

The Influence of Malory and the Manipulation of Guenevere in the Poetry of Morris and Tennyson

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Completing his *Morte Darthur* in 1470, Sir Thomas Malory succeeded in compiling perhaps the most famous and influential account of the life and death of King Arthur from previous English and French Arthurian material. However, if it weren't for the renewed interest in Medievalism during the nineteenth-century, Malory's importance would surely have been lost, for, after his first publishing by Caxton in 1485, he:

. . . passed into some obscurity. . . but since the revival of interest in the *Morte* that started in the nineteenth century, he has served as the direct or indirect basis for almost every Arthurian work in any medium: poems, novels, children's books, science fiction. Films, advertisements, cartoons, modern heritage paraphernalia -- everything from epics to t-shirts (Cooper ix .

The significance of Malory's contribution to Arthurian understanding cannot be overemphasized, but then neither can the Malorian revival of the Victorian Age: like Arthur and his Round Table Knights, the two traditions are forever enjoined. Both William Morris and Alfred Tennyson published poems in the nineteenth century that are directly influenced by Malory's work and reveal much about the Victorian reverence for both Malory and the chivalry and mystery of Camelot -- however, Morris and Tennyson manipulate Malory's text in conflicting ways, and this is revealed in their respective representations of the figure of Guenevere, who is strikingly *strong* in Malory's *Morte*. In her essay "Newly Ancient: Reinventing Guenevere in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," Carol Hart observes, "If we compare Malory's Guenevere with her earlier representations, it is obvious that the English author reconstructed her character to create an unconventionally heroic and influential version of the queen" (3 . Thus, in taking liberties with his portrayal of Guenevere, Malory paved the way for the Victorian Medievalists, but not without a Victorian response: for Morris and Tennyson, respectively, the doomed queen represents a contrasting ideal, and their own poetic manipulations of Guenevere demonstrate these distinct views.

For the purposes of this argument, I will focus upon Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere" (1858 , and the "Guinevere" Idyll from Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" (1859 , and compare them with Books VII and VIII of Malory's *Morte*. These final two books — *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere* and *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon* — are perhaps the most familiar and are argued to be "the finest of Malory's tales" (McCarthy 46 , not only because a sense of finality is

inherent within them, the anticipation of the downfall of Arthur and his Round Table (McCarthy 46, Benson 229 , but also because it is within these two books that Guenevere's presence is most prominent.

In Malory, Guenevere is not only an emotional force, but also a powerful and influential one as well: "Ryght so the quene toke sir Launcelot by the bare honde, for he had put of hys gauntelot, and so she wente wyth hym tyll her chambir, and than she commaunded hym to be unarmed" (Malory, Book XIX, 656 . In this episode with her lover, as with many others, Guenevere has complete control over Lancelot, and he gladly relinquishes this control, giving the queen full command of him. He reveals to Arthur that, early in his knighthood, the queen had returned his lost sword, thereby shielding him from shame, and "therefore, my lorde Arthure, I promysed her at that day ever to be her knyght in ryght othir in wronge (Book VXIII 620 . Thus, Lancelot has pledged himself to her, and Arthur is keenly aware of the situation. But Guenevere is not wholly satisfied with a knightly pledge — she wants a pledge of love as well, and she finds the perfect love in the form of the perfect knight, Lancelot. Malory spends much time exploring the complexity of their relationship, something that has not occurred in previous Arthurian accounts. In fact, Guenevere's presence in the final two books of the *Morte* is a force to be reckoned with, not only for her lover, but also for the rest of the court:

Guinevere is imperious, impulsive, and sometimes witty. She exercises her power by exiling Lancelot on several occasions, usually when she is in a jealous rage. Her power is that absolute power of the beloved in the courtly love tradition, which is revealed as merely the power to reject; the exercise of that power labels her capricious, cruel and arbitrary in the view of her husband and other knights (Archibald & Edwards 50 .

