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A STUDY OF GUENEVERE
IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of English

by
Carol Ann Pilon

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
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To My Husband

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will examine Guenevere as she appears in the Middle English romances, including Malory's Morte Darthur.¹ Chapter I will provide introductory material to and will serve as a framework for the remaining two chapters. It will offer a suitable definition of 'romance' and will outline the general features of the genre. Characterization in ME romances and, more specifically, the characterization of women will be discussed. Within this framework the ensuing discussion of Guenevere in the romances will become more meaningful.

In Chapter II I will examine Guenevere as she appears in nine ME romances, namely: The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Arthour and Merlin, Merlin, The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the alliterative Morte Arthure, Launfal,

¹The few major studies on this topic are: T.P. Cross and W.A. Nitze, Lancelot and Guenevere: A Study on the Origins of Courtly Love (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1930); K.G.T. Webster, Guinevere, A Study of Her Abductions (Milton, Mass.: Turtle Press, 1951); P. DiPasquale, Jr., "Malory's Guinevere: Epic Queen, Romantic Heroine and Tragic Mistress," Bucknell Review, 16(2), 1968, 86-102.

Sir Launfal, and the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur.² The romances examined do not necessarily have anything in common beyond the facts that they contain Arthurian matter and present portraits of Guenevere. I have not discussed the romances chronologically but, rather, I have grouped them in such a way as to facilitate my discussion of Guenevere.

In Chapter III I will examine Guenevere as she appears in Malory's Morte Darthur.³ Here we see her in various roles; particularly we see her as the lover of Lancelot and as Arthur's wife and queen. This Chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings of Chapters II and III.

²The texts of the romances used in this thesis are: The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, in Middle English Verse Romances, ed. D.B. Sands (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), pp. 323-347; Of Arthour and of Merlin, ed. O.D. Macrae-Gibson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), EETS 268, vol. 1; Merlin, ed. H.B. Wheatley, intro. by W.E. Mead (1865; rpt. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1899), EETS, OS 10, 21, 36, 112, in 2 vols.; The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, ed. R.J. Gates (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1969); Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 2nd ed. rev. by N. Davis; Morte Arthure, ed. E. Brock (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1865), EETS, OS 8; Launfal, ed. G.L. Kittredge, Amer. J. of Phil., 10(1), 1889, 1-33; Sir Launfal, in Middle English Metrical Romances, ed. W.H. French and C.B. Hale (1930; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), vol. 1, pp. 345-380; Le Morte Arthur, ed. J.D. Bruce (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1903), EETS 88.

³The text used in this thesis is Malory Works, ed. E. Vinaver (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 2nd ed.

CHAPTER I

THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

Guenevere appears in ten works in Middle English that have been classified as romances. These are The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Arthour and Merlin, Merlin, The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the alliterative Morte Arthure, Launfal, Sir Launfal, the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur and Malory's Morte Darthur.¹ Although Guenevere appears in other works too, for example the chronicles, we are interested in her in this present study only as a romance character.

The term 'romance' has had many meanings,² but for

¹They are all listed as romances in J.B. Severs, A Manual of the Writings in Middle English (New Haven, Conn.: Conn. Acad. of Arts and Sciences, 1967), Fascicule I Romances, pp. 13-16.

²'Romance' was first used to describe the vernacular language of France, as opposed to Latin. Later, it was used to refer to works, particularly histories, written in the French language. Still later, it came to describe tales of knights and their adventures, regardless of the language in which they were written. (See Dorothy Everett, "A Characterization of the English Medieval Romances," in Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 2-3; A.B. Taylor, An Introduction to Medieval Romance (London: Heath Cranton Ltd., 1930), p. 1; N.E. Griffin, "The Definition of Romance," PMLA, 38 (part I), 1923, 55n. 3; A.C. Gibbs, Middle English Romances (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1966), p. 6; and O.E.D. s.v., ROMANCE sb¹1.)

our purposes it is necessary to consider the meaning it has when it describes a genre popular in medieval England.³ Defining this genre has long troubled scholars. First, the term has become somewhat of a hold-all to label works of very diverse subject matters, themes, narrative approaches, prosody and even length. Second, differing criteria have been adopted by different scholars in their definitions. Even the number of extant ME romances is a matter of dispute.⁴ Sands summarizes the dilemma when he says: "However perceptive an observation may be, there is always lurking behind it, like an unexorcised ghost, the inevitable and disconcerting exception".⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, however, a fairly traditional definition has been used,

³The distinction between medieval romance in general and ME romance in particular must be made. French medieval romances, for example, are different in many respects from the ME romances. Some of these differences are that English romances are more concerned with adventure than love, which is the major concern of the French romances; English heroes are usually more devoted to the state than with serving or wooing women; the English romances often lack coherence, contain errors in detail and rely heavily on sensationalism. On the other hand, English romances are usually more direct and sincere than their French counterparts. See D. Mehl, The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 2-6; W.P. Ker, English Literature Medieval (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1912), pp. 102-111; Taylor, pp. 148-165.

⁴Mehl, p. vi, estimates around one hundred; Severs, pp. 13-16, lists 116 (excepting Chaucer's and Gower's Tales).

⁵D.B. Sands, Middle English Verse Romances (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), p. 1.

namely that given by the Oxford English Dictionary. Its definition of 'romance' is: "A tale in verse, embodying the adventures of some hero of chivalry, esp. of those of the great cycles of mediaeval legend, and belonging both in matter and form to the ages of knighthood; also, in later use, a prose tale of a similar character".⁶

We might do well at this point to consider the romances listed above in the light of this definition. Most of those listed are clearly tales which embody the adventures of a hero of chivalry. However, there are some exceptions. The first part of The Awntyrs, for example, does not deal with the adventures of a hero of chivalry. Rather, it has affinities with the dream vision genre and with the tradition of giving advice to the king or royal family. These aspects of the work will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter II. The second part of The Awntyrs, though, fits the definition of a romance. A knight, Sir Galeron, enters Arthur's court to challenge Gawain to fight, hoping to right an injustice done to him. He receives justice through subsequent acts of Guenevere, Arthur and Gawain.

⁶O.E.D. s.v., ROMANCE sb^{II}2. There have been many other definitions suggested by scholars. See, for example, G. Kane, Middle English Literature (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1951), p. 2; B.A. Rosenberg, "The Morphology of the Middle English Metrical Romances," Journal of Popular Culture, 1(1), 1967, 70; A.C. Baugh, "The Middle English Romance, Some Questions of Creation, Presentation, and Preservation," Speculum, 42(1), 1967, 1-2; Sands, p. 1; and Griffin, 55.

Merlin, another of the works listed above, strongly resembles a chronicle for it relates 'historical' events from the time of the death of Constans to the betrothal of Arthur and Guenevere, followed by the defeat of Rion. It does not deal with a single hero's knightly adventures. Arthour and Merlin is similar in many respects to Merlin⁷ except that it continues the narrative up to the point where Arthur subdues the Saxons. This work, as well, does not deal with the adventures of only one major hero. However, those parts of Merlin and Arthour and Merlin which deal with Arthur's 'history', the parts which contain portraits of Guenevere, are closer to the definition of romance. They both describe Arthur's rise to power through a series of battles. Finally, the alliterative Morte Arthure seems to bear more resemblance to tragedy or even epic poetry⁸ than to romance but, again, that it has romance qualities in parts cannot be denied. Two passages in particular which meet the requirements of the definition given above are Arthur's slaying of the giant of Mont St. Michel and Gawain's

⁷ Both poems are based on the Vulgate story and this explains their similarity. See Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Legends," in Severs Manual, pp. 48-49.

⁸ For a complete discussion of the Morte Arthure see William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1960). Ker says "Romance in many varieties is to be found inherent in Epic and in Tragedy", W.P. Ker, Epic and Romance (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1922), 2nd ed., p. 321; see also Kane, pp. 69-73.

adventure when he meets Priamus.

Although to define 'romance' presents difficulty and uncertainty, the underlying purpose of the romances is generally agreed upon. The intention of the romances was, first and foremost, to entertain.⁹ In medieval England the demand for new and exciting stories ran high. The ME romances helped to meet this demand by telling stirring stories of knightly adventure. In an important paper, "A Characterization of the English Medieval Romances", Dorothy Everett describes medieval romances as "stories of adventure" peopled by knights, famous kings and distressed ladies, motivated by love, religious faith or merely the desire for adventures.¹⁰

With regard to religion, Taylor identifies as characteristic of romance the emphasis placed on the external phases of religious duty, the presentation of men as sinners who must expiate their sins before regeneration was possible,¹¹

⁹Exceptions to this view are held by Sarah F. Barrow, The Medieval Society Romances (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1924), esp. pp. 32ff and pp. 73ff and E. Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), esp. Chapter II. Romance-writers themselves, on occasion, refer to the didactic or moral intent of their works.

¹⁰Everett, p. 3.

¹¹The emergence of a new character after the expiation of sin will be discussed later, especially in regard to Guenevere in Le Morte Arthur and Malory's Morte Darthur.

and the many references to pilgrimages and crusades.¹²

Though his comments have some truth in them, they are misleading when applied to the ME romances at least. For the majority of the ME romances, religion is not central in the plot or theme.

Love is not greatly significant in the ME romances. It is frequently the nominal reason for a knight to undertake adventures, but the romance writer is invariably more interested in the adventures than in the emotion that caused them. Virtually none of the psychology of love so frequent in early French romances is carried over to the English romances. It is not surprising, therefore, that only three ME romances celebrate the two most famous medieval lovers, Tristram and Lancelot, while romances in which the usually chaste Gawain is the hero number ten. This seems to suggest that love between men and women is not, in itself, a major theme in ME romance. The theme of the love between Lancelot and Guenevere, in fact, became famous and popular in England only when it came to be regarded as tragic.

By far the most significant motivating force in ME romances is the desire for adventure. The reason for this is not that the English romance writers were incapable of reproducing the rather abstract ideas of fine amour which

¹²Taylor, p. 169. In "Sir Gowghter" the devil child eats food only from the mouths of dogs by way of penance. Guy of Warwick undertakes a pilgrimage to atone for the deaths he has caused.

they found in the French romances,¹³ but rather that the aim of the English romance writer was "to record the deeds of a brave man, to relate how he served the State, or won his wife by daring exploits".¹⁴ Through their adventures, knights reveal their chivalric ideals of courtesy, loyalty, courage, service to the oppressed, to women and to the Church, and the necessity to abide by vows. These features of the ME romances are, of course, intimately linked to the two motive forces already mentioned, religion and love, but the emphasis is usually placed on the adventure itself.¹⁵

The total view of life presented in the ME romances, in terms of the adventures themselves and in terms of the heroes as individuals, was essentially an ideal one.¹⁶ Everett says "that they provided an escape from the failures or partial successes of life as it was lived by showing . . . that life idealized".¹⁷ Taylor claims: "Medieval romance. . .

¹³See Ker, English Literature Medieval, pp. 102-103; Cf. Taylor, p. 157.

¹⁴Taylor, p. 163.

¹⁵Gibbs, pp. 7-8.

¹⁶See, for example, Mehl, pp. 4-5 and Taylor, p. 210, who emphasizes that "the world of medieval romance is remote from life".

¹⁷Everett, p. 8.

usually mirrors only the brightest aspects of life: the chivalry between knight and knight, the loyal devotion of vassals, and warfare which has some ostensibly good purpose".¹⁸ Although the settings for the adventures often included aspects of everyday life, like hunting, food, armour and dress, these were embroidered with every splendour the writer's imagination could create. Furthermore, the settings for adventures were strange and exotic places: a Sultan's palace, the world of the Green Knight, ancient Greece or Rome, a dreamland, or the Britain of Arthur, "a Britain which has lost its historical personality".¹⁹ The adventures which befell a knight brave enough to travel through these lands were equally strange - rescuing a besieged damsel, overthrowing a cruel ruler, freeing an oppressed people, overcoming wicked sorcerers and giants - and all of this single-handed. By these adventures the perfection of the knight, already guessed at by the medieval audience or modern reader, was proven.

We have already pointed out that the purpose of the ME romances was to entertain, that this purpose was fulfilled by the telling of stories dealing with knightly adventures, and that the total view of life presented was an ideal one.

¹⁸Taylor, p. 202.

¹⁹Gibbs, p. 10; see also Ker, Epic and Romance, pp. 328-334.

Bearing all of these things in mind, we should not be surprised to find that romance characters are themselves idealized. This idealization is achieved by the 'heightening' of characters, by the simultaneous exaggeration and simplification of human characteristics, and results, inevitably, in simplified character-drawing.

In ME romances, therefore, every man is either black or white, a good man or a bad man, a saint or a devil, a virtuous hero or a villain.²⁰ The ordinary tones of human nature are lacking; "there is very little room . . . for the comfortable, smudgy greys of ordinary life".²¹ Poetic justice reigns supreme throughout the ME romances. The man who disregards knightly duty is labelled a villain from the onset and is, in due time, killed or disgraced. Innocence is always vindicated and triumphant (see Athelston, Emaré, Havelok, Chevalere Assigne), while the true Christian inevitably gets the better of all evil-doers and Saracens (see King Horn, Guy of Warwick, Roland and Vernagu). Most romances end happily, with a wedding, reunion or reconciliation.²²

²⁰See J.E. Stevens, Medieval Romance (London: Hutchinson Univ. Lib., 1973), pp. 169-170; Sands, p. 7; Everett, p. 9.

²¹Stevens, p. 169.

²²Everett, p. 9.

The simplified character-drawing in the ME romances is occasionally condemned by scholars. Sands, for example, claims that "most romance heroes and heroines tend to be 'flat' - that is, they lack inner contradictions, ethical standards based on elements other than convention and lip service, true inner turmoil (despite their excessive displays of grief or devotion)".²³ Ker adds, speaking of romances in general: "The romantic schools, following on the earlier heroic literature, generally substituted a more shallow, formal, limited set of characters for the larger and freer portraits of the heroic age, making up for this defect in the personages by extravagance in other respects--in the incidents, the phrasing, the sentimental pathos, the rhetorical conceits."²⁴

The 'heightening' of characters in ME romances and the resulting simplified character-drawing may, indeed, produce "flat" or "shallow" characters. In general, however, simplified characterization provides all that is required for what are, after all, tales of knightly adventure. Having recognized the limitations of the ME romances in terms of their purpose and the total view of life presented in them, we must also recognize that simply-drawn men and women are adequate.

²³Sands, p. 7.

²⁴Ker, Epic and Romance, p. 354.

Because only simplified character-drawing was required by the romance writer, much of the characterization in ME romances is accomplished by the use of stock figures. The False Steward and the Faithful Squire are two well-known male characters. Women characters, also, appear in stock roles. Examples include the Cruel Mother-in-law (see Chevalere Assigne, Emaré, and the Constans stories), the Cruel or Jealous Stepmother (see The Seven Sages of Rome, William of Palerne and Generides), the Chaste Duchess or Queen (see Erle of Tolous, Octavian, and Sir Triamour), the Reliable Confidante or Resourceful Maidservant (see King Horn, William of Palerne, Generides, Sir Degare, Lay le Freine and Malory's Morte Darthur), and the Innocent Persecuted Woman (see Emaré, Florence of Rome and the Constans and Griselda stories).

Guenevere herself appears in many ME romances in stock roles. In romances where she is the mistress of Lancelot, she is a courtly heroine. This means that she might be capricious and whimsical in her demands; she might even be cruel. On the other hand, she might be a 'benevolent dictator', rewarding her faithful vassal handsomely if he carried out her commands. Furthermore, if the lady at court held a high feudal position, she often became an arbitress of manners and an exemplum of courtesy. She might also be married and, if so, demonstrates concern for the secrecy of her adulterous relationship.

Unlike the idealized woman found in a few French romances, like Chrétien's Lancelot, she becomes in most ME romances, if not humanized, at least less of a goddess. In some cases she has family and friends; she speaks and acts. She is beautiful,²⁵ but aloof. Though she may be central to the action of a romance, she is basically passive. Probably her most important quality is her inspiration of men to be their best whether in battle or at court.

In some romances, Guenevere is an evil woman. She is presented as a destroyer of good knights and as a faithless wife. In fact, in Le Morte Arthur and in Malory's Morte Darthur, she may even be regarded as a kind of Eve, responsible for the fall of Arthur's great kingdom. In other words she is drawn in the tradition which saw woman

²⁵ Beauty is one aspect of the woman in ME romance that is often taken for granted. D.S. Brewer points out in "The Ideal of Feminine Beauty in Medieval Literature, Especially 'Harley Lyrics', Chaucer and Some Elizabethans," MLR, 50(3), 1955, 257-269, that nearly all medieval descriptions of beautiful women describe the 'ideal' of feminine beauty. The description of this 'ideal' is based on the description by Maximian in the sixth century: the woman he describes has golden hair, contrasting black eyebrows, slightly swelling lips and a milky white complexion. This description formed the basis for descriptions of women through to the end of the sixteenth century. Matthew of Vendôme, in his description of Helen of Troy, adds more details: her neck is long and smooth, her shoulders radiant and well-spaced, her breasts are small, her figure incomparable; she has smooth hands, white legs and short feet; her waist is small, her belly swelling, and her arms and fingers long. Grey eyes were another detail added to the ideally beautiful woman, by Chrétien de Troyes and Benoit de Ste-Maure. Idleness and Fraunchyse in The Romance of the Rose, for example, both have grey eyes.

as the seductress, the scourge of man, and the cause of his downfall. Antifeminism is not a purely medieval phenomenon,²⁶ though it did flourish in medieval England. Utley has examined some of the motive forces behind the popularity of antifeminist literature in this period of time and suggested that they include classical literature,²⁷ sex antagonism,²⁸ and jest, the "civilized veneer for sex antagonism".²⁹ He writes: "Man's satire on women is one of his prerogatives, a sign of physical snobbery which has not yet failed. Without it, without the ambiguous and jesting battle of courtship, the affairs of love would be in a parlous state".³⁰

The Christian Middle Ages added a further cornerstone to the tradition of antifeminism by interpreting literally the biblical story of man's downfall through Eve. This

²⁶See L.J. Friedman, "'Jean de Meung,'" Antifeminism, and "Bourgeois Realism," M. Phil., 57(1), 1959, 13-23; Katharine M. Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1966), pp. 15-19; St. Jerome, "Treatise Against Jovinianus," in The Principal Works of St. Jerome, trans. W.H. Fremantle (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1893), vol. 6 in A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, eds. H. Wace and P. Schaff, 2nd ed., pp. 346-417.

²⁷F.L. Utley, The Crooked Rib (1944; rpt. New York: Octagon Books, 1970), pp. 23-24.

²⁸Utley, p. 25.

²⁹Utley, p. 27.

³⁰Utley, p. 25.

view of women's inherent falseness and corruption is basic to much medieval literature, and can be summarized by Tertullian's invective: "You are the devil's gateway. . . you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert - that is, death - even the Son of God had to die".³¹

Antifeminism led to the presentation of a certain kind of woman in ME romances. At her worst, she was a monstrous, unscrupulous woman. She replied to rebukes and insults with cruelty and vindictiveness. Often, she was jealous and treated the object of her jealousy with scheming maliciousness, stopping at nothing to get revenge. Also, she was often lecherous. In some cases she was a woman who made bold advances to knights who were usually of great renown. She regarded the seduction and destruction of great knights as conquests. If she was married, she was a faithless wife who would treacherously betray her husband. Often, she was an enchantress who used her magical powers with evil intent.

