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To glory or to ruin : Guinevere and Vivien in Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur, Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the king, and Edwin Arlington Robinson's Merlin and Lancelot

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Merlin and Lancelot

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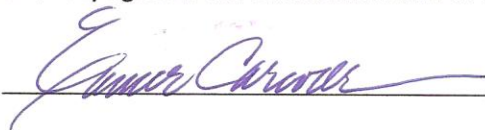
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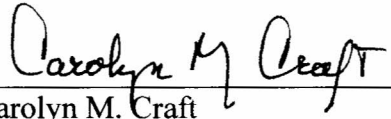


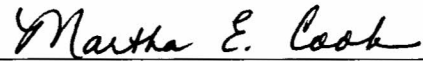
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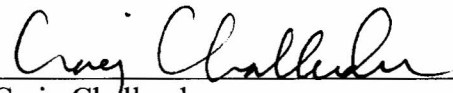
To Glory or to Ruin: Guinevere and Vivien in Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur, Alfred
Tennyson's Idylls of the King, and Edwin Arlington Robinson's Merlin and Lancelot

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A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Master of Arts in English,
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Preface

In ancient Greek mythology, a person's destiny was determined by the Three Fates, women at the spinning wheel who drew out the thread of life, measured or wove it, and cut it off. In literature since those ancient times, women have similarly been depicted as instruments of destiny; in many legends and stories, the female characters have been given the responsibility for the glory or ruin of most of human endeavor.

Until the twentieth century, this depiction of women is especially prevalent in traditional Arthurian literature, where women characters do not exist in their own right but are placed in the work as agents of temptation or manipulation, partners in vice or virtue, or simply instruments of a plot involving knights and warfare. Two female characters in Arthurian literature who often suffer this treatment are Guinevere, Arthur's wife, and Vivien (also called Nyneve, Vivian, or The Lady of the Lake), Merlin's paramour.

Because works based on the legend of King Arthur are almost too numerous to count—as are the works of explication and analysis—this study is limited to three of the greatest English-language writers in the Arthurian tradition: Thomas Malory, because he brought together in one romance a number of Medieval versions of the story and at the same time set the standard for English Arthurian literature; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who in the nineteenth century almost single-handedly caused the rebirth of Arthuriana; and Edwin Arlington Robinson, the first major American poet to explore the whole of the legend and to bring it to modern America. This thesis will explore the ways that Malory,

Tennyson, and Robinson characterize Guinevere and Vivien, especially in their relationship to the glory or ruin of the kingdom and its knights.

From Malory's Morte Darthur, through Tennyson's Idylls of the King, and through Robinson's Merlin and Lancelot, Guinevere and Vivien evolve from mere servants of a masculine plot and theme to well-rounded characters who struggle with the same problems that confront their male counterparts. Malory's world is about knights, warfare, and a holy quest, with women acting or reacting in certain ways only to move the plot along. While Tennyson develops female characters more fully than Malory, the great Victorian pays no homage to Arthurian womankind, bringing to his work a philosophy of sin-weakness-destruction that makes Vivien an evil seductress and Guinevere a woman who allows her passions to destroy a kingdom. In contrast, Robinson's Vivian and Guinevere are women of strength, intelligence, and imagination, whose male counterparts share the burden of fate and history.

If these women are partly responsible for the ruin of Camelot, they are equally responsible for its glory, assuring that the tradition lives beyond tales of chivalry and endures as a timeless legend of human beings struggling through tragedy and loss.

Chapter 1

Chivalry, Religion, Love, and Women: Malory's Morte Darthur

Most of Thomas Malory's work concerns itself with a king's establishing a new world social order; the epic romance is both a celebration of the strengths and a lamentation on the weaknesses of chivalry. Consequently, most of the dozens of female characters who appear in the Morte Darthur serve to move the plot along or to illustrate the code of knighthood—or its transgression. From the seven female characters who play more important roles in Morte Darthur, two emerge as more integral still to the narrative. Nyneve, Merlin's nemesis, actually helps him to fulfill his prophecy; assuming the sorcerer's role, she becomes Arthur's protector and thus has a part in determining the fate of the kingdom. Upon Guinevere, Arthur's queen and Lancelot's lover, is laid some of the burden of guilt for Camelot's demise; however, in renouncing her claim to Lancelot's unswerving devotion and releasing him to the service of God, she emerges as a tragic heroine in her own right.

Janet Jesmok writes that "Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian world is a male world" (1). All the female characters in Morte Darthur must compete for space with each other and with the major characters of the work, Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. However, Jesmok goes on to qualify her initial statement in a comprehensive study of Malory's female characters that, in spite of her introductory sentence, proves the worth of women in Camelot. Indeed, from the women whom the knights meet on the road, to the healers and guides, to Morgan, Nyneve, and Guinevere, women represent themselves well in Arthur's kingdom; they are essential to the narrative of its birth and collapse.

It would seem likely that at least a few of the dozens of women who act as sages, seers, healers, mothers, religious guides, temptresses, and sorceresses would be incidental to the kingdom of Arthur and to Malory's work. However, even these appearances have a purpose in Malory. This is true from the beginning of the work, when Arthur is founding his kingdom and assembling his knights: some of these women help to establish Arthur's code of chivalry. Jesmok agrees. "[T]he minor female characters in the early episodes, unimportant in themselves," she asserts, "are integral to the chivalric system: their needs offer knights the opportunity to test their chivalric commitment" (10).

At least three examples of women's work in helping Arthur to establish his code of chivalry occur on Arthur and Guinevere's wedding day. Gawaine is sent after the owner of a white deer that has run through Arthur's court. Defeating the knight he finds at the end of his search, Gawaine refuses to show mercy, although the knight submits to him in an honorable fashion. Just as Gawaine prepares to behead the knight, the knight's lady throws herself over her lover, and Gawaine kills her instead. When he reports back to Arthur's court, Guinevere assigns a group of women to judge him and warns him "ever [to be] be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that asketh mercy . . . and . . . never be ayenste a lady ne jantillwoman but if he fyght for a lady and hys adversary fyghtith for another" (Malory A 67)¹. This is one of the tenets of the oath that the knights take at Arthur's first Pentecostal gathering, "to gyff mercy unto him that askith mercy" (A 75).

¹ In *Morte Darthur*, references will be to sections and page numbers in *Malory: Complete Works* (2nd Edition. Ed. Eugène Vinaver. London: Oxford UP, 1971). Abbreviations for the "tales," or "books," are as follows: "The Tale of King Arthur," A; "The Tale of King Arthur that was Emperor Himself Through the Dignity of His Hands," AE; "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake," L; "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was Called Bewmaynes," G; "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones," T; "The Tale of the Sankgreal," HG; "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," LG; and "The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon," MA.

The code of chivalry is further defined when Pellanor fails to observe the rule, “allwayes to do to ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and widowes [sucour]” (A 75). Engrossed in his quest, Pellanor refuses to stop and help a damsel at a well who holds a dying knight in her arms. He finds out later that the woman is his daughter and that she and her knight are devoured by lions after he leaves them. Back at court, Merlin warns Pellanor that he, too, will suffer a cruel fate because of his negligence: in his time of greatest need, his best friend will fail him. Like the other women whom the knights encounter, Lyonet serves as a test and a guide to Gareth through the psychological hazards of knighthood. She provides, as they all do, tests of a knight’s ability to keep his oath to Arthur and to chivalry, and leads the way, through adversity, by strengthening the knight’s resolve. Many more instances occur in which women test the knights or, in asking for aid, illustrate one or more of the rules of chivalry. Isolde illustrates this phenomenon best when she argues with the misogynist Dynadan that defending a lady is what makes a man a knight: “Ye may not be called a good knyght by reson but yf ye make a quarell for a lady” (T 424). As Jesmok observes, these women “seem to know more about knighthood than the knights themselves” (72).

Other women, higher on the scale of importance, act as healers. Much of Tristram’s destiny, for example, is connected to women who have the ability to heal wounds. He first meets La Beal Isolde when he is sent to Ireland to heal after battle. The niece of the man Tristram has slain, Isolde is known as a “noble surgeon” (T 238). As she is caring for him, he falls in love with her, beginning their troublesome love affair. Despite treachery and discovery, they live happily out of the way of King Mark, Isolde’s husband and Mark’s murderous uncle, for a time, until Tristram is wounded in the

shoulder by an arrow as he sleeps in the forest. Once again, he must go to another land (this time Brittany) to be healed by a woman. That healer's name is also Isolde (of the White Hands); he agrees to marry her but never consummates the union out of regard for La Beal Isolde, with whom he is eventually reunited. Both women, through their power to heal, alter Tristram's destiny.

Appearing most often during the Grail Quest are demons in disguise, not damsels in distress. Both Percival and Bors encounter shape-shifters, beautiful women who promise riches and love. Percival, in particular, has a nasty time, first with a woman who gives him a demon horse to ride and later with a beautiful, rich, and powerful woman who gives him a sad story about having lost her estate, sees to it that he is greatly inebriated, and attempts to have sex with him. The sign of the Cross, almost accidental and reflexive, saves him. He discovers that she is Lucifer incarnate. Bors, too, escapes with his soul; as he witnesses a woman and her twelve maidens leap to their death from the top of the battlements because he will not yield to her desire, he is horrified, until he hears "a grete cry as all the fyndys of helle had bene aboute hym" (HG 571).

That Bors' and Percival's encounters with evil temptresses are followed by their religious journey with Percival's saintly sister shows the dichotomy in Malory's representation of women. Except for significant female characters, women are portrayed as either pure and virginal or evil and tempting. There are few instances of the virtues of motherhood, a woman's usual role in the destiny of a society or a kingdom. Arthur's half-sister, Morgan La Fey, has children, one of whom (Uwaine) castigates her for being an "erthely fende" (A 90); it may be that, except for Uwaine, she has only step-children. Because Arthur is taken away from his mother, Igraine, at birth, he never really knows

her. Isolde, Guinevere, and Nynave are barren. Elaine of Astolat and Percival's sister also die childless. Galahad, son of Lancelot and Elaine of Carbonek, is the last of his line. In general, children, the promise of the any future, are ignored or suffer a harsh fate: a grim example is Arthur's having all the boys born in May set afloat to drown at sea. Ironically, the king commits this act of genocide to protect himself from his destiny. How can anyone assure the future by destroying children? Where could childbirth—and marriage and passionate love—fit into this world, rigidly masculine and slowly degenerating into sterility and death?

