arthur: "He is the well-meaning, fallibly human but ultimately idealistic character in

Camelot, a man more sinned against than sinning” (Davidson 66). His character defines the actions and feelings of Lancelot and Guenevere, making the love triangle more complicated because of their love for one another and also for Arthur: “In the film, even the illicit love is almost hallowed, as long as it is not admitted, because the lovers love Arthur and he loves them and forgives them even as they sin, because Lancelot wins Guinevere’s love by working a miracle, and because time seems to stand still” (Grellner 122). *Camelot* is singular among the three films’ representation of the love triangle; it follows White’s version of the Arthurian legend, and is the only one where Arthur deliberately looks past the love affair for the betterment of the country. It seems the virtues that define Arthur as a good and well-meaning person, his “saintly forgiveness of those who betrayed his love, Guinevere and Lancelot, and his devotion to his country’s interests above his own,” are what causes his ruin (Davidson 66). If Arthur had not been so magnanimous in his nature, the devastation caused by the love triangle’s revelation at the hands of Mordred may not have occurred or to the depth it does. Arthur’s desperation to save Camelot as well as the two people he loves most, drives him to create the undoing of it all; had he allowed Lancelot to continue to defend Guenevere and his own innocence, Mordred could not have forced Arthur into a corner to desperately prove “Right over Might.”

Chapter 7

“Driven by a Woman’s Desire”: The Representation of the Love Triangle in *Excalibur* (1981)

Excalibur, directed by John Boorman featuring Nigel Terry, Nicholas Clay, and Cherie Lunghi, is an interesting combination of variations of the Arthurian legend, despite his claims that the film was based solely on Sir Thomas Malory’s text. In an attempt to fit the entirety of the Arthurian legend into one film, Boorman made significant structural changes to the plot as set by Malory: “even the briefest comparison of the film and the medieval text reveals that Boorman modifies the story in substantial and significant ways, innovating in fact and detail alike, in an evident if not entirely successful attempt to enhance the cinematic impact of his presentation” (Lacy 34). These changes push the love triangle of Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot as one of the central plot points of the film: “the film version has the adulterous longings of Lancelot and Guinevere form the centerpiece of a universe undermined from its very beginnings by illicit love” (Walters liv). The love triangle and how it affects the film is dependent on Arthur and his actions regarding his knowledge of the affair, making him the primary focus of the triangle; his character is established well before Guenevere, who is not introduced until approximately thirty-five minutes into the film, and Lancelot does not appear for an additional fifteen minutes after her. As such, *Excalibur* revolves around Arthur’s choices and decisions and the consequences faced because of them, particularly with regard to his kingship.

Early in the film and Arthur's rule, Merlin tells Arthur what it means to be king: "You will be the land, and the land will be you. If you fail, the land will perish. As you thrive, the land will blossom" (*Excalibur*).¹¹ The meaning behind Merlin's enigmatic statement stresses Arthur's connection to the land as king (Harty, "An Overview" 21). When he chooses to be a man, England suffers the consequences of his selfishness as he hurts the land to fulfill his need of validation and revenge, rather than putting the well-being of England above his own needs. His failure to put England above his emotions upon the discovery of Lancelot and Guenevere's adultery results in the loss of his right to rule and also his loss of "potency" embodied in Excalibur, which causes the ultimate fall of Camelot and the Round Table. Arthur's actions also determine the fate of the love triangle's members. It is almost as if the results are his fault entirely and none of the blame is placed on Lancelot and Guenevere, because their actions were predetermined and not of their own free will, and since Arthur knew they would occur and chose not to prevent them, he should have been prepared to act as king, not as a betrayed husband and friend. As Arthur is directly connected to the land, the love triangle and its effects are also connected to England and to what Camelot represents. When the love triangle's members keep the façade of propriety, mostly through Lancelot and Guenevere remaining chaste, Arthur and Camelot thrive. However, when Lancelot and Guenevere consummate their illicit love and Arthur discovers them, Arthur's choice to leave Excalibur, the symbol of his kingship, between them causes both Camelot and England to decay: "Their illicit love, emblematic of the decay in the Arthurian court, sows the seed of its ultimate destruction in a specific way, for Arthur discovers them together, sleeping nude in each other's embrace" (Lacy 37).