Guenevere is also presented in some ME romances as

³¹Rogers, p. 15.

a good wife and a gracious woman. Good wives³² are frequently found in ME romances as in the Constans and Griselda stories, King Horn, Sir Orfeo, Erle of Tolous, Athelston and Havelok the Dane. Their main characteristics are loyalty and devotion toward their husbands. In addition, they are usually brave, wise and virtuous. The gracious woman is also frequently found in ME romances. She is usually a hostess and brings refinement and the social graces to what might otherwise be a barbarous world. Though she is usually passive and inconspicuous, she is recognized as a necessary adjunct to a royal court. She is usually generous in giving gifts and praise. Another characteristic, which she shares with other role-characters, is that she inspires and encourages knights in battle, though she is usually left at home to pine and, in some cases, to grieve the loss of a loved one.

In some ME romances recognizing the appropriate stock figures is enough to account for Guenevere's portrayal. But in others she is less stereotyped and more a real character. In Le Morte Arthur and in Malory's Morte Darthur, Guenevere is a developing character. In these two works she rejects concern for worldly happiness, a concern made

³²For an interesting treatise on wifely virtues see The Goodman of Paris: A Treatise on Moral and Domestic Economy by a Citizen of Paris, trans. Eileen E. Power (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1928).

evident throughout the works, in favour of concern for the well-being of her spiritual self. She comes to recognize her faults and to accept the blame for her role in the destruction of Arthur's kingdom. Her confessions in each case are followed by repentance and penance. Her atonement is publicly recognized when, in death, she resumes her rightful position, buried beside Arthur.

CHAPTER II

GUENEVERE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES

Guenevere appears in nine Middle English romances in addition to Malory's Morte Darthur. These romances are: The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Arthour and Merlin, Merlin, The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, the alliterative Morte Arthure,¹ Launfal, Sir Launfal, and the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur. A study of these works will show that Guenevere can appear in a variety of roles. For example, she appears as a gracious queen in The Wedding, Arthour and Merlin, Merlin and the second part of The Awntyrs. She is a treacherous queen and the lover of Mordred in the alliterative Morte Arthure. Guenevere is presented as a jealous, malicious queen in Launfal and Sir Launfal. In the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur, she is the lover of Lancelot. Finally, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and in the first part of The Awntyrs, Guenevere appears rather as a device or symbol than as an active character.

¹A brief examination of Guenevere in Layamon's Brut will also be presented. The influence of the chronicles, such as Layamon's, can be seen in the alliterative Morte Arthure, and therefore some account of Guenevere as she appears in that chronicle is required here.

In The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, composed in the East Midlands about 1450, Arthur, hunting in Inglewood Forest,² and dressed only in green hunting apparel, leaves his retinue to stalk a great hart. While standing beside the slain deer, he is confronted by Sir Gromer Somer Joure, fully armed. Gromer threatens to kill Arthur for giving his lands to Gawain. Arthur's life is spared, but he is forced to promise to return similarly clad in one year to answer the question of what women love best. Arthur confides in Gawain and both journey throughout the world to find the required answer. When they return, Arthur again enters Inglewood Forest where he meets a loathly lady. She promises to give Arthur the correct answer to Gromer's question, but only if Gawain will wed her. Gawain unselfishly agrees to this and Arthur's life is saved. Gawain and Ragnell, the loathly lady, are married in great ceremony and, on their wedding night, Gawain's kiss transforms Ragnell into a beautiful woman. She gives Gawain the choice of having her beautiful by day or by night and Gawain, by leaving the choice up to her, gives her sovereignty over him. As a reward, Ragnell chooses to remain beautiful always, and the entire court rejoices at the outcome. Ragnell bears Gawain a son,

²Ralph Hanna, III, "The Awntyrs off Arthure: An Interpretation," MLQ, 21, 1970, 281. Hanna claims that Inglewood Forest in the Tarn Wadling area is a place "with spectral or magical connotations".

Gyngolyn, and they live in bliss for five years.

The theme of The Wedding is essentially the test of loyalty between men. Gawain, the major character, reveals his loyalty to Arthur by doing everything in his power to save Arthur's life. Gawain exclaims, upon hearing of the loathly lady's request:

"I shalle wed her and wed her again,
 Though she were a fend, . . .
 Or elles were not I your frende" (ll. 343-347).

Because the poet's principal concern lies with Gawain and Dame Ragnell, it is to be expected that Guenevere will play only a small role in The Wedding. She does not appear in the poem until Dame Ragnell arrives at court to marry Gawain. Guenevere and her ladies are concerned for the reputation of Gawain, and are abashed by the extreme ugliness of Ragnell. Thus, they are saddened by the prospective wedding:

"Alas!" then said Dame Gaynor;
 So said alle the ladies in her bower
 And wept for Sir Gawen" (ll. 542-544).

The passage demonstrates Guenevere's proper concern for Gawain's 'worchypp'.

Appropriately, as the leading lady of the court, it is Guenevere who voices the court's desire to spare Gawain embarrassment by having a small, private wedding:

"The queen prayd Dame Ragnelle sekerly
 To be married in the morning erly. . .
 "As privaly as we may"" (ll. 569-571).

Guenevere demonstrates discretion at this point and once

again a few lines later:

"I am greed," said Dame Gaynour,
 "But me wold think more honour
 And your worship moste "" (ll. 581-583).

Despite Guenevere's persuasions, Ragnell is determined to have a public wedding. Here, the reader of the poem must remember that Ragnell's purpose is to test Gawain's courtesy to the fullest whereas Guenevere's concern is to protect Gawain who is, after all, "the best of Englonde" (l. 695). By showing concern for Gawain, Guenevere perhaps criticizes her husband a little for he does not show much contrition for the situation he gets Gawain into.

On the morning after the wedding Guenevere, as well as Arthur, is concerned for Gawain's safety, and expresses her relief at the happy outcome:

"I thank God," said the queen,
 "I wenid, Sir Gawen, she wold thee have miscaried;
 Therefore in my hart I was sore agrevid;
 But the contrary is here seen "" (ll. 753-756).

When the details of the test by Sir Gromer and the indebtedness of Arthur to Ragnell have been recounted, the whole court is merry. Guenevere, too, is happy, and impressed with the beauty of the transformed Ragnell:

"The queen said (and the ladies alle),
 "She is the fairest nowe in this halle,
 I swere by Saint John!
 My love, lady, ye shalle have evere,
 For that ye savid my lord Arthoure,
 As I am a gentilwoman "" (ll. 793-798).

In this speech Guenevere shows her own modesty and sincerity and, perhaps most importantly, her generosity in readily

admitting that Ragnell is "the fairest nowe in this halle". In contrast, as we shall see later, Guenevere displays jealousy over the beauty of other women in Sir Launfal.

Guenevere in The Wedding is a gracious queen. Though admittedly she is no more than a minor figure in the poem, it is important to note instances where the poet might have, if he had wished, made her more important. For example, when Arthur returns to court depressed after his confrontation with Sir Gromer, all the court is concerned, but Guenevere's reaction is not mentioned. Again, when Gawain and Arthur resolve to ask every woman they meet what women want most, they apparently do not bother to ask Guenevere. These omissions force the reader to the conclusion already suggested, that Guenevere, and her relationship with Arthur, are simply not of any interest to the poet.

The Wedding has many analogues, the most well-known one being Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale.³ Like The Wedding, Chaucer's Tale makes use of the Loathly Lady motif with its two major aspects: the dependence of a man's life on the correct answering of the question of what women want most and a choice given by the lady to her husband on their wedding night. In Chaucer's Tale an unnamed knight, guilty of rape, is condemned to death by Arthur. But Guenevere

³Quotations from The Wife of Bath's Tale are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 2nd ed., pp. 84-88. c. 1393-1394. p. 598.

intercedes for the knight and spares his life, on the condition that he find the answer to the question of what women want most. The knight meets a loathly lady, who is willing to give him the answer if he will marry her. Unlike Gawain, this knight is horrified at the thought of marrying such a hideous hag: "For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste!/ Taak al my good, and lat my body go" (ll. 1060-1). The knight has no choice, for he had already promised to do whatever she requested and his use of her answer had brought his release. The choice which the lady gives the knight on their wedding night is somewhat different from that given Gawain by Ragnell. Chaucer's knight is given the choice of having his wife fair and unfaithful or ugly and loyal. Like Gawain, the knight gives the lady sovereignty over him by letting her choose.

Because Chaucer's Tale is set in an Arthurian context and because Guenevere appears briefly in the story, her role might be usefully examined here. The knight had been condemned to death by Arthur, but Guenevere and the ladies "longe preyeden the kyng of grace,/ Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place" (ll. 894-895). Thus, the knight is tried a second time, but this time by a female court. Guenevere's role as judge in this court symbolizes, in effect, her own sovereignty over her husband. She has been able to countermand the king's decision and substitute her own. Guenevere's role in The Wedding is bigger than her role in Chaucer's

Wife of Bath's Tale but it is also more straightforward. In The Wedding she exists only to emphasize the foulness of Dame Ragnell and confirm the enormity of the sacrifice that Gawain is making in marrying her. Her views are conventional and are those that the reader is expected to share. In Chaucer's poem, Guenevere's role is briefer but ultimately more important because she, by her actions, supports, not opposes, the hag. In this way she effectively reinforces the principal theme of the poem. In The Wedding, the author uses Guenevere rather mechanically; in The Wife of Bath's Tale, Chaucer uses her imaginatively and positively.

Arthour and Merlin maintains the tradition of Guenevere as a gracious queen already noted in The Wedding. This poem, 9938 lines long, was written between 1250 and 1300 in the dialect of Kent.⁴ It relates the Arthurian story from the death of Constans to the betrothal of Arthur and Guenevere, followed by the defeat of Rion. Newstead observes:

"The author seems to have followed a source that includes two recognizable stages in the development of the Merlin story. The first part, culminating

⁴See W.H. French, "Dialects and Forms in Three Romances," JEGP, 45, 1946, 125-132. French, in the course of refuting E. Kolbing's claim that Arthour and Merlin, King Alisaunder, and Richard Coeur de Lion have a common author, arrives at the conclusion that Arthour and Merlin was written north of the Thames, north and east of London (130). Newstead cites the date of composition at between 1250 and 1300, Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Legends," in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, ed. J.B. Severs (New Haven, Conn.: Conn. Acad. of Arts and Sciences, 1967), Fascicule I Romances, p. 47.

in the coronation of Arthur (vs. 3133), represents an expanded redaction of the chronicle story earlier than the version of Robert de Boron; the remainder follows the Vulgate sequel. The poem is essentially a skilfully abridged translation."⁵

The 'chronicle story' relates events beginning with Fortiger's usurping of Constans' crown and the subsequent defeat of Fortiger by Uter and Aurelis. Uter begets Arthur on Ygerne and a description of the raising of Arthur by Sir Antour follows. Arthur proves his right to the throne by pulling the sword from the stone, and is crowned king. The part of the poem based on the 'Vulgate sequel' recounts Arthur's subduing of the rebel princes, the Saxons and Rion. Arthur and Guenevere are betrothed and the victors rejoice at Arohaise.

The poem is interesting in its portrayal of Guenevere, if only because it presents her before her marriage to Arthur. The reader is thus able to see her first as a daughter and later as a young woman falling in love with her husband-to-be. Before the reader is ever introduced to Guenevere, however, her beauty and wisdom are revealed by Merlin, "Sche is beþe fair and wise / Of al þe lond sche berþ þe priis" (ll. 3613-4). Since Merlin's prophecies in

⁵Newstead, pp. 47-48.

the poem are invariably correct⁶ and in the best interests of Arthur, we must assume that there is no flattery or false praise of Guenevere at this point. What Merlin says about her is true.

When Guenevere first appears in the story, she is greatly concerned for her father, Leodegan, who is being taken prisoner:

"Hir hondes sche sett on hir here
And hir fair tresses al totere
Sche hir totar to hir smok
And on þe wal hir heued gan knok
And swoned oft and seyde, allas" (ll. 5815-9).

The concern is mutual, for Leodegan despairs that Guenevere will be taken by the pagans if he is defeated:

"'Allas' he seyde 'þat y was bore
Mi liif and priis so is forlore
And Gvenoure mi dohter gent
Of vile paiems worp yschent" (ll. 5801-4).

Guenevere's grief, though, is turned to joy upon seeing her father rescued by Arthur and his men: "No ask no man of þe gret blisse / Þat sche made þan ywis" (ll. 5929-30).

Guenevere gazes admiringly upon Arthur for his prowess, and exclaims "þeue þat he mi lord were / Þat 3ong þat fi3teþ so þere" (ll. 5989-90).

⁶As a child, for example, Merlin had told the Judge that he was conceived out of wedlock and this is proved true, at lines 1065-1144. Merlin predicts that the Judge's real father will commit suicide by jumping off a bridge at lines 1158-1160 and this also comes to pass (ll. 1165-1166). Merlin later predicts that a man who has just bought new shoes will die soon (ll. 1303-1310). This happens at lines 1313-1314.

The battle between the combined forces of Leodegan and Arthur against Rion, however, is a protracted one. Guenevere and her ladies express their unhappiness and their joy at Arthur's respective setbacks and victories. After the day's battle, the men enter Carohaise to rest. Before their meal, Guenevere washes Arthur, Ban and Bors. Throughout the meal, Guenevere serves Arthur humbly and with honor: "Gveneour was euer tofor Arthour / And serued him wiþ gret honour" (ll. 6553-4).

The poet describes the mutual attraction between Arthur and Guenevere:

"Ac on Gveneour biheld Arthour
 And was al nomen in hir amour
 Ac he tempred so his blod
 Pat non oþer it vnderstode;
 Gvenoure on knewes oft gan stoupe
 To serue king Arthour wiþ þe coupe
 And he seyð to hir saun faile
 'Crist lete me ȝeld þe þi trauaile,'
 And sche seyð to him 'Sir gramerci
 It nis nouȝt to ȝeld sir ie vus dy. . ."
 (ll. 6537-52).

This passage demonstrates at least two qualities of Guenevere. She is humble and more than willing to serve Arthur and she is truly grateful that Arthur has saved Leodegan's life.

The next appearance of Guenevere comes much later in the poem. Leodegan offers her to Arthur for his wife, and praises her, saying "Fairer not y non veir / Wise and hende and of mi lond air" (ll. 8613-4). And Arthur accepts Guenevere, on Merlin's advice: "Per treuþed Arthour Gwenore

his quen / *Pe fairest leuedi þat miȝt ben*" (ll. 8639-40).

Shortly after the betrothal feast, Arthur leaves once again for battle. Guenevere arms Arthur and:

"At ich armour þe gest seit þisse
 Arthour þe maden gan kisse;
 Merlin bad Arthour þe king
 Þenche on þat ich kisseing
 When he com into bataile" (ll. 8679-83).

As Merlin suggests, the memory of Guenevere's kisses becomes a source of inspiration to Arthur in his final battle with Rion (ll. 8821-30, 9239-46). The battle over, Arthur and his men return to Carohaise to feast and rest. The wedding, presumably, takes place after this point.

In summary then, Guenevere is presented in Arthour and Merlin as a worthy, admirable young woman. She is the most beautiful of women, but said to be as wise as she is beautiful. A devoted daughter, she is capable of strong emotions, whether they be grief or joy. In regard to Arthur, she is humble, admiring and, most important, in love. She has no reprehensible features in this poem and nothing suggests the possibility of later disloyalty.

The prose romance of Merlin (c. 1450) is a more or less faithful translation of the French Vulgate Merlin.⁷ It begins with the council of devils in hell and goes on to

⁷Newstead, p. 49.

the begetting, birth and marvelous 'enfances' of Merlin. The story includes events related in Arthour and Merlin but continues with Arthur's marriage to Guenevere, the institution of the Round Table, the wars with the Saxons and Rome, the enchantment of Merlin by Nimiane, and ends with the birth of Lancelot, son of King Bors.

Merlin is divided into two unequal parts. The first, comprising about one-seventh of the whole, ends with the coronation of Arthur and represents the original poem of Robert de Boron.⁸ The second part of Merlin deals more particularly with Arthur and follows the Vulgate story. Guenevere is first mentioned, as in Arthour and Merlin, by Merlin: ". . . and I knowe a mayden' that is kynges doughter and quenes, and of right high lynage, and also she is right feire, and of grete valour, that no lady ne may haue more, and that is the doughter of kynge Leodegan) . . . [and to Guenevere]the londe moste falle after his dicesse" (p. 141). Because of Merlin's special prophetic nature, his judgement of Guenevere is important. The passage quoted above reveals several qualities of Guenevere: she is of noble birth and an heiress, she is beautiful and a woman of valour.

⁸William E. Mead, "Introduction," Merlin, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1899), EETS OS 10, 21, 36, 112, in 2 vols., p. cxlv. Mead discusses the two-part Merlin, pp. cxlii-cxlv.

The portrait of Guenevere in this romance, up to the final defeat of Rion, is very similar to that in Arthour and Merlin. Correspondences in the two works include Guenevere's concern for her father's safety and her subsequent joy at seeing him rescued, her admiration for Arthur who demonstrates great prowess in battle, her bathing and serving of Arthur, and the eventual betrothal of Guenevere and Arthur. Other corresponding passages are those where Guenevere and Arthur show a mutual attraction, and where the memory of Guenevere's kisses inspires Arthur in his last battle with Rion. The similarities between Arthour and Merlin and Merlin, in the narrative from the coronation of Arthur to the defeat of Rion, are explained by the fact that both are based on the Vulgate story.⁹

Differences between Merlin and Arthour and Merlin, from Arthur's coronation to the point of Rion's defeat, are few. One, however, is the description of the begetting of the 'false Guenevere'. In Arthour and Merlin, Leodegan had, by accident, lain with his steward's wife; in Merlin, it was a deliberate act of adultery which led to the conception of the false Guenevere. In both stories, however,

⁹Newstead, pp. 48-49.

Guenevere and the false Guenevere are identical in appearance.¹⁰

When Arthur returns victorious from his battle with Rion, Guenevere welcomes him with joy: ". . . she ran to hym with armes spreadde a-brode, and seide he was welcome and alle his companye; and she kiste his mouth tendirly . . ." (p. 448). The wedding is set for a week later.

King Loot, unlike the other princes, refuses to pay homage to Arthur and devises a plan to steal Guenevere away and put the false Guenevere in her place. Merlin, however, knows of Loot's plan and is determined to thwart it.