Of the damsels and ladies who come and go in Malory's work, seven appear more frequently or in a special context, and therefore serve a higher function in his world. They are Morgan la Fey, Arthur's half-sister; Isolde, Tristram's paramour; Elaine of Carbonek, Galahad's mother; Elaine of Astolat (the Lady of Shalott); Percival's nameless sister, who leads the Grail Knights to the hall of the Maimed King; Nynave (later called Vivien), Merlin's prodigy; and Guinevere, Arthur's queen and Lancelot's paramour. These female characters are defined not only by their actions or function in the tales, but in contrast to each other, by their relationships with their paramours, and by the context of their appearances.

Morgan la Fey, Arthur's half-sister, is a powerful sorceress, a "grete clerke of nygromancye" (A 5), and Arthur's sworn enemy; she at first seems to be the kingdom's chief troublemaker. Whenever there is no one else to endanger Arthur or other knights, Morgan steps in. She replaces Excalibur and its scabbard with counterfeits, so that Arthur will be killed by his own knight, her lover Accolon. Arthur is saved by Nynave. Morgan tries to kill her husband Uriens; he is saved by their son Uwain. She sends

Arthur a deadly cloak to consume him in fire when he first wears it; the effort is defeated again by Nyneve. The list goes on: after Morgan sends a drink to King Mark to test Isolde's fidelity, she is said to be "the false sorseres and wycche most that is now lyvyng" (T 270). She and three other wicked queens are said to "have destroyed many a good knyght" (L 152).

However powerful Morgan seems at the beginning of the Malory's saga, though, she degenerates into not much more than a desperate crone who must capture younger knights and force them to do her will, as she does with the Alexander the Orphan. One of her last great acts is capturing Tristram and forcing him to wear a shield that makes a public scandal of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship (T 340). After this incident, she is mentioned only rarely, as more of a nuisance than a great danger. Indeed, Morgan is portrayed by the author as so irksome that when she appears at the end, on the barge that will take her critically wounded brother, Arthur to Avalon, and greets him with "A, my dere brothir! Why [ha]ve ye taryed so longe frome me?" (MA 716), her uncharacteristic gentleness is a shock. It represents a curious contradiction in Malory's portrayal of her, which Jesmok suggests is the author's attempt to lend Morgan's character richness and depth: "To see Morgan merely as a figure of evil is to overlook her mythic qualities of destroyer and preserver, a fay who wounds and heals and finally gathers Arthur to her bosom" (129). In Geraldine Heng's view, the changed Morgan's reappearance at the end is, rather, Malory's way of bringing about closure to the relationship between the king and his sister: "Here she [Morgan] addresses Arthur not agonistically, but as a fellow player in a drama that has now concluded all its scenes, with their former identities irrelevant and discarded" (107-108). Another possibility is that Morgan's change in

character may be no change at all. Her greetings to her brother could be ironic: he has been defeated, and, near death, he is about to leave this world with her. His death, it must be remembered, has been one of her obsessions since the story began.

More significant, though, than why Morgan appears at the end is that she does appear. It is part of a pattern Malory establishes in his treatment of significant women in the romance. Before or during the Grail Quest, Isolde, Percival's sister, and Elaine of Carbonek all disappear. Morgan is brought back for this final mention. Other than Nynve and Guinevere, she is the only character who remains or returns from the time of Arthur's marriage in the nascent days of Camelot.

Of the other women in the "significant seven," Isolde and the two Elaines need to be discussed in relation to the story of Guinevere: Isolde's story is only part of Tristram's and is told as a parallel to that of Guinevere and Lancelot; Elaine of Carbonek and Elaine of Astolat are two women who love Lancelot and thus must also be considered in relation to Guinevere. Although not connected to Guinevere except in a tangential way, Percival's sister must be discussed in connection with the Grail Quest and the way it changes the context of Malory's romance.

The two women who most influence the destiny of Arthur's kingdom are Nynve and Guinevere. Paramours of the most powerful men in the kingdom, these two women can be seen as integral to the rise and fall of Camelot: Nynve assures Arthur's survival, and Guinevere is generally deemed accountable for Arthur's destruction. The author certainly gives more attention to Guinevere, but Nynve's role in the romance has its own significance.

When Nynave first appears at court on Arthur's wedding day, she seems another damsel in need of rescue; in pursuit of the white hart and hounds, she is swept up and carried away by a knight. Pellador pursues her and finds her in a forest with two knights, her cousins, fighting over her. When she next appears, Nynave has been promoted from just another damsel to "one of the damsels of the Lady of the Lake." She is also hotly pursued by Merlin as an object of love; he is in fact, "assoted upon hir" (A 76). When the original Lady of Lake is beheaded by Balin, Nynave takes her place. And, as Malory's work unfolds, Nynave plays more significant roles: as Merlin's protégé, Arthur's protector and mentor, friend to the court, and honorable wife of Pelleus.

Merlin's role as creator of and counselor to King Arthur is well known. The stories of Igraine, Arthur's mother, conceiving the child with the person she thinks is her husband, Gorlois; of Merlin's taking Arthur away at birth, to be raised by Ector, Kay's father; of Arthur's drawing the sword from the stone to prove he is king; of Arthur's being guided by Merlin to retrieve Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake; of Merlin's counseling the king in war and marriage, and foretelling the greatness of Lancelot and the coming of Galahad: all these familiar stories show Merlin's beneficent power. On the other hand, he also counsels Arthur to put all the male children born in May out to sea: "for Merlyon told kynge Arthure that he that sholde destroy hym [Arthur's illegitimate son] and all the [children that] sholde be borne on May-day" (A 37). Merlin advises Arthur to do so to avoid the prophecy that Mordred, Arthur's illegitimate son (born in May) will grow up to destroy him; however, this heartless act creates bitterness among Arthur's lords and shows Merlin's role as kingmaker in a harsh light. It justifies the perception of some of Arthur's lords that Merlin is a half-demon. On the other hand,

King Lot dismisses Merlin as a petty “dream-reader,” a fraud (A 12). Despite the slight unevenness in his depiction of the sorcerer, Malory carefully circumscribes Merlin’s purpose. It is his destiny to see that Arthur becomes established as King of Britain. Said another way, he takes care of Arthur’s childhood and adolescence. Merlin, prophet that he is, has foreseen that once Arthur reaches maturity—once his court and the Round Table are established—Merlin will have lost his usefulness. To Arthur, he predicts his own demise, that of being buried alive. When Arthur urges Merlin to use his “craufftes” to “put away” the “mysseadventure,” Merlin replies, “Nay, it woll not be” (A 76). At just this time, Nyneve appears.

Eugène Vinaver considers the Merlin-Nyneve episode a holdover from the fairy legends emphasized in the French romances that served as Malory’s sources. He argues further that Malory “virtual[ly] suppress[ed] the Merlin-Nivien [another form of “Nyneve”] theme” to “shift the entire emphasis from the story of a great magician to the chronicle of a great king” (Notes 730). This view limits Nyneve’s role to replacing Merlin as the King’s protector, and that idea would seem to be justified in the text. The exchange between Arthur and Merlin occurs at almost exactly the same time that Merlin is said to be “assoted uppon” Nyneve. Malory states that she is using him to learn sorcery: “And ever she made Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thynges that sche desyred” (A 76). As is later revealed, many of the “craufftes” she learns from Merlin are used to save Arthur’s life. She causes Accolan to drop Excalibur when he is using it to slay Arthur; she saves Arthur from the flaming mantle; and she helps to destroy Aunowre, the great sorceress of the forest who decides to kill Arthur

after he refuses to “lye by her” (T 300-301). The role of magician and advisor to the king would thus seem diminished to one of protector.

Maureen Fries’ interpretation further diminishes Nyneve’s role in Morte Darthur; Fries characterizes Nyneve as a less-threatening (to medieval readers) half-sister to Morgan, more beneficent and “more committed to the knightly ethos which dominates their world” (“Female” 71). In contrast, Sue Ellen Holbrook contends that Nyneve “does not fit the label ‘wiley temptress’ inevitably applied to Merlin’s lover, and even more than her counterparts is worth being recognized in the fulness of the roles given her” (171). Kenneth Hodges even praises Nyneve for being “chivalric agent” instead of “chivalric object.” She “transforms chivalric values governing politics and romance,” Hodges asserts (78), and in “defeating a lustful sorcerer, rescuing the king, and then winning a spouse,” she herself becomes the epitome of knighthood (90).

In his clear and cogent explication of Malory’s text, Edmund Reiss advances an idea about Merlin’s and Nyneve’s roles, which differs slightly from Vinaver’s and offers further insight. Reiss notes that among Malory’s alterations to his source (for this part of his work, the Suite du Merlin) is the omission of Merlin’s birth or history before his association with Arthur (Reiss 35-36). This omission is significant, Reiss contends, not because Malory wanted to glorify Arthur more, but because he wanted to make a break with the past and turn to the new. According to Reiss, Malory wanted “to show the Order of the Round Table existing as a human order in its own right, not as one receiving continual and direct supernatural guidance from someone associated with the old order before Arthur” (61).

This move from the old to the new only increases Nyneve's significance in the narrative. Her purpose is more than superseding the wizard as Arthur's protector; she can be seen as the agent of Merlin's fate, the instrument that is used to bring about the wizard's self-predicted end and to help Arthur to rule in his own right. At first, their story seems simply one of an age-old struggle between will and desire. Merlin follows Nyneve wherever she goes, into France and back into Cornwall. Protesting his love for her, he loses control of himself in his desire to have her. She becomes "passyng weary" of his pursuit of her. She also becomes afraid of him, a "devyls son" who "allwayes [. . .] lay aboute to have hir maydynhode" (A 76-77). Sue Ellen Holbrook affirms that "[i]n all the major versions [of this story] except Malory's, Merlin is in love with as well as sexually desirous of the woman" (180). Malory thus converts a love story into what would seem to be simply another instance of an older man being "assotted upon" a younger woman—or a crafty young woman taking advantage of a lecherous old man. However, Merlin has made it clear to Arthur that he knows full well what is destined to be and that he refuses to try to avoid it. It makes sense that he would set about bringing his prophecy to fruition. His pestering Nyneve for her "maydynhode" and making a general nuisance of himself establishes a stronger case for the resulting effect. By the time he shows her the secret that will seal his fate, how to shut him up in living death, Nyneve is ready to do so. Merlin thus uses her as a way to fulfill his own prophecy. More than Merlin's replacement, then, Nyneve becomes what Holbrook agrees is the "instrument of [Merlin's] destiny" (179). "No matter how Merlin may have appeared earlier," says Edmund Reiss, "he does not control destiny. Rather he, like the merest

mortal, is subject to it” (60-61). Thus Nyneve offers the lesson that even Merlin is subject to the limitations of being human.

