



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

**The Gentle Touch of Ruin:**

*The Influence of Women in Malory's Le Morte Darthur*

**Ritgerð til B.A.prófs**

**Unnur Heiða Harðardóttir**

**Maí 2010**

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## Summary

The relationships between the sexes have been the subject of numerous plays, novels, and discussions through centuries and will continue to be of interest in the future. The difference between how men and women think and act is interesting for many people. Men have been in the spotlight more often than women, but they are by no means less important. This essay will argue that women in *Le Morte Darthur*, are the driving force that runs through the work, they push things forward and are responsible for the fall of Camelot, the Round Table and King Arthur. The focus will be on many of the female characters, especially the Lady of the Lake, Morgan le Fay and Queen Guinevere, as well as looking at some of the minor characters. The main focus will be on their interactions with other people, in particular with the men.

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## Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the nobleman, Sir Thomas Malory, wrote one of the most famous pieces of English literature, *Le Morte Darthur*, stories of the legendary King Arthur, Camelot and his Knights of the Round Table. Readers have continually been fascinated by the Arthurian world and will most likely continue to be so in the future, especially with the many modern adaptations of the legends in film and on television. The themes in the work are numerous; they consist of war, religion, treachery and loyalty, and last but not least, courtly love and the relationship between the sexes. It is a world of men, they are more visible in the work; the reader follows knights first and foremost, their adventures and challenges to greatness and saving damsels in distress. The work is a view into the world of King Arthur, from his conception to his grave, and how with his death a whole society collapses. The world continues after his death, but its glory is forever lost. In the numerous modern adaptations of Arthurian myth, particularly in film and on television, male-dominated knightly heroics take centre stage. There are exceptions, however, most notably the works of Marion Zimmer Bradley (see Lambdin and Lambdin 334), that portray the work's female characters as influential participants in the story's events. This interpretation, while possibly foreign to those whose exposure to the myth is limited to more mainstream fare, has a considerable basis in Malory's work. Although women in *Le Morte Darthur* seem to play second fiddle to the warmongering and heroics of the men, it can be argued that they are in fact the driving force of the piece and ultimately responsible for the end of King Arthur, the Round Table and Camelot itself.

The first English printer, William Caxton, published *Le Morte Darthur* in the year 1485. It contains 21 books and was most likely supposed to be a series of books instead of one long piece, but Caxton combined them and named the complete work *Le Morte Darthur*.

Malory finished his work in prison as he had been accused of multiple criminal acts, such as escaping from prison, breaking and entering, extorting money from people and committing rape. Malory lived through a period from 1455 until 1485 often referred to as the 'Wars of the Roses' where the two aristocratic families of Lancaster and York were fighting over the monarchy. Apparently, Malory's act of switching "...sides from Lancaster to York and back again – may account for some of his trouble with the law ” (David and Simpson 438). *Le Morte Darthur* must be partly a reflection of the society he lived in; he knew how dangerous politics could be, and he knew the experience of war, but the work might also reflect a desire for a much nobler society than the one he lived in. "Much of the tragic power of his romance lies in his sense of the irretrievability of past glory in comparison with the sordidness of his own age" (David and Simpson 439). The work contains a number of female characters, but their roles differ from those of the male characters (most of whom are knights). Women serve as a reward for the knights and as objects to defend and admire. However, there are also women who make things happen and steer events into a certain direction. Others try to act for themselves for their own personal gain, which is hard in this male-centric world. The piece contains some surprisingly strong female characters such as Dame Elaine, the daughter of King Pelles and the other Elaine, the Maid of Astolat. They are both in love with Sir Launcelot. The former is the mother of Galahad, whose very existence is to seek and find the Holy Grail. The other Elaine, is a fair maiden who gives Launcelot a token to wear, and he accepts it because he does not want to be recognized in a tournament. She is an especially interesting character, because she makes advances towards Launcelot as a man would to a woman. In a desperate attempt to capture him, she even offers herself to him, presumably in a carnal manner." "Than, fayre knyght, 'seyde she, 'woll ye be my paramour[lover]?" (Vinaver 1089). Her fate is to die of a broken heart, because Launcelot can only love one

woman. The story tells of another love besides the love between Launcelot and Guinevere. There is a second great love between Sir Tristram and La Beale Isoud. She is not very different from Queen Guinevere, she is beautiful and married to another man; Tristram's uncle King Mark, and she expects Tristram to be faithful to her at all times. When he betrays her, Isoud looks to Guinevere for assistance.