Guenevere and Arthur are married in great ceremony. She is regally beautiful, wearing a circlet of gold "that satte so well with hir bewte that all the worlde myght have ioye her to be-holden" (p. 453). After the ceremony, a treacherous mistress leads Guenevere to her enemies. The queen is naturally frightened when the abductors descend upon her, but, as Merlin's aides attempt to rescue her, she acts valiantly: ". . . she braied rudely oute of theire handes and down the gardin till she com to an ympe, and clippe it in hir armes full harde and thise com for to take hir a-wey;

¹⁰After the betrothal scene in Merlin, the narrative becomes confused. Guenevere is referred to as "quene" and "wif" (p. 320, 322) yet the marriage does not take place until much later (p. 452). The reader can only conclude that the poet has made an error. The poet makes another error later on. One of Guenevere's companions on the way to Logres was "Sadoyne hir brother that was elther than she" (p. 472). This is contradictory to the earlier emphasis on the fact that Guenevere is Leodegan's only heir.

but they myght not hir remeve" (p. 464).¹¹ She is finally rescued and, still frightened, goes to her chamber. Arthur then goes to her, and "thei ledde myri lif togeder as thei that well loued" (p. 466).

Eight days after their wedding, Arthur and Guenevere leave for Logres where Guenevere, as well as her husband, distributes gifts generously: ". . . the queene yaf hem robes fressh and newe as she that well hadde therfore ordeyned, and moche cowde of honour and all curteysie, that alle peple hadde hir in so grete love that hem thought thei hadde recouered the lady of alle ladyes. . ." (pp. 479-480). Guenevere's generosity is brought out often in Merlin. When her knights send prisoners to her, she gives each prisoner a rich jewel (p. 488) and later, new robes (p. 502). Still later, at a feast at Camelot, she gives rich gifts to all the ladies (p. 613). Her generosity is rewarded with the admiration and love of all the people. When an ugly dwarf arrives at court accompanied by a beautiful lady, Guenevere does not hesitate to admit the damsel's beauty, saying generously: "the damesell is full of grete

¹¹The fact that Guenevere clasps an "ympe" tree may be significant. Bliss states in his introduction to Sir Orfeo, ed. A.J. Bliss (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2nd ed., p. xxxv, that "It is a commonplace . . . that those who sleep, or even lie down, under a tree place themselves in the power of the fairies". In Sir Launfal, it is Launfal's act of lying under a laurel tree which leads him to meet the fairy mistress. In Malory's Morte Darthur, it is when Lancelot lies under an orchard tree that the four enchantress queens spirit him away. In Merlin, Guenevere's clasping the ympe tree might just conceivably be regarded as a desire on her part for supernatural help.

bewte, that in foure remes sholde not be founden hir pareile" (p. 638). Her generosity here contrasts with her jealousy of Dame Tryamoure's beauty in Sir Launfal, to be discussed later.

After the coronation of Arthur and Guenevere, Gawain requests that he and twenty-four knights be made the Queen's Knights. Guenevere graciously grants the request (p. 482). In Merlin, Guenevere in her role as queen is always gracious and discreet, and in many cases is the source of sound advice. For example, following an unfortunate dispute between the Queen's Knights and the knights of the Round Table, Arthur fails to convince Gawain to make peace. It is Guenevere who is able to persuade him, with her graciousness and wise words: ". . . be not so wroth, refroide youre maltalente, ffor wrath hath many a worthi man and wise made to be holde for foles. . . this londe is in sorowe and turment of the saignes, and ye here be but a small peple, [and so] ye shull love eche other and helpe a-gein alle peple" (p. 500-501). This passage demonstrates in practice the wisdom that had been claimed earlier for her by Merlin (p. 115). There are many instances where Guenevere's sound advice is taken, usually in regard to the leadership of the knights. When, for example, a delegation is sent to obtain a truce with the Princes, Guenevere advises that King Loot bring along his sons (p. 506). Later, in a conflict with the Saxons, King Loot's sons save his life (p. 511). When

it becomes necessary to send three of the Queen's Knights to rescue some knights of the Round Table, Guenevere suggests sending Ewein, Kay and Gifflet; Merlin agrees with her choices (p. 568).¹² In several instances Guenevere demonstrates her acceptance of responsibility for the leadership of the Queen's Knights. She also demonstrates wisdom in realizing that differences between the two groups of knights will weaken their attack against the Saxons.

Though Guenevere's role as queen is of primary importance in the second part of Merlin, the author has at least maintained the admirable relationship between Arthur and Guenevere described in the first part. The author frequently records Guenevere's joy upon Arthur's return after an absence. When Arthur returns from defeating the Saxons, he and his men "were resceyued with grete ioye at Cameloth of the Quene Gonnore" (p. 603). After defeating King Rion, Arthur rides to Camelot, "where-as the Quene Gonnore and the other quenes were a-bidinge that of theire comynge made grete ioye" (p. 630). When Arthur returns to Logres, on hearing of his father-in-law's death, Guenevere "hem resceived with grete ioye" (p. 678). We hear of the happy life that Guenevere and Arthur share on other occasions too: ". . . myri lif ledde the kynge Arthur and his wif" (p. 561) and ". . . the kynge a-bode stille at Cameloth, gladde and myri

¹²See also pages 507 and 574 for further examples.

with the Quene Gonnore that moche hym loved, and he hir,
and so thei a-bide in ioye and myrthe longe tyme" (p. 612).

Generally, the author adequately portrays Guenevere in her several roles as a young woman falling in love, as a queen, and as a wife, but there are several conflicting passages in Merlin which may disturb the reader. These passages, interspersed throughout the narrative, are of a prophetic nature. The first one pertaining to Guenevere reveals that treason, through Mordred but also through Guenevere's and Lancelot's adulterous love, will bring about the fall of Arthur's kingdom (p. 393). Later we are told that for three years Arthur lived adulterously with the false Guenevere, refusing to even see the true Guenevere, while Guenevere was with Galehaut "for the love of launcelot" (p. 466). Another such passage reveals the reason for Morgan le Fay's hatred for Guenevere. Guenevere had learned of the affair between Morgan and Sir Guyomar, and Morgan was afraid Guenevere would tell (p. 509). This underlying note of doom, supplied by these prophecies, is reinforced at the very end, when Lancelot is born. As Guenevere generally appears in Merlin as a gracious queen and a loyal wife, these prophecies seem strangely out of place. Mead supplies a likely explanation for their existence in the work when he says: "The Merlin, as already noted, was intended to serve as a connecting link¹ between two other

poems, Joseph d'Arimathie and Perceval".¹³ The prophecies, thus, can be regarded as useful pieces of foreshadowing to make the transition from Guenevere as a loyal wife to Guenevere as the lover of Lancelot. To complete this transition the author would probably describe the estrangement of Guenevere and Arthur and establish Guenevere and Lancelot as lovers. At this moment he merely points the way for a possible continuation by means of the prophecies.

The structure of the late fourteenth century poem, The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne,¹⁴ is unusual in that it has two distinct parts.¹⁵ However, only the second part concerns us at this moment, for it presents Guenevere as the gracious queen.¹⁶ During supper at Rondoles Hall, Sir Geleron and his lady enter and Geleron challenges

¹³Mead, p. cxxix.

¹⁴For a discussion of dialect and authorship see A.G. Hooper, "The Awntyrs off Arthure: Dialect and Authorship," Leeds Studies in English, 4, 1935, 62-74. For a discussion of the unusual form of stanza-linking in The Awntyrs see A.C.L. Brown, "On the Origin of Stanza-Linking in English Alliterative Verse," RR, 7, 1916, 271-283.

¹⁵For further discussion on the structure of The Awntyrs, see pp. 46-47 of this thesis.

¹⁶For a discussion of the first part of The Awntyrs see pp. 40-47 of this thesis.

any knight to combat to correct an injustice which has been done to him. Gawain accepts the challenge but, just as he is about to win the duel, the damsel appeals to Guenevere to ask Arthur to intercede. Arthur commands peace, Galeron's lands are restored to him and he marries the lady.

Guenevere does not play a very significant role in the second part of The Awntyrs. She is, however, given the responsibility of looking after Galeron's lady during the duel: "Siþene to Waynour wisly he [Galeron] went, / He laft in here warde his worthy wighte" (ll. 486-487). Then, during the course of the duel, Guenevere demonstrates a proper concern for Gawain: "Gaynor gret for her sake / Wiþ her grey eyen" (ll. 597-598). Guenevere does, however, play a significant part in assuring that Galeron receives "resone and riȝte" (l. 350, 362) from Arthur. When it seems that Gawain will surely slay Galeron, the latter's lady beseeches Guenevere to have mercy on the knight and Guenevere in turn begs mercy of Arthur:

"As þou art (r)oy roial, richest of rente,
And I þi wife, wedded at þi owne wille, . . .
Make þes knightes accorde" (ll. 627-635).

It is perhaps significant that Guenevere intercedes here as Arthur's wife rather than his queen. This seems to imply a marriage relationship of some value. Such a conclusion seems to be reinforced by Arthur's acceding to Guenevere's plea and commanding peace. The passage just quoted also

demonstrates Guenevere's desire to grant mercy when possible and her genuine concern for two knights who have fought bravely.

The result of Guenevere's intercession is that Arthur gives Gawain new lands and asks Gawain, who complies, to return Sir Galeron's lands to him. Sir Galeron becomes a knight of the Round Table and marries his lady. Both he and Gawain are made dukes. In the last stanza Guenevere, complying with her mother's wishes outlined in part one of The Awntyrs, sends throughout the kingdom to have masses sung for her dead mother's soul: "Waynour gared wisely write in-[to] þe west, / To al þe religious to rede and to singe" (ll. 703-704). This last passage provides the one substantial link to part one of The Awntyrs that there is but, as we shall see later, the poet gives only token service to structural unity.

As has been demonstrated, Arthour and Merlin, Merlin, The Wedding, and the second part of The Awntyrs present Guenevere as a gracious woman and queen. It should be pointed out, however, that in all of these works, Guenevere's role is not major, though it is a legitimate and interesting object of study.

Guenevere in the first part of the The Awntyrs and in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight cannot be considered a character in any real sense of the word. Rather she is an empty puppet-like figure that the poets conveniently use to develop their themes.

In the first part of The Awntyrs, Guenevere and Gawain separate from a hunting party in Inglewood Forest. During a sudden violent storm a ghastly apparition, the ghost of Guenevere's mother, appears before them. The ghost warns Guenevere of the evils of sin, prophecies the downfall of the Round Table and requires Guenevere to have thirty masses sung for the salvation of her mother's soul. The storm subsides as the ghost glides away and the party returns to Rondoles hall for supper.

The narrative of this part of The Awntyrs clearly has affinities with the genre known as the dream vision. The appearance of the ghost resembles what Macrobius terms the 'oraculum': "when in sleep there appears a relative or other sacred person, such as a priest or a priestess, or even a god, who openly announces what is or is not to come, what should be done in specified cases and what should be avoided."¹⁷ The only condition of Macrobius' definition that is not met in this poem is that of being asleep.¹⁸ Thus, in The Awntyrs, the ghost appears with a double intent, to warn Guenevere of the evils of sin and to prophesy both the fall of the Round Table and the death of Gawain.

¹⁷W.C. Curry, Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1926), p. 199.

¹⁸However, Guenevere and Gawain rest under a laurel tree (l. 32). As has been pointed out earlier, by being under a tree, mortals put themselves in the power of supernatural beings.

The first part of The Awntyrs also has affinities with the tradition of giving advice to the king (or royal family). In the Scottish romance, Lancelot of the Laik, the poet inserts a long discourse on the duties of a king, directed at a contemporary king, "probably James III".¹⁹ Advice to a king may also be present in Chaucer's Prologue to the Legend of Good Women. Advice to a king might be given in other ways too. Further evidence for the tradition is given by G. Wickham who cites many instances where, when the royal family visited cities, the "civic devisers of these entertainments [open air pageants] had a firm didactic intention in mind when preparing them and. . . they succeeded in expressing it explicitly enough in mime, spectacle and speech for the recipient to understand its significance and take appropriate action".²⁰ The ghost's advice to Guenevere, in The Awntyrs, on the evils of sin parallels these examples of giving advice to a king.

When Guenevere first appears early in the poem, she is led by Gawain. Her luxurious dress is described in rich detail by the poet: "In a gleterand gide þat glemed fulle gay, / Withe riche ribaynes reuersset. . ." (ll. 15-26).

¹⁹Newstead, p. 50.

²⁰G. Wickham, Early English Stages 1300 to 1660 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), vol. 1, p. 71.

Aside from this luxurious setting, however, we know nothing of Guenevere except that she is "gay" (l. 14). Though the lengthy description of Guenevere's attire may only be an example of the romance writer's love for detail,²¹ it may equally be intended to demonstrate Guenevere's vanity and concern for worldly wealth. Ralph Hanna takes the latter view of Guenevere, saying that the descriptive passage "suggests the extent of her indifference to the natural and elemental, her bored disinterest in the physical world around her", and that Guenevere "needs to learn that being 'wlonkest in wedes' is finally no distinction at all . . . She must learn that pride is little more than a useless 'appurtenaunce' (239) to the human form".²² If this interpretation is accepted, the appearance of the ghost and its warnings against pride take on a greater significance, for they are immediately pertinent to Guenevere.

When the ghost appears, the poet describes its effect: the birds shriek and the hounds hide their heads but Gawain resolutely stands up to the ghost. Guenevere on the other hand, is understandably frightened, "Then gloppenet and grete [Dame] Gaynour be gay" (l. 92), and in her fright calls on those knights whom she feels have deserted her:

²¹Everett, p. 16.

²²Hanna, 284.

"Sir Cadour, Sir Clegis, Sir [Constantyne], Sir Cay, /
Pes knyȝtes arne vncurtays - by crosse and by crede" (ll. 96-97). Hanna uses this action to demonstrate Guenevere's selfishness in her demand for complete service at all times: "She insists on the presence of attractive human beings intent on carrying out her slightest whims. . . [She calls them "vncurtays"] simply because they are not present and devoting their efforts to her current desires".²³ Though Guenevere's speech may be regarded as a natural, if hysterical, reaction, Hanna's view, again, gives purpose to the ghost's appearance. It should be kept in mind, however, that a simple yet nonetheless valid reason for the ghost's appearance is that she wants to save her own soul from eternal damnation.

The ghost explains her situation, brought about through the sin of breaking a vow (l. 205), and requests of Guenevere to "Fede folk fore my sake þat failene þe fode, / And minge me with matens and masse(s) in melle" (ll. 319-320). Hanna regards this as essentially one request - to act charitably - and that the singing of masses which Guenevere undertakes at the end of the poem is far less arduous than feeding the poor.²⁴ Again, Guenevere's selfish-

²³Hanna, 284.

²⁴Hanna, 285.

ness is pointed out. It is hard to accept Hanna's interpretation here, however, for in practical terms to carry out either request Guenevere would need to do no more than give a command. The cost might be greater in one case than in the other, but no other difference would separate the actions as far as Guenevere is concerned.

When Guenevere finally overcomes her fear, she is able to pity the ghost, saying "Wo is mi for þi wo" (l. 196) and she promises to have masses sung for the tormented soul. But most of Guenevere's speech to the ghost is in the form of observations, exclamations or questions, like: "If þou be my moder grete wonder hit is / That al þi burly body is brougte to be so bare!" (ll. 202-203) and "What wrathede God moste at þi weting?" (l. 238). Hanna regards Guenevere's responses and promises to the ghost as revealing her selfishness and lack of foresight: "Her comments suggest only the relief she will find in not being bothered by such apparitions in the future".²⁵ Hanna looks at Guenevere as if she were a realistically drawn character and fails therefore to identify what is more important - her role in the poem. In asking questions Guenevere is playing a useful role. As the mortal in the conversation, it is her function to prompt the ghost to further speech. Gregory, in Saint

²⁵Hanna, 290.

Gregory's Trentale,²⁶ one of the sources for The Awntyrs, plays a very similar role. "Prompters" play similar roles in The Pearl, The Book of the Duchess and, of course, in Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy. This use of a 'prompter' in The Awntyrs is a major affinity between that poem and the dream vision genre, suggested earlier.

The Awntyrs is, to my knowledge, the only poem which places the theme of Gregory in an Arthurian framework. It is interesting to speculate why the poet did this. Perhaps the poet used the setting of popular Arthurian legend only to make his own poem more popular. Or perhaps, being familiar with the Arthurian legend, the poet desired to point out the causes for the fall of the Round Table as he saw them. We know, for example, from the ghost's words, that Arthur is "to couetous" (l. 265) and Gawain refers to himself and his fellow knights as those "bat fondene to fighte / And bus defoulene be folke one fele kinges londes" (ll. 261-262). Thus, in a poem dealing with essentially unadmirable characters, an interpretation of Guenevere as selfish and short-sighted would be very appropriate.

In the last stanza of the poem the poet has made some attempt to link the two parts of The Awntyrs. Here, he describes Guenevere's sending throughout the realm to

²⁶Trentale Sancti Gregorii, in Political, Religious and Love Poems, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1866), EETS, OS 15, pp. 114-122.

have masses sung for her mother's soul. The second request of the ghost, to feed those who are hungry, is not referred to, though. One explanation for this omission might be that the ghost's requests are but one - to act charitably - so that the fulfilling of one request fulfills the other too. Looking again at the ghost's request, though, it seems obvious that two separate requests are being made: "Fede folk fore my sake bat failene be fode, / And munge me with matens and masse(s) in melle" (ll. 319-320). Another possible explanation would be that Guenevere, selfish by nature, merely did not comply with the ghost's wishes. This is unlikely though because there is nothing in the poem that would lead us to expect this. A third possible explanation, and the most likely one in my opinion, lies in the lack of structural unity in the work itself.

Major criticism of The Awntyrs has been directed at its use of two distinct and, for all intents and purposes, separate parts. Some critics are convinced of the poem's essential thematic unity: "In a confrontation of the pride of life with a 'memento mori', the first part states the moral principles of Christian world contempt: the second part is given over to a story that illustrates those principles and in which the characters of part one are prota-

gonists".²⁷ Adverse criticism is far more convincing, though. Oakden, for example, says that the poem "could not be a complete artistic unit; it is disjointed and unconvincing in its effect. . . the two main episodes are unconnected and inculcate different lessons".²⁸ Despite its structural flaws, however, The Awntyrs does present an interesting, if divided, portrait of Guenevere.

In The Awntyrs there is room for doubt as to whether Guenevere is a character or merely a device. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, written in the late fourteenth century in the North Midlands dialect, it is clear that Guenevere is not thought of as a real personality. Nowhere in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight does Guenevere ever speak or act.

²⁷William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1960), p. 160. Similar views are expressed by J. Boswinkel, "The Structure of the Auntes of Arthur," Handelingen van het Achtentwintigste Nederlands Filologen Congres, 1964, pp. 141-143; and "Introduction" to The Awntyrs, p. 5.

