



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

# **Queen Guinevere:**

*A queen through time*

**B.A. Thesis**

**Marie Helga Ingvarsdóttir**

**June 2011**

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Enskudeild

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### *Abstract*

*This essay is an attempt to recollect and analyze the character of Queen Guinevere in Arthurian literature and movies through time. The sources involved here are Welsh and other Celtic tradition, Latin texts, French romances and other works from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Malory's and Tennyson's representation of the Queen, and finally Guinevere in the twentieth century in Bradley's and Miles's novels as well as in movies. The main sources in the first three chapters are of European origins; however, there is a focus on French and British works. There is a lack of study of German sources, which could bring different insights into the character of Guinevere.*

*The purpose of this essay is to analyze the evolution of Queen Guinevere and to point out that through the works of Malory and Tennyson, she has been misrepresented and there is more to her than her adulterous relation with Lancelot. This essay is exclusively focused on Queen Guinevere and her analysis involves other characters like Arthur, Lancelot, Merlin, Enide, and more. First the Queen is only represented as Arthur's unfaithful wife, and her abduction is narrated. We have here the basis of her character. Chrétien de Troyes develops this basic character into a woman of important values about love and chivalry. Unfortunately, Guinevere's portrayal by Malory and Tennyson as a weak and unfaithful woman will remain as the general perception of Guinevere until the twentieth century. In the twentieth century, Guinevere's character will be rediscovered through the studies of early medieval works (e.g. Menmeuth, Wace, or Troyes) and Guinevere's role and influence in Arthurian legends will be revealed.*

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## Introduction

*According to Hopkins, "[Arthur's] queen, Guinevere, is more elusive, less written about [than Arthur and his knights], and yet has been for centuries a central character playing a critical role in the rise and fall of the Round Table" (6). He goes on by characterizing her as "a key figure in the life of Camelot, this remarkable woman is seen variably as scholar, seductress, warrior, and dignified gentle beauty by the countless artists and writers who have depicted her. Who, then, was Guinevere?" (10) The purpose of this essay is to answer this question by looking at different texts and novels referring to the Queen.*

*In the first chapter, I will go back in time, looking at works of the early middle ages of different origins (mainly Celtic and British), and I will point out that Guinevere at that time was defined as Arthur's wife and her genealogy was unclear. In the second chapter, I will follow the development of Guinevere's character in Arthurian literature in the twelfth and thirteenth century. In the first part, Chrétien de Troyes and French romances will be the main focus, while in the second part, an overview of the Vulgate Cycle, and other texts of the thirteenth century will serve as reference. In the third chapter, I will analyze the differences between Tennyson's Guinevere and Malory's Guinevere. Finally, in the last chapter, I will analyze Queen Guinevere in twentieth century literature and cinema/television. Although Queen Guinevere has been written about since the ninth century, it is since the twelfth century and Chrétien de Troyes that the features of her character have been developed and it is in the twentieth century that she is fully recognized as a character of great importance in Arthurian legends.*

## Chapter 1: The first references to Queen Guinevere.

*Queen Guinevere's first references are in Celtic texts; she is described as Arthur's wife as well as an unfaithful wife, and her abduction by Mordred is also mentioned. However, Celtic texts do not retrace her genealogy, and it is not until Menmouth's History of the King of Britain that Guinevere's family tree is revealed.*

### 1.1. Queen Guinevere in Celtic literature.

*Loomis states that "Wales was the birthplace and the early home of Arthurian romances" (20) because "all the documents from the seventh to the end of the eleventh century come from Wales" (20) and according to Littleton & Malcor, Guinevere is "the only major female figure of the Arthurian tradition who is almost a completely Celtic intrusion" (153). The first appearance of Guinevere is in early Welsh verse, in a poem recalling a conversation between Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere in Welsh) and Arthur (Jackson, 18) about Gwenhwyfar's abduction by Melwas'. Although Gwenhwyfar is clearly defined as one of the speakers of the poem, her partner is less clearly defined. This poem offers an alternative to the first meeting of Arthur and Gwenhwyfar. In this poem Gwenhwyfar recognizes Melwas which "suggests that in the original story Arthur and Gwenhwyfar had visited Melwas's lands and he fell in love with her there" (Jackson, 19).*

*As this poem is highly controversial (Jackson, 18-19), the major Welsh source for Arthurian legends is considered to be the Welsh Triads. According to Bromwich "some of the most curious and significant evidence concerning the Welsh*

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1 *Melwas in Caradoc's Life of St. Gildas.*

2 *Jackson points out that apart from Arthur, Melwas and Cai have also been identified as the second speaker (18).*

medieval traditions of Arthur and the figures associated with him is to be found in the short lists of three persons, objects or events known as triads. " (44) Guinevere is mentioned in five Triads. The first one is Triad 53, "Three Harmful Blows of the Island of Britain": "The second Gwenhwyfach struck upon Gwenhwyfar: and that cause there took place afterwards the Action of the Battle of Camlan" (Barber, 63). This Triad actually mentions Guinevere as responsible for the Battle of Camlan (later known as Camelot). This is also mentioned in the Triad 84, "Three Futile Battles of the Island of Britain": "And the third was the worst: that was Camlan, which was brought about because of a quarrel between Gwenhwyfar and Gwenhwyfach" (Barber, 63). The character of Gwenhwyfach is considered as the "shadow of Gwenhwyfar" (Barber, 63), that is a character in opposition with Guinevere.

There are three other Triads which mention Guinevere. Triad 54, named "Three Unrestrained Ravagings of the Island of Britain", is concerned with the character of Mordred and the abduction of Guinevere: "And [Medrawd] dragged Gwenhwyfar from her royal chair and then he struck a blow upon her" (Barber, 62). Triad 56 actually refers to three Guineveres: "Three great Queens of Arthur's Court: Gwenhwyfar daughter of Cywryd Gwent, and Gwenhwyfar daughter of Gwythr ap Groidawl, and Gwenhwyfar daughter of Gogfran the Giant" (Hepkins, 10). According to Hepkins, this Triad does not mean that there were three distinct Guineveres at the same time or successively at Arthur's court. The most satisfying explanation for this Triad is "that tripleness is a very significant quality and that this Triad links Guinevere to the three-personed goddess who appears in various guises in Celtic mythology" (12).