As can be seen from the above examples, the presence and influence of women is apparent in some of the most momentous events of the work. Further scrutiny raises some pertinent questions about the narrative, particularly regarding Arthur's death as an icon, and whether it (and several other important events in the story) would even have taken place, were it not for the machinations of female characters.

### **The Role of Women in the Founding of King Arthur, the Round Table and Camelot**

King Arthur came into the world because of a man's desire for another man's wife. *Le Morte Darthur* begins with Uther Pendragon, the King of England, and he is prepared to risk war because of his desire for Lady Igraine, the wife of the Duke of Cornwall. Uther manages with Merlin's help to have Igraine, on the condition that Merlin can have the child, should one be born. Their plan works, and it results in Igraine marrying Uther and giving birth to a baby boy. Merlin sends the infant to be nurtured by Sir Ector and his wife. The reason for this is never fully stated, but perhaps Merlin foresees that Uther will die an early death, and then Arthur will be a vulnerable prince for scheming noblemen to influence. It is clear that because of Merlin's decision, he does not grow up with his sisters, but things might have turned out differently, if he had. King Arthur's arrival into this world starts with lust, deception and treachery, which contrasts oddly with the image of the perfect, chivalrous king, who is later seen in the work.

Before Arthur becomes king, there is a period of uncertainty with power struggles and many wealthy men desiring the throne. Merlin solves the situation with the Archbishop of Canterbury. They invite all the lords to join them in asking for a miracle, since it is Christmas. The miracle happens and the sword in the stone is created, a sword which claims that only the rightful heir to the throne of England will be able to pull it out. Even though Arthur proves to all several times that he can pull the sword from the anvil, Arthur's reign begins with warfare, because not all the lords are satisfied with this decision. He has to earn their respect, and he manages gradually to do that. He is at the peak of his power and influence when he founds the fellowship of the Round Table. King Arthur is just and righteous and will be loved by his subjects. No one is more talented and able to wield a sword as well as he; he wins every tournament he takes part in. However, this fact is mostly true because of the great sword Excalibur and its scabbard. Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table become world-famous for being the most honourable and virtuous knights of all.

During the events of the story, Christianity is spreading. Arthur is baptized, but there are magical creatures in the story who are not associated with religion. Christianity has not completely taken over other beliefs of the country. These creatures are usually female; in fact the only important male with magical power is Merlin. But even though he is a follower of Arthur, he is called a son of the devil and a demon. These women, on the other hand, appear, for the most part, to serve as a force of good. Malory has at least two Ladies of the Lake, one remains nameless and the other is called Nimue. The "Lady of the Lake" is most likely some sort of a title because Nimue is called the Damsel of the lake in the beginning, but "Lady" and not a "Damsel" at another time. The first unnamed Lady gives Arthur Excalibur and a scabbard, but a possible third Lady takes it back when it is thrown into the lake, because the first Lady is killed at one point in the story. It is also



possible that Nimue is the one who takes back Excalibur, but the passage does not mention her by name. Excalibur is a great sword, and no one has seen its match, the scabbard is even more valuable, it has magical powers, and as long as Arthur keeps it by his side nothing can do him harm.

The fact that the sword in the stone is used to choose Britain's new ruler implicates that the country needs a certain kind of king. It needs first and foremost a warrior. Under Merlin's guidance, Arthur is pushed into a war: "...for ye [Arthur] shal overcome hem all, whether they wille or nylle" (Vinaver 18). When Arthur has gone into many battles and won many wars, he eventually gets his sword broken in two and receives Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake instead. Through Excalibur, the Lady of the Lake influences Arthur's actions in a way that could be considered feminine, as opposed to Merlin's decidedly masculine influence. Arthur's role changes, conquests are no longer a priority and his thoughts turn to solidifying the foundations of his realm. He has fought and won, but now he must build and nurture. The Lady of the Lake is taking over Merlin's role as an advisor and a guiding hand.

One of the most important acts of Nimue's is to remove Merlin from the work. She captivates Merlin, but she does not return his affections so she locks him up in a cave, and that is the end of him. One can wonder what might have happened if Merlin had been present for a longer time. In her essay Geraldine Heng says: "His [Merlin's] presence is superannuated, and a shift of authority to feminine disseminators of enchantment is timely and appropriate" (Heng 104). With Merlin gone, the element of the magical is exclusively in the hands of women. His role has ended, he has delivered all his prophecies, and Arthur can no longer benefit from his insights into the future. Nimue saves Arthur on numerous occasions, usually when he is up against other magical forces, but she can also do acts of

destruction, as can be seen by the Merlin incident. Nimue's kindness makes it so that people believe her word, and she is a person that one can rely on.