And therefore the relationship between Guenevere and Lancelot affects not only their own passions, but also the dynamic of the entire Round Table: knights are constantly caught up in disguising the affair from the king by updating and warning the lovers, and Guenevere is often blamed and rebuked for the absence of Lancelot when he is in need for battle -- for in her jealous rages, she drives him away from the court and his duties as a Round Table knight. But is their adultery wholly to blame for the downfall of the Round Table? Interestingly, Malory doesn't depict it as such. He even goes so far as to blame Agravain, the adamant knight who "discovers" the lovers in bed, as the ultimate cause: "And bycause I have lost the very mater of Shevalere de Charyot I depart frome the tale of sir Launcelot; and here I go unto the morte Arthur, and that caused sir Aggravayne" (Book XIX 669 .

Unlike many of his sources, such as the Vulgate Cycle *Mort Artu*, Malory himself does not place the blame of the fall of the Round Table on Guenevere, but he allows Guenevere to place blame upon herself after the death of Arthur, and she admits to Lancelot while in her nunnery: "... for as well as I have loved the heretofore, myne [har]te woll nat serve now to se the; for thorow the and me ys the f[lou]r of kyngis and [knyghtes] destroyed" {XXI, 720 . How are we then supposed to regard her? After the strength she has displayed throughout the text, she finally weakens as the Round Table is destroyed and goes to a silent death as a guilty nun. One possibility, perhaps, is that Guenevere is eternally tied to the Round Table -- for it came to Arthur with his marriage to Guenevere — and when it is finally gone, she too must go: the courtly romance that she shared with Lancelot can no longer thrive without the support of a court. But the romance is not forgotten.

Malory's emphasis on the love between Guenevere and Lancelot is striking, for not only is it given prominence in the final books, especially "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," but it is also deemed by Malory to be "vertuose." Malory praises this chivalric love of the days of old, which was one of "trouthe and faythefulnes," and he goes as far as inciting his readers to love as virtuously as Guenevere:

And therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre remembraunce the monethe of May, lyke as ded quene Gwenyver, for whom I make a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende (XIX 649 .

Therefore, Malory is careful to depict Guenevere according to his own idealistic perceptions throughout his text, and even when she acknowledges her guilt at the end, she does so with a martyr-like casualness about her -- an almost heroic resolve. As readers, we are allowed to sympathize with both her and Lancelot, and are finally compelled *not* to judge their love too harshly:

However reprehensible the behavior of the lovers may be, Malory lays the emphasis clearly on the far more destructive guilt of the others, and, in the face of such villainy, on the great virtue of Lancelot and the queen. Their love, admittedly, caused trouble, but Malory takes time to describe and justify it; it is, he says, virtuous love (McCarthy 46 .

Although Malory's representation of Guenevere and her affair with Lancelot is unique, his desire to "take up the position of a latter-day historian to Arthur's court" (Cooper xvii) prevents his readers from truly understanding the motivations behind Guenevere's actions. As Dobyns explains, Malory's characters are "never given the opportunity to express

their private thoughts; indeed, as Mark Lambert has observed, *Le Morte Darthur* is ‘strikingly apsychological’ “ (31 . It is not until the nineteenth-century Arthurian revival that psychology is introduced to character representations, and feminine representations such as Guenevere are prominent in the Victorian corpus. Both William Morris and Alfred Tennyson, influenced primarily by Malory, employ the figure of Guenevere in their poetry, but do so with different purposes in mind. For Morris, who published his collection of poems, *The Defence of Guenevere* in 1858, a year before the publication of Tennyson’s *Idylls*, did so at his own expense and to an unresponsive audience — unresponsive “...because the texts in the volume were seen as “ideologically estranged” and it was thus “largely ignored by Victorian reviewers and readers alike” (Harrison 23 .

Victorians were not accustomed to such passionate portrayals of women as the portrayal of Guenevere in Morris’s title poem. Taking Malory one step further, Morris “investigates the effects of love on character” and “examines the motivations of Malory’s figures, analyzing emotions at which Malory only hints” (Silver, “In Defense of Guenevere” 230 . In examining the context of Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of Guenevere — which characteristically employ a sympathetic view of her and other ambiguous Arthurian women — Carole Silver claims that Morris and his counterparts considered these women uniquely, therefore withholding any personal and/or cultural judgments. The Pre-Raphaelites’ “glorification” and “defenses” of these “medieval fallen women ... stemmed from their study of Malory, their views on chivalric love, and their perceptions of Arthurian women as being from another time and order who therefore functioned under different moral laws” (“Victorian Spellbinders” 249-50 . This view of Guenevere allowed Morris the freedom to depict her closer to Malory’s more liberal portrayal than as a typical Victorian heroine. And, because Guenevere is such a malleable and poetic figure, Morris does not hesitate to maximize the creative possibilities of her character.