The last Triad, along with Triad 54, set the tone for the development of Guinevere's character in medieval literature. This last Triad is the Triad 80 and is named "The Three Unfaithful Wives of the Island of Britain". Guinevere's infidelity towards Arthur is already mentioned: "And one was more faithless than those three: Gwenhwyfar, Arthur's wife, since she shamed a better man than any of the others" (Hepkins, 12).

*Although Guinevere appears in Welsh Literature, Barber defines her as "a Shadowy figure [...] She does not appear in the genealogies at all. Her name is an unusual one, and apparently connected with the Irish Finnabair." (64)*

*Loomis does not agree with Barber; for him*

*this seems most doubtful, first, because Gwenhwyvar means "white phantom," whereas Finnabair probably means "fair eyebrow"; and secondly, because there is nothing in common between Guenievre and Gwenhwyvar on the one hand and Finnabair on the other, except that Guenievre and Finnabair were of royal birth and all three seem to have more than one lover (Loomis, Celtic, 196).*

*Loomis and Barber disagree about the link between Finnabair and Guinevere that Barber has pointed out, and Barber is also contested by Bromwich, Jarman & Roberts, who refer to Guinevere as Gegrfan's daughter (the third Gwenhwyfar in Triad 56), giving her a place in the genealogies. Though Barber and Loomis disagree about a link through the names, there is surely a link between Irish and Welsh legends. As Lee points out:*

*Here, the Welsh myths are identical to the Irish, with the three wives of Arthur (Gwenhwyfars) being the personifications of Britain or the Sovereignty of Britain. Gwenhwyfar represents the land of the kingdom, and was more than just a queen, but a powerful goddess (1).*

*This statement from Lee is also followed by Hepkins who claims that:*

*Guinevere has been stereotyped as a seductress and adulteress, so that little attention has been given to other aspects of her life and abilities. However the picture of Guinevere that comes to us from medieval literature is much more varied and complex [...] The mentions of Guinevere in Welsh literature give tantalizing glimpses of the persona that was rounded out much more fully in French, German and English medieval works (10).*



## 1.2. Queen Guinevere outside of Celtic literature, before Chrétien de Troyes.

Guinevere is mentioned in texts usually written in Latin during the twelfth century. Usually based on Welsh texts (Bromwich, 48), these texts were written by British authors and many are the sources of Arthurian French romances of the same period. Hopkins states that Welsh texts “set the tone for the development of Guinevere’s character in medieval literature. On the one hand, she was a great queen; on the other, she was an unfaithful wife” (12).

One of the first texts outside of Celtic literature in which Guinevere is mentioned is Caradoc’s Life of St Gildas. Guinevere is referred to as Arthur’s wife (Barber, 66, 79) and her abduction by Melvas<sup>3</sup> (Barber, 65) is briefly mentioned. Previous Arthurian texts in which Guinevere is mentioned only recollect her abduction by Mordred and the battle for her rescue between Arthur and Mordred<sup>4</sup>. In this recollection of Guinevere’s abduction, her rescue is made possible by an intervention by Gildas the Wise and the abbot of Glastenbury:

Glastenbury was besieged by the tyrant Arthur with an enormous army, on account of Guenevere his wife, who had been snatched away and raped by the aforementioned wicked King Melvas and taken to Glastenbury since it was an impregnable refuge [...] The rebel king had been searching everywhere for the queen for an entire year and had at last discovered her whereabouts [...] the abbot of Glastenbury, together with his clerical followers and Gildas the Wise, entered the battlefield and advised Melvas to make peace with his king and restore the captive queen. So she was returned, as she should have been, peacefully and in good faith (White, 20).

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3 Also referred to as Malegant or Maleagant.

4 See Triad 54, and The Annales of Wales mentions the battle between Mordred and Arthur.

Guinevere is also mentioned by Gerald of Wales, in *The Description of Wales*<sup>5</sup>. He mentions her when recovering the supposed grave of King Arthur (c. 1193). According to Barber, Wales translates the words on the cross on Arthur's grave as "here lies buried the famous King Arthur with Wenneveria his second wife in the isle of Avalonia." (127) In this case Guinevere is referred to as Arthur's second wife.

The most important author in Arthurian legends in the early Middle ages is Geoffrey of Monmouth. In his *History of the Kings of Britain*, a great section of the book is dedicated to King Arthur. He mentions Guinevere (Guanhumara) and already gives more details about her life; married to Arthur, she has an adulterous relationship with Mordred (White, 37). Her origins are revealed; "she descended from a noble Roman family and had been brought up in the household of Duke Cadur. She was the most beautiful woman in the entire island [...] who had broken the vows of her earlier marriage" (White, 37). Monmouth's *History* develops the external aspect of Guinevere's character. The reader learns more about Guinevere's background and her relationships. Another aspect analyzed by Monmouth (and later explored by Wace and Layamon) is Arthur and Guinevere's coronation; they both are crowned separately, "from another direction" (Hepkins, 14), in separate churches with their own followers. Wace states that "so that the queen should not be overshadowed by her husband's state, the crown was set on her head in another fashion" (Hepkins, 17). Wace also mentions for the first time the Round Table; however, he attributes its origins to Arthur (Hepkins, 17).

Some variants of Monmouth's *History* are giving us a different ascendance of Guinevere; she is the daughter of Leodegan (Leodegraunce), king of Camelot. After Arthur helped Leodegan he became betrothed to Guinevere (Jee, 1). Furthermore, some texts say that Mordred married Guinevere by force (e.g. Monmouth), while others say that she was

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<sup>5</sup> Written in Latin.