Because of the way that Nyneve emerges from her encounter with Merlin—spared the characterization of manipulative usurper and retaining her chastity—she can also be seen as the antithesis to Morgan La Fey. While Morgan traps knights and wishes to harm them, Nyneve does “grete goodnes unto kynge Arthure and to all hys knyghtes thorow her sorsery and enchauntementes ” (LG 621). Morgan seeks always to have others serve her carnal desires; Nyneve serves justice and true love. For instance, when she hears about Pelleus, wasting away because the lady Ettard scorns him, Nyneve brings him out of his death bed and casts an “enchauntemente” upon Ettard, causing her to fall madly in love with Pelleus. Lady Ettard then dies of sorrow because Pelleus will not return her love. In causing this turnabout, Nyneve uses witchcraft to dispense “the ryghteouse jugemente of God” (AE 104). She marries Pelleus and takes care of him as one who loves him should (AE 104).

After the Grail Quest, Morgan’s influence declines, and Nyneve acquires some authority at court. This is illustrated in part in the “Poisoned Apple” incident, when Guinevere is wrongly accused of poisoning a visiting knight. Vinaver argues that having Nyneve attest to Guinevere’s innocence in this case is unnecessary, because Guinevere has already been proved innocent by Lancelot’s combat with her accuser (Notes 769). However, by including Nyneve’s assessment at this point in the narrative, Malory emphasizes her continuing authority at Camelot and also calls attention to her significance in the work, by placing her among the other female characters (Guinevere and Morgan) who endure from Arthur’s wedding day until after the Grail Quest.

Further, in this episode, Nyneve is put in direct contact with, and therefore direct contrast to, Guinevere. When she arrives at court to testify for Guinevere, Nyneve is the one “whych wedded the good knyght sir Pelleas” (LG 620). Elsewhere, Nyneve and Pelleus have a happy marriage that lasts all their lives. Significantly at Arthur’s death, Nyneve is shown to have protected Pelleus, “and so he lyved unto the uttermost of hys dayes with her in grete reste” (MA 717). Of this contrast, Jesmok rightly argues that, in reasserting the long-lasting endurance of Nyneve and Pelleus’s marriage, Malory “offers an appealing alternative to the turbulent, and sometimes damaging, unlawful love relationships in Morte Darthur” (142). In this way, Nyneve not only serves as Merlin’s agent of destruction but creates a further condemnation of Guinevere. At the end, “Nyneve’s love,” says Hodges, “prevents all sexual love from being rejected as evil, despite the cold celibacy of the Grail and the horrors of the final war” (92).

Although she lacks the evil genius of Tennyson’s Vivien and the memorable beauty of Robinson’s Vivian, Malory’s Nyneve is a significant character in Arthurian tradition. Present from Arthur’s marriage until his death, when she accompanies him to Avalon, as his protector, as the enemy of Morgan, as defender of the Queen, and as the one who renders Merlin useless, Nyneve controls the fate of the kingdom as much as any other woman except Guinevere.

Guinevere, Arthur’s wife and Lancelot’s lover, is undoubtedly Malory’s most significant female character, and the most important female character in Arthurian literature. Understanding Malory’s Guinevere necessitates studying the change in her character, from most powerful woman in the world to perhaps the most culpable female who ever lived.

Among the methods Malory uses to develop Guinevere's character is comparison to other significant female characters in the work. Two of these are named Elaine: Elaine of Carbonek, mother of Lancelot's son, Galahad, and Elaine of Astolat. Both women serve ultimately as a contrast to Guinevere. In the story of Lancelot and Elaine of Carbonek, which Malory places just before the Grail Quest, the author predicts the coming of Galahad and begins to introduce some of the wonders surrounding the Holy Grail. On one of his "adventures," Lancelot comes to the Point of Corbin (Carbonek) and arrives at the Grail Castle, where King Pelles, descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, shows him the Holy Grail covered in white samite. Then Pelles and Elaine, his daughter, deceive Lancelot into thinking he is sleeping with Guinevere. Lancelot's eagerness to jump into bed with the person he perceives to be Guinevere is telling: "And so he wente [thought] that mayden Elayne had bene quene Gwenyver. And wyte you well that sir Launcelot was glad." In the morning when "fayre lady Elayne skypp[s] oute of her bedde all naked and [knele[s] downe afore sir Launcelot," it is not difficult to imagine what has occurred in the night (T 480). Lancelot's belief that it has occurred with Guinevere is shattered by Elaine's morning-after nakedness. This is one of the first hints—and it is only a hint—that Arthur's queen and his greatest knight may, indeed, have a sexual relationship.

This Elaine serves a purpose other than adding to the suspicion about Lancelot and Guinevere. As mother to Galahad, she fulfills the prophecy of Lancelot's begetting an heir who will be the holiest knight who ever lived. Although Sarah J. Hill has observed "how the birth of a son mitigates any crime or deviation from Christian morality" (270), Elaine's sexual encounter with Lancelot stems from her and her father's

belief that God had ordained that she bear Lancelot's child and is in their minds the ideal of obedience to Christian morality. When Elaine brings the infant Galahad to court, she places herself in stark contrast to Guinevere in two ways. First, Guinevere is never shown to be able to bear a child. This concern is more than one of fertility. Malory wrote his work during the Wars of the Roses, those skirmishes to determine the succession to the throne of England. In those days, probably long before, and certainly after—Henry VIII comes to mind—a woman's worth was determined in part by her ability to produce an heir to the throne. Elaine has brought this heir and potential saint, a living reminder of Guinevere's shortcoming, to Guinevere's court. The second way that Elaine serves as a reminder of Guinevere's shortcoming is embodied in medieval Christian morality, as described by Edmund Reiss:

For medieval Christianity, the end of love is procreation, and the act of love is justified only if intended to produce offspring. To delight in sexual love for its own sake is a striking example of desmesure [lack of moderation, or sinful perversion or excess]. Guinevere is, therefore, like the knights who misuse their lives by enjoying quests for adventure as if they were ends: she loves for the sake of loving. (166)

Having reminded Guinevere of her shortcomings and sins, Elaine presents a further affront by again deceiving Lancelot into sleeping with her. Guinevere catches them in flagrante delicto in a bedroom of her own castle. She banishes Lancelot for all time and turns to Elaine. Both women are thematically and dramatically brought together here: the scene represents the only significant interaction between two major female characters in the romance. Here, it is not Guinevere's actions, which could be seen as appropriate

no matter what the nature of her relationship with Lancelot, but Elaine's words which contribute to the deterioration of Guinevere's identity as a powerful and just queen. Instead of accusing Guinevere of lust or adultery, Elaine charges her with greed. "[A]las, madame," Elaine says to her, "ye have done grete synne and yourselff grete dyshonoure, for ye have a lord royall of youre owne, and therefore hit were youre part for to love hym; for there ys no quene in this worlde that hath suche another kynge as ye have" (T 488). In confronting Guinevere in this way, Elaine voices for the first time the idea that Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship is perceived as wrong and places the burden of guilt on Guinevere.

To cast Guinevere in an even darker light in the waning days of Arthur's court, Malory compares her to another Elaine, Elaine of Astolat, the virginal young woman who nurses Lancelot back to health. Lancelot encounters this Elaine when he must stop to rest on his way to a great tournament Arthur has called at Camelot. Still suffering from severe wounds (significantly, in the thighs) he sustained in a battle to save Guinevere from burning at the stake, Lancelot is reluctant to enter the lists. Guinevere, ill and unable to attend, urges him to do so, to avoid scandal; people will wonder, she reminds him, whether they are engaged in illicit behavior if Lancelot does not go: "What woll youre enemyes and myne sey and deme? . . . 'Se how sir Launcelot holdith hym ever behynde the kynge, and so the quene doth also, for that they wolde have their plesure togydirs'" (LG 622). The knight reluctantly mounts his horse and heads off to Camelot. When he must stop to rest at the lodging of Bernard of Astolat, he meets Bernard's daughter, Elaine, who falls in love with him even before knowing his name. Lancelot unwittingly encourages her: he returns one of her kisses and agrees to wear her sleeve on

his helmet as a token during the tournament. She becomes the perfect nurse and helpmeet to him. Adoringly, she watches over him. To emphasize her goodness, the author reveals that “ever this maydyn Elayne ded ever hir dyligence and labour both nyght and day unto sir Launcelot, that there was never chylde other wyff more mekar tyll fadir and husband than was this Fayre Maydyn of Astolat” (LG 635). Even Bors is taken with Elaine’s gentility and devotion; he suggests that Lancelot marry her. When Lancelot’s wounds “braste” and he collapses, Elaine rushes in, all the while chastizing Bors and Lavayne for allowing such silly endangerment of Lancelot’s life. “For and [if] he dye,” she tells them, “I woll appele you [accuse you before the law] of his death!” (LG 636). It is clear that Elaine does not want to control Lancelot so much as care for him, comfort him—love him.

At the same time, Guinevere rages jealously over Lancelot’s wearing a token of Elaine into the joust. When Bors tells her of Lancelot’s condition, Guinevere screams: “Fye on him, recreayde [cowardly] knyght! . . . For wyte you well I am right sorry and [if] he shall have hys lyff” (LG 637). Whether Lancelot lives through his wounds matters less to Guinevere than what she perceives as his betrayal of her.

These two women never encounter each other but are connected by the presence of Bors, Lancelot’s cousin and best friend. With Bors as a messenger to each of them, Guinevere’s insecurity and jealousy are contrasted with Elaine’s steadfast devotion and ideal love for Lancelot. At the same time that Elaine displays the perfect earthly love, Lancelot is praised for his “harte” and “currayge,” and Bors is portrayed rightly as a loyal friend, Guinevere, in Jesmok’s words, “is beginning to sound like an aging, disgruntled woman” (200).

This parallel between Guinevere and Elaine hints, if only briefly, at what Lancelot's life without Guinevere would be like. The first question that occurs—Would he be able to choose Elaine and the perfect domestic life she offers, if not for Guinevere?—gives way to the larger one, especially in the context of the story after Lancelot fails to achieve the Grail: Would Lancelot be better off without Guinevere? Would Camelot? The greatest loss is what might have been, or, as Edmund Reiss confirms, the possibility for Lancelot to engage in a healthy, sanctified relationship with a woman. Elaine is “an innocent girl,” Reiss comments, “whose love could have been proper and good” (163). These implications increase the uncertainty about the culpability of Malory's main female character, and the uncertainty adds to the ever-increasing testimony against Guinevere for her role in the fall of Arthur's kingdom.