²⁸J.P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: The Dialectal and Metrical Survey (1930; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968), 2 vols. in 1, vol. 2, pp. 47-48. Similar views are expressed by Hanna, 293-297; J.L.N. O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R.S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 527; Newstead, p. 62.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the most highly praised of the ME romances. It is praised for various reasons: its brilliant realism, its dramatic vigour, artistic sensitivity and unified structure.²⁹ After a brief historical introduction, the story opens with a description of the Christmas festivities at Arthur's court in Camelot. A huge knight, clad all in green, interrupts the celebrations and challenges the knights, offering to let any knight deal him a blow with his axe if the knight will receive a return blow from the Green Knight a year later. The court is astonished, but Gawain takes the challenge and decapitates, but fails to kill, the Green Knight. The year passes, and Gawain sets out to find the Green Chapel. He finds shelter in a magnificent castle and is persuaded by his host to linger for three days. Gawain and his host make a pact to exchange the day's winnings in the evening. On three successive days the host hunts, while Gawain avoids the amorous advances of his hostess. He finally takes from her, however, a girdle with the supposed property of preserving life. Gawain does not exchange the girdle with his host, but wears

²⁹For example, see Laura H. Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R.S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 258; L.D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), pp. vii-viii; "Introduction" to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. xiv.

it the following day when he meets the Green Knight. The Green Knight strikes three blows, though only the last nicks Gawain's neck. He then reveals that he was Gawain's host at the castle and had arranged the temptations by his wife in the castle. Gawain, in bitter shame, returns to a joyful court and relates his adventure. The court decides to wear the green lace in memory of Gawain's experience.

Because Gawain is the point of interest in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, we cannot expect a great deal of concern on the part of the poet for the minor characters. References to Guenevere, for example, are rare, and never does she speak or reveal herself through actions. She is first referred to early in the poem:

"Whene Guenore, ful gay, grayþed in þe myddes,
Dressed on þe dere des, dubbed al aboute,
Smal sendal bisides, a selure hir ouer
Of tryed tolouse, of tars tapites innoghe,
Þat were enbrawd and beten wyth þe best gemmes
Þat myȝt be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye,
in daye.
 Þe comlokest to discrye
 Per glent with yȝen gray,
 A semloker þat euer he syȝe
 Soth moȝt no mon say" (ll. 74-84).

In this passage, the first seven and the longest lines are surprisingly devoted to description of, not Guenevere, but her immediate surroundings. Guenevere herself is described only in conventional terms, as the "comlokest" with "yȝen gray". The detailed description of the canopy and tapestries surrounding her, and the little interest shown by the poet in the queen herself, might conceivably be taken as evidence

to prove that the court in general is proud and unduly conscious of worldly wealth.

Guenevere is next mentioned in the poet's description of the seating arrangements on the dais, where "Gawan watz grayþed Gwenore bisyde" (l. 109). That Gawain is seated beside the queen may be the result of nothing more than the royalty of his birth. As nephew to Arthur and Guenevere, Gawain is given his rightful position in the royal court. Mentioning Guenevere at this point is thus perhaps a structural device for the poet, for it is in relation to her that Gawain's own stature is revealed. The description of the seating arrangements at this point parallels a scene later in the poem. At Bercilak's castle, too, the seating arrangement is described: "Gawan and þe gay burde togeder þay seten" (l. 1003). The seating of Gawain first beside Guenvere and then beside Bercilak's wife, leads to a seemingly inevitable comparison between the two ladies, "And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyȝe þoȝt" (l. 945). Comparisons between the beauty of Guenevere and other ladies are frequently found in romance and are usually conventional,³⁰ but in this poem the linking of the two ladies is not with-

³⁰In Merlin, for example, Guenevere is second in beauty to Helayn, daughter of Pelles and keeper of the Holy Grail (p. 229). In Launfal, Guenevere's beauty is compared unfavourably with that of Launfal's fairy mistress. In Malory, of course, comparisons of this kind are numerous. Here, Guenevere's beauty is compared to that of Isode, Elaine, and others.

out significance. By bringing together in comparison two women who appear in the poem, the poet is probably suggesting that the reader go on to compare other parallel aspects of the poem, like Arthur's court and Bercilak's court, Arthur as host and Bercilak as host, the real world and the fairy world, and so on.

In yet another passage, Guenevere performs a useful function for the poet:

"'Wolde 3e, worþilych lorde, ' quop Wawan to þe kyng,
'Bid me bo3e fro þis benche, and stonde by yow þere,
Þat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table,
And þat my legge lady lyked not ille . . ."
(ll. 343-346).

Gawain courteously requests permission, from both the king and the queen, to leave the table and take up the Green Knight's challenge. It might be that Gawain's deference to Guenevere is solely a recognition of her position as the queen but much more likely is that Gawain is acknowledging that she is a lady. The chivalric courtesy which Gawain displays here is fundamental to his character and is a quality that is later tested severely by Bercilak's wife.

After the Green Knight has been beheaded, he deliberately waves his gruesome head in front of Guenevere:

"For þe hede in his honde he haldez vp euen, / Toward þe derrest on þe dece he dressez þe face" (ll. 444-445).

During the course of the poem, the reader is made increasingly aware that the Green Knight's acts are always calculated, deliberate and directed at a specific result. What, then,

would be the significance of this particular act? At the end of the poem we are told the reason for the appearance of the Green Knight - he was sent by Morgan le Fay to frighten Guenevere to death (l. 2460). In the light of this knowledge, the Green Knight's deliberate waving of his head in front of Guenevere is explicable to us. Significantly, however, Guenevere's reaction to his act is not recorded by the poet. The reader can only conclude that Guenevere's reaction is not important after all. And yet, when the Green Knight leaves, Arthur comforts his queen:

"Paȝ Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder,
 He let no semblaunt be sene, bot sayde ful hyȝe
 To þe comlych quene wyth cortays speche,
 'Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer;
 Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,
 Laykyng of enterludez, to laȝe and to syng,
 Among þise kynde caroles of knyȝtez and ladyez.
 Neuer þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres,
 For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake'"
 (ll. 467-475).

It is obvious, however, that this speech would not be adequate to console an hysterical woman. Rather, having no desire to upset his court further, or to embarrass his astounded knights by showing his awareness of their stupefaction, Arthur desires only a return to normal. Thus, though his speech is ostensibly a consolation to his wife, it is perhaps meant to be a comfort to the court at large. By saying his words "ful hyȝe" and by seeming to rise above the incident, Arthur is in effect reestablishing his own leadership.

Guenevere is last referred to near the end of the poem, when the Green Knight reveals that it was Morgan le Fay who initiated the test of the court:

"Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
 For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were
 Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;
 Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,
 For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe"
 (ll. 2456-60).

It would seem, from this passage, that Morgan had three reasons for sending the Green Knight to Arthur's court: to discover whether the worthiness of the Round Table was based on fact, to "reue" the "wyttez" of the courtiers, and to frighten Guenevere to death.

The role of Morgan in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has been and still is the source of controversy for critics.³¹ Some scholars have attempted to justify Morgan's role in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight by pointing out that, to a medieval audience, she would have been recognized early in

³¹For discussions on the role of Morgan see: D.M. Moon, "The Role of Morgain La Fée in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Neophilologische Mitteilungen, 67, 1966, 31-57; A.M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays, ed. R.J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 159-175; A.B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays, ed. R.J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 135-158; J. Eadie, "Morgain La Fée and the Conclusion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Neophilologus, 52, 1968, 299-304; V.Y. Haines, "Morgan and the Missing Day in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Medieval Studies, 33, 1971, 354-359.

the poem as a major figure, and that her plan to frighten Guenevere to death is basic to the poem's composition.³² Other scholars take the view that, although Morgan's role in the poem may be justifiable in itself, the comment by the Green Knight that her purpose in sending him to Arthur's court was to frighten Guenevere to death, is not. They believe that this is an inconsistent addition to the otherwise tight structural unity of the poem.³³ My view is that Morgan is not needed in the poem. With regard to Guenevere, it is obvious that she is not frightened to death by the sight of the decapitated Green Knight; her reaction is not even mentioned. Significant too is the fact that, even when Morgan's plot has been revealed to us, Guenevere, supposedly important enough to have been the victim of an elaborate scheme, is nevertheless not mentioned again. When Gawain returns to court, "*þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als/Laȝen loude þerat . . .*" (ll. 2513-4), but Guenevere's reaction is not given. Morgan's motive of frightening Guenevere thus seems to be an unfortunate addition to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and constitutes a flaw in the poem's design.

³²Scholars who share this view include Haines, Eadie and Moon.

³³Scholars who share this view include Friedman and Markman.

The reader can only conclude that Guenevere is of little importance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Her only importance lies in the poet's use of her as a device to reveal qualities in Gawain, to form the basis for comparisons with other women, or to fulfill the role of a necessary adjunct to a royal court.

The alliterative Morte Arthure, written between 1360 and 1430 in the North-west Midlands dialect, centres on the Roman wars. After refusing to pay homage to Lucius, the Roman emperor, Arthur and his men win a series of battles on the continent that lead to the promised submission of the Romans. Arthur's dream of the Nine Worthies follows, and his philosophers interpret the dream as a prophecy of his fall. This ominous episode is followed by the news of Modred's treason and the drastic series of events leading to Arthur's death. Some of the more noteworthy passages in the poem are Arthur's two dreams, the fight with the giant of Mont St. Michel and the moving scene where Arthur gives a threnody for the slain Gawain. The poem ends, not with a journey to Avalon, but with Arthur's burial at Glastonbury.

Guenevere appears directly in only two scenes. When Arthur is ready to depart for the wars on the continent, he takes his leave of her:

" . . . ffor to comfurthe the qwene, that in care
 lenges;
 Waynour waykly wepande hym kyssiz,
 Talkez to hym tenderly with teres ynewe, -

"I may wery the wye, thatt this werre mouede,
 That warnes me wyrchippe of my wedde lorde;
 Alle my lykyng^e of lyfe owte of lande wendez,
 And I in langour am lefte, leue 3e for euere!
 Whyne myghte I, dere lufe, dye in 3our armes,
 Are I this destanye of dule sulde drye by myne one!"
 (ll. 696-704).

Ironically, her comments of a "destanye of dule" aptly describe her future.

Guenevere's second appearance occurs upon hearing the news of Arthur's intended vengeance:

"Than cho 3ermys and 3ee at 3orke in hir chambire,
 Gronys fulle grysely with gretand teres,
 Passes owte of the palesse with alle hir pryce
 maydenys,
 Towarde Chestyre in a charre thay chese hir the wayes,
 Dighte hir ewyne for to dye with dule at hir herte;
 Scho kayres to Karelyone, and kawghte hir a vaile,
 Askes thare the habite in the honoure of Criste,
 And alle for falsede, and frawde, and fere of hir
 louerde!" (ll. 3911-8).

Her treachery, her "falsede, and frawde", consisted of adulterously marrying Modred in Arthur's absence. Guenevere must have committed another treacherous act as well for, when Arthur faces Modred in the final battle, he notices that Modred is carrying his (Arthur's) sword, Clarent, which "Wist no wy of wone bot Waynor hir seluene, / Scho hade the keypyng^e hir selfe of that kydde wapyne" (ll. 4204-5).

The two appearances of Guenevere in the Morte Arthure seem basically contradictory and require analysis, for her profuse grief upon Arthur's departure seems inconsistent with her subsequent acts of treachery. One ex-

planation, of course, is that Guenevere is an inconsistent character, but this seems a too easy oversimplification of Guenevere and would, if true, seriously call in question the artistic integrity of the poet.

An alternative explanation for the seeming contradiction in Guenevere's character is that she is consistently treacherous. If this is true, then her grief at Arthur's departure would have to be regarded as mere literary convention and not an expression of real emotion or, what is worse, as actual hypocrisy on Guenevere's part. The traditional scene of leave-taking in romance is that of the weeping, swooning lady and the stoic man. Arthur's response to Guenevere's grief might very well be construed as stoicism:

"Grefe the noghte, Gaynour, fore Goddes lufe of
 hewene,
 Ne gruche noghte my ganggynge, it salle to gude
 turne!
 Thy wonrydez and thy wepynge woundez myne herte,
 I may noghte wit of this woo, for alle this werlde
 ryche;
 I haue made a kepare, a knyghte of thyne awene,
 Querlynge of Ynglande vndyre thy seluene,
 And that es sir Mordrede, that thow has mekylle
 prayse,
 Salle be thy dictour, my dere, to doo whatte the
 lykes"" (ll. 705-712).

But Arthur's response might also be interpreted as showing impatience, in contrast with his wife's genuine grief. This reading leads to yet another possible way of looking at Guenevere. We might see her as a consistent character who, increasingly aware that her husband does not care for her, is willing to direct her affections elsewhere. Her

disloyalty, in this case, would not be totally unexpected. We know from Arthur's speech that Guenevere has already praised Modred; indeed, he is one of her knights. This admiration, combined with the realization that her husband does not love her anyway, might be cause enough for Guenevere to marry Modred and bear his child.

A last possibility for the seemingly inconsistent behaviour of Guenevere is that people change with the passing of time. Thus, while her grief for Arthur's leaving might be regarded as genuine at the time, her treachery towards him might be regarded as genuine and also consistent. Another memorable romance heroine, Criseyde in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, seems to pass through a similar change. Troilus, forsaken in his absence for Diomedes, might well parallel Arthur's case.

It is obvious that no single interpretation of the character of Guenevere outweighs all the others. This is perhaps testimony to the skill of the Morte Arthure poet who, unlike most romance writers, refuses to create characters who are either black or white; but, on the other hand, ambiguity, unless some purpose is served by it, is not a merit in a poem. Perhaps in the end we can do no more than say, like Arthur, "Ȝife Waynor hafe wele wroghte, wele hir be-tydde!" (l. 4325).

The alliterative Morte Arthure, written in the chronicle tradition, is derived ultimately from the works of

Wace and Geoffrey of Monmouth.³⁴ The English version of these chronicles is Lazamon's Brut. In the Brut, Guenevere is presented as a treacherous queen and the adulterous wife of Modred. The major difference in Lazamon's Brut as far as Guenevere is concerned is Arthur's prophetic dream in which he sits astride a hall with Walwain before him. In the dream, Modred approaches and, with a battle axe, hews down the posts supporting the hall. Wennaver pulls down the roof so that Arthur falls and breaks his arm.³⁵ Arthur learns, through one of his knights, of the treachery of Modred and Guenevere. There is no doubt as to Guenevere's complicity in the treason.

When Guenevere hears of the vengeance of Arthur on Modred, she escapes to a nunnery:

"Ut of Eouerwike?
bi nihte heo iwende.
and touward Karliun tunte;
swa fwiþe fwa heo mahte" (p. 138).

She is never heard from again.

Guenevere appears as a jealous and malicious queen in Launfal and Sir Launfal. In Launfal, written in the first half of the fourteenth century in the South of England, a

³⁴Newstead, p. 46.

³⁵Lazamon's Brut, ed. Sir Frederic Madden (1847; rpt. New York: A.M.S. Press, 1972), III, pp. 118-121.

generous bachelor knight, Launfal, leaves the court because of poverty. "Vndre the shadow of a tree"(l.40), Launfal rests and is approached by two maidens. They bathe him and lead him to their mistress, who offers Launfal her love and many riches, provided that he never mentions her to anyone. Launfal immediately falls in love with the fairy mistress. On his return to court, Launfal imprudently mentions the beauty of his mistress when Guenevere provokes him by wanting him as her own lover. Launfal is tried by Arthur's court for treason when Guenevere lies to Arthur, saying that Launfal made dishonourable advances toward her and insulted her physical beauty. He is finally acquitted, however, when his fairy mistress appears in person in his defense.

Introduced into the poem only after Launfal's meeting with the fairy mistress, Guenevere, impetuously and boldly, determines to obtain the love of the fair and wealthy bachelor: "Tide me good or tyde me ille, / I wille assay the knyghtes wille" (ll. 199-200). But Guenevere's bold advances are rebuked by Launfal, and she becomes abusively angry: "'Ty," saide she, "thow fowle cowarde, / An harlot ribawde I wote thou harte" (ll. 221-222). Guenevere's charge of cowardice towards women provokes Launfal into defending himself by proudly claiming that he has a fairy lover who is surpassingly beautiful. He continues by saying that his mistress has serving ladies who are more beautiful than Guenevere (ll. 231-232). Guenevere is ashamed, but still

angry, and "To bede she goithe alle drery" (l. 235).

Guenevere, seeking revenge, lies to Arthur, claiming that Launfal made dishonourable advances to her and degraded her beauty. Arthur, "wondir wrothe" (l. 251), demands that Launfal be tried for treason. But Arthur's knights are convinced that Guenevere has lied, for "she was wyckyd oute and oute" (l. 295). Thus Guenevere's reputation for lechery and wickedness is established by the poet (ll. 292-299). The knights, rather than condemn Launfal, support him and urge him to produce his mistress that all might see that she is more beautiful than the queen.

There arrive at court two damsels "That one dame Gay-nour they myght be a queen" (l. 353); then other maidens arrive, "Welle more fairer than the other two" (l. 383). Guenevere, seeing these women of great beauty, "trowid of gyle, / That Landevale shuld be holpyn in awnile" (ll. 412-413) and demands of Arthur that Launfal be slain immediately. But Launfal's mistress appears and it is obvious to all that Guenevere and her ladies "to her were allso donne / As the mone-lyght to the sonne" (ll. 470-471). The mistress reveals Guenevere's lecherous intents, to which not even Arthur responds, and generously forgives Launfal for his indiscretion.

The contrast between the fairy mistress and Guenevere is well established in the poem. Where the love of the mistress is generous (she gives Launfal many riches as well

as her love), Guenevere's love is selfish; she demands Launfal's love but offers nothing in return. The mistress's forgiveness and mercy are contrasted with the queen's vengeance and maliciousness.

Sir Launfal differs in some respects from Launfal. In Chestre's poem, the wedding of Guenevere and Arthur is described. Her bad reputation is established early in the poem by the poet: ". . . sche hadde lemannys vnþer here lord,¹⁵/ So fele þere nas noon ende" (ll. 47-48). Because of her lechery, Guenevere is disliked by Launfal (l. 44), though he is not alone in his disapproval. Perhaps because she senses Launfal's hostility, Guenevere deliberately does not give him a gift at her wedding, though everyone else receives one: "Euerych knyȝt sche ȝaf broche oþer ryng, / But Syr Launfal sche yaf no þyng" (ll. 70-71). Because of the slight done to him, and because of his father's death, Launfal leaves the court. Guenevere's evil nature is clearly drawn from the beginning. A little later, Guenevere, in a spirit of maliciousness, inquires after Launfal, hoping to hear that he is doing poorly. When she hears of Launfal's success, "þe Quene hyt rew well sore" (l. 177).

Launfal returns to court with great wealth and demonstrates his sincere generosity by feeding the poor, giving to the religious institutions and prisons, and dressing his retainers in rich clothes. Guenevere, despite her former hostility, now offers her love to Launfal. Her sudden

change of attitude requires an explanation. It is a plot requirement, of course, for Guenevere to make advances to Launfal and inconsistency is not unheard of in ME romance.³⁶ But it must be kept in mind that Launfal has become the most celebrated knight at Arthur's court, and thus more desirable. Guenevere is probably responding here to the challenge of a conquest and, in keeping with her character as we have seen it, selfishly desires the best for herself.