Even though Arthur is now influenced by feminine forces, it cannot be said that he is any less masculine for doing so. He is still just as mighty a warrior and leader as he was under Merlin's tutelage, but the nature of his battles is different. He is not actively going to other countries because of conquests but to help his allies and taking part in smaller battles where he is mostly righting wrongs. For example, he saves twenty knights from prison and founds an abbey. However, although he is being influenced by the female element, he also has to fight another woman, his sister Morgan le Fay. Soon after Merlin has gone, he starts building Camelot, founds the fellowship of the Round Table, and the work focuses now on his knights and their adventures.

It could be said that there is foreshadowing in the story when King Arthur receives the Round Table as a dowry with Guinevere. She brings it with her, and her treason breaks it. Uther Pendragon gave Guinevere's father Leodegrance of Cameliard the Table, and therefore it is now where it belongs. The table might play a large part in Arthur's decision in marrying Guinevere. Karen Cherewatuk says in her book:

[Guinevere] has already provided Arthur with a kind of male line through her marriage portion, the Round Table. While Guinevere has brought this unifying dowry to the king, her childlessness threatens the stability of the court, making impossible the smooth transfer of power from Arthur to a legitimate heir (Cherewatuk 26).

Guinevere cannot give Arthur an heir, which would help to unify the court, but instead, her childlessness serves as a factor in ruining the fellowship of the Round Table. The Table is noticeably large; it seats a hundred and fifty men and Leodegrance sends with it a

hundred knights; knights who change their allegiance to another lord, and Arthur can only thank Guinevere for their presence. The foundations of Arthur's power are thus immensely strengthened by his marriage to her.

The idea with the Round Table, both as a fellowship of knights and a piece of furniture, is that all the men sitting at it are equals since there is no place for someone in charge to sit higher. It represents a warrior brotherhood governed not by hierarchy of lords and vassals, but by a shared code of chivalry. It takes many qualities to be a decent knight, and King Arthur makes sure that his knights swear an oath:

...than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them never to do outorage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and yonge. And every yere so were the[y] sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste (Vinaver 120).

This oath is mostly about the knights' behaviour during a battle. However some of it can also relate to ordinary human behaviour, but then it is about interactions and connections between men. Knights are always supposed to protect women and fight for them, as long it is done for the right reasons. Most likely the men should defend women because they are unable to do so for themselves. It is also interesting to note that the penance for using (i.e. raping) a woman is death, a very harsh sentence for the time. Given the historic treatment of women during wartime, especially in the turbulent and often violent era in which Malory lived, this knightly code of conduct certainly comes

across as unusually enlightened. It lends credence to the idea that Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur* out of exasperation with the chaotic world of his time. Whether the work is intended to be a criticism and commentary on the savagery of Malory's time or simply a description of his yearning for an idealized past of chivalry and honour (or some combination of the two) is harder to determine.

His contemporary women must have influenced Malory, and since the major female characters are aristocratic, then he must have been looking specifically at noble women. They had generally no power of their own, very wealthy women were usually just a way to unite wealthy or old families. The women themselves seldom had a say in who they married, but if a woman became a widow she sometimes inherited all of her husband's land and could, if she wanted, keep it and do business as a man. According to Frances and Joseph Gies, royal and baronial wives had little to do, because servants took care of everything, even the upbringing of their children (Gies 232). This lack of female purpose reflected the men's attitude towards women. A person who does not do anything cannot be respected for his or her actions. Respect is everything, if it is not present then it is very easy to objectify and stop considering the feelings of the person. Women of the upper classes had no role besides getting married. However, it should also be remembered that many women did not sit idle all day long. Women of the lower classes were more active and often had to make serious decisions. Then again, almost all of the female characters in the piece are of noble lineage.

Knights in *Le Morte Darthur* try to live their lives with those ideals constantly in mind. They strive to defend and help women, but they are also very human and not all of them follow these rules to the fullest. Kidnapping is fairly common in the work, and it is usually a married woman who is the one being kidnapped.

The fellowship of the Round Table does not fall apart in one day. It is a slow process, and the main damage comes in the form of disputes between the knights. It can be argued that women are often behind those quarrels, and the female influence in Arthur's life not only helps him in the rise of the Kingdom Camelot, but also in tearing it down.