In his poem, Guenevere is sexual and intellectual and threatening to the patriarchy of both her own audience as well as Morris’s: “She stood, and seemed to think, and wrung her hair,/Spoke out at last with no more trace of shame,/With passionate twisting of her body there...” In her dramatic monologue, Guenevere invades us, her viewers and her readers, with her seductive defense, in which she professes her own innocence and her lover’s while she anticipates what is to come, for neither she nor her audience know if she will be burned for treason or rescued by Lancelot. History tells us that Lancelot will come for her, but Morris delays our expectations until the very end: this poem is not about lovers’ guilt and remorse, but about an accused woman who confronts her accusers and

“delivers a monologue that sanctions sexual passion rather than chastity” (Harrison 24 . In fact, Guenevere celebrates herself, reveling in her own spring-like beauty and in the joys of mad love:

— In that garden fair
 Came Lancelot walking; this is true, the kiss
 Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
 I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,
 When both our mouths went wandering in one way.
 And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
 Our hands being left behind strained far away.

Their verdant love in the garden is similar to Malory's depiction of the influence of the “lusty month of May” upon young lovers, that month “whan every lusty harte begynnyth to blossom and to burgyne. For, lyke as trees and erbys burgenyth and florysshyth in May, in lyke wyse every lusty harte that ys ony maner of lover spryngith, burgenyth, buddyth, and floryssyth in lusty dedis” (XVIII 648 . This “virtuous love” that Malory describes as existing between Lancelot and Guenevere is a love that cannot be stifled — young lust is too powerful, and so is a beautiful queen's persuasive abilities.

In Morris's “Defence,” Guenevere asks the accusing knights if they would not have done as Lancelot had done — could they have resisted her entreaties? She challenges them: “Is there a good knight then would stand aloof,/When a queen says with gentle queenly sound:/O true as steel, come now and talk with me,/I love to see your step upon the ground/. . . come here to-night,/Or else the hours will pass most dull and drear...” Even while she stands in accusation, for adultery, Guenevere acts as seducer -- with her body and with her words. But Morris is careful not to depict her as the stereotypical temptress Eve; she is instead a strong and intelligent woman, who sees herself an intellectual equivalent to her masculine audience, at one point even crying out: “So, ever must I dress me to the fight...” Having lived her adult life with the Round Table knights, she knows best how to appeal to them and, according to Bullen, “[w]ithin the chivalric code, as employed by Malory, she is an honorable woman” (80 .

One aspect of Guenevere that is revealing of her honor is the nature of her relationship with both of the men in her life, Arthur and Lancelot. As is seen in both Malory and Morris, the love that she shares with Lancelot is a true, passionate, and loyal love that remains steadfast until the fall of the Round Table. However adulterous it may be, there is evidence that, although she and Arthur love one another, their marriage is one of political necessity and not of sexual love. In Malory, it is hinted that Arthur is perhaps aware of the affair but is accepting of it as long as it remains private:

For, as the Freynshe booke seyth, the kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shuld be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a demynge of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge love him passyngly well (XX 764 .

This concern for Lancelot is consistent throughout the text, and it can be concluded that Arthur has little true concern for his wife, for after war breaks out against Lancelot, Arthur laments: “And much more I am soryar 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” (XX 685 . Should we as an audience feel sympathy for Arthur, then? Should we place blame upon Guenevere for experiencing the lust of youth? Apparently, Morris followed Malory closely, agreeing that the lovers should not be blamed for Arthur’s downfall. In fact, in her poetic “Defence,” Guenevere emphasizes that time of her youth “ere I was bought/By Arthur’s great name and his little love...” She asks her audience if she should have wasted her youth, and, upon her marriage should she have remained “stone-cold for ever?” It is a compelling argument for one in her position, but is her audience willing to listen? The knights to whom she speaks do not reply within the context of the poem, but there is evidence that they are in her presence; we only get hints that Gauwaine, who has provided the most condemning accusations, is not interested in her defense — but then again, he does not turn away until she declares that her spirit will haunt him for the rest of his life: “Let not my rusting tears make your sword light!” It is Morris’s own Victorian audience who was unwilling to listen, and Morris’s collection “failed as a cultural intervention at the time of its publication” because it was radical and because it was “morally impure” (Harrison 23, 26 .