¹¹ All quotations quoted in this chapter are from the production *Excalibur* (1981).

From the beginning of Arthur's rule, there has been a sense of foreboding regarding Guenevere and Lancelot. When Arthur immediately takes a fancy to Guenevere upon meeting her, he tells Merlin, "I love her. If only she'd be my queen... Merlin, can you make her love me?" (*Excalibur*). Merlin's response is less than promising, but when he tells Arthur he will marry Guenevere, he adds a beloved friend will betray him with her (*Excalibur*). Arthur seems to ignore Merlin's warning, appearing too absorbed with the knowledge that he will marry Guenevere. While Guenevere's relationship with Arthur is easily created, Lancelot's introduction is less so. He is initially seen guarding a bridge, wearing shiny armor that surpasses even Arthur's, and astride a white horse, no less. He refuses to move until he has been defeated, and when he has defeated all of Arthur's knights, Arthur rides to fight him. During the fight, Lancelot is clearly the superior fighter, and angered, Arthur cheats to win by using Excalibur's power. However, with this 'unkingly' behavior, Arthur breaks Excalibur; he has abused its power out of anger for personal gain. By breaking the sword, Arthur has, in theory, broken his right to be king. With Arthur's true remorse, Excalibur is remade whole and returned to him, and Lancelot, finally defeated, embraces Arthur as his king.

While both Lancelot and Guenevere build relationships with Arthur separately, they do not meet until England has been united under Arthur's rule. Once this has happened after a seemingly long stretch of time, Arthur can finally marry Guenevere, and he sends Lancelot, who has grown very close to Arthur, to escort her to Camelot: "Guenevere, here is Arthur's greatest knight come to escort you to the king" (*Excalibur*). In the brief moments when they first lay eyes on one another, there is an immediate attraction between the two, accompanied by a deep sense of foreboding. As Guenevere and Arthur are married, it seems England is in

a time of prosperity, visually resulting in the knights' shining armor. Despite this sense of prosperity, the film quickly establishes that Lancelot is often away from Camelot. His constant absence creates rumors that Guenevere has adulterous feelings for Lancelot, which is pointed out by members of the court: "Watch Guenevere. Remember what I told you about them" (*Excalibur*). A conversation initiated by Arthur about whether evil has been defeated in England results in a drunk knight, Gawain, who has listened to the rumors of Guenevere being in love with Lancelot, claiming he knows where evil lies in Arthur's kingdom: "He's our best and bravest. Why then is he never here? Without Lancelot, this Table is nothing. Is there anyone here who doesn't think him a god? And now to be driven from us by a woman's desire" (*Excalibur*). With his accusation, he deliberately points at Guenevere, who looks shocked, and Arthur leaps to his feet ready to fight, but Guenevere holds him back, saying, "In the idleness that comes with peace, I see that gossip has bred its own evil. I will forgive your hasty words. Come. Drink from Lancelot's cup, and partake of his goodness" (*Excalibur*). Gawain declines, and a formal accusation is presented, but because he is king, Arthur cannot champion Guenevere: "I'm your king, and I must be your judge in this. Lancelot must do it. He also stands accused. I decree that at sunrise two days from now, the champions will meet, and the truth shall be known. For by the law of God, no knight who is false can win in combat with one who is true" (*Excalibur*). Arthur's inclusion of Lancelot essentially makes a farce of the duel; because Lancelot is the best knight, he will win and prove Guenevere's innocence and his as well, regardless of the truth. Gawain's accusation clearly lays blame solely at Guenevere's feet for the reason why Lancelot does not remain at court. Thus, Lancelot seems to be a victim rather than one accused of the transgression of adultery against Arthur.

Later it is learned that Arthur's choice of Camelot and king over her and husband has substantially hurt Guenevere as it appears for the first time, she realizes Arthur will choose Camelot over their marriage:

Arthur: You are the two people I love best in the whole world.

Guenevere: Then why can't you defend me?