Even though Malory does show some distinction between the personalities of the knights, they define themselves almost solely through their achievements. For instance, both Launcelot's and King Arthur's upbringing is never shown; they are just suddenly fully grown men, even though they both show some character development, in their adulthood years. King Arthur has two half sisters, Morgan le Fay and Morgawse on his mother side. Arthur is sent away when he is born so he does not grow up with his sisters and as a result, Arthur and Morgawse do not know that they are related when they meet for the first time. Morgawse and King Arthur take a one look at each other, decide to have intercourse and produce Mordred, with terrible consequences. Merlin tells King Arthur that the one who will destroy him will be born on the first of May, so Arthur orders all children born on this day to be sent out to sea in a boat to die. Mordred survives, floating to a shore where a good man finds him, and when Mordred is fourteen, the man brings him to court. Mordred is the one who kills his father in the end. He wants to become the ruler of Britain, and seizes his chance when Arthur decides to go abroad to fight Launcelot. Mordred declares that Arthur has died and takes over the rule. Indirectly, Morgawse has been the means of ruining Arthur and Camelot, and the fate that awaits her is grim. She has other sons apart from Mordred with her husband King Lot, but after his death she has an affair with a young knight whose father is responsible for the death of Lot. Morgawse's fate is to be killed by her son Gaheris, because he caught her in bed with her lover Lamorak. Morgawse is not very fortunate with her sons, perhaps, her being killed by her son serves as a sort of punishment for producing Mordred.

## **Morgan le Fay**

Another very important character in Malory's work is Morgan le Fay, or Morgan the Fairy. Even though she does not appear in the text very often, she is probably the most important woman in *Le Morte Darthur*. She is first introduced as Arthur's half sister, the daughter of Lady Igraine and the Duke of Cornwall. She is sent to a nunnery where she learns necromancy, which is peculiar, because the church did not accept any kind of magic. In fact, if women were found guilty of sorcery they were burnt, and Malory might be referring to this when the knights "...all had mervayle of the falshede of Morgan le Fay. Many knyghtes wysshed hir brente" (Vinaver 157). However, she is also a great healer, most likely because of her association with magic. There is an interesting passage of her healing a knight called Alysandir, which shows her talent in the art: "And than she put another oynemente uppon hym, and than he was oute of his payne" (Vinaver 642).

Morgan le Fay is portrayed as being evil; she keeps lovers, hates Arthur for apparently no known reason except that she wants power and thus she strives to ruin him. However, Malory portrays her as a positive character at first, she is obviously very intelligent, she is a king's sister and a queen in her own right through marriage, and he also describes her as being very beautiful. Then again Malory might be talking about a common trope, which says that the outer appearance does not always reflect with what is within. Morgan is of noble lineage and therefore should be expected to act as one; marry the right person, and behave in the right manner. In spite of this, many of her actions seem deliberately designed to flaunt social mores and conventions. She can be said to have married the right person, but she certainly does not behave as a proper lady (in fact, she often behaves as a crude man). She even tries to kill her husband, but fortunately for him, their son manages to save him. In her essay Geraldine Heng discusses the difference between the Lady of the Lake, Nimue and Morgan. She says:

Morgan, on the other hand, is intensely interested in the Arthurian ethos as a stage for her powers, and the disruptions she manufactures for the king and his knights point to a pleasure in their competitive display (Heng 10).

She takes pleasure in seeing people struggling and ruining what appears to be a perfect life. The reader cannot be completely sure of Malory's view of Morgan. Her actions certainly paint her as the evil enchantress, but her motives are more complex. The deeds that others consider evil are often her intrusions into the affairs and domains of men or her revealing of uncomfortable truths about the indiscretions of those who believe themselves to be her moral superiors. In the tale of Sir Tristram, everyone in King Mark's court despises her, because she tries to make public the infidelities that have been taken place. Morgan sends a knight to the court with a magical horn, which determines whether a lady is true to her husband, or not. If she is faithful then she can drink from the horn without spilling a drop. It turns out that only four women remain true to their husbands. Instead of punishing the ladies, Morgan is declared a false sorceress and that "...she was an enemy to all trew lovers "(Vinaver 430). Adultery seems to be completely acceptable as long as no one knows about it, or rather, that it is not declared to the public.

Morgan le Fay has many lovers and had as well a crush on Launcelot. She knows of his affair with Guinevere, and because of his repeated rejection of her, she plans on taking revenge. She manages to get Sir Tristram to bear a shield she has made in a tournament, where King Arthur and Guinevere will be in the audience. The shield shows a picture of a king and a queen and a knight keeping them in bondage and slavery. She hopes that King Arthur will recognize the love between Launcelot and Guinevere by looking at this shield. Her attempt fails because Arthur does not acknowledge openly what the image on the shield might represent. Guinevere knows immediately that this is Morgan le Fay's doing, but Arthur appears to be ignorant. However, she must have raised suspicion amongst

people of the court, but in the end it is really Guinevere herself that reveals her love by becoming mad with jealousy: “So the queen was nyghe oute of her wytte, and than she wrythed and waltred as a madde woman” (Vinaver 805). Lady Elaine, King Pelle’s daughter, is visiting the court and her sorcerous maid Dame Brisen makes it so that Launcelot goes into Elaine’s room and thinks he is with Guinevere. This is the second time Launcelot falls pray to Dame Brisen’s cunning. Guinevere discovers this because of the sounds he makes when he is asleep. She becomes furious, drives lady Elaine away from court, and thus exposes to all that she cares more for Launcelot than she should.