The most significant innovation in Chestre's poem is the blinding episode. Guenevere, impetuously and in anger, says: "ȝyf he bryngeþ a fayrere þynge, / Put out my eeyn gray" (ll. 809-810). But Dame Tryamoure (the fairy mistress is named in Sir Launfal) proves to be more beautiful than Guenevere. Tryamoure reveals Guenevere's lecherous intentions "And blew on here swych a breþ / Pat neuer eft myȝt sche se" (ll. 1007-8). Tryamoure's actions here seem somewhat inconsistent for while she is quite willing to forgive Launfal for breaking his vow, she is seemingly spiteful toward Guenevere. However, Tryamoure should be regarded here as an agent for justice. Through her Guenevere is justly punished for her impetuosity and arrogance, vanity in the form of Guenevere is brought to its downfall, and poetic justice reigns.

The character of Guenevere in Launfal and Sir Launfal

³⁶Rymenhild, too, changes character in the course of King Horn.

is essentially that of a selfish, jealous and vindictive queen. To my knowledge, however, these are the only ME poems in which this portrait of her is drawn.³⁷

Le Morte Arthur, a stanzaic ME romance written near the end of the fourteenth century, presents Guenevere as the lover of Lancelot. The poem tells us of Lancelot's experience with the Maid of Astolat, his championship of the queen who is falsely accused of poisoning a knight, the betrayal by Agravain of the lovers, and the fateful sequence of events leading to the death of Arthur. This romance is important not only for its own sake, but also for its influence upon Malory, a matter discussed in Chapter III. Le Morte Arthur is the first romance to be discussed so far which presents Guenevere as a developing character.³⁸ The

³⁷ The basis for this portrait of Guenevere probably stems from Celtic origins. See T.P. Cross, "The Celtic Fée in Launfal," Kittredge Anniversary Papers (New York: Russell & Russell, 1913), pp. 377-387; T.P. Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of Lanval and Graelent," M. Phil., 12(10), 1915, 585-644; and P.J. Lucas, "Towards an Interpretation of Sir Launfal," Med Aevum, 39(3), 1970, 291-300. But, what we have in these two ME romances is not the careful preservation of old Celtic myth but rather the use of a well-established folk-lore type figure to act as a suitable foil to the virtuous characters in the poem. Evil, corrupting love contrasts with generous, open love; malice contrasts with goodness; defeated sin and pride contrasts with triumphant virtue and loyalty.

³⁸ Guenevere may also be regarded as a developing character in the alliterative Morte Arthure, depending, of course, on which interpretation of her is accepted.

nature and scope of this development will be demonstrated in the following discussion.

Guenevere first appears early in the poem, where "The kinge in bed^d lay by the quene" (l. 18).³⁹ The fact that Arthur and Guenevere are in bed together reminds us in a direct way that Guenevere is Arthur's wife as well as Lancelot's mistress. In the course of their conversation, Guenevere tells Arthur of her concern for the reputation of the knights of the Round Table, "Of a wondir thinge I wold you mene,/ How your courte by-gynnyth to spill" (ll. 22-23), and advises him to hold a tournament. Arthur takes her advice.⁴⁰

The love affair of Lancelot and Guenevere is introduced early in the poem (stanza 7) as already being in full swing. No explanation is given for Guenevere's fascination with Lancelot or his love for her; no background for the affair is given. Lancelot and Agravain stay behind when the rest of the knights leave for the tournament. Lancelot goes to the queen's chamber, but Guenevere is afraid they

³⁹This is not a modernized edition and thus contains some forms of letters which will be substituted, in following quotations, as follows:

d ^d (bed ^d) = d	r ^r (Arthur ^r) = r
ff (spiff) = ll	m ^m (hem ^m) = m
n ⁿ (vppon) = n	f (of) = f

⁴⁰In Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth century romance, Erec et Enide, Enide is similarly concerned for the reputation of her husband and here too Erec unquestioningly accepts her evaluation of the situation.

will be discovered:

"I drede we shall discouerid be,
Off the loue is vs by-twene;

(10)

Sir agravayne at home is he,
nyght & day he waytes vs two" (ll. 71-74).

While Guenevere's concern for secrecy might be interpreted as a requirement forced upon her by the courtly love code, it is probably on this occasion more the result of sensible prudence. Aware of Agravain's intentions to spy on them, Guenevere refuses to take any chances.

Lancelot leaves for the tournament. He dwells that night with the lord of Astolat. The lord's daughter, the Maid of Astolat, falls in love with him, and he agrees to wear her sleeve at the tournament. This is the first time that Lancelot has ever worn any lady's sign but Guenevere's: "So did I neuyr no ladyes ere / Bot one that most hathe lovid me" (ll. 215-216). Lancelot's wearing of the sleeve, however, has nothing to do with love. His reason for conceding to the Maid's wishes is simply that he wants to enter the tournament in disguise and, of course, none of the knights do, in fact, recognize him. Though they suspect that he is Lancelot, they are puzzled by the sign he bears, noting that Lancelot "bare nevyr none suche by-fore / But it were for the quenys sake" (ll. 295-296). This reiteration of the fact that never before has Lancelot worn anyone's sign but Guenevere's perhaps gives some justification for her reaction later to Gawain's mistaken comments that the Maid

and Lancelot are lovers.

Guenevere is distraught when she learns of Lancelot's apparent infidelity:

"The quene than said wordis no mo,
Bot to hyr chambir sone she yede,
And downe vppon hyr bed felle so
That nighe of witte she wold wede" (ll. 648-651).

When Lancelot returns to court, she refuses to speak with him for three days, though "Sore she longid hym to sene" (l. 725). Finally, Lancelot goes to see Guenevere. She reproaches him in a tearful manner,

"Well-a-way!" than sayd the quene,
"launcelot, that I euyr the se!
The loue þat hathe be vs by-twene
That it shall thus departed be" (ll. 740-743),

and begs him at least to keep their former relationship secret " Sithe it nedelyngis shall be so" (l. 753). Lancelot, sad and angry, leaves the court.⁴¹ Guenevere's tearful manner in her reproach of Lancelot demonstrates a lack of force and dignity, but her reiterated concern for secrecy at least demonstrates practical prudence. When later in the poem she is less prudent, she falls into Agravain's trap.

After the court learns of Lancelot's departure they are angry and blame Guenevere: "And hyr they cursyd for his

⁴¹In Malory, Guenevere orders Lancelot to leave the court, while here, Lancelot leaves on his own. Donaldson says: "By doing her own dismissing, instead of letting Lancelot do it for her, the Queen increases in stature" in Malory. Guenevere here is a "wishy-washy clinging vine", E. Talbot Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur," SP, 47(3), 1950, 462-463.

sake / That euyr loue was them by-twene" (ll. 798-799). It is interesting that, though the affair is widely known, objections to it are based on the harm being done to Lancelot. The moral implications are seemingly of no concern to the Knights of the court. Malory emphasizes the court's emmity here in order to explain why Guenevere's desperate need for a champion is so desperate when she is falsely accused of poisoning a Scottish knight.

One day, Arthur and Gawain notice a small, richly appointed boat floating down the river. In it they find the body of the Maid of Astolat bearing a letter. The letter reveals that she died for the love of Lancelot. Gawain confesses to Guenevere that what he had reported of Lancelot and the Maid was false. Passionately angry, Guenevere reproves Gawain:

"the quene was as wrothe as wynde
And to syr gawayne sayd she than :
"For sothe, Syr, thou were to vnkynde
to gabbe so vppon any man . . ." (ll. 1144-47).

Her angry rebuke of Gawain may be regarded as a natural desire to hit back at one who had caused her great unhappiness, but it may also come from the pricking of a guilty conscience. Whatever explanation one puts on her outburst, it seems that an explanation is required, for it is her immediate reaction to the news of Lancelot's loyalty. Only after Gawain leaves her does Guenevere lament over having believed his tale of Lancelot's infidelity.

The poem demands a comparison of Guenevere and the Maid of Astolat. The Maid's love for Lancelot is open and honest, a selfless love. Guenevere's is surrounded with an aura of duplicity and secrecy. Where the Maid is an innocent, if naive, young woman, Guenevere is a woman of the world. The Maid is willing to die for Lancelot. Guenevere does not reach this state of selflessness until much later in the poem, where, in her desire that Lancelot be happy, she is willing to see him marry someone else (ll. 3666-69).

It has already been pointed out that the court's enmity toward Guenevere paves the way for her desperate need for a champion when she is falsely accused of poisoning a Scottish knight. Upon seeing the dead knight, Guenevere realizes at once that she will be blamed, "Certis, now will all men wene / My-self that I the knight haue slayne" (ll. 862-863). She tries to revive him, but to no avail and is sentenced to death by burning.

Arthur is upset at the idea of his wife being sent to a shameful death, but the poet makes it apparent that he has no choice: "Thoughe Arthur were kynge þe land to weld , / he myght not be agayne the Righte" (ll. 920-921). He does join Guenevere in the search for a champion. Guenevere says: "lord , suche syttes me haue sought! / Why ne may I nevir be blithe!" (ll. 870-871). Whether she is really condemned to unhappiness by fate as she seems to suggest or not Guenevere's problems certainly are grave. She has

seemingly, by this point, lost Lancelot to the Maid of Astolat and is now faced with death because of the poisoned apple. She requires a champion who will defend her. She approaches many knights, individually, and in each case "The quene one knes be-fore hem felle" (l. 1330; similarly in l. 1342, 1358, 1374, 1391). The long series of requests by Guenevere and her humiliated approach emphasize her pitiful position. While her humiliation may be regarded as unqueenly behavior⁴² beside the more dignified alternative of noble stoicism, her humiliation does accurately reflect the desperation of an innocent victim faced with death, and might be regarded as the more realistic alternative. The motives for the knights' refusals to help her also deserve comment. Some knights, like Lyonelle, Ector and Bors, refuse only because she is responsible for Lancelot's absence. Their motives are petty and reduce Guenevere to a victim of circumstances. Others however, like Gawain, genuinely believe she is guilty of the crime. Because they are interested in seeing justice done, their motive is far more admirable.

Guenevere finally convinces Bors to champion her, unless a better knight presents himself, but he does so because "Of her he hade grete pyte" (l. 1428) not because he believes her innocent. She rejoices, "That nere for Ioye

⁴²We will recall her lack of force and dignity in her reproaching of Lancelot.

she swounyd swythe" (l. 1437) for she "of dethe was sore A-drade" (l. 1510). And when Arthur learns that Bors will defend his wife, "The terys ranne on the kyngis kne / For Ioye that he sawe bors adyght" (ll. 1544-5). Just in time, however, Lancelot arrives to take up Guenevere's defense and:

"Than was the quene glade I-noghe
Whan she saw launcelot du lake,
that nyghe for Ioy she felle in swoughe" (ll. 1632-4).

The accuser, Sir Mador, is defeated and, when a squire under torture confesses that he had slain the Scottish knight, begs forgiveness of Guenevere (ll. 1656-9). Lancelot and Guenevere are reconciled.

The affair of Lancelot and Guenevere is known of by the knights of the Round Table. Agravain, discussing it with his brothers, says that Arthur should be told. Despite Gawain's opposition to the plan, Agravain informs Arthur of the affair. Arthur's grief is all for Lancelot and not, surprisingly, for Guenevere or himself:

"Certes, that were grete pyte,
So As man nad neuyr yit more
Off biaute ne of bounte . . ." (ll. 1737-43).

His concern for Lancelot is, perhaps justifiable when we consider that Lancelot is his best and most renowned knight. And yet, bearing in mind Arthur's obvious joy and relief when Bors offered to champion Guenevere, his lack of concern for the duplicity of his wife here is puzzling. Furthermore,

Arthur readily believes Agravain's accusations⁴³ and it is Agravain who devises a plot to catch Lancelot in the act.

When Guenevere hears that Arthur and Agravain will be away for the night (part of Agravain's plot), "Tho was the quene wondyr blythe" (l. 1768), and imprudently sends for Lancelot. He arrives unarmed and, while they are in bed, Agravain and his men raise a clamour. Guenevere is naturally frightened:

"launcelot, what shall worthe of vs twoo!
The loue that hathe bene vs be-twene
To suche endyng that it sholde goo!" (ll. 1817-19).

The "endyng" to which she refers seems to indicate that Guenevere almost senses the tragic outcome of the discovery of the lovers. Lancelot escapes and, with his followers, waits in a forest for news of the queen. Arthur and his knights determine that Guenevere will be burned to death. Lancelot rescues Guenevere, but slays two of Gawain's brothers in the attempt. He thus incurs the vengeance of Gawain.

Lancelot is besieged by Arthur and Gawain at Joyous Garde and his many attempts at reconciliation fail. The Pope intercedes and commands Arthur to take back his wife. Lancelot agrees to return the queen and does so. Guenevere

⁴³Whether or not Arthur had suspicions of the affair is not reported. But it seems to be conventional for romance characters to believe accusations. In Athelston, for example, king Athelston readily believes Wymound's claim that Egeland is planning to murder him even though all three are sworn brothers.

becomes a mere pawn in the exchange. Her feelings in the matter are never described. When she is returned to Arthur, he does not seem to notice her. Though it could be argued that the poet's concern here is only with the civil war, the treatment of Guenevere here might very well reflect the position of women in the Middle Ages. That position, deduced from this episode, would be to the effect that women are essentially of little consequence. As a result, their preferences and desires are ignored in what is essentially a man's world.⁴⁴

Arthur and Gawain follow Lancelot into Benwick and the kingdom is left in the hands of Modred. News from England interrupts the battle on the continent - Modred has turned traitor and desires to wed Guenevere. She, though, "went to london to the towre / And speryd the gates And dwellyd therin" (ll. 2996-7) and Modred cannot get in. Her behaviour shows bravery and initiative. This queenly act contrasts with Guenevere's earlier reproaching of Lancelot discussed previously.

Upon Arthur's death, Lancelot learns that Guenevere has entered a nunnery and goes in search of her. When Guenevere sees him, she swoons, but recovering, openly confesses her guilt to the abbess:

⁴⁴Against this, many of Guenevere's earlier problems are a result of her preferences (even whims) being followed by Lancelot.

"Abbes, to you I knowlache here
 That throw thys ylke man And me, . . .
 All thys sorowfull werre hathe be;
 my lord is slayne, that had no pere. . ."
 (ll. 3638-51).

Her realization of her own guilt and her public confession are followed by repentance:

"I-sette I am In suche A place,
 my sowle hele I wyll A-byde,
 Telle god send me som grace . . . (ll. 3654-61).

Guenevere has overcome her worldly concern for Lancelot and is now concerned only for her soul. Finally, she is self-critical and takes the blame for the fall of Arthur's kingdom. She goes on to reject Lancelot, even refusing to kiss him goodbye:

"nay," sayd the quene, "that wyll I not;
 launcelot, thynke on that no more;
 To Absteyne vs we muste haue thought" (ll. 3714-6).

She is even able to advise Lancelot to find himself a wife in his own kingdom (ll. 3666-9); she wants happiness for him. Her self-sacrifice here is similar to the Maid's earlier, and in contrast to her previous jealousy of the Maid.

Guenevere and Lancelot never see each other again; both lead holy lives. When she dies, Lancelot ". . . beryed hyr with masse full merry / By syr Arthur, as I yow mene" (ll. 3958-9). Her place of burial is fitting. Being buried beside Arthur gives public recognition to her atonement - atonement attained through the progressive acts of rejecting Modred and thus remaining politically loyal to Arthur, of

becoming a nun, and finally rejecting Lancelot. Her atonement demands a return to her rightful position of wife to Arthur. Guenevere's place of burial may also have a structural significance in the poem. Le Morte Arthur, we will recall, began with Arthur and Guenevere in bed together; it ends with their burial side by side. The tone at the end of the poem, though one of melancholy, also includes a note of optimism. Two of the main characters have re-directed their lives to the realm of the spiritual, the civil war has ended, and the healing process can now begin. This tone of optimism is symbolized by Guenevere being buried beside her husband.

It is evident that Guenevere in Le Morte Arthur is a developing character. She develops from a petty-minded, self-centered and jealous woman to a repentant, self-critical one. This development makes for a much more complex character than we have noted in previously discussed romances. And, Guenevere is more interesting as a character as a result of this complexity.

CHAPTER III

GUENEVERE IN MALORY'S MORTE DARTHUR

A study of Guenevere in ME romances would not be complete without an examination of her in Malory's Morte Darthur even though it is debatable whether Malory's work is a romance. Vinaver argued that Malory in effect, wrote eight romances.¹ Other scholars have opposed him by arguing that Malory's work is essentially a unified whole,² though containing aspects of several genres.³ Rather than

¹The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. E. Vinaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 2nd ed. I, xxxv-xcix.

²Examples are: Malory's Originality, ed. R.M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964); R.M. Lumiansky, "The Question of Unity in Malory's Morte Darthur," TSE, 5, 1955, 29-39; R.H. Wilson, "How Many Books did Malory Write?" University of Texas Studies in English, 30, 1951, 1-23; Essays on Malory, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); R.S. Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (London: Hutchinson Univ. Lib., 1963).

³See J. Arthos, On the Poetry of Spenser and the Form of Romances (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1956); P. DiPasquale, Jr., "Malory's Guinevere: Epic Queen, Romance Heroine and Tragic Mistress," Bucknell Review, 16(2), May 1968, 86-102. Even before Vinaver it was recognized that the Morte Darthur contained aspects of several genres. See G. Saintsbury, The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory (1897; rpt. London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1923); G. H. Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets (London: Archibald Constable & Co. Ltd., 1907).

entering the controversy by discussing the genre of Malory's Morte Darthur I will point out only that, regardless of the position various scholars take in the controversy, none denies the essential 'romance' quality of Malory's work.

In Malory's Morte Darthur, Guenevere essentially appears in three roles: she is the queen, she is the wife of Arthur, and she is the mistress of Lancelot. A study of Guenevere in Malory requires, then, a discussion of each of these roles. However, the reader must always remember that Guenevere is a single character, that underlying each of the roles is one person. In the light of this, the following discussion will examine Guenevere, first in each of her three roles, and then will present an over-view of the character of Guenevere which will seek to reconcile the diverse elements.

In her role as queen, Guenevere reveals characteristics similar to those we noted in the previous chapter.

In all romances she is very beautiful, but in Malory, though she is again beautiful, she is not always the "fayryst and pyereles" (p. 223) of women. In most cases though, the woman who is more beautiful than she is so because of magic. For example, Lyonesse is acknowledged by the court to be the most beautiful (p. 223). Lyonesse, we will recall, owned a ring which "encresyth my beawté muche more than hit is of myself" (p. 213); she also has connections

with the Isle of Avalon, where her brother lives (p. 211). Elaine, because she was "called the fayryst lady of that contrey", (p. 478) had been imprisoned by Morgan's enchantment in boiling water. When she arrives at Camelot, it is generally agreed that she is the "fayrest and the beste beseyne" (p. 485) lady present. However, the presence of her enchantress maidservant, Dame Brusen, may cause the reader to wonder whether Elaine is this beautiful in herself, or whether she is so due to Dame Brusen's magic. In the quest of the Holy Grail, Sir Bors is tempted by a woman, "the fayryste of the worlde" (p. 570). She proves, however, to be a fiend in disguise, whose purpose was to seduce Bors and thus cause him to fail in his quest. The only woman who is generally accepted to be more beautiful than Guenevere, and this without the aid of enchantment, is Iseult. Sir Dynadan thinks Iseult is "much fayrer" (p. 424) than his queen; even Arthur thinks so (p. 461).