Much of Guinevere's development as a character depends on the author's comparing her to another significant female character, “La Beal Isolde,” daughter of the King of Ireland, wife to King Mark of Cornwall, and Tristram's lover. It is common practice among scholars to discuss the parallels in the relationships between Tristram and Isolde and Guinevere and Lancelot. Many commentaries exist about the similarities of scenes and events in the two relationships, both adulterous and both involving a knight and the wife of his king. As the story progresses, Lancelot and Guinevere's love is increasingly scandalized at court, while that of Tristram and Isolde is celebrated.

The difference in the perception of the Lancelot-Guinevere and Tristram-Isolde affairs is in part that the two kings are so different. King Mark is consistently portrayed as a coward, ambushing Tristram rather than fighting him head-on (T 245). Dyanadan, a trustworthy knight in Arthur's service, reveals that Mark is “full of cowardyse” and a

“murtherar” (T 356). Mark is a liar, yielding to Gaherys and swearing never to harm Tristram, an oath he breaks soon after. Even Arthur calls Mark “Kynge Fox” because Mark “faryth allwey wi wylys and treson” (T 380). Vinaver affirms that “Tristram’s love for Isode [is] fully justified because Tristram [is] a true knight and Mark an enemy of knighthood” (Notes 750). What Bors says later justifies this opinion: “Kynge Arthur and kynge Mark were never lyke of cond[y]cions, for there was never yet man that ever coude preve kynge Arthure untrew of hys promyse” (MA 681). In contrast to Mark is Guinevere’s husband, Arthur, the “floure of chivalry” (A 74). It is one thing to cuckold a murderous lying coward, and quite another to betray the man said to be the greatest king who ever lived, the creator of a new social order.

Another significant difference between the two affairs is that, while almost every detail of Tristram and Isolde’s relationship is revealed, there is no real direct access to Lancelot and Guinevere’s. Malory’s narrative about Tristram (which takes up two-fifths of Morte Darthur) tells how he and Isolde are first attracted to each other (when Isolde heals him), struggle together against King Mark, live in domestic bliss at Lancelot’s castle, Joyous Gard, and so on. Other characters add testimony about how blessed is their union. On the other hand, although there may be some hint at the end of the work about what brought Lancelot and Guinevere together, the story of how their relationship begins is never told, nor are any reasons given for their remaining together and preferring each other’s company. This development of the Tristram-Isolde story in lieu of Lancelot and Guinevere’s constitutes characterization by parallel, in which the author substitutes the Tristram-Isolde tale for the one about their complementary couple. References to Lancelot and Guinevere appear in Tristram’s story sixteen times, according to R. M.

Lumiansky (208), and almost every element in that tale brings them to mind. In this way, Malory is still able to develop all the characters, while getting by with telling, for him, the less morally ambiguous or problematic tale. Because Lancelot and Guinevere as a couple are not in sharp focus until the end, their relationship is not clear until the tragedy is unfolding, and even then the author's telling leaves some doubt.

Intruding upon Malory's story of Arthur's kingdom and casting a dark shadow on all of Camelot's last days is the Quest for the Sankgreal. It is the aspect of Malory's work that most affects his themes and characterization; it changes the context in which the last third of the legend must be viewed.

In explanatory notes as contradictory as Malory's work itself sometimes appears, Vinaver both asserts that Malory altered his source document very little and insists that Malory was successful in his "attempt to secularize the Grail theme" (Notes 759). Malory cannot have done both—left the original source almost the same and yet made it more secular. Charles Moorman also refutes Vinaver's claim that Malory "secularizes the Grail" story. Although Malory "pares away" much of the repetitive didactic material, asserts Moorman, the author "is always careful to keep, usually in summation, the religious lore of the argument presented" (Book 33). As Vinaver himself affirms, the source document, the Queste del Sant Graal (one of the French prose cycle works) is a "treatise on grace" (Notes 760). Malory's Grail Quest story remains just that—a religious piece. Instead of secularizing it, the author allows the Quest's overtones and messages to spill over into and tinge the rest of his work.

The knights who undertake the Quest learn that achieving the Grail (that is, seeing its miracle) is the new proof of prowess for the knights of Arthur's court; they are told

that making themselves worthy of a heavenly kingdom will take precedence over gaining fame and prowess as knights in earthly combat. Larry Benson agrees: in the Grail Quest, “penance rather than prowess is the requirement for adventure, and the adventures themselves tend to be spiritual trials rather than ordinary deeds of arms” (212). Lancelot is told more than once, “youre strengthe and your manhode will litill avayle you and [if] God be ayaynste you” (HG 538). Percival is told that there is a new law, the law of the Church (HG 547); Galahad is reminded (as if he needs to be) that “vertuous lyvyng,” not earthly fame, will enable a person to achieve the Grail (HG 531). With the Grail Quest, a new day has dawned. Indeed, Ector and Gawaine are told that “knyghts of pure fayth and of wycked beleve”—this description shows the dichotomy between appearances and actions which has begun to develop in the Round Table—have “fayled” at “charité [Christian love], abstinaunce, and trouth” (HG 563). Arthur’s knights are now “Jesus Crystes knyght[es],” and there is a “newe law” they must abide by—Christianity (HG 572). Perhaps, as Vinaver and Larry Benson contend, Malory does not allow the Grail story to intrude on Arthur’s world, and leaves the “assurance that earthly knighthood retains its value . . . after the . . . spiritual chivalry of the Grail” (Benson 224). Nevertheless, “we are,” says Stephen C. B. Atkinson, “repeatedly urged through the final tales to consider the possibility of divine intervention and thus to weigh the actions of the characters in the seventh and eighth tales directly against the standards of the Grail world” (106).

The Grail story reinforces, as well, the idea that women can be the cause of wickedness. Women are forbidden to go on the Quest; they are a distraction to the men and an occasion to sin, thus causing men to be unworthy of the Grail (HG 523). “Here

women clearly are associated with the uncleanness of sin, with concupiscence,” Jesmok observes (59). Galahad, Percival, and Bors, the knights who achieve the Grail, are told, too, that when God chose to create Jesus Christ, He saw “suche wrecchyndnesse” in the world that He “toke fleysh and bloode of a clene maydyn” (HG 528), putting forth the idea that sin came into the world through Eve in her acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil—her recognition of sin—and that the world can only be saved by a virgin. Bors’ choice between saving a virgin’s “maydenhode” and saving his brother’s life emphasizes the value of a woman’s remaining physically pure.

The chief representative of the “clene” woman in the new era is Percival’s sister, the guide for Percival, Bors, and Galahad on their voyage to the Wasteland to heal the Maimed King. She is never given a name (but it probably is “Elaine”). In allowing herself to be bled to death to heal a sick woman, she represents the ideal of Christian love and sacrifice. She is able to handle the belt of Galahad’s sword only because she is a “mayde” (HG 581). She is also held to a different standard than, say, Bors. Having “trespassed but onys in hys virginite” (HG 562), Bors is eligible to achieve the Grail and become close to God. For the virgin maid who must put the sword-belt on Galahad, however, there is a warning. The maid who handles it “must be a mayde all the days of her lyffe . . . and if she breke her virginité she shall dy the most vylaynes deth that ever dud ony woman” (HG 582). The message here is that a man is allowed to err, but to keep the evil out of the world, a woman must remain “clene” and ever mindful to suppress her natural tendency to bring evil into the world. If she does not, she and mankind are damned.

As the Grail Quest story promises a new order, so it raises questions of sin and salvation. These questions are focused on Lancelot. As Larry Benson confirms, the author makes sure that “we begin and end the tale [of the Sankgreall] with our attention upon Lancelot” (G 217). In the beginning of his Grail quest, Lancelot is told by the first of a succession of hermit-prophets that he “dwelleth in some dedly synne” (HG 537). As he goes along, he comes to understand that he is guilty of having “loved a quene unmesurably and oute of mesure longe” (HG 539). He is given no room to doubt that his love for Guinevere is his greatest sin and weakness; he is “defouled with lechory.” He is told that if he never sees her again, he will have a chance for salvation (HG 539). Ector and Gawaine are told that, because Lancelot is likely to return to sin, Lancelot “ys nat stable” (HG 563). Determined nevertheless to achieve the Grail, he dons a hair shirt and agrees to “ete no fleysshe . . . drynke no wyne. . . and hyre masse dayly” (HG 553). He nears his “desyre” of partaking of the Grail’s bounty but is allowed only to see it covered in cloth. Prevented from getting closer, he falls into a twenty-four day coma (one day for each year of sin with Guinevere). When he awakes, he tells the people around him that he has seen “grete mervayles that no tunge may telle and more than ony herte can thynke.” But, he laments, “had nat my synne bene beforetyme, ellis I had sene muche more” (HG 597). Through his failure fully to achieve the Grail, then, Lancelot becomes able to see his “dedly synne” with Guinevere and is reminded in the cruellest way of the consequences of that sin—his not being allowed to partake of the greatest mystery on earth and his being prevented from seeing more of Heaven. Lancelot takes the new knowledge of sin back to Camelot, reminding Guinevere early and frequently that if he “had nat had [his] prevy thoughtis to returne to [her] love agayne,” he would

have seen “as grete mysteryes” as he could have seen (LG 611). Having lost his son and been reminded of his sinful nature, Lancelot brings to Guinevere the disappointment and disillusion that characterize Arthur’s final days.

After the Grail Quest, Malory brings together the themes of chivalry, the Christian concepts of sin and salvation encountered in the “Tale of the Sankgreall,” and the plots involving Aggravaine and Mordred’s treachery and Gawaine’s revenge into a meaningful tragedy of the end of the “flower of chivalry.” Here, in the last two books of his work, “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere” and “The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon,” Malory turns in earnest to Guinevere.

Like Guinevere and Lancelot’s relationship, until the Grail Quest her character is developed indirectly through what others say, or, as with the story of Tristram and Isolde, through parallel stories about other people that define her obliquely. She is rarely given a chance to defend herself. She does not speak, for example, from the time she and Lancelot are set upon in her bedchamber until after Arthur’s death. Nevertheless, the Guinevere at the end of the Morte Darthur differs greatly from the one at its beginning.

From the time of her marriage to Arthur to the end of this epic, it is evident that Guinevere suffers a loss of power. At first, Jesmok says, “Guenevere develops from a shyly reticent bride to a judicious consort worthy of a king” (27). As Arthur’s powerful queen, she is able to command sinful knights to travel to Rome and confess to the Pope, among other acts of penance. Punishment is meted out “by ordynaunce of the queene” (A 67). She shares the crown while Arthur is away fighting Emperor Lucius, Arthur having “resyned all ther rule unto thes two lordis [Cadore of Cornwall and Baldwin of Brittany] and quene Gwenyvere” (AE 118). She is Arthur’s love, helpmeet, and chief

supporter. He insists on taking her with him, “for I may nat longe mysse you,” he tells her. “Ye shall cause me to be the more hardy, what adventure so befall me” (A 77).