*an accomplice in the treason, that she may have seduced Mordred and that Guinevere and Mordred had a secret affair before Arthur's departure for France (e.g. Robert Mannyng of Brunne).*

*The character of Guinevere is slowly being shaped as a queen and adulterous wife; her origins are clearer and her abduction is definitely implanted in Arthurian legends. However, her role and her behavior at court is still unknown, and it is through French romances, especially with Chrétien de Troyes, that her character will be finally completed with her role at court finally revealed and her behavior towards the knights and other guests analyzed.*

## Chapter 2: Guinevere in twelfth and thirteenth century literature.

*Arthurian literature of the twelfth and thirteenth century can be divided in two parts: the French romances and the Vulgate Cycle<sup>6</sup>. Apart from being Arthur's wife and a king's daughter, Queen Guinevere has an important role at court in the affairs of love and she also is the keeper of the ideal of the Round Table.*

### 2.1. Chrétien de Troyes's Guinevere.

*The most influential author in Arthurian French romances is Chrétien de Troyes. According to White, "Chrétien de Troyes introduces the Arthur of chivalric romance" (141), and he portrays Arthur as a weak and possibly inadequate ruler whereas Guinevere is a strong character. His novels are retelling the quest of young boys wanting to become a knight. They need to complete a quest before they can be knighted and recognized as Knights of the Round Table. By focusing his romances on young men on a quest, Troyes attributes second roles to Arthur, and by extension, Guinevere.*

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<sup>6</sup> See White for references.

The first of Troyes's romance is "Erec and Enide" (1170); in this romance, Guinevere is protected by Erec while Arthur is on a stag hunt. There is a conflict between Guinevere and an unknown knight ("Erec", 2-3). Loomis states that "the departure of Arthur and his household to hunt the White Stag forms the prelude to an attack on the Queen's escort" (77). To avenge the affront made upon Queen Guinevere, Erec follows the knight, and here starts his quest. His reward is a beautiful young woman that was held captive by the knight. In the meantime, Arthur is done hunting and after killing the White Stag, his honor is to kiss the most beautiful woman that he knows. Although everyone agrees on the Queen, Guinevere asks Arthur to wait for Erec's return. When Erec comes back with Enide to Arthur's court, Guinevere recognizes her beauty and lends her clothes and jewels ("Erec", 21-22), which results in Arthur kissing Enide instead of the Queen (23). In this French romance, Queen Guinevere appears as a victim (of the knight and his dwarf) as well as a protector and friend to Enide; she calls him "fair friend" ("Erec", 2), she "more than five hundred times commends him to God, that He may defend [Erec] from harm" (4), when meeting with a knight who saw Erec, she "keeps her peace no longer" (15) and needs to know Erec's whereabouts. Though Enide is considered as the most beautiful woman at Arthur's court, Guinevere is not jealous of the attention given to her; she "welcomes her very warmly" ("Erec", 20) and "no one objects to Arthur's claim at her being the most beautiful maiden in the room" (22). Even if Guinevere's character is not central to this romance, her role in it is of great importance, and it is the affront made to her by the knight and his dwarf that set the reason for Erec's quest.

Troyes's romance in which Guinevere has the greatest role is "Lancelot, or the Knight of the Cart". This romance retells Lancelot's quests and his life at the court, as well as his affair with Guinevere. In this romance, Troyes follows Caradec's idea of Guinevere's abduction by Mehuas (156). However, the rescue is made by a knight, Lancelot, and this sets the ground for the love affair between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. In "Lancelot", the abduction of Guinevere is

divided in two stages, two 'abductions'; first, *Kieu*<sup>7</sup> tricks *Arthur* into permitting him to ride away with the *Queen* (abduction by ruse), and then *Meleagant*<sup>8</sup> forcibly abducts her from *Kieu* after injuring *Kieu* (*Leemis*, 45). The abduction sets a "psychological drama to be enacted later between *Lancelot*, *Guinevere*, [and] *Meleagant*" (*Hepkins*, 27). It is through *Lancelot*'s heroic deeds that *Lancelot*'s love for the *Queen* is proved. *Leemis* points out that *Queen Guinevere* and *Lancelot* obey the rules of "amour courtois" (49). The "amour courtois" is a mutual noble and chivalrous love and admiration between two persons, generally of equal social class, and usually not married. *Guinevere* sees in *Lancelot* her champion and lover, he is the one rescuing her from dangers; *Lancelot* is portrayed as her hero.

*Guinevere* is made responsible for *Arthur*'s downfall in "*Lancelot*". Her love causes *Lancelot* to fail in the *Quest of the Grail*, and brings about the circumstance which causes *Arthur*'s death. The destruction of the *Knights of the Round Table* is also a result of the love between *Lancelot* and *Guinevere*. *Gawain*'s brothers died while helping *Lancelot* rescuing *Guinevere*, which drives *Gawain* into a war against *Lancelot*. The kingdom and the *Round Table* are both associated with *Guinevere*. When *Arthur* married *Guinevere*, he was given the *Round Table* among other gifts. When *Arthur* discovers *Guinevere*'s treason, a war breaks out between him and *Lancelot*. According to *Lee*, "before the *Grail* quest, *Guinevere*'s love for *Lancelot* had in fact made *Arthur*'s kingdom and the *Round Table* strong" (1). *Hepkins* claims that "the portray

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7 Kai

8 Or Malegant; in this case he is not a king himself, but the son of King Baudemagus of Gorre.

9 "Courtly Love" in French.