Only the other members of Morris’s Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were interested in Guenevere as a heroic figure, glorifying and praising her with words and in images. Perhaps this connection to an ideal brotherhood, much like the Round Table knights, is a feature that further connects Morris with Malory. For, like the nineteenth-century Medieval revival, Malory’s own fifteenth century “witnessed a cult of chivalry,” in which Malory partook, where “orders of knighthood flourished” and “Malory himself apparently modelled the oath Sworn by the fellows of the Round Table on the charge laid on the neophyte knights in the ceremony for creating Knights of the Bath” (Cooper xi . And, at the end of each book of the *Morte*, Malory signs “Sir Thomas Malleorre, Knyght.” Morris also fancied himself similar to a modern day knight, not only belonging to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who “painted and wrote of

[Arthurian] sullied females with such respect and understanding” (Silver, “Victorian Spellbinders” 249 , but also founded with Burne-Jones a separate brotherhood “with Sir Galahad as their patron” (Harris 8 . Thus, both Malory and Morris present challenging discourses to their respective audiences: they are more inclined to empower women like Guenevere because, in regard to their own chivalric ideal, these women *are* ideal. Guenevere is beautiful and, according to the conventions of courtly love, virtuous, and because Malory and Morris are men who existed outside of their own time, glorifying the medieval past, Guenevere becomes a means by which the myth of Camelot can be upheld and possibly imitated. In fact, Morris’s wife, Jane, was not only the model for Morris’s only completed oil painting — of Guenevere, ironically — but also for Rossetti’s depictions of Arthurian women. For the Pre-Raphaelites, she was the realized medieval ideal. Tennyson, on the other hand, is truly a man of his Victorian Age, and this is perhaps why his representation of Guenevere contrasts so starkly with those of Malory and Morris.

Tennyson’s *Idylls* were an instant success. In fact, after the first edition was sold, “a second edition was needed in six months” (Harrison 19 . The popularity of the poems reveals much about Victorian expectations and ideologies regarding the role of women — the same expectations and ideologies that Morris attempted to thwart in his own collection. Harrison claims “Tennyson’s work best illustrates what might be described as a traditionalist and conservative engagement with medievalist discourse in mid-Victorian England” (19 . Unlike Morris, who views Guenevere within her own time as an archetypal female figure, Tennyson brings her directly into his contemporary world, essentially utilizing Malory “in the service of Tory social, political, and religious values” (ibid . Through this lens, Guenevere has little to revel about. In the “Guinevere” Idyll, Tennyson presents to his audience an idealized Arthur, who sweeps into his wife’s chambers at the nunnery and “allows” himself to forgive her as she grovels at his feet. But not before he makes sure to put her in her place:

For think not, tho thou wouldst not love thy lord,

Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.

I am not made of so slight elements.

Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame (505-508 .

Tennyson’s “Guinevere” is 692 lines and, although inspired by Malory’s work, only works from a single passage from Malory, which depicts Guenevere’s retreat to the nunnery at Almesbury (Malory, XXI 717 . Though both Morris and Tennyson take liberties with Malory’s texts by creating scenes from their own imaginations in their poetry, Tennyson’s “Guinevere” tends to deviate, not only from Malory’s narrative structure, but also his character depictions in order to create a virtuous

and heroic Arthur and a pathetic, guilt-stricken Guenevere. Throughout the course of the poem, she is constantly weeping and lamenting her sins for dooming Lancelot, betraying the King, and causing the downfall of the Round Table. According to Killham:

The love of Lancelot and Guinevere which led to the downfall of the Round Table, and which Malory could yet not feel it in him to condemn, is made by Tennyson the rift within the lute which progressively destroys the harmony upon which the Round Table depends (376).