After they survive an ambush, the narrative goes, “the kynge [kneels] down and thank[s] God mekely. And then he sen[ds] for the quene” (A 79). In these and other instances in the beginning of the narrative, Malory leaves no doubt about Guinevere’s importance to Arthur and to Camelot.

In the kingdom’s final days, though, Guinevere becomes a queen without king, knights, or subjects. While Arthur is besieging Lancelot’s castle in Benwick, Guinevere holes up in the Tower of London, and Mordred “lay[s] a myghty syge aboute the Towre” (MA 707). She has become another lady under siege, like the ones who have called on Arthur for aid in earlier days. In addition, instead of contributing to the harmony of Arthur’s court, Guinevere now increases its disharmony. In the “Poisoned Apple” incident, she causes further disagreement among the knights, leaving “somme . . . well pleased and som . . . nat” (LG 617). She is transformed from a constructive force into a destructive one, in an increasingly contentious court. With this incident, as well, Guinevere’s life becomes a series of episodes of avoiding the fiery stake; Lancelot, Arthur, and the court become caught up in “excusing of the quene” (LG 621). When the kingdom is heading toward chaos, with Arthur and Gawaine besieging Lancelot, it becomes evident that Guinevere may not be so important to Arthur after all. As the internecine war erupts, Arthur laments, “And much more am I soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenes I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company” (LG 685). This perspective, that he can get another queen at any time, but he has lost his knights forever,

is a good indicator of Arthur's priorities in this struggle. It is further emphasized when Arthur cries over losing Lancelot, and further still, when, as Arthur lies dying, he cries out to Lancelot, not to Guinevere: "A, Launcelot! . . . And alas, that ever I was ayenste ye" (MA 714). Nevertheless, the Morte Darthur is about Arthur and the fall of his kingdom as much as it is about Guinevere and Lancelot. As Wilfred L. Guerin says, "the loss of [the] Round Table, a loss partially attributable to Arthur himself, constitutes the tragedy of Arthur" (263). Arthur's lamentations must be seen in this light.

In early Round Table days, Guinevere serves as a wise judge of delinquent knights. Her punishment of Pedivere, for instance, the knight who beheads his wife in a jealous rage, is appropriate to the crime: she sentences him to carry his lady's head and sleep with her body every night of the journey to the Pope in Rome, where he will confess and do further penance (G 171). Guinevere is a merciful judge of Gawaine, discussed earlier, when he refuses to show mercy to a knight who yields to him and then beheads the knight's lady. Compared to what onlookers want to do to him—take his life for the life he has taken—Guinevere's judgment is tame (as well as corrective rather than merely punitive): she sentences him to being at the eternal judgment of a group of women, and to show mercy to all (A 67).

The "Poisoned Apple" incident, mentioned above, serves to illustrate what kind of treatment Guinevere receives at court in the kingdom's final days. After the Quest, the court takes on a new atmosphere: it is full of rumor and ill-will. The knights are fractious, with little to do but engage in war games and dangerous, sometimes deadly, intrigue. When Guinevere is accused of poisoning her guest, it is made clear that any number of people could be guilty of the crime. However, the first person they all look to

is Guinevere: “Then every knyght . . . lepe from the bourde ashamed and araged for wratthe out of their wittis . . . considering quene Gwenyvere made the feast and dyner they had all suspeccion unto hir” (LG 614). The reflexive turn of their heads toward her end of the table (they are in London, not Camelot, so the table is not round) would not have occurred in the old days before the Quest. Whether the subtle change in atmosphere at court or the increasing scandal between Guinevere and Lancelot is causing this development, it signals the changed way in which the Queen is regarded. Most knights are against her, as much for having banished Lancelot as for poisoning one of their own. It is significant, too, that Gawaine is the first actually to point the finger at Guinevere: “My lady the quene!” he shouts (LG 614). Here, no one wants to defend the queen who earlier showed such mercy and would later turn herself over to her abductor Meleagaunce to save her knights. If Guinevere has no knight to defend her, she is deemed guilty and is to be “brente” then and there. Unlike the knights she has judged before, she will be given no opportunity to speak in her own defense, and no mercy will be shown her. The merciful queen is to be the victim of harsh chivalric justice.

An additional change in Guinevere may have been brought about by Lancelot, who comes back from the Quest with an altered perception of sin. Their argument shortly after Lancelot’s return bears this out. When Guinevere complains of Lancelot’s diminished love for her, he responds:

[I]f that I had nat had my prevy thoughtis to returne to you[r]e love
 agayne as I do, I had sene as grete mysteryes as ever saw my sonne
 sir Galahad, Percivale, other sir Bors. And therefore, madam, I was
 but late in that queste, and wyte you well, madam, hit may nat be yet

lyghtly forgotyn, the hyghe servyse in whom I dud my dyligente
laboure. (LG 611)

Throughout the argument, Lancelot uses the phrase, “wyte you well, madam,” three times; it means something like “you know very well, madam” (Vinaver Glossary 810). He is pointedly reminding her that his obsession with her was the cause of his failure to fully achieve the Grail, and that service to an idea (Christian faith)—more noble than their love—is difficult to forget. It is, as well, something to be treasured and sought. Thus is Guinevere is made fully aware of the effect of her and Lancelot’s relationship on the kingdom socially and politically, as well as of the sinfulness, in this new and judgmental atmosphere, of her relationship with Lancelot.

Adding to the difficulty of understanding Guinevere is the persistence of doubt about her and Lancelot’s relationship. Long before, Merlin had warned Arthur that Guinevere was “nat holsom for hym to take to wyff” and that she and Lancelot would engage in illicit love (A 26). Morgan had designed a shield that scandalized the relationship, and had Tristram carry it at the great tournament (T 340). Even the cowardly and wicked King Mark had written scathing letters to Arthur and Guinevere, accusing Arthur of not being able to control his court (T 381). However, these actions have offered no real confirmation of the sexual nature of Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair. To make that explicit, Malory waits until Guinevere is held in Meleagaunce’s castle and Lancelot steals into Guinevere’s bedroom late at night. The author states clearly that “sir Launcelot wente to bedde with the quene” and “toke his plesaunce and hys lykyng until hyt was the dawning of the day” (LG 657). In the morning, when the “over-shyte” is “all

bebled of the bloode of sir Launcelot [from a cut on his hand]” (LG 658), the evidence against their having a platonic relationship goes out the window that Lancelot has entered.

This episode is significant for another reason, having to do with the parallels that Malory draws between Tristram and Lancelot, discussed in part earlier. In incidents common to both relationships, both Tristram and Lancelot bloody the sheets of a woman’s bed. In the first incident, Tristram is in “bedde” and has taken “grete joy and plesaunce” with Segwarydes’s wife, a woman of loose morals and quick affection for whom Tristram and King Mark have been contending (T 245). Having been speared by King Mark, Tristram has bled on the dame’s sheets. Her servant rushes in and tells her that Segwarydes is on his way. Tristram takes his horse and “so depart[s].” Segwarydes finds that in his bed has “leyne a wounded knyght.” To spare her life, the woman tells her husband with whom she had been sleeping and where he has “becom.” Segwarydes pursues Tristram and is killed by him (T 245). In Lancelot and Guinevere’s case, when Meleagaunce discovers the blood, he accuses Guinevere of allowing “som of the wounded knyghtes” that had slept in her chamber to “ly by her” (LG 658). No one even considers Lancelot as a suspect (perhaps because of Meleagaunce’s fear of the knight), in spite of an obvious cut on his hand. Lancelot eventually fights Meleagaunce and kills him, but he never admits to having been the one in Guinevere’s bed. He remains blameless, at least publicly and at least for this moment.

In a parallel incident, Tristram is captured by Sir Andret and twelve knights in Isolde’s bedroom. This is a foreshadowing of Mordred, Aggravaine, and twelve knights’ trying to capture Lancelot in Guinevere’s bedchamber. The difference in the two events,

though, is crucial. In Tristram's case, he is "takyn nakyd a-bed with La Beale Isode, and so was he bounde hande and foote and kepte tyll day" (T 271). There can be no doubt that Tristram and Isolde have engaged in some sort of sexual activity during the night. In contrast, the author refuses to convey what Lancelot and Guinevere are or have been doing when Mordred and the others attack the chamber door: "And whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make no mencion" (LG 676). The author's reticence here is surprising, given that this event occurs shortly after Lancelot and Guinevere's night of lust in the "Knight of the Cart" episode, when Lancelot bloodied the bed sheets .

By parallel and contrast, then, the author has both increased the doubt about the guilt or innocence of Lancelot and Guinevere and confused the issue of blame. The greatest doubt may arise from Lancelot's continuing to deny anything but innocent friendship with the Queen. As he has done all along, at every instance and in the face of all evidence, Lancelot insists that Guinevere is the "treweste lady unto her lord lyvyng" (G 152). "Hydir I cam to the quene for no maner of male engyne [evil intent]," Lancelot tells his assailants at Guinevere's door when they are caught by Aggravaine, Mordred, and others (MA 677). The evidence still mounts against them. It is revealed that Arthur has suspected the affair for some time (MA 674). Lancelot, however, continues to protest that Guinevere "ys a trew lady untyll her lorde" (MA 680). After Lancelot escapes with Guinevere to Joyous Gard, Arthur and Gawaine lay siege to the castle. Refusing to fight Arthur, Lancelot tries to settle the feud over the battlements. Still protesting the innocence of his relationship with Guinevere, he delivers a stirring speech to Arthur outside the gates:

And as for my lady quene Gwenyver, excepte youre person of your
 hyghnes and my lorde sir Gawayne, there nys no knyght undir
 hevyn that dare make hit good uppon me that ever I was traytour
 unto youre person. And where hit please you to say that I have
 holdyn my lady, your quene, yerys and wynters, unto that I shall
 ever make a large answere, and prove hit uppon any knyght that
 quene Gwenyver, ys as trew a lady unto youre person as ys any
 lady lyvyng unto her lorde, and that woll I make good with my
 hondis. (LG 688)

However vociferous his protestations, Lancelot has no way to prove Guinevere's loyalty to Arthur except in the usual way—by force of arms, his old, reliable trial-by-combat. Arthur, himself, has predicted that Lancelot would use prowess to get around the truth, telling Gawaine, "I woll nat that way worke with sir Launcelot, I dare say he woll make hit good uppon any knight lyvyng that woll put uppon hym vylany or shame, and in lyke wyse he woll make good for my lady the quene" (MA 682). While Lancelot could have spoken in these terms before the Grail Quest, when a knight's worth was a matter of prowess in "earthly" battles and the judgment of sin was less harsh, he is in a new world with new standards.