Morgan le Fay’s role in the demise of Arthur consists mostly of poisoning relationships at court. However, there is one crucial, direct act she commits when she betrays Arthur (before he knows of her evil nature), and this is when he gives her Excalibur and the scabbard for safekeeping. She makes replicas of the objects and gives the real artefacts to her current lover Accolon, whom she wants to get to the throne. After various events, Arthur retrieves the sword, but Morgan manages to throw the valuable scabbard into a lake: “ ‘Whatsoever com of me, my brothir shall nat have this scawberde!’ And than she lete throwe the scawberde in the deppyst of the water. So it sanke, for hit was hevy of golde and precious stonys “ (Vinaver 151). This consequently enables, Mordred to wound Arthur to his death in the end.

After Morgan has done most of her damage, she disappears from the scene for a while, and is even presumed to be dead by the court. However King Arthur stumbles upon her whereabouts while hunting, and they reconcile their differences. In the end she is one of the three queens who come to bring Arthur’s body to the island of Avalon, or the island of apples. Perhaps it is her healing ability that brings her there, or maybe the power of the forgiveness’s that strong.



## Knights and Damsels

There are many short passages that deal with knights that are less prominent in the work. In several of these “side stories” the relations between men and women are at the forefront, in the dealings of these knights with various ladies. Taken as a whole, they paint a picture of the fellowship of Arthur’s Round Table; one in which the knights, while valorous in their own way are plagued by their very human failings.

In the tale of Sir Gareth, there comes a lady, Linet, to King Arthur’s court and needs a knight to save her sister Lyonesse from a knight who holds her hostage. Gareth remains unknown but is nicknamed Beaumains or Fair-hands. Without the association of his famous name, he remains a knight without a past. Linet and he travel to the castle, and on the way she scolds and mocks him repeatedly. She is by no means submissive, and when Gareth has rescued Lyonesse, he wants to marry her, and Linet has to make sure they behave properly until they are married, because Lyonesse would gladly consummate their love earlier. Gareth’s story ends happily, but he is by no means a perfect knight. A true knight would never try to sleep with a lady before marriage, but luckily Linet uses magic to prevent this from happening. Christianity has not entirely been accepted in Arthur’s society, and thus do the rules of society as they are and the rules of the Christendom sometimes clash. Beverly Kennedy argues in her book that “canon law” is on Lyonesse’s side and “the lovers’ problem is not so much with the Church as with their respective families” (Kennedy 142). Linet makes the decision to interfere on her own, perhaps because she is worried that Lyonesse would not receive approval from King Arthur, because Linet says in *Le Morte Darthur*: “ ‘My lorde sir Gareth, ‘ seyde Lyonett, ‘all that I have done I woll avowe hit, and all shall be for your worship and us all’ ” (Vinaver 334).

Another very similar story is that is of the knight La Cote Male Taile, or the evil-shapen coat, who is constantly being rebuked by the damsel Maledisant. She is, however,

rebuked by Sir Launcelot and declares that she only scolded him because she loves La Cote Male Taile. This tale ends with him being made a knight of the Round Table, Launcelot gives him land, and he is wedded to Maledisant, who is renamed Beauvivante.

Incidents of kidnappings occur several times in the work. The lady La Beale Isoud is loved by Tristram but also by another knight, Sir Palomides the Saracen. He does not kidnap her as such but has done her a favour earlier and the price for that is a favour from her in return. Her husband and she agree that she has to go with Palomides (though reluctantly), but they are certain that she will be rescued later. Tristram comes and saves the day, but Isoud saves Palomides from certain death, because she does not want him to die without being baptized.

Another important kidnapping incident is when Sir Meliagrance, a knight of the Round Table, takes Queen Guinevere captive. He takes his chance in May when Guinevere goes for a ride in the woods and fields. She has a group of people, knights and ladies with her, but they are not well armed. Meligrance and his men outnumber Guinevere's company, so she agrees to go with him, if he spares her knights, but she makes it clear to him that he is doing a shameful deed. The queen manages to send a child with a ring from her to Launcelot to tell him what has happen, and of course he comes to the rescue.