*we have is approving; this is a leader, an arbiter of taste and fashion, an active, energetic, able woman, accustomed to command, valuing courtesy, setting high standards of courtly behavior for her knights and followers" (41).*

*The adulterous relationship between Queen Guinevere and Lancelot affects the representations of Guinevere; she is either "a woman who is the model of propriety in conducting her love affairs [...] or a selfish, predatory, spiteful adulteress" (Hopkins, 13). The first part of Hopkins's statement is demonstrated in Troyes's "Yvain, and the Knight of the Lion", when Queen Guinevere helps in matter of dispute, not only for the matter of love. Galegrenant tells his tale as follows: "seven years before, he had ridden through the forest of Broceliande, had met with some adventures, had been attacked at a storm-making spring by a tall knight, who overthrew him, led away his horse, and left him to make his ignominious way back on foot" (Loomis, 274). When the Queen hears Galegrenant's tale of shame, "she rose from beside the King and stealthily approached the group" (277), she also has her own dispute with Keu, calling him a "seneschal" (White, 161). Hopkins states that in "Yvain", Guinevere is represented as "a Guinevere who clearly enjoys full conjugal relations with her husband [...]. She is clearly a beautiful, confident, sexually attractive woman, very much in command of herself and her courtiers" (37). Although Arthur wants to take care of the dispute between Keu and Galegrenant, it is Yvain who avenges his cousin, Galegrenant. Guinevere is also at the head of a tribunal of love, where she is discussing cases of love and even issuing decisions not only in love conflicts but also in conflicts between knights ("Yvain", 181-182).*

*Chrétien de Troyes's evolution of the character of Guinevere is progressive. First in "Erec and Enide", she is presented as a shamed queen whose honor is defended by Erec. She is close to her knights and though she is thought the most beautiful woman at Arthur's court, she has no trouble when Enide arrives and Enide's beauty is considered superior to hers. She "appears as the queen of a highly civilized and polished society, a woman who commands respect and values proper courtly behavior" (Hopkins, 32). Hopkins also describes her as "not only articulate but also very witty" (37). In "Yvain",*

her role is the one of a council and judge of manners and behavior among the knights. Finally in "Lancelot", her character is fully developed as apart from her role at court and her abduction, her love affair with Lancelot is also described. Guinevere evolves from a queen and a wife to a judge, counselor, friend and lover.

## 2.2. Guinevere after Chrétien de Troyes.

Apart from the work of Chrétien de Troyes, the twelfth and thirteenth century literature has a large variety of authors writing Arthurian novels. To go on with French texts, there is an interesting short story, written by Marie de France in the late 12th century, titled "Lanval" ("Le Lai de Lanval"). According to Joe, Marie's inspiration was a Breton song, known as the Lai, which she translated (1). The hero Lanval has to hide the presence of his lover, a fairy woman, from everyone. When Queen Guinevere unsuccessfully tries to seduce him, he reveals the existence of the fairy woman, and proclaims that she is more beautiful than the Queen. Seeking revenge on Lanval, Guinevere falsely accuses him of making unwanted advances to her and boasting of loving a woman more beautiful than her. If Lanval cannot prove his allegations, he will be executed. The fairy woman arrives before the execution, and reveals her appearance, which saves Lanval. They leave the mortal world together and enter the magical world of Avalon. Guinevere is clearly portrayed as the adulterous lover in the Lai.

There are two other works of French origin also worth mentioning here. In Meraugis de Portlesgues<sup>10</sup>, by Rigoul de Houdenc, Guinevere appears as the "Queen of hearts", making judgment in all cases concerning love. The queen is considered very proud of her love court, "all the judgements concerning love are [hers] and [the knights] have no right to make a decision." (White, 235) The knights are asked to leave the castle and with her ladies help, Guinevere will make a

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10 In this case, extracts of Meraugis can be found in White's *King Arthur in Legend and History*.

decision on the love affair presented to her. In this instance, Lideine, the fair lady of Landamere, is unable to choose between two suitors, Meraugis and Gervain. The Queen and her ladies listen to the two lovers plead their cases, and they unanimously declare themselves in favor of Meraugis. However, Gervain refuses the decision and forces Meraugis into a combat. Again in this work, Guinevere is portrayed as the judge in love cases. In the Huth Merlin<sup>11</sup> Arthur's reason for marrying Guinevere is not love, but the desire to possess the Round Table. It is often written that Guinevere's father was the true owner of the Round Table and that he offered it to Arthur as a wedding gift or as part of her dowry.

Another important work of the thirteenth century is The Vulgate Cycle<sup>12</sup>. It is a compilation of works of different European origins (e.g. French, British, Spanish, or Italian) with Lancelot as the main character. In "The Story of Merlin", we learn that Gawain and his knights are the Queen's knights, after Gawain offered his knightly services to the Queen. It is probably from Gawain's loyalty and close connection to the Queen that the idea of a love affair between Gawain and the Queen is born. In "The Prose Lancelot", the reader learns more about Lancelot's upbringing and his life before he became Arthur's knight. His love for Guinevere inspires him to seek adventure (only coming back when the Queen is in danger) and along the road he befriends Galehot. Galehot is considered as an important character in Lancelot and Guinevere's affair. He is the one who secretly arranges Lancelot and the Queen's first meeting ending with their first kiss. "The Prose Lancelot" also introduces the idea of a fidelity test, which usually reveals the unfaithful wives to their husband. In this case, the fidelity test consists of the husband drinking from a goblet, and if the content of the goblet is spilt

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<sup>11</sup> See note 6.

<sup>12</sup> All extracts of works in The Vulgate Cycle can be found in White (cf. Note 6).



on the husband, then the wife has been unfaithful. Arthur is also blamed for not recognizing the ring he gave Guinevere on their wedding day. White quotes a passage from "The Prose Lancelot":

*You married her legally and loyally and promised God, as the sacred and anointed king, that you would treat her as honourably as a king should treat a queen. Thus you have done much wrong both towards God and the world (275).*

"The Prose Lancelot" also uses the false Guinevere's character to set up a plot against Arthur. In "The Death of Arthur", Morgan is finally identified as the character who reveals Guinevere and Lancelot's affair to King Arthur:

*Morgan thought a great deal about King Arthur, because she intended him to know the whole truth about Lancelot and the queen, and yet she feared that if she told him everything and Lancelot heard that the king had found out from her, nothing in the world could guarantee that he would not kill her (White, 290).*

French and British Arthurian literatures are different in the aim of Guinevere's lovers. In Menmuth, Guinevere willingly gives herself to Mordred, who seeks Arthur's throne, whereas in "The Prose Lancelot", Lancelot loves and supports Arthur and his reign. Lancelot never intended to reveal his secret affair with the Queen. However, the love triangle could not last (especially with Arthur's numerous enemies). When Arthur arrested Guinevere for adultery and treason, the ideal supported by the Round Table broke, and the Knights chose their allegiance between Lancelot and Gawain (supporting Arthur), later ending in a war. The war had no winner and according to the Vulgate, Guinevere became a nun.