For Arthur, what until now has been a reliable method of establishing guilt or innocence has failed; neither his greatest knight nor his system of justice can be relied upon. It is not surprising, then, for Arthur to turn the decision over to Gawaine, who seems to be the one in control here. Not much moved by Lancelot's "proude wordis," Gawain is too caught up in avenging Gareth's and Gaheris's deaths (accidentally, at

Lancelot's hands) to think about the truth of Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere. He turns the shouting match into one about prowess and honor in battle, harkening back to the old, clannish ways of violence and vengeance (MA 689), ways they can still understand.

When he is commanded by the Pope to return Guinevere to Arthur, Lancelot once again proclaims stubbornly that Guinevere is a "trew lady unto" the king. He adds further weight to his argument by reminding Arthur and his court that his (Lancelot's) word has the approval of God, evidenced by his victory, unarmed, over the fourteen knights outside Guinevere's door on the night she was captured. He calls any other accounts or perceptions of their affair lies (MA 694).

Rather than exonerating Guinevere, Lancelot's protestations of her innocence have the opposite effect; they create a constant tension between the accumulating evidence and the need to believe Lancelot, the greatest knight in the world. Does Lancelot defend Guinevere because there is a possibility that she is innocent, because he is a knight and it is his chivalric duty to protect her to the end, or because he is trying to protect Arthur? Would Lancelot lie? By now, it is evident that he would, indeed.

In his effort to clarify the couple's relationship, Charles Moorman insists that no confusion exists about the author's rendering of the Lancelot-Guinevere affair. In fact, Moorman avers, the last two books of Malory's work "bear witness to the unity of Malory's vision" ("Courtly" 176). Malory was a champion, he says, of love, the honorable kind that is an enemy of the adulterous l'amour courtois, courtly love:

Courtly love as it appears in Malory's French sources reveals the basic paradox which underlies the system in all the works in which it appears.

Love, on the one hand, is the source of the best features of the chivalric code. Properly and devoutly followed, the service of the beloved prompts a man to reveal in action the noblest feelings possible to him. . . . Yet courtly love is by definition immoral and adulterous, and it was vigorously condemned as such by the Church.

. . . [T]o Malory, the adulterous courtly love of his sources was an evil, and he sets out in the Morte Darthur to show how this tragic confusion of earlier times contributes to the destruction of the Round Table civilization. Thus Malory consistently reduces [the] sections of his sources [that glorify courtly love]. . . . [Y]et he is careful to preserve the core of such passages in order to demonstrate the tragic effect of courtly love upon his characters. (“Courtly” 165)

In Moorman’s view, Malory is faced, in these last two books of his work, with the “paradox” created by Guinevere and Lancelot’s relationship, in the early days a “fresh, chivalric [honorable] love” that turns in the end to “an adulterous courtly love” (“Courtly” 174).

Moorman explains that this “adulterous courtly love” is Lancelot’s “dilemma”; he cannot abandon the Queen, not because she is his queen, but “because he is her pledged lover” (“Courtly” 174). However, Malory shows that Lancelot has from the beginning of his association with the Round Table sworn to defend and protect his queen. After the first time he rescues Guinevere from the stake, he reminisces about his first day as a knight of the Round Table, when Guinevere had found his lost sword for him. “I promysed her at that day ever to be her knyght in ryght other in wronge,” he tells her and

Arthur (LG 620). He has pledged, as a good knight should, to defend his queen and her honor “ever.” Although they subsequently engage in an adulterous affair, Lancelot’s vow to his queen remains. At the same time, he must remain loyal to Arthur, and he, like his literary descendant, Edwin Arlington Robinson’s twentieth-century Lancelot, is drawn by a vision. Lancelot’s conflict thus resides not only in his pledge to his “lover,” but also in his vow to defend his queen, his oath of fealty to Arthur, his desire for Guinevere, and his remembrance of a glimpse of something beyond this world.

There is more uncertainty about the greater issue, the kingdom’s fall. Malory indicates at first that the fault lies with Aggravaine: “A, Aggravayne, Aggravayne!” Arthur laments. “Jesu forgyff hit thy soule, for thyne evil wyll that thou haddist and sir Mordred, thy brother, unto sir Launcelot hath caused all this sorow” (MA 685). In the narrative that follows, the author makes it seem at times that it is not Lancelot and Guinevere’s illicit love that brings down the kingdom, but the hatred and jealousy that Aggravaine and Mordred have always held for Lancelot and Guinevere.

In his Book of Kyng Arthur, Charles Moorman contends that Arthur’s kingdom perishes because it fails in three important ways. It fails in religion, “the final test of the Round Table,” the Grail Quest. The Round Table knights’ inability to achieve the Grail because of their sinfulness and corruption not only weakens Arthur’s kingdom but also prevents it from becoming a kingdom of God on earth (37). Chivalry fails, as shown through the feud between the houses of Lot (Morgause, Gawain, Gaheris, Aggravaine, Gareth, and Mordred) and Pellinore (Torre, Lamorak, Aglovalle, and Perceval), which fuels Mordred’s hatred of Lancelot and Gawaine’s need for vengeance, and causes the knights to line up, in the end, behind Mordred or behind Lancelot (Book 55-58). Finally,

love fails: “The whole story of Lancelot and Guinevere is . . . seen by Malory as a gradual debasement of what might have been ‘vertuouse’ love into the adulterous relationship he observed in his sources,” asserts Moorman (Book 17), who sees the tripartite theme of failure as encapsulated in Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship.

“Lancelot upon his return [from the Grail Quest], fogets the ‘promyse and the perfeccion that he had made in the queste’ of the Grail,” asserts Moorman, “and, in rejecting holiness for adultery, permits the plots of the house of Orkeney [Gawain, Mordred, et al.] to reach fruition” (Book 77).

While Moorman argues that Malory does not let Lancelot escape from condemnation in the affair (“Courtly” 167), other scholars agree that the author does much to protect his “favorite knight.” It becomes evident, affirms Peter R. Schroeder, that “Malory almost surely wants us to sympathize with poor, reasonable, much-put-upon Lancelot” (375). From the end of the Tristram tale, asserts P. E. Tucker, Malory’s problem remains “how . . . to present Lancelot, the pattern of knightly virtue, as an adulterer with his sovereign’s wife” (81). Terence McCarthy suggests that Malory alters the emphasis of his source in the Guinevere-Lancelot affair by “omitting most of the lengthy condemnations of his favourite knight” (82). Indeed, observes Larry Benson, in the final tragedy, “Malory spreads the blame so widely that little is left for Lancelot: Gawain and Guinevere claim they are to blame; Mordred and Agravaine are indeed guilty of initiating the disaster; and blind destiny, the English people, even the adder, are among the causes of the final catastrophe” (238).

The main theme or guiding principle in assigning blame is honor, concludes C. David Benson, “one of [the] central values of the Round Table which also causes its fall”

(231). To Benson, honor is all about appearance. Whether Lancelot and Guinevere actually consummate their relationship is not so important as the appearance of an illicit affair and the dishonor it brings to the court. As Benson says, honor's "basis [is] in responsibility, its focus [is] on public reputation, and it [is] indifferen[t] to right or wrong" (232). Issues of honor go beyond those of morality and blame; acts committed in the name of honor (like Gawain's vengeance) are just as destructive as those that are immoral. To remain honorable, Arthur must execute his queen; to retain his honor, Gawain must challenge Lancelot; to keep his "worshyp," Lancelot must defend Guinevere (C. Benson 233-234).

The men's story may be about chivalric honor and "worshyp." But in Malory's work, women are not given the Round Table Knights' privilege of falling back on honor as a way to make decisions and justify actions. This inequity applies especially to Guinevere, who in the end is exposed as an adulterer, an "unclene" woman, and a traitor to her king. Indeed, while the author gives Guinevere more attention than he does the other female characters in this work, he really makes "lytyll mencion" of her in the last two sections of his narrative except in relation to the other, male, characters.

In the "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" and "The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon," Guinevere is in most instances the property that Arthur, Lancelot, Meleagaunce, and Mordred vie for. As Guinevere goes "a-Maying," Meleagaunce gathers twenty armed knights and decides to "take the quene" (LG 650). Lancelot, Aggravaine, Arthur, and Gawaine discuss her as if she were not present or had no voice. The treacherous Aggravaine uses the possession of Guinevere as the first gambit in beginning the strife at court. "Sir Launcelot holdith youre quene," he

tells Arthur, “And all we wote [knew] that ye shulde be above sir Launcelot, and ye are the kynge that made hym knyght” (MA 674). In rallying troops to fight Lancelot, Arthur is quick to point out that Lancelot “had beraffte hym hys quene” (MA 687). In his end-the-fighting speech to Arthur at Joyous Gard, Lancelot refers to Guinevere as “my lady” or “yours [Arthur’s] quene.” “Take yours quene,” he finally tells Arthur (MA 688). When Lancelot is banished from England, and Arthur and Gawain follow him there to continue the war, Arthur leaves Mordred in charge of the Kingdom and Guinevere in Mordred’s “governance” (700). Guinevere is claimed by Mordred, who makes himself king and considers her the prize that befits a victorious ruler (MA 707).

Worse than being property to be fought over and seized, Guinevere cannot even be seen as the primary reason for their wars: “But the Freynsh booke seyth kynge Arthur wold have takyn hys quene again and to have been accorded with sir Launcelot, but sir Gawayne wold nat suffir hym by no maner of meane” (MA 689-690). When Lancelot at last agrees to fight, Gawain asks him, “Is nat thys the kynges quarell to fyght wyth the? And also hit ys my quarell to fyght wyth the because of the dethe of my brothir, sir Gareth” (MA 690). There is, as well, Arthur’s famous line about his preferring to lose his queen than his knights, for “quenys [he] myght have inow” (MA 685). But the most telling testimony to Guinevere’s becoming a secondary cause to the war among Arthur, Gawaine, and Lancelot is that, even after Lancelot returns her to Arthur and goes to France, Arthur and Gawaine follow him and attack him at Benwick. In the last two books of his work, Malory thus shows Guinevere to be a catalyst for strife between the factions of the kingdom; at the same time, he never lets go of his true subjects, Arthur and the Round Table.

With Lancelot banished and Arthur away in France fighting Lancelot, Guinevere becomes almost another damsel in distress when she escapes to the Tower of London to hold off Mordred. In contrast to the besieged damsels earlier in the work, though, Guinevere has no rescuer. Tennyson will later illustrate Guinevere's suffering and true remorse while she is shut up in the convent, and Robinson will, still later, eloquently illustrate how desolate and lonely that experience in the Tower must have been for Guinevere. Malory, though, is unable to show Guinevere beyond the effect she has on these struggles between men.