As can be seen from these examples the base desires of the knights often lead them into peril. At times it is not at all that clear what separates the supposedly honourable knight from a murderous brigand or base villain. The code of chivalry that is supposed to elevate them to the status of heroes often proves difficult, if not impossible, for them to uphold. For example, it is not acceptable behaviour for a knight to kidnap a woman, especially your queen, yet a great many of them do engage in that dubious pastime. It falls to the true paragon of chivalry, Arthur, and his most trusted knights Launcelot and Tristram, to serve as an example to the others that chivalry can be upheld and can thus

form a foundation for their fellowship and Camelot itself. In order for the knights to improve themselves, it is very important that these idols do not fall from their pedestal.

### **Guinevere and Launcelot**

Queen Guinevere is another important female character in *Le Morte Darthur*, and while her role in the story is less active than that of Morgan le Fay's, she is intimately connected to Camelot's fall with her relationship to Sir Launcelot. Thomas C. Rumble says in his essay, while discussing their relationship that: "... it [the relationship] is thus symbolic of the moral degeneration to which the potentially perfect world of Arthur's realm is so inevitably being brought"(Rumble 181).

King Arthur decides to marry Guinevere even though Merlin has foreseen that she and Launcelot will love each other, and advises him to find someone more suitable. Queen Guinevere is portrayed in a very positive light in the beginning. She is the daughter of King Leodegrance of the land Cameliard; a noble, and true princess. She fulfils her duties as a king's wife, and she is shown as a beautiful queen worth fighting for. King Arthur must trust her, because he sometimes puts her in charge when he goes away, and she proves herself to be wise. When Sir Gawaine has accidentally killed a lady and refused mercy to a knight, the queen orders Sir Gawaine that from now on he must fight for all ladies and their quarrels (however silly they might be) and never refuse mercy to knight if he asks for it, whatever the circumstances. This is considered to be a fair and wise decision by all, and she is greatly admired. Despite all this, King Arthur does not love her like Launcelot. In Arthur's eyes Guinevere is most certainly a person whom he cares for deeply, but she always takes second place. He values his knights above all other company, and when the adultery has become public, Arthur says: " 'And much more I am sorry for

my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company’ “ (Vinaver 1184). Arthur is not saddened by the queen’s betrayal in itself, but rather the effect it will inevitably have on the spirits and camaraderie of his knight’s and court.

Elizabeth Edwards says in her essay:

Her [Guinevere’s] power is that absolute power of the beloved in the courtly love tradition, which is revealed as merely the power to reject; the exercise of that power labels her as capricious, cruel and arbitrary in the view of her husband and other knights (Edwards 50).

Guinevere uses her only means of manipulation by driving Launcelot away and rejecting him. For that reason, there can be seen changes in her character when Launcelot arrives; she has no motivation to reject anyone, and she becomes hot tempered; jealous and suspicious. Malory shows the reader a different side of Guinevere mainly by using dialogue. Peter R. Schroeder, explains that the reader knows Guinevere through the externals, the words, they show her to be “...selfish, selfless, jealous, generous, faithfully loving, vindictive, forgiving, passionate, good and bad all in a plausible ‘human’ “ (Schroeder 384). Malory portrays her as a human being, albeit not a perfect one, but one with strong feelings and emotions.

Terence McCarthy says in his book: “Malory constantly turns away from the private side of their affair and, as an important result, keeps our minds off its sinful nature” (McCarthy 95). Malory does not show the progress of Launcelot’s and Guinevere’s affair, he probably just presumes that it is known that their love is the greatest of all and intimate details are all very vague “...sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the quene and toke no force of hys hurte honed, but toke hys pleasaunce and hys lykyng untyll hit was the

dawnyng of the day” (Vinaver 1131). This is also the case when it comes to Launcelot’s prowess. He is simply the most talented knight of them all and his ascent to that status is never shown. He is probably Malory’s favourite; he continually praises Launcelot’s conduct, but he is far from being perfect. Wildred L. Guerin says that Launcelot is filled with a blend of good and evil attributes and that his characteristics make him a tragic hero (Guerin 259). There is one interesting scene in *Le Morte Darthur* when Launcelot hears of Sir Tristram’s marriage with the lady Isoud la Blanche Mains. He says: “ ‘Fye uppon hym, untrew knyght to his lady! That so noble a knyght as Sir Trystrames is sholde be founde to his fyrst lady and love untrew, that is the quene of Cornwayle’ ” (Vinaver 435). Launcelot has put himself in the position of being single by rationalizing that his love for Guinevere is a virtue, even though she is married. Tristram’s decision to marry is a blow to Launcelot’s rationalization, because it implies that Launcelot might be deceiving himself and that there is nothing noble in committing adultery with his king’s queen. Launcelot is certainly a complex character, even though Malory does not do much to develop characters.