But we have no reason to believe Guenevere is vain about her beauty. In fact, in at least two instances she generously acknowledges women to be more beautiful than herself. When Sir Bleoberys and Sir Ector greet the queen after the tournament at Lonsep (the Queen had been ill and therefore could not attend), they praise Iseult, calling her "pyreles of all ladyes"; Guenevere replies: ". . . thus seyth all folkys that hath sene her and spokyn wyth her.

God wolde. . . that I had parte of her condycions!" (pp. 465-466). When Elaine enters Camelot, accompanied by a hundred richly appparelled knights and gentlewomen, "kynge Arthure and quene Gwenyver seyde wyth all the knyghtes that dame Elayne was [the fayrest and] the beste beseyne lady that ever was seyne in that courte" (p. 485).

In keeping with the 'gracious queen' we saw in other works discussed, Guenevere plays, in Malory, the role of the gracious hostess. Guenevere graciously welcomes Tristram to court: "Than come quene Gwenyver and many ladyes with her, and all tho ladyes seyde at one voyce, 'Wellcom, sir Trystram!'" (p. 352). As Arthur's queen, she is saluted and recognized as the first lady of the kingdom. As queen, Guenevere presides at the tournament of Surluse (p. 403, p. 409). At the tournament at the Castell Perelus, she is one of the "royalté" in attendance (p. 214). Dynadan salutes her and the king upon his arrival at court (p. 372). After Sir Palomydes' christening, he, Sir Tristram and Sir Galleron ride towards Camelot "where that kynge Arthure and quene Gwenyvir was" (p. 510). When a lady on a white palfrey enters the court, to warn Lancelot that he is no longer the "best knyght of the worlde", she salutes both Arthur and Guenevere (p. 520).

Guenevere's concern for the knights of the Round Table is demonstrated throughout Malory's work. After Sir Mellyagaunce leads her and her knights to his castle,

Guenevere insists on keeping them near her, "that she myght herself se unto them that they wanted nothyng" (p. 657). She is always glad when a worthy knight wins glory. When Torre returns from his quest of the white brachet, "he tolde and made prevys of hys dedys . . . , wherefore the kynge and the quene made grete joy" (p. 71). When Kay worshipfully upholds his promise to overthrow two of the Five Kings, Guenevere "praysed sir Kay for his dedis and seyde, 'What lady that ye love and she love you nat agayne, she were gretly to blame. And amonge all ladyes . . . I shall bere your noble fame, for ye spake a grete worde and fulfylled hit worshipfully" (p. 79). Later, when Sir Lamorak accomplishes great achievements at the tournament at Surluse, Guenevere "enbraced hym in her armys and seyde, 'Sir, well have ye done this day!'" (p. 405). She displays grief when the king and knights depart for war. Upon Arthur's departure for Rome, "quene Gwenyver made grete sorow that the kynge and all the lordys sholde so be departed, and there she fell doune on a swone. . . ." (p. 118). When most of the knights of the Round Table take up the quest of the Holy Grail, "aboven all othir quene Gwenyver made grete sorow" (p. 523).⁴

Guenevere's concern for the welfare of the knights

⁴Of course, her "grete sorow" might be attributed to the fact that her lover is leaving, too. However, Malory is not explicit here.

of the kingdom is reciprocated in their reverence of her. Kay, convinced he has received his death wound, asks Arthur to commend him to "dame Gwenyvere, thy goodly queene" (p. 133). Later, when Guenevere is falsely accused of poisoning a knight, Sir Bors defends her reputation in the face of the knights' criticism saying: "at all tymes, as far as ever I coude know, she was a maynteyner of good knyghtes; and ever she hath bene large and fre of hir goodis to all good knyghtes, and the moste bownteuous lady of hir gyffti[s] and her good grace that ever I saw other harde speke off" (p. 617).

On numerous occasions the queen acts as judge. When Gawain slays a woman in quest of the white hart, both Guenevere and Arthur are "gretely displeased" and, "by ordynaunce of the queene there was sette a queste of ladyes uppon sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes and to fyght for hir quarels; and ever that he sholde be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy" (p. 67). She also takes Pellinor to task for not having tried to save the life of a lady, saying, "ye were gretly to blame that ye saved nat thys ladyes lyff" (p. 75). Lancelot sends Sir Pedyvere to Guenevere to be judged for beheading his wife. The penance Guenevere gives Sir Pedyvere is as grotesque as his crime was: ". . . make ye as good skyffte as ye can, ye shall bere this lady with you on horsebak unto the Pope of Rome, and of hym resseyve

youre penaunce for your foule dedis. And ye shall nevyr reste one nyght thereas ye do another, and ye go to ony bedde the dede body shall lye with you" (p. 172). In the three instances presented above, Guenevere bears a strong resemblance to the courtly queen who acts as judge.

That is not to say that Guenevere is 'merely' a courtly queen. In several instances she reveals real wisdom. When Guenevere learns of Sir Palomydes' envy, she says: "Than shall he never wyne worshyp. . . for and hyt happyn an envyous man onys to wyne worshyp, he shall be dishonoured twyse therefore. And for this cause all men of worshyp hate an envyous man and woll shewe hym no favoure, and he that ys curteyse and kynde and jantil hath favoure in every place" (p. 466). Later, Guenevere prevents a final confrontation between Sir Mellyagaunce and her rescuer, Sir Lancelot, saying: "bettir ys pees than evermore warre, and the lesse noyse the more ys my worshyp" (p. 655). Guenevere is also clever. After her abduction by Sir Mellyagaunce, she secretly sends a child on horseback to inform Lancelot of her plight (p. 652). Later, when Modred voices his intention to marry her, after having forged letters telling of Arthur's and Lancelot's deaths, Guenevere "was passyng hevy. But she durst nat discover her harte, but spake fayre, and agreed to sir Mordredys wylle" (p. 707). Through her "fayre" speech she is allowed to go to London, supposedly for "thynges tha[t] longed to the brydale" (p. 707). Instead, she stocks the Tower of London with provisions and knights and locks herself in.

Guenevere's dignity is nowhere as evident as in her speech rebuking Sir Mellyagaunce. Sir Mellyagaunce has just confronted Guenevere's knights, outnumbering them sixteen to one, at the May Day celebrations:

"'Traytoure knyght,' seyd quene Gwenyver, 'what caste thou to do? Wolt thou shame thyselff? Bethynke the how thou arte a kyngis sonne and a knyght of the Table Rounde, and thou thus to be aboute to dishonoure the noble kyng that made the knyght! Thou shamyst all knyghthode and thyselffe and me. And I lat the wyte thou shalt never shame me, for I had levir kut myne owne throte in twayne rather than thou sholde dishonoure me!'" (p. 651).

But Sir Mellyagaunce is not dissuaded from his purpose. He and his men overtake the Queen's Knights, and Guenevere, "for verry pyté and sorow" (p. 651) for her wounded knights, calls to Sir Mellyagaunce to stop.

Guenevere is also brave. When it seems inevitable that Arthur and his men will be overcome by the Five Kings, Guenevere is given the choice of facing death by the Five Kings or facing the "rowgne" water of the Humbir River; she replies: "Yet were me lever to dey in this watir than to falle in youre enemyes handis . . . and there to be slayne" (p. 78). Much later, when Lancelot and Guenevere are confronted by Aggravayne, Mordred and their twelve companions, and it is obvious that war between Lancelot and Arthur will be unavoidable, Guenevere refuses Lancelot's offer to take her away. Even though she realizes she will be sentenced to death for treason, she says: "Sir, that ys nat beste, . . . mesemyth, for now ye have don so much harme hit woll

be beste that ye holde you styll with this"(678).

In one incident, though, Guenevere appears as the defenceless woman often found in romance. In the absence of Arthur and his knights, "an horryble lyon kepte in a towre of stoon, . . . brake lowse and cam hurlyng before the quene and her knyghtes. And whan the quene sawe the lyon she cryed oute and fledde and prayde hir knyghtes to rescow her" (pp. 282-283). La Cote Male Tayle rescues her by slaying the lion and, when Arthur hears of it, he knights La Cote Male Tayle. Guenevere's helplessness in this instance may be somewhat surprising, especially when the several examples of her bravery and dignity in the face of danger are considered. Her helplessness in this example, though, may justifiably be regarded as a means for Malory to allow La Cote Male Tayle to prove himself. Significantly enough, all the other knights present are too afraid to help Guenevere, and, after this incident, La Cote Male Tayle takes up the adventure offered by an unknown damsel who enters the court on the same day, bearing a curious shield (p. 283).

One other incident in Malory presents Guenevere as being unlike her usual dignified and gracious self. At the tournament of Surluse, during the nightly feasting and revelry with the Haute Prynce Galahalte, Sir Lancelot, and the knights participating in the tournament, Sir Dynadan becomes a source of great amusement:

"And anone grete coystrons gate sir Dynadan, and into the foreyste there besyde, and there they dispoyled hym unto his sherte and put uppon hym a womans garmente and so brought hym into fylde. . . And than was sir Dynadan brought in amonge them all, and whan quene Gwenyver sawe sir Dynadan ibrought in so amonge them all, then she lowghe, that she fell downe; and so dede all that there was" (p. 410).⁵

To see Guenevere laughing so hard that she falls off her chair comes as a shock to the reader. Why is she suddenly depicted as a woman in fabliaux might be? Has Malory forgotten who his queen is, so to speak? There is the possibility, of course, that Malory is being inconsistent at this point - there are inconsistencies enough throughout his work. But let us speculate on other possible reasons for this seemingly unusual presentation of Guenevere. First of all, are we to regard the incident as unusual? After all, Guenevere is not the only person who expresses glee, "so dede all that there was". However, to my knowledge, in no other romance does a queen, or any heroine, act in such an undignified way. Perhaps, though, there is something within Guenevere's character which makes her actions here more understandable. We know, for example, that her anger is quick and sharp towards Lancelot at times. Her anger at Lancelot over Elaine and the Maid of Astolat are good examples; at one point, she even wishes Lancelot dead (p. 637)! It is perhaps possible that her glee in this incident is the

⁵DiPasquale, 94, passes this off as "light-hearted silliness."

opposite extreme. Perhaps we may also consider significant the fact that Arthur is not in attendance. With the merriment around her, and with the company of her lover, Guenevere is perhaps enjoying the opportunity of having her tense overall situation relieved, if only temporarily.

In the course of Malory's Morte Darthur the reader witnesses Arthur's attitude toward Guenevere change from the devotion of a loving husband to the indifference of a king whose primary concern is for his knights and his realm.

Early in the story, Malory stresses Arthur's affection for his wife. Arthur sees Guenevere and "ever afftir he loved hir" (p. 26).⁶ He tells Merlin that she is "the moste valyaunte and fayryst that I know lyvyng, or yet that ever I coude fynde" (p. 59), and marries her, despite Merlin's warning that "Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff" (p. 59) because of the love that would exist between her and Lancelot. Of course, Guenevere herself has no say in the question of the marriage. Merlin tells her father of the king's desire, and Lodegreauns "delyverd hys doughtir

⁶The relationship between Arthur and Guenevere is covered very well in E.D. Kennedy, "The Arthur - Guenevere Relationship in Malory's Morte Darthur," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 4(2), 1971, 29-40.

Gwenyver unto Merlion" (p. 60). Arthur and Guenevere are married "in the chirche of Seynte Stephyns with grete solempnité" (p. 63). Guenevere's arrival at Camelot marks the arrival of the Round Table as well, for this is the gift Lodegreauns has given Arthur. At the wedding festivities, Gawain, Torre and Pellinor begin their quest to return the white hart, the white hound, and the mysterious damsel, respectively. The presence of the Round Table thus brings about mysterious events that culminate in the formation of the fellowship of renowned knights. The quests undertaken by Gawain, Torre and Pellinor lead, in part, to the adoption of the chivalric code and, also, to the incidents in which we first learn something about Guenevere herself. She acts as a judge in several cases. The wedding of Arthur and Guenevere may, thus, be regarded as the real starting point of Malory's story.

Later, when Arthur somewhat reluctantly goes forth to defend his kingdom against the Five Kings, he tells Guenevere: ". . . ye shall go with me, for I may nat longe mysse you. Ye shall cause me to be the more hardy, what adventure so befalle me; yette woll I nat wyghte my lady to be in no joupardye" (p. 77). Arthur's need of Guenevere and his concern for her safety are shown in this statement. Guenevere, in reply, is obedient and willing: "Sir. . . I am at youre commaundemente, and shall be redy at all tymes"

(p. 77). When confronted with the rough waters of the Humber River on one hand and the threat of being overthrown by the Five Kings on the other, Arthur gives Guenevere the opportunity to decide between the two dangers. Her reply reflects her loyalty, and proves that Arthur's opinion of her bravery is well-founded: "Yet were me lever to dey in this watir than to falle in youre enemyes handis. . . and there to be slayne" (p. 78). After the battle, Arthur sends for Guenevere and "anone she was com and made grete joy of the overcommynge of that batayle" (p. 79).

In the other Books of the Morte Darnur, however, Arthur seems to be less enamoured. For example, Book II also presents Arthur leaving for war, this time with Lucius of Rome. On this occasion, however, he does not express love for Guenevere, invite her to come along and tell her that her presence would cause him "to be the more hardy". Guenevere, on the other hand "made grete sorow that the kynge and all the lordys sholde so be departed, and there she fell doune on a swone, and hir ladyes bare hir to her chambir" (p. 118). Arthur simply commends her and her ladies to God and leaves her in the care of his regents.⁷

Only a few incidents in Books III to VI give further

⁷His impersonal attitude toward Guenevere here seems remarkable when one recalls his affectionate devotion in Book I and also when one recalls the corresponding scene in the alliterative Morte Arthure (see Chapter II).

indications of the Arthur-Guenevere relationship. In the La Cote Male Tayle incident, where Guenevere is rescued from a "horryble lyon" (p. 282) by the young knight, Arthur is said to be pleased with the outcome: "He was well pleased and seyde, 'Uppon payne of myne hede, he shall preve a noble man and faythefull and trewe of his promyse!'" (p. 283). Yet, perhaps significantly, there is no mention made of concern, on Arthur's part, for his wife's condition. A little later, though, the sorceress Aunowre attempts to seduce Arthur: "she desired hym to ly by her, and than the kynge remembird hym of hy[s] lady and wolde nat for no crauffte that she cowde do" (pp. 300-301). This scene, showing Arthur's fidelity to his wife, contrasts sharply with an incident occurring much later in the Tristram book. During the tournament at Lonsep, Arthur meets Iseult, "behyldde her, and lyked her wondirly well" (p. 452). When accosted by Palomydes as an "uncurteyse knyght", Arthur "toke none hede", but "ever he loked styлле uppon quene Isode" (p. 452). Later, Arthur tells her: "hit is many a day ago sytthyn I desyred fyrst to se you, for ye have bene praysed so fayre a lady. And now I dare say ye ar the fayryste that ever I sawe" (p. 461).

In Book VII the queen is accused of poisoning one of Arthur's knights and is to be burned at the stake if she does not find a champion to defend her. Guenevere swears

to her innocence (p. 615), but to no avail. Because Arthur believes in her innocence, he is unhappy and wants Lancelot to fight for her. Lancelot, however, is not available and, in seeming annoyance, Arthur turns to Guenevere and asks: "What aylith you . . . that ye can nat kepe sir Launcelot uppon youre syde?" (p. 615). But Arthur's primary concern seems to be to act as a rightful judge: ". . . for favoure, love, nother affinité there sholde be none other but ryghtuous jugemente, as well uppon a kynge as uppon a knyght, and as well uppon a quene as uppon another poure lady" (p. 618). Bors finally agrees to fight for Guenevere, and "Than was the kynge and the quene passynge gladde" (p. 616). When Guenevere's innocence is proved "the quene com to the kyng and aythir kyssed othir hartely" (p. 620). These brief signs of affection and concern on Arthur's part, it should be pointed out, are rather insignificant in comparison to the love expressed in the similar incident recounted in the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur (see Chapter II).⁸

In the 'Knight of the Cart' episode, Guenevere's life is again at stake, as Sir Mellyagaunce accuses her of sleeping with one of her wounded knights. On this occasion, too, Arthur is "sore abaysshed and shamed that the quene shulde have be brente in the defaute of sir Launcelot" (p. 661),⁹

⁸Kennedy, 33, also points this out.

⁹Lancelot, we will recall, was treacherously imprisoned by Mellyagaunce so that he would not be able to defend the queen.

and is convinced of the queen's innocence: "I dare say all that sir Mellyyagaunce puttith uppon my lady the quene ys wronge" (p. 661). His conviction of her innocence, though, is based upon evidence: "I have spokyn with all the ten wounded knyghtes, and there ys nat one of them, and he were hole and able to do batayle, but he wolde prove uppon sir Mellyyagaunce body [that it is fals that he puttith upon my] <lady>" (p. 661). In this incident, even the insignificant expressions of Arthur's concern for his wife, shown in the poisoned apple episode, are lacking.

In the final book, when Arthur is told of the affair between Guenevere and Lancelot, he wants proof: "For . . . the kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that . . . the kynge loved hym passyngly well" (p. 674). Malory notes here that while Arthur suspected the adultery, it was because of his love for Lancelot that he preferred to do nothing about it; Malory says nothing about Arthur's feelings for the queen.

Later Arthur's knights find Lancelot and Guenevere together and in the fight that follows, Lancelot kills thirteen of them. Mordred, wounded, escapes and tells Arthur what has happened. Arthur does not seem to be concerned about the affair itself; rather he is sorry "that ever sir

Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever" (p. 682).

He concludes immediately, moreover, that Guenevere must die as punishment, without the chance to escape by means of a judicial combat. But Malory gives legal justification for Arthur's action:

"And the law was such in tho dayes that whatsomever they were, of what astate or degré, if they were founden gylty of treson there shuld be none other remedy but deth, and othir the menour othir the takynge wyth the dede shulde be causer of their hasty jougement. And ryght so was hit ordayned for quene Gwenyver: bycause sir Mordred was ascaped sore wounded, and the dethe of thirtene knyghtes of the Rounde Table, thes previs and experyenses caused kynge Arthure to commaunde the quene to the fyre and there to be brente" (p. 682).¹⁰

Arthur does not act without emotion: he was "sore amoved" (p. 682) in making his judgement. But although Gawain assumes that Arthur has condemned Guenevere for her infidelity (p. 682), Arthur is apparently more concerned with the deaths of his thirteen knights. The treason that condemns her, in Arthur's eyes, is the fact that she was involved with Lancelot in the death of some of his men. Arthur's reason for refusing to allow Guenevere the chance of escape through judicial combat is interesting: "[Sir Lancelot] trustyth so much uppon hys hondis and hys myght that he doutyth no man. And therefore for my quene he shall nevermore

¹⁰See also O. Kratins, "Treason in Middle English Metrical Romances," Phil. Quart., 45(4), 1966, 668-687.

fyght, for she shall have the law" (pp. 682-683). The trial by combat was regarded as the most valid kind of judgement because of the belief in the direct intervention of God. By refusing to allow Guenevere this trial, is Arthur displaying disbelief in this well-established custom and its theological basis, or is he merely being realistic in recognizing that, because Lancelot is the greatest knight, the outcome of a trial by combat would inevitably vindicate Guenevere? Had Guenevere been condemned for adultery, we might very well accept the former. After all, there is no real evidence of adultery: Lancelot tells Bors before he goes to see Guenevere that he "shall go and com agayne and make no taryynge" (p. 675), and Malory adds that "the quene and sir Launcelot were togydirs. And whether they were abed othor at othor maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make no mencion" (p. 676). The charge of adultery, as purely an accusation, then, may have required a trial by combat. But, as was suggested earlier, Arthur's basis for the charge of treason was probably the death of thirteen knights. Concrete evidence for this charge is given by Mordred and the bodies of the thirteen knights and, on the basis of this evidence, there is no room for doubt as to Guenevere's guilt. Thus the death sentence.