After hearing "kyng Arthure was dede and all the noble knyghtes, sir Mordred and all the remanaunte" (MA 717), Guinevere knows she has no choice in what she must do. She is a deposed queen, who, though not the sole cause of war, has a part in it. She flees to the convent at Almsbury. Of the final scene that takes place there between Guinevere and Lancelot, Sarah J. Hill says that Guinevere is rejecting "an inherently self-destructive political system and regains her position as a moral teacher" (277). On the other hand, Maureen Fries characterizes Guinevere in a less flattering way, as a "male-inspired" heroic image. "Her spurning of [Lancelot's] offer of marriage and even of a final kiss," says Fries, "casts her into a heroic mold, but it is a male-inspired one: that of the repentant worldly woman, on the model of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Egypt, and other formerly sexual females" ("Female" 66).

Such ideas as Hill's and Fries' are attempts to make Guinevere conform to feminist concepts of literature. More simply and accurately, in refusing Lancelot's love, Guinevere releases him from his vow to her and, finally, truly frees him. She first acknowledges publicly their part in the destruction of Arthur's kingdom. In front of

witnesses, she attests, “Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the most nobelest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow our love that we have loved togyders ys my moste noble lorde slayne” (MA 720). In making their affair public, Guinevere relieves Lancelot of the burden of defending falsehood, as he had been forced to do in honoring his commitment to defend her.

Here, Guinevere is again the wise judge, as in the early days of Camelot. She makes herself and Lancelot realize that it would be a great injustice for them to enjoy each other the rest of their lives after having helped to destroy a kingdom. She pronounces a fitting end to their story: “Go thou to thy realme,” she tells Lancelot, “and there take ye a wyff, and lyff with [hir wyth] joy and blyss.” For her there is only the hope that after her death, she will “have a syght of the blyssed face of Cryte Jesu” (MA 720). But Lancelot, persisting in his earthly dream of marriage to her and happily-ever-after existence at Benwick or Joyous Gard, responds: “I had caste me to have had you into myn own royaume” (MA 720-721). She reminds him in her rejection of this idea that nothing remains on Earth for them to cling to; that the world is, as Arthur says in his dying minutes, nothing to trust in (MA 716); or, as Galahad conveys to Lancelot through Percival, “remembir of this unsyker [unstable, uncertain] worlde” (HG 607). It is not up to Guinevere to save Lancelot’s soul; he has already been given the means to do that, if he will take it. But in her denial of him, Guinevere pushes Lancelot to choose the “selff desteny” that she has chosen. She forces Lancelot, at last, to “forsak[e] the vanyties of the worlde” (MA 721). It is Guinevere’s return to dignity and power. She has nobility, wrought in tragedy and heightened through self-abnegation.

Malory's Guinevere may be, in Edmund Reiss's words, the "symbol of the dangers of excessive earthly love" (162) who engenders too great a passion and causes too much of an occasion to sin in Lancelot. Not charitable, not mortally unselfish, not a mother-figure, and not an ideal wife, she scandalizes the court with a dangerous love affair. On the other hand, as Larry Benson suggests, Malory calls Guinevere a "trew lover" because she is "truly repentent" and loves Lancelot until her death, "know[ing] the power of her love" (242). All that Guinevere has left to give, finally, is her love: she gives up her adulterous passion for Lancelot, frees him to find true love, and undertakes a life of Christian love. Guinevere's evolution is uneven and her character uncertain, but her role in Malory's Morte Darthur is not. As she shuts the convent door, closing out the world and Camelot, she shows the way to an existence that leaves the realm of chivalry behind; it is she who loved a knight and brought down a great king, but made them immortal. If Lancelot is Malory's favorite knight, Guinevere becomes, unwittingly his greatest hero.

From Malory's dozens of female characters, then, emerge Nyneve and Guinevere. Nyneve, at first another damsel to be rescued, becomes the instrument of Merlin's self-prophesied end, Arthur's protector, exemplary wife, and pervading good spirit of the kingdom. Guinevere, whose love for Arthur's greatest knight helps to bring about the tragic end of the kingdom, redeems herself through self-abnegation. Although Malory's heart was with Arthur and Arthur's knights, his presentation and development of Nyneve and Guinevere offer to his successors a wealth of possibilities for reiterating and enriching the Arthurian legend beyond accounts of chivalry.

Chapter 2

Passion or Perfection:

Alfred Tennyson's Idylls of the King

Through his works, Sir Thomas Malory served as a kind of mentor to Alfred Tennyson. In Idylls of the King, the Victorian poet follows the Medieval author closely in some ways and diverges widely in others. One of the most significant changes is Tennyson's reducing the number of women in the legend. Of those, Vivien and Guinevere play the only significant roles; this chapter will thus concern itself with them.

Vivien is quite unlike Malory's Nyneve, upon whom she is based: Nyneve, the good sorceress who lived to help Arthur and his court. Tennyson's Vivien traps Merlin in living death, like her predecessor, and Vivien seems a creature of the forests, but there the similarities end. In Malory, Merlin has foretold his living death, and Nyneve serves, in part, to fulfill his prophecy; Merlin's lechery becomes the catalyst for his and Nyneve's final confrontation. In contrast, Tennyson's Vivien sets out deliberately to entrap Merlin to gain greater fame.

In Malory, Nyneve becomes a friendly presence at Court. In Tennyson, Vivien is Chaos come again; she is Death, Rumor, Destruction—she represents any one of a number of personifications of evil that precede her in mythology.² She lies “with ease” (BB 517)². Her first act is driving Balin insane by telling him a rumor about Lancelot and Guinevere. For Balin, her gossip completes the horror, because it meshes so well with what he has observed and suspected but has denied. In his rage, he kills his twin

² References to text of Idylls are to individual idylls and line numbers. Abbreviations are as follows: “The Coming of Arthur,” CA; “Gareth and Lynette,” GL; “The Marriage of Geraint,” MG; “Geraint and Enid,” GE; “Balin and Balan,” BB; “Merlin and Vivien,” MV; “Lancelot and Elaine,” LE; “The Holy Grail,” HG; “Pelleas and Ettarre,” PE; “The Last Tournament,” LT; “Guinevere,” G; “The Passing of Arthur,” PA.

brother, who also delivers a deadly wound to him. She scoffs at them: “brainless bulls, / Dead for one heifer!” (BB 568-569). Vivien’s remark, thrown casually across the bodies of the brothers, is a signal early on that she cares little for humanity and considers most of what she encounters in light of sexual satisfaction. She is a physical, callous creature. Surrounded by animal imagery, she is most significantly associated with a serpent (like the one in the Garden of Eden), displaying “vivid smiles, and faintly-venomed points / Of slander” in her work of undermining Arthur’s court (MV 170-171).

Vivien steals into Camelot by convincing Guinevere that she is running away from King Mark, actually her lover. She “hate[s] all the knights” of Arthur’s Round Table; her father had died in battle against the King. When her play for Arthur fails, she chooses to defeat Merlin, “[a]s fancying that her glory would be great / According to his greatness whom she quench’d” (MV 215-216). It is through their dialogue and verbal struggle that the poet delivers a complex argument on the issues of good and evil and appearance and reality.

People like Vivien would not have been able to defeat people like Merlin in the good times, when the Court was at its best. As it is, Merlin has fallen into “a great melancholy” and feels

A doom that ever poised itself to fall,
 An ever-moaning battle in the mist,
 World-war of dying flesh against the life
 Death in all life and lying in all love,
 The meanest having power upon the highest,
 And the high purpose broken by the worm. (MV 189-194)

Merlin has seen the end of Camelot. More, he has seen Vivien coming. He is old, tired, weak, and no longer wants to face the “death in all life” alone. He tries to avoid Vivien but finally finds her amusing. When he tells her that he knows that she wants to “sweep from” him his “hold upon the world, / My use and name and fame” (MV 301-302), he indicates that he either wants to end his life in this way or thinks he can beat her at the game of wits. She is after the “charm,” the magic spell that can paralyze a person in a living death. She wheedles, flatters, threatens, and bluffs him. He holds fast, although admitting “one could yield for weariness” (MV 370). They both know what she is doing. She drops names—Lancelot, Gareth. Hinting about rumors of Lancelot and Guinevere, she talks about the erosion of trust at court, the “little pitted speck in garner’d fruit, / That rotting inward slowly moulders all” (MV 393-394)

Merlin begins to relent; he “half believed her true, / So tender was her voice, so fair her face, / So sweetly gleam’d her eyes behind her tears” (MV 398-400). He begins to reminisce about the “founding of a Table Round, / That was to be, for love of God and men, / Noble deeds, the flower of all the world” (MV 409-411). The melancholy returns, and Vivien moves in for the kill. She talks of love, of fame; he relents, somewhat, by telling her the story of the charm. He still feels in control, “smiling as a master smiles at one / That is not of his school” (MV 660-661). Vivien begins to gossip about the knights at court, besmirching their honor, and Merlin counters with the real story behind each scandal. When she begins to gossip about Lancelot and Guinevere, Merlin has no counter; he is disturbed by their affair as well. Finally, she attacks Arthur for his overlooking the affair: “is he man at all, who knows and winks?” (MV 779). She has gone too far; Merlin loses his temper, begins mumbling about “harlots.” He forgets that

throughout this interchange, Vivien is the consummate actress, half-believing herself so that she can stay in character, yet all the while working toward the ultimate effect of her deception. Like an actress taking on a role, she does not forget reality: she simply suspends it. He probably knows when he enters the argument how it will end but thinks like most humans that he can escape his fate. Midway he forgets or no longer cares. As the storm breaks, Vivien does not “forget her practice in her fright,” but leaps upon Merlin. By the time the storm, “its burst of passion spent,” ceases, “Merlin, overtalk’d and overworn,” has “yielded, told her all the charm, and slept” (MV 963-964). Worn out or worn down, he succumbs.

The poem is about more than an old man giving in to a harlot. As Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer acknowledge, Merlin is “not a beguiled old fool succumbing to passion but a prophet fully aware of Vivien’s perfidy, who yields to a crushing weariness generated by his recognising the widening gap between the ideals of Arthur and the realities of men” (105). “Merlin and Vivien” is a complex and detailed treatment of the ever-present and ever-threatening power of evil, presented almost as a philosophical argument between two peers. Their long, extended contest is one that Merlin has known would come. He and Vivien each maintain two separate trains of thought at once, one about what is really happening and the other about what they want to pretend is happening. Merlin recognizes Vivien’s techniques of false logic, flattery, threat, cajoling, and so on, but stays in the game. They are fighting with the sorcery of words: gossip, innuendo, and suspicion.