Arthur: The law! My laws must bind everyone, high and low, or they're not laws at all.

Guenevere: You are my husband.

Arthur: I must be king first.

Guenevere: Before husband?

Arthur: If need be!

Guenevere: Before love? (*Excalibur*)

Arthur's choice to be king over husband is one Guenevere does not understand, and realizing she will not get the love she desires from Arthur forces her to Lancelot, which the film reiterates by turning to Lancelot after her realization. The film shows Lancelot alone in the forest, revealing to God his feelings for Guenevere: "Lord, we are innocent, but not in our hearts. To hold her once in my arms, I would sacrifice everything: Honor. Truth. My sacred trust. God, save me from myself, purge me of this love so that I can defend her" (*Excalibur*). Lancelot feels guilty not only for improper feelings for Guenevere, but also because he is willing to sacrifice all that makes him a great knight for her. That night, Lancelot's conscience manifests itself in his dreams as he battles his armor and impales himself on his sword, both in his dreams and in reality. Though the injury is serious, it is not life threatening, but is a blatant reflection of his inner turmoil over loving Guenevere.

The day of the challenge arrives, but not Lancelot. As Arthur looks around at the other knights, they all avert his gaze, implying none want to champion Guenevere because they all believe that she is guilty. In his haste to have a champion for Guenevere to disprove Gawain's accusation, Arthur knights Perceval, a would-be knight, an action driven by his

desperation for Guenevere's name to be cleared. As soon as Gawain and Perceval are about to joust for justice, Lancelot arrives and fights Gawain, but the wound he caused himself makes fighting difficult. Though Lancelot does end up victorious, "I yield to your mercy, Lancelot. The queen is innocent!" he promptly collapses from his wounds shortly after (*Excalibur*). Merlin, Arthur, and Guenevere tend to him, and Guenevere blames Arthur alone for Lancelot's state,

Guenevere: Look at your laws now. Look what they have done.

Arthur: Save him, Merlin.

Merlin: He has no will to live.

Arthur: Bring him back, Merlin, whatever the cost. Whatever the cost! Do it!
(*Excalibur*).

To heal Lancelot, Merlin takes Guenevere's hand and places it on his wound, and whispers magic to heal him. It appears through Merlin's actions that only Guenevere's love can heal him, even though Lancelot's love for her caused his wound in the first place. He leaves shortly after, clearly displeased to have saved Lancelot. Arthur follows Merlin out and asks,

Arthur: Will he live?

Merlin: Oh yes.

Arthur: Will Guenevere...?

Merlin: Yes. (*Excalibur*)

With this exchange, Arthur is still aware that Guenevere is destined to betray him with Lancelot, but appears to care more for Lancelot than he does for this future betrayal.

When Lancelot is fully healed, he is welcomed back by Arthur and takes his seat at the Round Table; he looks at the other knights and seems disheartened by what he sees.

Arthur, in an attempt to give reason to the knights' behavior, says,

Arthur: They miss the battlefield. I think we do too.

Lancelot: We have lost our way, Arthur.

Arthur: It is not easy for them without the hard teaching of war and quest. It is only your example, Lancelot, that binds them all. (*Excalibur*)

Just as Arthur is deeply connected to England's welfare, Lancelot is just as connected to the welfare and success of the Round Table. He is the inspiration and example many young knights look to and live by, as he is the embodiment of the Round Table through his virtues. The implication in Lancelot's response is he has lost his way because of his love for Guenevere, and is unable to inspire the younger knights by his example. Perhaps because of this guilt, Lancelot chooses to leave to take his rest in the forest, but his parting does not go unnoticed by Arthur:

Arthur: Hasn't Merlin mended your wound?

Lancelot: It is deep.

Arthur: You'll be sorely missed. Heal yourself, and come back. (*Excalibur*)

It appears both Lancelot and Arthur are aware they are not talking about Lancelot's physical wound Merlin healed, but rather the guilt of loving Guenevere that Merlin cannot heal or fix, but that Lancelot must heal himself.