There are certain similarities with the relationship between Launcelot and Guinevere and Tristram and Isoud. The ladies are both married, and the lovers officially fight for them, and everybody knows of the affairs. Guinevere and Isoud write to each other and take solace from each other because of these similarities. Fiona Tolhurst writes of Guinevere being a hero as well as tragic heroine who turns the tale from being a story about a downfall of a king and into a tale of a human tragedy. She says: “her sharing tragic heroine status and life patterns with Isode further enhances the tragedy’s impact by creating a sense that both pairs of lovers move in a world infused with tragic implications” (Tolhurst 143). *Le Morte Darthur* is first and foremost a tragic work, with most of the characters suffering along the way.

A large section in *Le Morte Darthur* is the quest for the Holy Grail. In it Launcelot has to question his relationship with Guinevere and that is the reason for his failure, but “not because of lack of nobility, but because he is dedicated to another noble but more earthy type of love” (Reid 90). However, since their Christian religion makes it a sinful act, he returns from the quest determined to end his relationship with his queen, but when they meet after a very long period of separation, they renew their affair with vigour until Launcelot notices that rumours about them are getting too loud. In an attempt to save Guinevere from shame and disgrace, he tries to avoid her company, but as she is very headstrong and hot tempered, she orders him to leave the court. In an act of pettiness, she decides to throw a great feast to show that she cares as much for the other knights as she does for Launcelot. This ends up backfiring on her, because she ends up being accused of poisoning one of the knights, Sir Patrise. This event shows that the foundations of the fellowship of the Round Table are beginning to crumble, and Guinevere and Launcelot’s adultery has managed to damage their reputation and also spark disputes in the court. When Guinevere is falsely accused of a horrible act, there is not one knight ready to stand up for her, not even her husband:

What aylith you,’ seyde the kynge, ‘that ye can nat kepe sir Launcelot upon youre side? For Wyte you well,’ seyde the kynge, ‘who that hath sir Launcelot uppon his party hath the moste man of worship in thys worlde uppon hys side (Vinaver 1051).

Arthur is clearly annoyed with her, it is obvious that he knows of their affair and is perhaps getting tired of her as well. She has to ask Sir Bors, one of Launcelot’s friends, to defend her honour, and even he does it reluctantly. “I mervayle how ye dare for shame to requyre me to do onythyng for you “ (Vinaver 1052). When Guinevere literally begs him for help, and Arthur convinces Bors to help her, he agrees, on the condition that if a better knight should come along he will step down for him. Bors makes sure Launcelot

appears just in time to defend Guinevere's honour and manages to save her from being burnt at the stake. Finally, the Lady of the Lake, Nimue, comes to court and clears the queen's name, names the guilty party, and all is forgiven, even though she has been accused of being a "destroyer of good knyghtes" (Vinaver 1054).

Although there is no one reason for the fall of Camelot, Guinevere and Launcelot's adultery is a crucial factor. Charles Moorman says: "one of the great causes of the downfall of Arthur's court is a failure in love, or rather a triumph of the wrong kind of love" (Moorman 166). Launcelot and Guinevere are supported by almost everyone; they are a model example of true love. In a reasonable society, their love would have been frowned upon and would not have been supported. The couple should, furthermore, have had the sense to be more discreet or rather Guinevere should have had the sense to be more secretive. But love makes fools of people.

King Arthur sentences the queen to be burnt at the stake because the sentence for treason is death, but Launcelot saves her. Unfortunately, he kills two of the most prestigious Knights of the Round Table, (Arthur's two nephews, who are also brothers of Sir Gawaine). This act of Launcelot's, though unintentional, is the final straw and the fellowship of the Round Table breaks. Mordred kills King Arthur, and that is the end of Camelot. Despite this, Malory does not seem to blame Guinevere for the fall, even though her part in it should be obvious. He says: "...whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende " (Vinaver 1120). On the other hand, perhaps Malory is saying this ironically, because she was a true lover, just not to her husband as she should have been. It is debatable whether she has a good end; her guilt drives her into a convent where she repents for her sins. She even refuses to give Launcelot a final kiss before she becomes a nun. " 'Wherfor, madame, I praye you kysse me, and never no more. 'Nay, sayd the quene, 'that shal I never do, but absteine you from suche werkes' " (Vinaver

1253). In her essay, Elizabeth Edwards mentions this passage and says: “the only solution, for Guinevere, to the horror of this realization is to turn away from the things of this world” (Edwards 54). Guinevere takes responsibility for her actions, even though she does not realize it fully until that very moment.