Apart from The Vulgate Cycle, thirteenth century Arthurian literature, like in the twelfth century, is overflowing with French romances. Like in the twelfth century, the main characters in these romances are young men trying to become knights or simply young knights. Most of the thirteenth century romances are focused on Gawain and his heroic deeds.

*There is little more to find out about Queen Guinevere if anything. It is next in the sixteenth and eighteenth century that major aspects of Guinevere are developed.*

### Chapter 3: Malory's Guinevere vs. Tennyson's Guinevere.

*Malory and Tennyson are two important authors in the development of Guinevere's character. Malory's Morte d'Arthur dates back to the sixteenth century while Tennyson's Idylls of the King is from the eighteenth century.*

#### 3.1. From Malory to Tennyson.

*Malory's Morte d'Arthur is a sixteenth century work based widely on French romances. It is divided in eight tales (Lumiansky, xi): "The tale of King Arthur" (Malory's Books I, II, III, and IV), "The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius" (Book V), "The Tale of Lancelot" (Books VI, VII, VIII, and IX), "The Tale of Gareth" (Book X), "The Tale of Tristram" (Books XI, XII, XIII, and XIV), "The Tale of the Sangreall" (Books XV, XVI, XVII, and XVIII), "The Tale of Lancelot and Guinevere" (Books XIX, XX, XXI, and XXII), and "The Tale of the Death of Arthur" (Books XXIII and XXIV).*

*Queen Guinevere does not appear before Book III, in which her wedding to King Arthur is narrated. Arthur makes his choice clear, he "love[s] Guenever"<sup>13</sup> and describes her as "the most valiant and fairest lady that [he] know[s] living, or yet that ever [he] could find" (Malory, III, 1). Although Merlin warns him about Guinevere, Arthur also mentions the Round Table as a great reward for marrying her. Book IV shows a subjected Guinevere, she is at Arthur's command (Malory, IV, 2), and she will rather "die in the water than fall in [Arthur's] enemies' hands and there be slain" (3). Following Troyes's representation of Guinevere, Malory portrays her as worrying for her knights when they*

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13 Malory's spelling as for all the other characters mentioned in quotes from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

leave for war with the Romans: "Queen Guinevere made great sorrow for the departing of her lord and other, and swooned in such wise that the ladies bare her into her chamber" (Malory, V, 3). The little trust that Arthur gives to Guinevere concerning the matter of state is portrayed not only through his consultation with Morgan rather than Guinevere (Malory, IV, 7), but also by trusting Sirs Baudwin and Constantine with the realm in the government rather than Guinevere (Malory, V, 3).

There are passages in Malory before the beginning of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair where the reader clearly has access to Lancelot's emotion: "he loved the queen again above all other ladies and damsels of his life" (Malory, VI, 1); however, Guinevere is not portrayed as in love with Lancelot: "she had him in great favor" (VI, 1). Lancelot's love for the queen is tested several times in Malory's Book VI (3, 16). She is also portrayed as a close friend of Iselde and communicates with her through letters (she speaks of the events in Camelot and also of Lancelot<sup>14</sup>). She respects him highly but there are no indications of a shared love until "The Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere" (Malory, XVIII and XIX). In this tale, their love affair, Arthur's discovery of it and the war between Arthur and Lancelot are all retold using a dramatic approach towards love, friendship and treason. However, until the end, Lancelot defends Guinevere's honor (Malory, XX, 15-19), and after the death of Arthur and her retirement in Amesbury, she confesses her sins and asks Lancelot to never come and see her again (Malory, XXI, 10).

Malory bases a lot of his works on French romances (e.g. "The Prose Lancelot", "The Huth Merlin") just like Tennyson, yet Tennyson starts his poems where Malory finishes his tales. While Arthur dies at the end of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, in Tennyson Arthur is still alive and the reader has a glimpse of Guinevere's state of mind in the Abbey. Staines points out the contrast between Malory and Tennyson's representation of Guinevere. The importance accorded to

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14 Throughout Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, for more details see Books VI, IX, X, and XI.

*Guinevere's role is the difference between Malory's and Tennyson's Guineveres; "in Malory, Guinevere remains a shadowy, secondary, and seemingly unimportant figure. [...] Her appearances are brief and desultory" (Staines, 88).*

*Her character is vaguely developed in Malory's Morte Darthur. On the contrary, in her idyll,*

*she is a penitent, weeping woman living in grief and self-imposed solitude at Amesbury. There is no portrait of the queen at a time when her life was pure and happy; she is confused and frightened already conscious of her sin and its effects [...] she is] a woman burdened by her own sense of guilt (Staines, 88).*

### *3.2. Guinevere in Tennyson's Idylls of the King.*

*In Tennyson's Idylls of the King, the characters of Arthurian legends are represented in twelve poems. Guinevere is an important character in this collection of poem. Again the adulterous relation between Lancelot and Guinevere is put under scrutiny (Staines, 85). There is an interesting contrast between Enid, Vivien (Viviane) and Guinevere.*

*"Vivien's destructive nature demanded a positive response, a female character who embodies the ideal of truth absent in the earlier poem" (Staines, 86). The response to Vivien's character is Enid (Enide); "Enid is the paragon of virtue, of love, of selflessness" (Staines, 87). Guinevere is somewhere in between these two characters.*