Excalibur quickly shifts to Guenevere's face as she watches Lancelot leave, and then to her riding into the forest seeking him. When she finds him, Lancelot tries to deny her, even at sword point, but they both give in to their desire. While this is occurring, Arthur discusses their betrayal with Merlin and what choices he should make regarding it:

Arthur: Do you still have the sight, Merlin? Are they together?

Merlin: Yes.

Arthur: You warned me of this all those years ago. What must I do now, kill them? (*Excalibur*)

Despite knowing what would be best for England, which would be to ignore Lancelot and Guenevere's transgression, particularly since he was aware of it from the beginning, Arthur cannot and his rage overtakes his better judgment; he rides out to find them. He finds them asleep and naked in each other's arms, and he raises Excalibur as if to strike them, but instead thrusts the sword into the earth between them and leaves. When they wake, and see

the sword between them, they know Arthur has discovered them, and figuratively come between them as well. Lancelot's cry of "The king without a sword! The land without a king!" when he sees Excalibur between Guenevere and himself refers to Arthur's kingship or "potency" as directly related to the sword (*Excalibur*). By leaving Excalibur behind, Arthur freely gives up his right to kingship, rendering him impotent as king and husband, and because he has lost what makes him king, he is easily stricken down later. When he cannot regain his health, the land consequently perishes because he cannot put his role as king above husband.

This is the culminating point of the love triangle in *Excalibur* as Arthur's discovery of Lancelot and Guenevere asleep in each other's arms in the forest results in his ultimate surrendering of his manhood. Although Guenevere and Lancelot are publicly accused of adultery, the affair and its discovery is a private rather than a public matter. However, regardless of whether it's private or public, because the affair directly affects Arthur and Arthur directly affects the land, the effect on Arthur is deeply reflected in England, even though he had prior knowledge of it before marrying Guenevere. His inability to put aside his personal feelings opens the door for England and himself to fall prey to enemies: "When Arthur comes upon the lovers, it is a private moment and not a public moment, so that the hurt Arthur receives is personal, leaving him vulnerable" (Umland and Umland 139). After the discovery, Arthur is injured as is the land, and to heal himself, he sends his knights on a quest for the Holy Grail, but because he willingly gave up his right to rule, he is weakened and rather than take responsibility for what has come to pass, he seeks an outside solution for Camelot and his problems:

The quest for the Grail is Arthur's means to deny the consequences of placing the knights' code of honor over love for Guinevere, his wife. Arthur drove

Guinevere into the arms of Lancelot when Arthur placed law above his wife. By embedding Excalibur into the rock between Lancelot and Guinevere, Arthur relinquishes a symbol of his power as King, and the waste land appears. The quest for the Grail displaces Arthur's refusal to recognize and renounce his mistake. When Arthur announces that the knights must find what was lost, Arthur is refusing to look into his own heart for the cause of the crisis. (Bartone 152)

Eventually, Arthur is restored by the Holy Grail, so subsequently is the land. With his restoration, Arthur returns to his kingly state and it is learned that since that fateful night, Lancelot has been lost and Guenevere has been in a convent.

With his restoration, Arthur seems dedicated to fixing the wrongs he had committed, and his first action is to seek Guenevere and to ask for her forgiveness: "Guenevere, accept my forgiveness, and put your heart to rest. We've suffered too long. I have always loved you, and still love you [. . .] Forgive me, my wife, if you can. I was not born to live a man's life, but to be the stuff of future memory" (*Excalibur*). Although it was Guenevere who betrayed him, Arthur is the one to ask for forgiveness, implying his actions were wrong, and because he failed to act as he should have for the best interest of Camelot, he needs to take responsibility for the consequences. The implication here is that it was an unavoidable fate for Guenevere and Lancelot to betray him, making them essentially blameless in their adultery, and because Arthur failed in reacting appropriately to the discovery of the affair, what has come to pass is the result of his actions, no one else's. Guenevere's response to Arthur's apology is in part an explanation of why she did have an affair with Lancelot: "I loved you as king, sometimes as husband, but one cannot gaze too long at the sun" (*Excalibur*). Guenevere's comments also seem to lay blame at Arthur's feet as the cause of her transgression, because he was "too good" for her to love, which was fine for a king, but not a desirable quality in a husband. As Lancelot was more "earthy," she could be with him

and love him in a way she couldn't with Arthur. However, with Arthur's request of forgiveness, she returns to him Excalibur, which she had kept since Arthur left it between Lancelot and her. It is as if only when he admits he acted wrongly that Guenevere gives him back his "potency," but at the end of all things, it is still Guenevere who had an illicit affair with Lancelot. By all rights, she should be asking forgiveness of him, as her choice in joining and retreating to a convent implies.