Arthur's lack of love for Guenevere is emphasized further when Guenevere is to be executed; although there was "wepynge and waylynge and wryngyng of hondis of many

lordys and ladyes" (p. 684), Malory does not indicate that Arthur shares this distress. Arthur's attitude is made more explicit later when he says: "And much more I am sorryar 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" (p. 685). Later, in his rebuke of Sir Lancelot, Arthur says: "thou haste slayne my good knyghtes and full noble men of my blood, that shall I never recover agayne. Also thou haste layne be my quene and holdyn her many wynters, and sytthyn, lyke a traytoure, taken her away fro me by fors" (p. 688). This is one of the few passages in the last book in which Arthur shows any feeling for his wife. However, it should be emphasized that Arthur mentions here the loss of his knights before the loss of his queen. And when Guenevere is returned to him, by the Pope's command, Arthur does not indicate even an awareness of her existence (pp. 694-698).

If the discussion of the Arthur-Guenevere relationship presented here seems to dwell on Arthur's attitude, rather than his wife's, it is because the material dictates this. Guenevere's emotions are never explicitly outlined by Malory; we can only tell what they might be by reading between the lines. There is no explicit statement by Malory that Guenevere ever even loved Arthur, not even at the beginning of their relationship. We see, only, examples of

her obedience and loyalty (as in loyalty to a king). Examples of her grief at the departures of Arthur, and joy at his returns may be regarded as signs of affection for her husband, but may also be regarded as examples of what Sands referred to as the romance character's tendency to lack "true inner turmoil (despite their excessive displays of grief or devotion)".¹¹

The lack of real love between Arthur and Guenevere, on either of their parts, does make the love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere understandable to some extent. Her turning to a lover may be regarded as corresponding to Arthur's turning to his responsibilities as a king.

Though the portrayal of Guenevere as queen and her relationship with Arthur are of importance and interest in Malory's Morte Darthur, the reader's attention ultimately focuses on her in her relationship to her lover, Lancelot. It is the love of Guenevere and Lancelot which defines one of the causes for the downfall of Arthur's kingdom and, in effect, gives lasting significance to Guenevere herself.

In Malory's treatment of the love affair between Guenevere and Lancelot, several qualities of the jealous, vindictive woman we already noted in Launfal and Sir Launfal

¹¹Sands, p. 7.

are evident. In Malory, her jealousy is aroused most often because of Elaine. Elaine had seduced Lancelot through enchantment once, and had born his son, Galahad. Guenevere had been "wrothe, and she gaff many rebukes to sir Launcelot and called hym false knyght" (p. 485). But when Lancelot told Guenevere that Elaine had been made, by enchantment, to appear as Guenevere, the queen "hylde sir Launcelot exkused" (p. 485). Later, when Elaine arrives at Camelot, Guenevere makes a point of trying to keep Lancelot with her during the night. Guenevere's suspicions prove to be well-founded for when she discovers that Lancelot is not in his bed, Guenevere realizes that he must be with Elaine: "So the quene was nyghe oute of her wytte, and than she wrythed and waltred as a madde women" (p. 487). Guenevere's rage is unrelenting and vehement, directed at both Lancelot and Elaine; she banishes both of them from the court. Even after she is reconciled with Lancelot, she is not willing to let him out of her sight (p. 515).

After his return from the quest of the Holy Grail, Lancelot offers his services to other women, in order "to do for the plesure of oure Lorde Jesu Cryst" and also to "eschew the sclawndir and noyse" (p. 611) of his affair with Guenevere. Though Lancelot tries to justify his actions to Guenevere, she "waxed wrothe with sir Launcelot" (p. 611) and angrily, and tearfully, rebukes him: "Sir Launcelot, now I well understonde that thou arte a false, recrayed

knyght and a comon lechourere, and lovyste and holdiste othir ladyes, and of me thou haste dysdayne and scorne" (p. 612).¹² Lancelot is banished, once again, from court.

In her jealous rages Guenevere reveals a streak of vindictiveness. She warns Elaine, for example, "And for the love ye owghe unto sir Launcelot discover not hys counceyle, for and ye do, hit woll be hys deth!" (p. 488). Later, after hearing from Gawain of Lancelot's supposed infidelity with the Maid of Astolot, Guenevere exclaims, when hearing about Lancelot's wounds: ". . . wyte you well I am ryght sory and he shall have hys lyff" (p. 637).

Guenevere's anger and jealousy, already discussed in regard to Elaine, reappear in the Maid of Astolot episode. As in Le Morte Arthur, Lancelot wears the Maid's sleeve at a tournament, as a disguise. In Malory, Arthur exclaims: "ar now I never herde sey nor knew that ever he bare ony tokyn of none erthely woman" (p. 632). And Bors says: "or than we nother none of us all never knew that ever he bare tokyn or sygne of maydyn, lady, nothir jantillwoman" (p. 632). In Le Morte Arthur, we will recall, it was twice pointed out that never before had Lancelot borne any lady's sign but Guenevere's. Here, then, her resulting anger is

¹²Miko refers to this as a display of Guenevere's "petulance", S.J. Miko, "Malory and the Chivalric Order," Med. Aevum, 35(3), 1966, 214.

more understandable. And Lancelot predicts her anger before he is even told about it: "sir Launcelot compaste in hys mynde that sir Gawayne wolde telle quene Gwenyvere how he bare the rede slyve and for whom, that he wyst well wolde turne unto grete angur" (p. 633). That Lancelot can so accurately foretell his lover's reactions may indicate two things: first, that he knows Guenevere well and, because he loves her, can accept her flaws; and second, that Guenevere is a totally predictable woman. By this time in the narrative, the reader has come to expect Guenevere's quick anger and can say, like Bors: "ye have ben oftyntymes displeased with my lorde sir Launcelot, but at all tymys at the ende ye founde hym a trew knyght" (p. 637).

Her unreasonableness is emphasized when, after her anger and jealousy over the Maid, she reproaches Lancelot when she realizes that the Maid is dead: "ye myght have shewed hir som bownté and jantilnes whych myght have preserved hir lyff" (p. 641). It is not surprising to hear Lancelot giving her a subtle warning at this point: "I love nat to be constrayned to love, for love muste only aryse of the harte selff, and nat by none constraynte" (p. 641). In her anger and unreasonableness in regard to both Elaine and the Maid, Guenevere seems to belie the earlier calm confidence with which she comforted Iseult:

"So quene Gwenyver sente hir another letter and bade her be of goode comforte, for she sholde have joy aftir sorow: for sir Trystrames was so noble a knyght called that by craftes of sorcery ladyes

wolde make suche noble [men] to wedde them. 'But the ende,' quene Gwenyver seyde, 'shulde be thus, that he shall hate her and love you bettir than ever he dud" (p. 274).

The similarities between Guenevere in Malory and in the Launfal poems ends with her occasional outbursts of jealousy and vindictiveness. The repentant, reconciliatory Guenevere is more like the Guenevere in the stanzaic Le Morte Arthur. For example, after Lancelot has defended her against the accusation of murder by Sir Madore, "evermore the quene benhylde sir Launcelot, and wepte so tendirly that she sanke allmoste to the grownde for sorow that he had done to her so grete kyndenes where she shewed hym grete unkyndenesse" (p. 620). When she learns of Lancelot's madness, after she had banished him because of her jealousy of Elaine, Guenevere literally begs his kinsmen to go in search of him: "she kneled afore tho three knyghtes and hylde up bothe <her> hondys and besought them to seke hym" (p. 489). Recovered from her jealousy of Lancelot's service to other women, and facing the punishment of death in the poisoned apple episode, Guenevere says: "now I mysse sir Launcelot, for and he were here he wolde sone putte me in my hartis ease" (p. 615). And, after discovering that Gawain's report of the love between Lancelot and the Maid of Astolot is false, "the quene sent for sir Launcelot and prayde hym of mercy for why that she had ben wrothe with hym causeles" (p. 642). Lancelot points out, accurately enough,

"Thys ys nat the firste tyme . . . that ye have ben displese with me causeles" (p. 642). Bors, as we have seen, regards her anger, jealousy and changeable mind as characteristic of women in general. He advises Lancelot, after Guenevere has banished him, not to leave, because "women in their hastynesse woll do oftyntymes that aftir hem sore repentith" (p. 612).

As the lover of Lancelot, Guenevere reveals several qualities that one would naturally expect her to show. On at least one occasion, for example, she is concerned about secrecy. She seems to have learned, from her inopportune banishment of Lancelot and the ensuing poisoned apple episode, that Lancelot's desire for secrecy was indeed prudent. Indeed, after Lancelot's explanation of why he served other women, we learn that "the quene outewarde made no maner of sorow in shewyng to none of his bloode nor to none other, but wyte ye well, inwardely . . . she toke grete thought" (p. 613). Thus later, though she is unable to attend the tournament at Camelot because of illness (p. 621),¹³ Guenevere sends Lancelot, by saying: "Sir, ye ar gretly to blame thus to holde you behynde my lorde. What woll youre enemyes and myne sey and deme?" (p. 622). Lancelot departs, but comments: "Hit is of late com syn ye were woxen so wyse!" (p. 622).

¹³We will recall that she was also unable to attend the tournament at Lonsep because of illness (p. 465).

But Guenevere also shows imprudence, in that she falls into Aggravayne's trap. In Le Morte Arthur, we will remember, Guenevere sent for Lancelot only because Arthur and Aggravayne were supposed to be away. In Malory, only Arthur stays away; however, it is never explicitly stated that Guenevere was aware particularly of Aggravayne's enmity.

Guenevere, on several occasions, demonstrates a genuine but natural concern for Lancelot's welfare. For example, at the tournament of Surluse Guenevere warns Lancelot not to fight against any of Arthur's relatives (p. 404). Her warning is followed by an account of Palomydes' defeat of several of Arthur's kinsmen, "And therewithall kyng Arthur was wrothe" (p. 405). Malory seems to have forgotten for a time that Arthur is not even at the tournament.¹⁴ The inclusion of this minor episode gives weight to Guenevere's warning. After learning of Lancelot's madness, Guenevere does everything in her power to find him, even to the extent of begging for help (p. 489). Later, Lancelot is seriously wounded by his own kinsmen because of his disguise (the Maid of Astolot's sleeve) and Guenevere advises him to "ryde no more in no justis nor turnementis but that youre kynnesmen may know you" (p. 642). Even when she insists that he wear her sleeve at the Great Tournament, she also

¹⁴ On p. 399 Arthur says that he will not attend.

insists that he notify his kinsmen of the sign.

There are also passages in Malory, however, which present Guenevere as being rather selfish. Through Morgan's malicious intervention, Tristram on one occasion bears an unusual sign on his shield. The shield depicted "a kyng and a quene . . ., and a knyght stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge uppon the kynges hede and the othir uppon the quenys hede" (p. 340). Though Arthur is puzzled by the shield, Guenevere immediately recognizes its meaning. She tells Sir Ector: "I drede me sore leste I shall be distroyed" (p. 342), and is afraid.¹⁵ Later, in the conversation between the two lovers when they are trapped by Aggravayne, Guenevere seems to swing from a selfish concern for her own safety, to loyalty to and concern for her lover, even if it means her own death. For example, when they are first aware of their discovery, Guenevere exclaims: "I here by their noyse there be many noble knyghtes, and well I wote they be surely armed, and ayenst them ye may make no resistence. Wherefore ye ar lykly to be slayne, and than shall I be brente!" (p. 676). This passage testifies to the gravity of their situation. Guenevere is not confident that even the greatest knight in the world will be able to escape.

¹⁵ Perhaps it is too harsh a statement to call Guenevere selfish at this point. Lancelot can, after all, defend himself with his body; Guenevere cannot.

It is only when Lancelot has given her assurances that, even if he were to be slain, his kinsmen would rescue her, that Guenevere recovers her sense of devotion and loyalty, saying: "But and ye be slayne I woli take my dethe as mekely as ever ded marter take hys dethe for Jesu Crystes sake" (p. 677).¹⁶ Guenevere recovers herself fully after Lancelot defeats Aggravayne's forces. By this time she is in control of the situation, and bravely turns down Lancelot's offer to take her away with him, even though she is aware that war between Arthur and Lancelot is now inevitable and that she will be burned at the stake (p. 678).

To examine Guenevere fully in her role as a lover, a discussion of Malory's own views on love, particularly courtly love, is necessary. It seems to be generally agreed, for example, that Malory was aware of the 'paradox' of courtly love and that, while he could not remove all courtly passages without altering substantially the story, Malory could exploit the courtly love material to his own purposes. Moorman claims¹⁷ that Malory did, indeed, exploit it for a

¹⁶Guenevere's comparing herself here to a Christian martyr might well seem sacrilegious; but, it does remind us of the 'religion' of courtly love.

¹⁷C. Moorman, "Courtly Love in Malory," ELH, 27(3), 1960, 153-176.

definite purpose: to show how the evil of courtly, and thus adulterous, love contributed to the destruction of the Round Table civilization.¹⁸ Malory, according to Moorman, retained only enough courtly love material to demonstrate the tragic effect of courtly love on the characters and the civilization.¹⁹ Because of the direct relevance of Moorman's article on this discussion, it will be briefly summarized. The story of Lancelot and Guenevere is seen, by Malory, as a gradual debasement of what might have been "vertuouse" love, exemplified in Malory by the love of Gareth and Lyonesse, into adulterous love. This gradual debasement follows this route: at first, Lancelot's love for Guenevere is only a love at a distance; Guenevere favours him only because of his prowess as a knight. Their growing love is paralleled by the love of Tristram and Iseult; though we watch the progress of Tristram and Iseult directly, the reader is always aware of a similar progress in the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship. The later history of the lovers, Lancelot and Guenevere, follows a stormy course and, finally Lancelot is forced to defend the guilty Guenevere. His actions lead to the accidental death of Gareth, the "vertuouse" lover, and

¹⁸Moorman, 165.

¹⁹Moorman, 165.

bring crashing down the whole Arthurian civilization.

Moorman's view, that Malory avoided the 'paradox' of courtly love by unequivocally condemning it, seems to be somewhat of an over-simplification. First of all, it is debatable whether or not Gareth is, indeed, a "vertuouse" lover; after all, what kind of virtue is it, when it is forced on a person?²⁰ Secondly, in his comparison of love with the coming of May Malory compares the old love, like the love of Guenevere and Lancelot, with its faithfulness and devotion, favourably with 'love nowadays'. He says of Guenevere that "whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (p. 649). He advises the reader, though, to "firste reserve the nonoure to God, and secundely thy quarell muste com of tny lady" (p. 649). This, he adds, is what he calls "vertuouse love". This whole passage, on Malory's part, is a matter of some contention among scholars:²¹ exactly what does Malory mean by it? Scholars seem to agree to this extent, that Malory is by no means condoning Guenevere's adulterous love for Lancelot, but neither is he explicitly condemning it.

Davies believes that Malory "neither embodies in his

²⁰Gareth's inclinations are no more virtuous than anyone else's. His attempts to make love to Lyonesse are thwarted, however, by Lyonet's magic.

²¹See Kennedy, DiPasquale, and Moorman.

imagined world a systematic philosophy or code of love, nor is wholly consistent even in his purely local comments, whether they are overt or implied".²² Davies' article is directly relevant and will be briefly summarized here. Although romantic adultery is predominant in Malory's presentation of love, there is one fairly typical romance love affair which ends in marriage - that between Gareth and Lyonesse. And, in an earlier book, Arthur himself marries a lady with whom he is in love. As well, Lancelot rejects love outside of marriage, saying: "as for to sey to take my pleasaunce with peramours, that woll I refuse" (p. 161). That we might expect a distinction to be made by Lancelot between faithful and promiscuous love is suggested by Malory's own comments concerning love that is not pleasing to God, and love which Malory calls "vertuouse". In the long digression previously referred to, Malory, "In his own unsystematic way . . . elaborates his very simple reconciliation between romantic love and Christianity".²³ According to Davies, Malory is "given" two facts: first, that "there was never worshypfull man nor worshypfull woman but they loved one bettir than anothir", and "worshyp in armys may never be

²²R.T. Davies, "Malory's "Vertuouse Love", " SP, 53, 1956, 459.

²³Davies, 461.

foyled" (p. 649). From these positions, Malory goes on to say that the knight should first honour God, presumably when in battle, and "secundely thy quarell muste com of thy lady. And such love I call vertuose love" (p. 649). The knight must serve God first, and his lady second. Malory goes on to describe this "vertuose love" more fully. The most important characteristic of it, says Davies, is stability.

Malory, Davies points out, is not alone in putting faithfulness above fulfilment of passion.²⁴ Promiscuity, for example, met with as little favour in medieval society as in Malory's Morte Darthur. Guenevere calls it the conduct of a "comon lechourere" (p. 612). That she has been faithful to Lancelot and is not a "comon lechourere" is Elaine's defence when her confessor bids her put aside thoughts of love. She explains her confidence in her innocence by saying "I take God to recorde, I loved never none but hym, nor never shall, of erthely creature; and a clene maydyn I am for hym and for all othir" (p. 639). It should be noted that she then makes her own reconciliation between romantic love and the Christian way, by begging God to let her mortifications as an innocent lover in this world relieve the suffering for her sins that would otherwise be hers in

²⁴Davies, 462; Davies cites examples from Andreas Capellanus, Henryson's "Testament of Cresseid", and today's society.

purgatory: "I beseche The, Hyghe Fadir of Hevyn, have mercy uppon me and my soule, and uppon myne unnumerable paynys that I suffir may be alygeaunce of parte of my synnes" (p. 639). Later, of course, she confesses one reason why her love was not, in fact, good: "I take God to recorde I was never to The grete offenser nother ayenste Thy lawis but that I loved thys noble knyght, sir Launcelot, oute of mesure" (p. 639). She admits, presumably, that the extravagance of her love, if not the love itself, does offend God. Lancelot, too, confesses "how he had loved a quene unmesurably and oute of mesure longe" (p. 539) and, as a result, attains only qualified success in the Quest of the Holy Grail.