*The Guinevere portrayed by Tennyson is a strong woman, aware of her mistake and conscious of the sacrifices she will have to make in order to set things right. She decides to separate from Lancelot. When Arthur arrives at Amesbury, she repents and is now "more aware of human frailty" (Staines, 89). She realizes that Arthur is "the worthy center of Guinevere's love and obedience" (Staines, 90). Tennyson's Guinevere is the one to grow or change, "from the human level, she rises to a new understanding of the height to which a mortal may ascend" (Staines, 91-92). Contrary to Malory's representation of characters in Arthurian legends, women grow and change; they learn from their mistakes. In Malory, the men are at the center of the action and they are the one evolving through their actions (Vinaver, 546).*

Tennyson's portrayal of Queen Guinevere has stamped her character (Hopkins, 6). An entire poem is dedicated to the queen, titled "Guinevere". The poem starts where Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* finishes; Queen Guinevere is entering the convent of Amesbury. The character of Guinevere is portrayed as a weak figure; she fled from the court and Arthur (Tennyson, 1) and she is mostly weeping throughout the poem. Her flight from the court is explained from lines 9 to 20; Mordred has been trying to expose Guinevere and Lancelot and his success brought war between Arthur and Lancelot. Portrayed at the beginning sitting "betwixt her best/Enid, and hisseme Vivien, of her court/The wisest and the worst" (26-29), she has dreams about the exposure of her affair with Lancelot and tries to push him away (87-91, 94); however, they still plan a secret meeting, supposedly their last. Vivien is the one who will betray her; "Vivien, lurking, heard. /She told Sir Mordred." (97-98). Their rendezvous results in the exposure of the Queen and Lancelot. They leave together; however, they must separate as Lancelot knows the consequences he will have to face for betraying Arthur. The Queen then arrives in Amesbury, where the nuns are willing to give her sanctuary without any question asked:

And when she came to Amesbury she spake/There to the nuns, and said, 'Mine enemies/Pursue me, but, O peaceful Sisterhood,/Receive, and yield me sanctuary, nor ask/Her name to whom ye yield it, till her time/To tell you: ' and her beauty, grace and power,/Wrought as a charm upon them, and they spared/To ask it (137-144).

Upon her arrival at the convent, a young maiden attends to her and sings while the Queen weeps (163-164). Alarmed by the tears of the unrecognized Guinevere, the maiden tries to cheer her up by reassuring her that her acts, how grave they might be, are probably not as grave as the betrayal of the Queen. Thus follow a dialogue between the maiden and the Queen, in which the maiden judges the acts of the Queen and blames her for the downfall of Arthur and the destruction of the Round Table. Guinevere's character through this conversation gradually evolves from sadness to anger. She qualifies the discourse of the maiden as "innocent talk" (212), "jealous prate" (223) before her tone evolves from

"bitterly" (269) to "mournful" (339); finally their conversation ends with the Queen's outburst (354-365). The maiden had "like many other babblers, hurt/<sup>o</sup>Whom she would soothe, and harmed where she would heal;" (352-353); however Guinevere knew she had only spoken the truth.

Guinevere finds comfort in her memories of Lancelot. She compares her first meeting with Lancelot and their travel together with her first encounter with Arthur:

[...] in which she saw him first, when Lancelot came,/  
Reputed the best knight and goodliest man,/  
Ambassador, to lead her to his lord/  
Arthur, and led her forth, and far ahead/  
Of his and her retinue moving, they,/  
Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love/  
And sport and tilts and pleasure [...]/  
Rode under groves that looked a paradise/  
Of blossom, ever sheets of hyacinth/  
That seemed the heavens upbreking through the earth [...]/  
Came to that point where she first saw the King/  
ride toward her from the city, sighed to find/  
Her journey done, glanced at [Arthur], thought him cold,/  
High, self-contained, and passionless, not like him,/  
Not like my Lancelot' (382-404).

However, the major difference between Tennyson and Malory is in the following event in the poem; King Arthur is still alive and comes to confront his queen at the convent (408-576). During the time of the confrontation, Queen Guinevere "[is] guilt-stricken, [she] grovels on the floor at Arthur's feet, while he, depicted as a stern Victorian patriarch, delivers [a] crushing rebuke" (Hopkins, 6). After this confrontation, Arthur blesses Queen Guinevere and forgives her; the Queen realizes then that she will never see him again and tries to reach out to him, unsuccessfully: "Gone, my lord the King,/  
My own true lord! how dare I call him mine?" (Tennyson, 611-612). She hopes she will be able to stay by his side in their afterlife (629-633) and admits Arthur's superiority compared to other men:

I thought I could not breathe in that fine air/  
That pure severity of perfect light-/  
I yearned for warmth and colour which I found/  
In Lancelot-now I see thee what thou art,/  
Thou art the highest and most human too,/  
Not Lancelot,

*nor another. Is there none/Will tell the King I love him though so late? [...] Ah my God,/What might I not have made of thy fair world,/Had I but loved thy highest creature here?/It was my duty to have loved the highest:/It surely was my profit had I known:/It would have been my pleasure had I seen (649-654).*

*The nuns hear the Queen's confession and start weeping with her. She goes on living with them, is named Abbess, and dies at the convent:*

*they took her to themselves; and she/Still hoping, fearing 'is it yet too late?'/Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess died./Then she, for her good deeds and her pure life,/And for the power of ministracion in her,/And likewise for the high rank she had borne,/Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived/For three brief years, and there, and Abbess, past/To where beyond these voices there is peace (684-692).*

*Tennyson's Idylls of the King can be considered as the last major Arthurian work before the Arthurian literature of the twentieth century and the apparition of Arthurian legends on screen.*

## Chapter 4: Guinevere in the twentieth century

*The Arthurian literature of the twentieth century is focused in the role of women in the Arthurian tale. The women (especially) are not represented as romantic figure anymore. They have power and some of them (like Morgan) are seeking for more. The question of religion is also an important theme.*

4.1. Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* vs. Miles's *Guenevere, Queen of the Summer Country*.