Lancelot's final moments with Arthur are similar to Guenevere's, except he is the one seeking forgiveness from Arthur:

Lancelot: Arthur... Forgive [. . .] My salvation is to die a Knight of the Round Table.

Arthur: You are that and much more. You are its greatest knight; you are what is best in men.

Lancelot: It is the old wound, my king. It has never healed. Guenevere... Is she queen again?

Arthur: She is, Lancelot. (*Excalibur*)

With this redemption from Arthur, not only for himself, but also for Guenevere, Lancelot dies, seemingly at peace. It is interesting despite Lancelot's transgression with Guenevere, Arthur still claims him to be the best knight, with him being what is best in men, implying again he was not at fault for his actions when Arthur discovered them. Arthur has to accept responsibility for what has occurred before forgiveness can be given and received by Lancelot and Guenevere. Once it has, the three can move on from the past.

Like *Knights of the Round Table* and *Camelot*, *Excalibur* adds a different interpretation of the love triangle to the repertoire of adaptations of the Arthurian legend. Though Boorman claimed his film was solely based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, his adaptation clearly has influences aside from Malory. In his film, Boorman used elements of different versions of the Arthurian legend to create his own retelling; like

Camelot, the film focuses on Arthur primarily, but in a different fashion. For *Excalibur*'s Arthur, although Merlin preordained the love triangle, it is regarded in this film as a test of kingship for Arthur to overcome. When Arthur thrives against the "test," the land does well, but when he fails to overlook the affair between Guenevere and Lancelot, the land suffers. What differentiates *Excalibur* the most from the other film adaptations is Arthur's beseeching Guenevere for forgiveness before the final battle. This is singular, as traditionally Guenevere has assumed the guilt and therefore sought forgiveness. The change in this aspect shows the love triangle's adaptability for different audiences, directors, and writers.

Chapter 8

The Future of the Arthurian Love Triangle: A Conclusion

King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot are some of the most readily recognizable figures of legend. Even in the 21st century, these figures and the Arthurian legend itself are constantly being revived in popular culture: “Arthurian themes and symbolism continue to be widely disseminated throughout popular culture, the culture of our young people” (Nash 36). The legend has resonated throughout history for its memorable and larger than life characters, who go on adventurous quests and find true love, and for its ability to be frequently adapted and revised to suit any audience it may encounter.

What is interesting about this is King Arthur, while prevalent in the fine arts, is somewhat of an elusive figure in history. There are a multitude of theories and ideas about who was the “original” King Arthur, but no one figure who can be pointed to as *the* King Arthur. Despite this lack of historical evidence, literature, and more recently film, has helped bolster King Arthur in the public eye, rather than letting him and his legend fade into obscurity. With popular works and references to the legend, such as Dreamworks’ 2007 film, *Shrek the Third*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s popular novel, *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), King Arthur has come to be one of the “most famous historical figure[s] to emerge from the Middle Ages” (Aberth 1). However, although Arthur has remained a historical enigma, the lack of historical fact has allowed for creative freedom for writers adapting the Arthurian legend.