Malory's digression on the subject of "vertuouse love" comes to a rather startling end, when he says of Guenevere that she was a "trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (p. 649). The crux, as Davies sees it, is the word "therefor".²⁵ Davies examines several possible interpretations of the passage. Perhaps Malory is implying that fidelity in love conduced to Guenevere's final fidelity to God; perhaps he means that in the eyes of God loyalty in sin is better than disloyalty. These possibilities, though, are inconsistent with what happens in the last and penitent days of the lovers. That Guenevere eventually goes to a nunnery

²⁵Davies, 468.

to make amends for her sins shows that Malory believed her love to be a sin. As Davies concludes, "She has to work out her penitent salvation, and if her days of "trew love" contribute in any way towards it, it can only be because they were "trew", not because they were loving. For her love is adulterous".²⁶

One possible description of Malory's 'view' of love, the possibility discussed by Davies, is that Malory simply does not have one, consistent, overall position on love. If true, this should not surprise us because Malory's primary concern in the Morte Darthur is not to examine the intricacies and varieties of love but to describe the rise, flowering, and downfall of a kingdom. Furthermore, the main argument to support the opinion that Malory was unequivocally condemning courtly or adulterous love, is to point to the tragic effect it had on the characters and the kingdom. However, it should be pointed out, that Malory ultimately had no choice but to make it tragic. After all, the story of Arthur's rise and fall was, by Malory's time, well-known, as was the story of Guenevere and Lancelot's love affair. The only way that the religious, medieval Englishmen would tolerate the love affair in the story at all was if it ended tragically.

²⁶Davies, 469.

Tucker, in a discussion of Malory's views of love, suggests that, though Malory does not present one philosophy or code of love, he does arrive at such a code in the course of the Morte Darthur.²⁷ In the Tristram book, Tucker notes, Malory shows little interest in the love between Tristram and Isode; rather, his interest lies in Tristram's prowess as a knight. That is not to say, however, that Malory was not aware of the love affair and of the sexual implications of it. Whether Malory would have preferred a platonic relationship between the lovers is discussed by Tucker. He points out many instances where sexual relationships are at least referred to: between Gawain and Ettard, Lancelot and Guenevere, Lancelot and Elaine, and, if it had been allowed, Gareth and Lyonesse. In these instances Malory refrains from giving sophisticated accounts of the physical relationship, as a courtly poet might have. Tucker claims that "To Malory the 'courtly love' of his sources seemed artificial and cultivated for its own sake".²⁸ Rather, love should be "spontaneous, and the outcome of natural affection".²⁹ This is revealed in Malory's portrayal of sex as

²⁷P.E. Tucker, "Chivalry in the Morte," in Essays on Malory, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 64-103.

²⁸Tucker, p. 79.

²⁹Tucker, p. 79.

natural: "Now leve we them kyssynge and clyppynge, as was a knydely thyng" (*italics mine*) (p. 487). The Maid of Astolat, we will recall, justified her love for Lancelot by pointing out its 'naturalness': "Am I nat an erthely woman? . . . my belyve ys that I do none offence, thou[gh] I love an erthely man, unto God, for He fourmed me thereto" (p. 639). Her whole speech is simple, direct and passionate. Lancelot's justification for his part in her death is made equally clear when he tells Guenevere: "Madame. . . she wolde none other wayes be answerde but that she wolde be my wyff othir ellis my paramour, and of thes two I wolde not graunte her . . . For, madame. . . I love nat to be constrayned to love, for love muste only aryse of the harte selff, and nat by none constraynte" (p. 641). The love of Isode and Elaine is also expressed in direct, passionate and natural terms.

Together with natural affection in love, Malory seems to prize fidelity on both sides. Fidelity on the parts of Guenevere and Lancelot is stressed in the Morte Darthur. Significantly, in Malory's account of the Quest of the Holy Grail, Guenevere is not condemned as she is in the French version.³⁰ And, in interpreting Malory's reference to Guenevere as a "trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende", Tucker adds: "He seems here to be implying that Guinevere (though imperious in her treatment of Lancelot)

³⁰Tucker, p. 80.

remained faithful to him until there could be no more faith of lovers, and then she died a religious death",³¹ and "Malory finds fidelity in love praiseworthy in itself - ultimately, perhaps, because it is a form of loyalty".³²

Guenevere's great beauty, as we have seen in romances previously discussed, is often praised; often, her beauty becomes the basis for comparison with other women.³³ Some such comparisons have already been discussed in regard to Malory's Morte Darthur. Here, though, Lancelot's opinion of Guenevere's beauty requires some amplification. He compares Iseult and Guenevere by saying: "yondir rydyth the fayreste lady of the worlde excepte youre quene, dame Gwenyver" and "hit is quene Isode that, outetake my lady youre quene, she ys makeles" (p. 451). But later even Lancelot admits, though only in his heart, that Elaine is more beautiful than Guenevere: "And yet sir Launcelot thought that she was the fayrest woman that ever he sye in his lyeff dayes" (p. 486). Whatever his private opinion, however, Lancelot is obliged, by his love of the queen

³¹Tucker, p. 80.

³²Tucker, p. 81.

³³Examples are Guenevere and Bercilak's wife, Guenevere and Dame Ragnell, Guenevere and Elaine, and Guenevere and Tryamoure.

and perhaps by the courtly love code, to support her in comparisons of beauty. When he learns that Sir Lamorak thinks queen Morgause of Orkeney is more beautiful than Guenevere, Lancelot exclaims: "make the redy, for I woll preve uppon the that quene Guenyver ys the fayryst lady and most of bounté in the worlde" (p. 298). Through Sir Lamorak, Malory points out the unreasonable nature of this kind of quarrel. Lamorak states, and Sir Bleoberys concurs, that "every man thynkith hys owne lady fayryste, and thoughe I prayse the lady that I love moste, ye sholde nat be wrothe. For thoughe my lady quene Gwenyver be fayryst in youre eye, wyte you well quene Morgause of Orkeney ys fayryst in myne eye, and so every knyght thynkith hys owne lady fayryste" (p. 298). Malory is perhaps, at this point, criticizing the courtly love code which demands that a lover support his lady with his body in even petty and unreasonable quarrels.

At least two other qualities of Guenevere, as Lancelot's mistress, require examination. One is curiosity. The other, the desire for revenge. Guenevere shows curiosity in regard to Lancelot's son, Galahad. Upon hearing of the marvelous knight who dared to sit in the Sege Perelous, and that he resembles Lancelot, Guenevere says: "I may well suppose. . . that sir Launcelot begate hym on kynge Pelles doughter, whych made hym to lye by her by enchauntementé, and hys name ys Galahad. I wolde fayne se him . . . for he muste nedys be a noble man, for so hys fadir ys that hym

begate: I reporte me unto all the Table Rounde" (p. 519). After a display of Galahad's prowess, "the kynge at the quenys desyre made hym to alyght and to unlace hys helme, that the quene myght se hym in the vysayge" (p. 521). Later, Guenevere comes to Galahad "and asked hym of whens he was and of what contrey . . . 'And sonne unto sir Launcelot?'" (p. 523). Although she knows the answer, she still asks whether or not he is Lancelot's son. Could it be that she is secretly hoping that he is not, despite the evidence which points to Lancelot as his father?³⁴

Significantly though, the only deplorable action of Guenevere's which is not motivated by the traits already discussed, anger, jealousy, and changeableness, is when she mercilessly signals for the death of Sir Mellyagaunce in the Knight of the Cart episode. Her motivation here seems to be revenge for a slur against her reputation. Evidently, Malory thought that there were certain things a woman will not forgive, and that her desire for revenge is a terrible and inexorable thing.³⁵ It should be pointed out, though, that Guenevere had already shown mercy on Sir Mellyagaunce

³⁴Dipasquale, 99, suggests that her remarks about Galahad seem to suggest that she feels her childlessness to be a lack.

³⁵Dipasquale, 96.

once, by refusing to let Lancelot fight against him (p. 656). Furthermore, Sir Mellyagaunce's imprisonment of Lancelot so that he would be unable to defend the queen removes any sympathy the reader might have felt for him.

Thus far, the discussion in this chapter has dealt with Guenevere in each of her three roles. As a queen, we have noted that she was dignified, proud and wise. We saw her concern for the welfare of the knights and her generosity towards other women. As a queen, she fulfilled the roles of judge and hostess. We saw also the reverence with which she was regarded, as a queen and a gracious woman. Examples of her fear and helplessness, as well as her bravery, were also noted. In her role as Arthur's wife, we noted examples of affection and loyalty between them. We also examined the deterioration of Arthur's love for her into indifference. The most significant of her roles, that of lover of Lancelot, has also been discussed. Here, we saw her jealousy, anger and changeableness. We also saw her as humble, conciliatory, and concerned for her lover's welfare. Examples of her selfishness, imprudence, curiosity and desire for revenge were pointed out. Also pointed out were her desire for secrecy, prudence and, above all, her loyalty, love and devotion toward her lover, Lancelot.

We have not examined Guenevere, however, as she appears in the final pages of the Morte Darthur. The reason

for leaving this discussion till now is that at the end of Malory's work, more than anywhere else, the three roles of Guenevere are fused. It is here that the decision of Aggravayne and Mordred to reveal her love for Lancelot is made the beginning of the end of the Round Table. Certainly, she is central to the tragic action, for Lancelot kills Gareth and Gaheris in rescuing her and the deaths of those two knights in turn lead to Gawain's turning against Lancelot.

Guenevere, we will recall, is returned to Arthur by the Pope's command. She is returned in a ceremonious and colourful procession³⁶ but remains, essentially, a pawn in the transaction. Later, Arthur leaves her in Mordred's "governaunce" (p. 700), and when Mordred tries to force her to marry him, Guenevere locks herself up in the Tower of London, in one last show of loyalty to Arthur. Mordred "soughte uppon quene Gwenyver by lettirs and sondis, and by fayre meanys and foule meanys, to have her to com oute of the Towre of London; but all thys avayled nought, for she answerd hym shortely, opynly and pryvayly, that she had levir sle herself than to be maryed with hym" (p. 708).

Upon hearing of Arthur's death, Guenevere steals away to Almesbury where she becomes a nun, "and grete penaunce she toke uppon her, as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe. And never creature coude make her myry, but ever she lyved

³⁶Miko, 224, regards this display as an example of the importance of appearance in Camelot.

in fastynge, prayers, and almes-dedis, that all maner of people mervayled how vertuously she was chaunged" (pp. 717-718). Her self-imposed penance after Arthur's death, a life of "fastynge, prayers, and almes-dedis", is the final impression that stays with the reader.

Lancelot goes to see Guenevere. He had heard that "she hath had grete payne and muche disease" (p. 719).³⁷

The moving speech she makes in her final meeting with Lancelot brings together the three roles previously discussed: queen, wife, and mistress:

"Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne. Therefore, sir Launcelot, wyte thou well I am sette in suche a plyght to gete my soule [hele]. And yet I truste, thorow Goddis grace and thorow Hys Passion of Hys woundis wyde, that aftir my deth I may have a syght of the blyss[ed] face of Cryste Jesu, and on Doomesday to sytte on Hys ryght syde; [fo]r as synfull as ever I was, now ar seyntes in hevyn. And there[fo]re, sir Launcelot, I requyre the and beseche the hartily, for all the lo[v]e that ever was betwyxt us, that thou never se me no more in the visayge. And I commaunde the, on Goddis behalff, that thou forsake my company. And to thy kyngedom loke thou turne agayne, and kepe well thy realme frome warre and wrake, for as well as I have loved the heretofore, myne [har]te woll nat serve now to se the; for thorow the and my ys the f[lou]re of kyngis and [knyghtes] destroyed. And therefore [go] thou to thy realme, [an]d there take ye a wyff, and lyff with [hir wyth] joy and blys. [A]nd I pray the hartely to pray for me [to] the Everlastynge Lorde [tha]t I may amende my myssely-vyng" (p. 720).

³⁷On two previous occasions, we will recall, Guenevere was ill. The nature of her illness, though, is never mentioned.

Here, in the nobility ringing throughout, we have the queen; in the grief and repentance, the wife; in recognition of her great fault, the mistress. Her confession, moreover, is made in public, "to all tho ladyes"(p. 720).

Guenevere's exhortation for Lancelot to "take ye a wyff" may be regarded as lack of understanding of Lancelot, after all that he has withstood to hold his vow to her intact.³⁸ It may, on the other hand, be regarded as proof of Guenevere's genuine desire to forsake the material world altogether in favour of the spiritual, and as a genuine desire for Lancelot to attain happiness in this world.³⁹

Later, a vision appears to Lancelot and he is told of Guenevere's death. He reaches Almesbury to find that Guenevere had died just half an hour earlier, and learns that for two days she had prayed that she "may never have power to see syr Launcelot wyth my worldly eyen" (p. 722). This may suggest to the reader that Guenevere was not as "vertuously" changed as he may have been led to believe; that seeing Sir Lancelot might have reawakened her love for him. But, even if she did not completely succeed in banishing her worldly love for Lancelot, there can be no

³⁸Miko, 228, is of that opinion.

³⁹Tucker, p. 89, does not regard it as surprising that Guenevere cannot believe that Lancelot will find the strength of will to stay in monastic life, because of the instability he has demonstrated throughout the Morte Darthur.

doubt that she tried and, perhaps in trying, she was able to "have a syght of the blyss[ed] face of Cryste Jesu" (p. 720).⁴⁰

The last part of the Morte Darthur, "The Dolorous Death and Departing Out of this World of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere", may be regarded as an attempt by Malory to tie up his loose ends by a resort to religion. Miko suggests, for example, that Lancelot and Guenevere never really confront their own limitations; Lancelot's final reactions, to feel guilty and become a monk, may be regarded more as escapes than they are tragic recognitions.⁴¹ And so, Guenevere's desperate desire not to see Lancelot before her death may conceivably be regarded as a more realistic presentation for, though Guenevere tried to achieve total immersion in the spiritual welfare of her soul, she was unable, finally, to succeed. On the other hand, there is evidence to show that Guenevere did, indeed, achieve spiritual well-being. We learn that a vision appeared to her, whereby she knew that Lancelot had been a priest for a year and that he was coming to her, to take her corpse and bury her beside Arthur (p. 722). As in Le Morte Arthur, Guenevere is buried beside Arthur at Glastonbury (p. 723). And, as in Le Morte Arthur, by being buried beside her husband, Guenevere is returned to her rightful position, and her atonement is publicly recognized.

⁴⁰Perhaps her success in banishing Lancelot in the end might be contrasted with his failure to banish her on his quest for the Grail.

⁴¹Miko, 229.

In our discussion of Guenevere in Malory's Morte Darthur we have examined numerous and various qualities of her. The range of qualities discussed extends from a loving and loyal lover to a vindictive and jealous shrew; from a dignified and gracious queen to an undignified one; from a queen concerned for the welfare of knights to a revengeful one; from a loyal and devoted wife to one who ultimately contributes to the death of her husband and the downfall of a great kingdom; from one who is brave and wise, to one who is imprudent, defenceless and frightened. As we have seen, the range of qualities and emotions embodied in Guenevere in Malory is vast, producing, in effect, a whole spectrum of possibilities. It is this spectrum of characteristics and qualities that has led scholars to make the following comments:

"And there is Guinevere herself, who, were she known nowhere else than in Malory's Morte Darthur, would be one of the great epic queens of the world . . . Proud and passionate, unreasonable in her demands on Lancelot, vindictive . . . she can be, and generally is, sweetly gracious, womanly, and queenly . . . And when finally shame and sorrow came, she was not only courageous in her resistance of Mordred, but also firmly self-sacrificing in her refusal to live her last days in love at Joyous Gard with Lancelot . . . Poor lady, who never found peace in her palaces of Westminster and Cardigan, Carlisle and Camelot, she found something of it finally, after she took her last leave of Lancelot, in this nunnery at quiet Almesbury".⁴²

⁴²Maynadier, pp. 237-240.

Saintsbury says: "The Guinevere of the original romances is the first perfectly human woman in English literature. They have ennobled her unfaithfulness to Arthur by her constancy to Lancelot, they have saved her constancy to Lancelot from being insipid by interspersing the gusts of jealousy in the matter of the two Elaines which play so great a part in the story".⁴³ Though Maynadier and Saintsbury may be excessive in their evaluation of Guenevere, her ultimate tragic significance in Malory cannot be denied. That is not to say that her adulterous love for Lancelot was even the primary cause of the ultimate tragedy of the Morte Darthur. Many other factors were at work: the incestuous relationship between Arthur and his sister, resulting in the birth of Mordred; the envy and viciousness of Aggravayne and his followers; Gawain's insatiable thirst for revenge and Arthur's inability to confine it; and so on. Malory could have made Guenevere into a tragic character - her situation would certainly have been conducive to this. But Guenevere in Malory is much more passive and receptive than she need be.⁴⁴ She is perhaps the least tragic of the central characters in Malory because, although she attains virtual sainthood in the final book, there is little evidence shown

⁴³ Saintsbury, p. 124.

⁴⁴ N.C. Starr, "The Moral Problem in Malory," Dalhousie Review, 47(4), 1967-8, 472.

earlier to indicate spiritual depth.⁴⁵

But Malory is dealing with a tragedy far wider in scope and implication than the tragedy of one individual. The tragedy of the Morte Darthur is the fall of an ideal society and the collapse of a dream much greater than the members of the Round Table individually. It is a contrast between what the God-like in man can aspire to, and what his baser self can do. It is a series of deaths and frustrations, caused by a conflict of often ironic, yet always human, circumstances, and by inscrutable fortune or chance which man alone can never dominate.

The presentation of Guenevere in Malory may well be regarded as the culmination of all of those presentations examined in other ME romances. In most cases, qualities of Guenevere in Malory were already noted in the other romances discussed; in other cases, characteristics revealed in the other romances have been deleted. Characteristics which she reveals in Malory that correspond to characteristics we noted in other works are: her bravery, wisdom and prudence; her concern for the knights of the Round Table and their reverence of her; her generosity. In Malory, as in other ME romances, she acts as a judge, gracious hostess and gracious queen; in some incidents, she

⁴⁵See W.L. Guerin, "The Tale of the Death of Arthur': Catastrophe and Resolution," in Malory's Originality, ed. R.M. Lumiansky (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 268.

is a helpless and defenceless woman. Even some of the deplorable qualities of Guenevere that we noted in some of the ME romances reappear in Malory: her jealousy, anger, vindictiveness and desire for revenge. In Malory, though, Guenevere does not appear as the treacherous queen and lover of Mordred; the latter would be inconceivable, of course, because Chrétien de Troyes had established Lancelot as Guenevere's lover. Neither, in Malory, is Guenevere presented as a young and modest girl before her marriage. The Morte Darthur, though, perhaps due only to its greater length, gives coherence, unity and completeness to the character of Guenevere, where only bits and pieces of information, in some cases, are given in the shorter romances.

Whatever else Guenevere might be in Malory, she is, above all, a woman caught in an inevitably tragic situation: a woman married to the greatest king in the world; a woman who, perhaps finding the lack of love in her marriage unbearable, turns to the greatest knight of the world to fill a gap in her life. Regardless how understandable this act may be, it is treason. The overall tragedy described in the Morte Darthur is inevitable, and Guenevere plays a part in it.

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