*Bradley's The Mists of Avalon (1982) is "one of the most famous retellings of Arthurian legend" (Schellenberg, 1). This novel offers an adaptation of Arthurian legend, in which women have important roles in the destiny of King Arthur and his Knights. According to Schellenberg's review of the novel, it contains some flaws, one of them being that "the book*

sets out to focus on the lives of the women and it only does a halfhearted job"; there is very little focus on Guinevere (Gwenhwyfar). Another problem pointed out by Schellenberg is the importance given to the question of religion, which adds confusion to the already heavy plot. Religion seems to be a recurring theme in twentieth century Arthurian literature, as it is also central in Miles's Guenevere.

Narrated through Morgaine's eyes, Gwenhwyfar is portrayed as the polar opposite of Morgaine (Stefansdóttir, 24). Gwenhwyfar is "narrow minded, timid, and afraid to take hold of her own womanly power" (Stefansdóttir, 21). When she fails to produce a child, she is convinced that it is a punishment of God: firstly for the presence of pagan elements (Morgaine's religion), and secondly, for her forbidden love for Lancelot (Morgaine's object of desire) (Stefansdóttir, 23). There is an analogy between Lancelot and Guinevere on one side, and between Avalon and Morgaine. When the relations between Guinevere and Morgaine become hostile, so do the relations between Lancelot and Avalon. The novel ends with Lancelot's death and with Morgaine's realization that the Goddess she believes in is represented by the Virgin Mary in Christianity.

In Miles's Guenevere, Queen of the Summer Country (1999), Guenevere is the daughter of the Queen of the Summer Country. When her mother dies, she is next in line to succeed her, as the royal line in the Summer Country is passed through the female line. Her religion is the Old Religion (the pagan religion in Bradley), and she is against Christianity. Before accessing her throne, she is asked to choose a champion, and her cousin Malgaunt<sup>15</sup> is the favorite. However, he inspires her repulsion, and it is Arthur, disguised as a Golden God, that comes to her rescue. She is very attracted to Arthur and they are both in love with each other. She sees in Arthur her savior, and identifies him with "the

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15 See note 4.



Lord of Gold" (Miles, 89), "the Lord of Light" (Miles, 150), or "the Shining Ones who made the world" (Miles, 150). She pushes Arthur to a greater destiny, and is portrayed as very ambitious herself:

*"Have you thought that together we could build something greater yet? That it lies in our power to turn back the tide of lawlessness that threatens our land, and bring back the glory it once knew? [...] That we could make all these scattered kingdoms into one, and turn this country into an island of the mighty once again? [...] That we are destined to become High King and Queen?" (Miles, 115-116)*

There is a contrast with her representation in earlier work; after being crowned Queen, she travels with Arthur back to Camelot and is disappointed by the end of the journey (in Tennyson, she is disappointed to meet him). Only a few days after meeting him, Guenevere marries Arthur; when the Lady of Avalon asks Guenevere if she is sure, she replies that Arthur is her true and only love (136). It is hard for the lady to believe it because the Queen of the Summer Country is usually married with her first champion, and takes her future champions as lovers. Guenevere says that she will abandon this tradition for Arthur as she is certain of her love for him. The night after their wedding, they have a passionate embrace (150) before Arthur goes to war. Guenevere has some bad feelings which are often resulting with headaches and her fainting; these bad feelings often involves Arthur's sisters. However, for the sake of Arthur's reunion with his lost mother and his two sisters, she keeps her uneasiness to herself or sometimes shares it with her maid Ida.

The major differences between the Guinevere portrayed by Bradley and the one by Miles, apart from their religion, lie in the love that Guinevere has for Arthur and her involvement in Arthur's affairs of state. In Miles's novel, Guenevere wants to protect Arthur at all costs, which is why she gives him her mother's armor:

*I know that I will never lead an army in battle as my mother did [...] but that is not why I am giving up my birthright to you. It's because there is a life now that is dearer to me than mine. You are my life. And tomorrow when we marry, you will be mine, and I yours, for ever and a day (Miles, 142).*

*Guenevere has a son with Arthur, who will be raised in the Christian religion (as Arthur was). Guenevere is very disappointed as she wanted a daughter first, someone to succeed her as Queen of the Summer Country. However, Amir will be Arthur and Guenevere's only child. Guenevere is also afraid of some of the other male characters in Miles's novel. First there is her cousin Malgaunt, who looks at her with a hungry lust in his eyes (Miles, 75). Then there is Merlin, who has the power to see the future and knows that Guenevere will provoke Arthur's downfall. He says that "no girl from the Summer Country could forget her Mother-faith, her body-hunger, her woman's will. She would come between [him] and Arthur, and between Arthur and his destiny. And she would break his heart" (Miles, 44). She is also against Christianity, and the Abbot is against her and the way of life of her country. He describes her as:*

*a young Queen, bold and beautiful. Doubtless a shameless pagan as her mother had been, reveling in her freedom, flaunting her band of knights. Knights? [...] Par amours and bed warmers, male concubines, warrior thugs to kill or pleasure her at her command. And this -- this thing of iniquity to become Queen? (Miles, 46)*

*Miles's portrayal of Guenevere as Queen of the Summer Country, Arthur's wife and lover, Amir's mother, and her abandonment of her Mother-right will not last for long. When she hears the name Lancelot, her body shivers and she is reminded of the skepticism of the Lady of Avalon on her monogamy. After meeting with him she understands the meaning of the Lady of Avalon's words. With Arthur slowly uniting the kingdom under his and Guenevere's rules, and after fighting the Saxons, Guenevere and Arthur are proclaimed High King and Queen. Miles's novel is the first of a*

trilogy on Queen Guenevere; it offers an insight on Arthur and Guenevere's early years together, before the affair between Guenevere and Lancelot, which is rarely focused on in Arthurian literature.