Literature and film have provided different interpretations and versions of a legend that is defined by its breadth and scope. Due to the absence of a single cohesive version, many people have their own ideas of what the Arthurian legend is and what it consists of. As Kathleen C. Kelly points out, “Each modern iteration or recreating of the Arthurian legend calls into question the idea of an original, of the real—not the real in the historical sense (though there is that), but the idea of the real that we have come to assign to the textual” (271). While these differentiations may lean themselves toward some commonalities, every version has changed to suit the needs and goals of the author; some retellings can contradict others, and no one version can truly be deemed the “original.” What has allowed the Arthurian legend to survive and to be so amenable to different authors’ interpretations are in its themes, which can be placed in any time and adapted to different societies: “The vast diversity of the new Arthurian moment reveals the legend’s elastic strength. With its universal message of love and loyalty, faith and frailty, it survives repeated revision for ever-changing audiences” (Mancoff, “Introduction” xiii). One of the most universal themes, love, is prominent in many adaptations of the Arthurian legend, and therefore has become a main feature to be repeated. Therefore, the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot is one of the most frequently recurring elements in renditions of the legend, especially in modern day versions: “The subject of love and adultery in Arthurian romances usually calls to mind the love triangle that unites King Arthur, his wife Queen Guinevere, and the knight Sir Lancelot. The great love affair of Guinevere and Lancelot is often celebrated as an enduring passion that overcomes all obstacles, including the queen’s marriage” (McCracken 188). While it is unsurprising that a love story of this magnitude has remained popular and commonly known, literature and film do not support an “enduring passion that overcomes all

obstacles, including the queen's marriage" (188), as more often than not, the love affair collapses because of the obstacle of the queen's marriage.

As with most retellings of a work, the author has used another's work as the frame for his or her own. In regard to the Arthurian legend, particularly in the "English tradition," meaning that of Britain and America primarily, three texts have provided the "canon" of Arthurian literature. The three most influential texts of the "English tradition" of the Arthurian legend are also the ones films use as their basis. Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* all possess elements readers and viewers recognize as part of the Arthurian legend: Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is the text that provides the framework for all the versions, literary and otherwise, that follow his text. Of the three, "Malory's Arthurian version of the legend was so powerful in its effect on Arthurian revivalists from the nineteenth century to the present that it has *become* the jewel in the canonical Arthurian crown" (Umland and Umland 2). This is not to say Tennyson and White did not make noteworthy contributions in their own right, but both writers used Malory as the framework for their respective works, furthering the extent of Malory's influence into the 20th century. While each of the texts is influential in its own right, the three represent the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot in dramatically different ways.

Le Morte D'Arthur includes the triangle, but as a less important element in the overall work. The primary intention of the text is to examine the bond of chivalry between men, and the constancy of the love between Launcelot and Gwenyver; thus, the implication is that the relationships between Arthur and Launcelot, and Launcelot and Gwenyver, are more important than the affair itself: "Above all, in his ambivalent presentation of the love of

Launcelot and Gwenyver Malory achieves a precarious equipoise that enables the *Morte* to balance and hold together the crucial values of the chivalric society” (Windeatt 98). Of the three characters, Launcelot is by far the most interesting in terms of Malory’s intent for the text as Launcelot is torn between the chivalry required of him as a knight, but also the constancy needed to deem and redeem him as Gwenyver’s lover:

Chivalry he regards as a serious political and moral idea, a temporal expression of timeless virtues [. . .] The centre of this developing theme is Lancelot, in whom the tragic division of loyalties—loyalty to his lord and loyalty to Guenevere—is centered, and it is from this division that the downfall of the whole system directly precedes. (Pearsall 103)

With this in mind, the representation of the love triangle by Malory is hard to define in Launcelot’s dual loyalties that both condemn him (against chivalry) and also prove his worth (constancy to Gwenyver). Malory’s choice to focus on chivalric loyalty results in his downplaying the sexual nature of Launcelot and Gwenyver’s affair: “As ever, Malory’s narrative is unconcerned to dwell on the experience of love for its own sake and only acknowledges any sexual intercourse between Launcelot and Gwenyver when the plot demands, focusing rather on episodes that try the lovers’ constancy” (Windeatt 98). However, despite the muted aspect of the love triangle in *Le Morte D’Arthur*, its influence on the characters has remained one of the most ever-present aspects in later Arthurian works.

Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* presents a very stark and defined representation of the love triangle in comparison to Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. Written at the height of the Victorian period, the ideals and values of Victorian society are pervasive in the text, particularly regarding sexual and moral codes: “this immensely successful publication made morality, in particular the avoidance of sexual misconduct, central to the myth of Arthur as a guide to good maintenance of both the kingdom and the home” (Gossedge and Knight 114).