And, while Tennyson's Queen is so plagued by guilt that she conceals her sexuality in her robes, hides shamefully from the King, and contemplates suicide, asking "Shall I kill myself?" (615), Morris's Queen, who is even more headstrong than Malory's, flaunts her sexuality — using it as her own weapon against the knights who accuse her — and refuses to feel guilt for her actions. And while Morris depicts Guenevere as a woman still in love with her gallant Lancelot, ". . . therefore one so longs/To see you, Lancelot; that we may be/Like children once again, free from all wrongs/Just for one night" Tennyson's Queen tries to convince herself that she was wicked to lose Arthur's love:

'Ye know me then, that wicked one, who broke
The vast design and purpose of the King.
O, shut me round with narrowing nunnery-walls,
Meek maidens, from the voices crying, 'Shame!
I must not scorn myself; he loves me still.
Let no one dream that he loves me still (653-8).

In his study of Tennyson's *Idylls*, Rosenberg makes an interesting point, in that, "Tennyson wants us to believe that Arthur feels sexual passion for Guinevere, and hence that both his inquiry and his forgiveness are all the greater. But if we must take Arthur on these terms, then he had no business losing Guinevere in the first place" (130). In regard to this notion, I am inclined to recall both Malory and Morris, who depict the marriage as passionless, and Arthur as having more concern for his knights than for his wife. As readers, we tend to *like* the relationship between the Queen and her knight, because, as Malory claims, it is true and virtuous — we believe it and want to idealize it. Like all passionate loves, this one is also tragic. But we don't feel sorry for Guenevere in the end, we want to glorify her, which is what Morris successfully does. As she revels in her own May-like beauty, so does her captivated audience, because she dares them to look upon her and still uphold their accusations:

'... see my breast rise,
Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;
And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,
Yea also at my full heart's strong command,

See through my long throat how the words go up
In ripples to my mouth...

...yea now

This little wind is rising, look you up,
And wonder how the light is falling so
Within my moving tresses: will you dare,
When you have looked upon my little brow,
To say the thing is vile?’

Tennyson’s Guenevere is a pathetic figure in comparison to Morris’s, who is without fear or guilt. How we as audiences are to respond to these two equally provoking but equally distinct representations can perhaps be determined by the final moments of the respective poems. Morris’s “Defence,” which begins in *medias res* with Guenevere’s speech and ends with her “joyful” rescue by her lover, is a depiction of a dynamic event, much like the dynamism of Guenevere herself, which we admire. Tennyson paints quite a different portrait, though, because all that is left for the guilty groveling Queen is repentance and an early death in the nunnery. Tennyson’s moral Victorian audience would have appreciated this Guenevere, who admits her sins, but turns to a pious life and for that “Was chosen abbess, there, and abbess, lived/For three brief years, and there, an abbess, past/To where beyond these voices there is peace” (690-2).

Although both poems drew on Malory as a primary reference, Morris and Tennyson, publishing only a year apart, manipulated Guenevere in the manner that best suited them for their respective purposes -- Morris to glorify time past and aesthetically influence time present, Tennyson to use time past to morally comment upon time present. Chapman writes of Tennyson in the writing of his *Idylls*:

One of his great gifts was to make poetry from the weaknesses of the human race, and the tragic flaws in the main Arthurian characters gave him what he needed. The *Idylls of the King* present an image of Victorian England, with a hope that goodness may yet emerge from an unpromising people and unpropitious conditions (49).

Tennyson appealed to the ideology of Victorian morality by presenting Guenevere as a redeemed woman, while Morris challenged it with his portrait of a heroic and sexual Guenevere — a portrait that is consistent with Malory, who understood his Queen to be essential to the depiction of the chivalrous court:

His concept of her character acquired definition and vitality as his mastery of his material grew, and in the culmination of his great work he created both a cultural icon and an individual whom George Saintsbury has called ‘the first perfectly human woman in English literature’ (Hart 18).

Guenevere’s humanity is what endears her to us, in Malory, and then again in Morris. Tennyson leaves us disappointed. Although Maccullum claims that Tennyson’s “Idylls are a great deal more read than Malory’s Romance” (290), it is Malory’s tradition that we most remember; and through the poetry and images of the nineteenth-century Medieval revival of Morris and his Pre-Raphaelites, the “virtuous” love of Lancelot and Guenevere is forever idealized.

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