#### 4.2. Guinevere on screen

The novel *The Mists of Avalon* was adapted on screen in a TV mini-series of the same name. However, according to Schellenberg, the

adaptation is quite a muddle. It's saddled with all of the weaknesses of Bradley's book, and falls into a number of traps of its own making [...] Things start off promisingly, with an efficient setup of the plot, and a clear sense of how the characters are related. Some nice touches elucidate the medieval setting. But as the story progresses, the epic story gets lost in, among other things, long moments of boredom, gaps in the chronology, and uneven aging effects for the actors (1).

There are not a lot of movies focusing only on the role of women in Arthurian legends. Some movies retrace the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, among them *Knights of the Round Table* (1953), *Excalibur* (1981) and *First Knight* (1995). These movies represent Guinevere as a woman conscious of the problems surrounding her, who marries Arthur for the sake of her people, and who falls in love with Lancelot after he rescued her from being kidnapped. In *First Knight*, their adulterous relation is discovered by Arthur and Lancelot is banished, while Guinevere has to face trial in Camelot.

Another movie involving the romance between Guinevere and Lancelot is *A Knight in Camelot* (1998), where Dr. Vivien Morgan (from the United States) travels through time<sup>16</sup> and experiences life in Camelot under the reign of

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16 The first movie that involves travelling through time to end up in Camelot is *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1964). Another one would be *A Kid in King Arthur's Court* (1995).

*King Arthur. The Guinevere represented in this movie wants to get rid of Vivien, who knows of course about Lancelot and Guinevere's affair; Guinevere is portrayed as a cruel and ignorant woman. Two movies King Arthur (2004) and Pendragon, Sword of his Father (2008) show Guinevere as part of the native people, and Arthur as a Roman descendant. In both movies, her father taught her to fight and she is very capable with a bow.*

*Finally, the TV series Merlin was broadcast for the first time in September 2008. Three seasons have been broadcasted with a total of thirty-nine episodes. The writers of the episodes mixed the Arthurian legends and added a few innovations. One of the major innovations in the TV series is Guinevere's or Gwen's social standings. She is Morgana's<sup>17</sup> maid. She is the daughter of the blacksmith and during the first few episodes, she seems interested in Merlin (she even kisses him in Season 1, Episode 4). She is also a very good friend of Morgana; she is her confidante. She is imprisoned on suspicion of practicing magic, and her father dies due to Uther's hate of magic, his paranoia that he is surrounded by evil sorcerers, and incapacity to make rational judgments. Gwen is represented as the flirty type; first it is Merlin, and when she meets Lancelot, she flirts with him (Season 1 Episode 5). When Merlin makes a remark about her interest in Lancelot, she declares that he is "not her type" (Season 1 Episode 5), to which Merlin retorts that she would not know her type, even if he was standing next to her. He finally asks her the ultimate question: if she had to choose between Arthur and Lancelot, which one would she choose?*

*As the daughter of the blacksmith, she knows how to wield swords and repair armor. She is honest, and lectures Arthur about his behavior. After her father's death, she admits that she does not care if Uther dies; however, even if she was given the choice, she would not participate in his murder, claiming it would make her as bad as him. In the last episode,*

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<sup>17</sup> In Arthurian literature, this character is better known as Morgan, le Fay or Morgaine.

she attends on Arthur, who is injured and close to death and she tells him that he needs to live for Camelot and for the great things he is destined to accomplish. She follows Merlin's belief that Arthur will become a great king if he acts less like a 'brat' and more like a gentleman (Season 1, Episode 10). The first season introduces Guinevere as a servant girl and not a queen or a noble woman. She is honest with Arthur even though it might bring her troubles. She seems, however, to have a soft heart and fall in love easily. It takes her a while to realize the nature of her relationship with Merlin (friendship and not love), and she is more attracted to Lancelot than Arthur.

The second season will see her love for Lancelot grow stronger, until she realizes Arthur's feelings for her (Season 2, Episode 5). The basis for the love triangle is established, and at the end of the third season, Arthur and Guinevere reveal their love for each other in front of a hurt Lancelot (Season 3, Episode 13). The character of Gwen evolves from Morgana's maid to Arthur's lover and possible future queen. At the beginning, she was impressed by Merlin's way of standing up against Arthur's abusive power, and slowly she also started to reprimand Arthur on his behavior. She is a loyal friend to Merlin and when Morgana betrays Uther and Arthur, she stays by Morgana's side as a spy before helping a knight escape from Morgana's death judgment (Season 3 Episode 12), and joining Arthur's rebellious and loyal friends. Her character evolves from a shy and ignorant maid to a faithful friend and a possible future queen.

## Conclusion

To answer to Hopkins's question "Who then was Guinevere?" we need to go back to the early Middle Ages and the Celtic literature. Queen Guinevere is portrayed mostly as Arthur's wife, a woman easy to kidnap, and an adulteress (Mordred's lover in Monmouth). However, through the twelfth and thirteenth century, more importance is accorded to her role at Arthur's court, especially in her role as a judge in love cases, and there is a shift of interest in her lovers; her lover is sometimes identified as Yder or Gawain, until a general agreement was made on Lancelot.

In Malory's and Tennyson's approach to Arthurian legend, Guinevere was labeled with the words 'weak', 'selfish' and 'adulterous'. The general convention at the time was to write about the Knights of the Round Table, focusing on their heroic deeds and their love affairs. As demonstrated in *Miles*, there is more to the character of Guinevere than her wedding with Arthur or her infidelity with Lancelot. Guinevere is a woman of power, with goals for herself and Arthur. She is a quick judge of characters and is careful in her decision. She really is in love with Arthur, but his constant absence drives them apart.

Finally, since the invention of the cinema, a lot of novels have been adapted into films. Arthurian novels are often the basis for movies. On screen, the character of Guinevere has as much different origins and different faces as in literature. The late TV series *Merlin* offers a fresh perspective on the character of Guinevere while retaining old Arthurian legends and tradition. Guinevere is a character with a complicated heart; though she is in love with Arthur, she is fated to betray him some day.

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