There is no ambiguity regarding Tennyson's love triangle: Arthur is the blameless and virtuous king, and Guinevere is the fallen and immoral queen, whose infidelity causes the decay and downfall of Camelot. Since Malory's Arthur is imperfect, to achieve this representation of the love triangle in *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson "excises any unsavory elements relating to Arthur's character [. . .] It is the betrayal of Arthur by his adulterous queen and his 'chief of knights,' [. . .] that corrupts Arthur's realm from within and leads to its downfall" (Umland and Umland 8). This theme is exemplified in Tennyson's characterization of Guinevere, whose faithlessness and deceit toward Arthur, who is spotless in character and virtue, makes her all the more despicable (E. Brewer, "The Figure" 281). However, while Guinevere is clearly blamed for the destruction of Camelot, Lancelot is not judged in such brutal terms; he is faced with consequences at the end of *Idylls of the King*, but not nearly to the same extent as Guinevere. In more recent retellings of the legend, this is more often the type of representation of the love triangle that is used.

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* presents the most convoluted representation of the love triangle. Though based on Malory's work, *The Once and Future King* changes the main focus of Malory's text, and structures the majority of the novel around the love affair. The section, *The Ill-Made Knight*, the largest of the four that comprise *The Once and Future King*, focuses primarily on the love triangle and its effects on Lancelot in particular, but also on Guenever and Arthur. White's novel shows the complexities of human emotion and duty within Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever:

White explains the complex relationship between the three main characters: Lancelot is at first jealous of Guenever, because he had to share Arthur with her, then attracted to her when he realises that, in a moment of exasperation, he has 'hurt a real person.' Arthur perceives at once that Lancelot and Guenever are in love: from the beginning White sets out the complexity of the situation, and accounts for everything. Guenever is credited with virtues of

courage, generosity, and honesty—and we soon see that she is a much more positive character than most early twentieth-century versions allowed her to be. (E. Brewer, “The Figure” 283)

While other works have made the love triangle a one-dimensional element of the legend, White’s rendition shows otherwise, often looking at the complex relationship that does not make the love affair either black or white in terms of morality, but rather as a morally indefinable “gray” area. In addition to the emotion and psychological complexity of the love triangle, the affair lasts a lifetime, as White presents the three not only in their youth, but their middle age, showing both the flaws and positive attributes of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever, revealing things are not as simplistic as they are in texts that feature more archetypal characters.

Films introduced another venue in which the Arthurian legend could be retold and viewed by a larger and more diverse audience. Unlike literature, film renditions faced time constraints, which forced directors and screenplay writers to focus on specific elements of the legend, rather than on the entirety of it. Directors such as John Boorman claimed to have retold the entirety of the Arthurian legend in one film, but such claims are misleading, because even Boorman’s *Excalibur* focuses only on a few of the most recognizable plot elements and characters of the Arthurian legend: Arthur’s becoming king by pulling the sword from the stone, the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, the quest for the Holy Grail, and the fall of Camelot. Films also have the ability to reach different types of audiences by presenting the legend in different genres of film: Disney’s 1963 animated film, *The Sword in the Stone* is intended for children and families and focuses on Arthur’s childhood, whereas Joshua Logan’s 1967 adaptation of the Lerner and Lowe Broadway sensation, *Camelot*, is a musical that focuses on the love triangle. Many films do use one of

the three texts aforementioned as their basis for the plot and theme. Although some do suggest they are retelling the work directly, such as MGM's 1953 *Knights of the Round Table* directed by Richard Thorpe and 1981's *Excalibur* by John Boorman, both films are not strictly based on Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. However, upon closer examination of both, it is clear more than Malory's version of the legend was used in both films to achieve the desired effect. While some films claim a literary basis, others have no apparent structural relationship to a literary forebear, but rather use the vague generalities of the desired aspect of the Arthurian legend. This free adaptation allows for new versions of the legend to be introduced and shows elements that may not have been previously considered.