### **The Fall of Camelot**

The society of Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table represent an ideal society, where people are courteous, noble and Christian values are held in the highest regard. King Arthur is the most perfect king that has ever reigned, and his death represents the complete end of Camelot. Even though this society is supposed to be a model example of a perfect world, it has many flaws. Adultery is acceptable as long as people don't know about it. The Round Table has fallen some time before the collapse of Camelot, and the beginning of the actual fall begins when the Knights of the Round Table turn on each other, and a few conspire to catch Guinevere and Launcelot in the act with hate and greed being the main reason. Irene Joynt says in her essay, “...two motifs of vengeance and love combine to bring about the beginning of the downfall of the Arthurian civilization “ (Joynt 111). She is talking specifically about the love between Launcelot and Guinevere and also claims that: “Malory never hesitated to present his love for Guinevere as wrong and inherently destructive” (Joynt 111).

One of King Arthur's knights, Sir Bedwere, throws Excalibur into the lake by Arthur's request. He is returning it to its first owner, when that is finished Arthur dies and is taken to the mystical island of Avalon in the hope that he will return one day to restore the kingdom of Camelot. Those who take him are three queens, among them his sister Morgan le Fay, the Queen of the Waste Lands, the Queen of Northgalis and Nimue, the



Lady of the Lake. Considering the past relationship between Morgan and Arthur, it is peculiar to notice her among this company. Sue Ellen Holbrook argues that: “By placing Nymue in the ship as well as Morgan, Malory extends both the influence of good and the influence of evil, of creation and of destruction, into Arthur's departure” (Holbrook 776). Malory balances out Morgan’s sinister influence with the presence of Nimue and thus emphasizes Morgan’s healing powers rather than her wicked ways. The women help throughout, help King Arthur during his reign, provide him with challenges. They also take a large part in his downfall, but at the same time help him right at the end. The result is a bittersweet ending, with Guinevere taking responsibility for her actions, and the court is saved from horrifying world under Mordred’s rule. But the price is the end of Camelot.

## Conclusion

There are of course many reasons for the ending of King Arthur, the Round Table and Camelot. The supposedly ideal society: “ ‘...and there ys such a felyship that they may never be broken...there ys the floure of chevalry’ ” (Vinaver 118) is doomed from the beginning. With so many flawed characters; it can easily be presumed that society must be flawed as well. A perfect society does not overlook adultery and incest, and it is interesting to note that a king who is famous for being noble, kind and righteous can sacrifice so many children to save his own skin. Nevertheless, the women are the main reason; they lurk in the background and influence everything around them. Their relationships and interactions with men play a crucial part in the eventual fall of Camelot. It might even be said that relations between the sexes are more at fault than any particular woman or a man. However, even though women are often considered inferior to men in general, it is not the intention of the work to condemn women or paint them as a source of all evil in the world. Men cannot be without them and the knights cannot function completely without women in their lives.

Women are indirectly responsible, Moragawse by giving birth to Mordred and others by influencing their men. Then there are women, who act more directly, as Guinevere by having an affair with the most prestigious knight of the court and the scheming Morgan who sows distrust and dislike and consequently attacks the very foundations of society. Zofia Tatiana Reid says in her MA thesis: “The real reason for the downfall of Camelot is the subliminal decay of its very foundations“ (Reid 56). If the foundations are weak then the structure can easily collapse.

The knights are imperfect in general, even the noblest knight (apart from Arthur) Launcelot is also deeply flawed. The bottom line is that knights are human and as a result make human mistakes. However, King Arthur ought to be the perfect example for others.

He is the head, along with his queen, and they should represent the ideal couple, a king and his queen for people to look up to. When Guinevere and Launcelot's adultery has been revealed to everyone, it is clear that King Arthur has lost his glory. He is human as well as them and has to face the same problems. He cannot keep a faithful wife by his side and cannot keep control of Sir Launcelot. In fact the image of the great King Arthur dies long before his actual death, and the Round Table and Camelot falls easily with him. No one who has taken part in Arthur's world can continue in it. Guinevere and Launcelot spend the rest of their lives repenting their sins, and they can never see each other, alive, again. His remaining knights do not want to stay with Arthur's successor King Constantine, although he is proclaimed to be both noble and worshipful ruler. They go back to their own lands and spend the rest of their lives as holy men. King Arthur's court never recovers from his death; society lives on with new king in another kind of world.

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