Richard Thorpe's *Knights of the Round Table* shows the love triangle maliciously manipulated by outside political forces for personal gain. Lancelot and Guinevere both choose duty over love, but circumstances force them to act otherwise. The influence of the 1950s is apparent in the chaste relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. The most scandalous act is a single kiss; there is no need for a physical affair, as *Knights of the Round Table* makes it explicit that rumor alone is enough to damage the idealism of Camelot, both said by Merlin and to a lesser extent by Morgan le Fay and Modred. With the lack of a physical affair to show on film, *Knights of the Round Table* can better focus on the effects of rumor about the queen's adultery and how it is manipulated to cause civil strife. There is a hint of sadness and guilt attached to the love triangle as the film first establishes the individual relationships Guinevere, Lancelot, and Arthur have with one another: Guinevere and Arthur have been friends since childhood; Arthur and Lancelot develop a deep friendship that is more akin to brotherhood; and Guinevere and Lancelot accidentally fall in love when they have no knowledge of the other's identity. While other elements of the Arthurian

legend are alluded to, such as the quest for the Grail, the primary focus of the film is on the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere and the manipulation of their love.

Adapted from the successful Broadway musical, *Camelot* (1967), directed by Joshua Logan, is said to have been adapted from T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. There are many similarities, the most predominant being the focus on the love triangle and Arthur's ultimate willingness to put kingship above his role as husband: "Logan's film [. . .] does focus on the love of Lancelot and Guenevere and its tragic consequences, albeit on a one-dimensional level" (Harty, "Lights!" 285). The love triangle's representation is complicated to say the least; the main characters' relationships with the others are explored, and it is Guenevere who is the most dynamic, as her relationships with Arthur and Lancelot change the most. Guenevere does not want to marry Arthur, nor does she fall in love with Lancelot at first sight. Lancelot and Arthur develop a deep friendship based on their ideals, but it becomes complicated with Lancelot's relationship with Guenevere. The film's tone is weighed with the sense of impending doom because of the love affair and Arthur's immediate knowledge of it, his hypocrisy in ignoring the love affair for the betterment of Camelot, and because of the devious Mordred, who wants nothing more than his father's crown. Though the film ends on a slightly optimistic note as Arthur realizes that in the figure of a young boy, the ideals of Camelot will live on, the love triangle is what shatters the kingdom and, subsequently, breaks the main characters apart.

Excalibur, directed by John Boorman in 1981, is singular in its representation of the love triangle. Arthur is presented as directly responsible for the love triangle and its effects on Camelot. From Guenevere's introduction in the film, Arthur is aware that she and Lancelot will ultimately betray him, but he does nothing to change this future. In addition,

Excalibur is literally forced into the love triangle when Arthur embeds it in the earth between the sleeping Lancelot and Guenevere. This is significant in that Arthur and Excalibur are directly tied to one another; Arthur is the land and Excalibur represents Arthur's right to rule. In forcing and leaving Excalibur between the adulterers, he is forcing and leaving himself between them. His abandonment of Excalibur also implies his inability to rule as he is unable to do the "kingly" good of putting country above self. It takes an outside force, the Holy Grail, to heal and redeem Arthur, and only then does he put the love triangle to rights by begging Guenevere's forgiveness and granting Lancelot his salvation before death. Boorman's film is an interesting deviation in the scope of adaptations of the Arthurian legend, because it focuses primarily on Arthur and his choices rather than a specific plot element like the quest for the Holy Grail. It is his decisions and consequences regarding the love triangle that are examined more carefully in Boorman's film.

The 21st century has already been marked with the Arthurian legends' presence: Antoine Fuqua's 2004 *King Arthur* and Dreamworks' 2007 *Shrek the Third* were both widely popular films. Although there are many elements to choose from in the Arthurian legend when representing it in literature and film, it seems the universality of forbidden love appeals strongly to audiences and has sealed the love triangle's central place in most adaptations. The different precedents set in the representation of the love triangle and the differences between them seem not to have constrained future retellings, but rather allowed for new interpretations to blossom in their wake.

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