One criticism leveled at Tennyson is that he is guilty of stylistic blunders. Christopher Ricks has spoken out about the poet’s language, contending that it is

“mannered and extraneous,” calling for “some sort of anthology of stylistic demerits,” and remarking on “the failure of Tennyson’s ear” and the poet’s “weak rhythm” (268-270). However, Ricks’ criticism does not apply to “Merlin and Vivien.” In two passages in particular, Tennyson’s “ear” is faultless. They are Vivien’s iterations of her story to two different people, Mark and Guinevere. Subtle changes in the language and rhythm alter the way in which the two speeches are perceived by their audiences. First Vivien tells Mark:

My father died in battle against the King,
 My mother on his corpse in open field;
 She bore me there, for born from death was I
 Among the dead and sown upon the wind. . . . (MV 42-45)

When Vivien later relates a similar story to Guinevere, she wants to gain the Queen’s sympathy, so she changes the language slightly:

My father died in battle for thy King,
 My mother on his corpse—in open field,
 The sad sea-sounding wastes of Lyonesse—
 Poor wretch—no friend! (MV 71-74)

But the difference in the two speeches is also created by the poet’s manipulation of the rhythm and the sound. In the first line of the first version, “My father died in battle against the king,” Tennyson alters the iambic pentameter only slightly, by adding the “a” to “against.” The extra syllable not only breaks up the rhythm, but adds stress to the already harsh-sounding “st” in “against.” It is an angry statement, compared to the similar one Vivien makes to Guinevere: “My father died in battle for thy King.” The

regular iambic pentameter makes this line easier on the ear; combined with the soft sound of the “th” in “thy,” it creates a gentler, more pleading statement.

In the second lines, “My mother on his corpse in open field,” and “My mother on his corpse—in open field,” Tennyson performs a similar transformation in rhythm, with the dash in the second speech serving to create a pause for the sympathetic listener—Guinevere—to take in the horror of what happened. In the second speech as well, the line, “The sad sea-sounding wastes of Lyonesse,” creates, on one level, the sound of a gently rolling sea, a lulling rhythm. But it is full of sibilant “s’s”: “sad,” “sea-sounding,” “wastes,” and “Lyonesse,” just the sounds a snake like Vivien would make when trying to hypnotize her prey. These subtle changes in rhythm and sound create double meaning, especially in the second speech, when she pretends to be helpless but wants to destroy Camelot. The comparison of just these two passages demonstrates not Tennyson’s failure at but his mastery of poetic language.

Another criticism leveled against Tennyson is that he is guilty of misogyny. Catherine Harland and others argue that the way the poet presents Vivien is confirmation of this (65), most pointedly provided in Merlin’s speech about women being “worst and best, as Heaven and Hell” (MV 812-813). When all evidence about the sorceress is gathered, though, Vivien is more a sign of the coming generation than a representative of Woman. She enters the Idylls singing a song about the “old sun-worship” rising again, in the words of John Rosenberg, “her own potent, pagan hymn” (81). She vows almost at the beginning to “break the King / And all his Table” and “beat the cross to earth” (BB 451-453). Like Arthur’s “younger knights,” Vivien is “lissome,” and energetic; she connects every action to physical urges. She thus also represents the coming age, when

the kingdom will “reel back into the beast, and be no more” (LT 124-125). Arthur perceives this degeneracy of his ideal society only when it is too late, as his young and uncivilized knights massacre men, women, and children after they grind the Red Knight’s head into the mud and “slime themselves” (LT 470). Like Arthur, Merlin cannot stop what happens to him. The forest’s echo of Vivien’s “Fools!” at the end emphasizes the idea that Arthur’s creating a perfect human world is futile. Humankind will always be defeated by its selfish primitivism. The old way—natural barbarism and self-gratification—will always triumph. Coming in the center of Camelot’s story, “Merlin and Vivien” thus marks the downward turn in the kingdom’s, and Arthur’s, struggle for goodness and light in a dark world.

As much as the tale of the end of a kingdom, Tennyson’s Idylls of the King is a love story: it tells of Arthur’s love for his knights, the illegitimate love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and other loves that warp or wither. In the end, the couples come down to one, Arthur and Guinevere, for it is the story of their failed love Tennyson tries to tell.

Arthur and Guinevere’s relationship is clearly one-sided from the beginning.

When Arthur first rides into Cameliard, Guinevere does not take notice: she

Stood by the castle walls to watch him pass;
 But since he neither wore on helm or shield
 The golden symbol of his kinglihood . . .
 She saw him not, or mark’d not, if she saw,
 One among many. (CA 27-30, 48-54)

For his part, though, Arthur, “looking downward as he past, / Felt the light of her eyes into his life / Smite on the sudden” (CA 55-57). He knows right away that he would be

“as nothing in the mighty world” without her (CA 86). His vision of creating a kingdom out of the barbaric chaos that exists is completed by Guinevere, and his dream of their living “together as one life / And reigning as one will in everything” comes to him almost immediately (CA 90-91).

Arthur has another, whom “he loved / And honoured most”: Lancelot, his companion, chief subject, fellow warrior, and helpmeet in the battlefield (CA 124-125). They swear “on the field of death a deathless love”; Arthur declares to Lancelot, “I trust thee to the death” (CA 124-133). This vow is echoed later in Arthur and Guinevere’s marriage ceremony, when they swear to love each other “to the death” (CA 467-469). They are all “[t]he fair beginners of a nobler time” (CA 456), full of promise, trust and love. Arthur has lifted his queen “from this land of beasts” (CA 79); he dreams of a civilized world brought up out of barbarism. But just as surely as Oedipus’ vow never to kill his father reminds his audience of what they know is to come, so do the promises of deathless love and the initial promise of Camelot heighten the sense of coming tragedy for Tennyson’s heroes.

Although Tennyson tries to make the love story and the work itself about Arthur’s vision and his kingdom’s destruction, Idylls of the King centers on Guinevere. This queen is unlike the Guinevere of Malory’s Morte Darthur, who is only acknowledged obliquely or talked about and seldom appears directly, except for her scenes with Lancelot. As David Staines asserts, Malory’s Guinevere’s “sin seems more important than her own character” (88). In contrast, Tennyson’s Queen permeates the Idylls. She is the most fully developed character in the work; she is, also according to Staines, its “controlling force”(93). John Rosenberg speaks of her “regal sensuality and self-

possession” (121). It is Guinevere who converts Edyrn, Enid’s wicked and greedy cousin (GE 859-60) and whom Geraint and Enid know as “the great Queen” (GE 946). On the other hand, Guinevere is also the one who aggravates Balin’s madness and the one whose actions (with Lancelot, of course) spur rumors that destroy the innocence of people like Balin and Pelleus.

One scene, in particular, sheds more light on Guinevere and her relationships with Arthur and Lancelot than most of Malory’s Morte Darthur. It occurs halfway through the Idylls, in “Lancelot and Elaine.” Arthur has arranged to hold a grand tournament in London to give away the last diamond he discovered years before in the crown of a dead king. As in Malory’s work, Guinevere is ill and cannot attend; Lancelot decides to stay behind. Before Arthur departs alone, he and Lancelot visit the Queen. Arthur reminds Guinevere that she will miss the sight of “Lancelot, and his prowess in the lists, / a sight ye love to look on” (LE 82-83). Guinevere’s response is to lift “her eyes, and they dwelt languidly / On Lancelot” (LE 84-85). Three things happen here. In letting her eyes “dwell languidly” on Lancelot, Guinevere is risking Arthur’s discovery of the affair, by now talked about all over Camelot and known by everyone except Arthur (and Pelleus, the ingenuous knight who appears later). The possibility that Arthur is being ironic and trying to bait them both cannot have escaped Guinevere. Finally, Lancelot decides to stay behind because he thinks Guinevere wants him to. His misreading of her expression shows that they do not communicate on an instinctive level, as true lovers do; he should, after all, be able to read her “eyes” by now. Arthur’s reminding her of her “love” for Lancelot and Lancelot’s failure to comprehend her meaning serve to distress Guinevere, who has become aware of the gossip that surrounds them. She turns to Lancelot as soon

as the King has left, complaining that the crowds at the jousts will assume that they are taking their “pastime” in the King’s absence.

Unlike this scene in Malory, Guinevere does not rage at Lancelot for his diminished love for her; she shows no jealousy or suspicion. Instead, it is Lancelot who questions Guinevere’s change in love: “My Queen, that summer, when ye loved me first, / Then of the crowd ye took no more account / Than of the myriad cricket of the mead” (LE 104-106). He considers the talk about them innocuous; he is praised for his bravery, she is praised for her beauty, they are toasted at the King’s table, and the King smiles over it, he reminds her. Still, Guinevere is shaken. John Rosenberg contends that by the time of this idyll, Lancelot and Guinevere’s love is “a remembered rapture heavy with the sense of present pain” (57). From this point forward, Guinevere’s existence is marked not by joy or passion, but by increasing worry and guilt about their public image and how it affects the court.

In this scene Tennyson also reveals why Guinevere has trouble loving Arthur, a mystery only partly explained in Malory. Lancelot wonders if Guinevere is “weary of [his] service” and now wants to “be truer to [her] faultless lord” (LE 118-119). With a “little scornful laugh,” Guinevere responds:

Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King,

That passionate perfection, my good lord—

But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?

He never spake word of reproach to me,

He never had a glimpse of mine untruth,

He cares not for me . . .

Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round

And swearing men to vows impossible,

To make them like himself; but, friend, to me

He is all fault who hath no fault at all. . . . (LE 120-126, 129-132)

“Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round” recalls Malory’s Arthur, when the King laments the loss of his knights more than he does the loss of his queen, “for quenys [he] myght have inow” (LG 685). Here, in Tennyson, the King’s “passionate perfection” and “swearing men to vows impossible” reveals that this Arthur is not only engaged elsewhere (with his knights); he is unapproachable. He is not human; he is too nearly perfect, untouchable. He is not of this world, perhaps, but certainly unreachable. He is absent: he never reproaches her and probably seldom converses with her at all. His love lies in the Round Table, his vision for a better world. He simply does not need her (the word “fault” can also mean “need”). Close to perfection, his eyes on the battlefield, his vision on a better world, Arthur is not with her. Guinevere needs not light but warmth, not a visionary but a man.

“In Morte Darthur and other medieval romance,” say Taylor and Brewer, Guinevere “is most notable for jealousy and duplicity” (122). Tennyson creates a different Guinevere, one driven by forces she cannot control. In her reverie in the convent, she remembers “when Lancelot came . . . Ambassador, to lead her to his lord / Arthur” (G 378-81). It was a splendid day in May. As they rode to Arthur’s kingdom “under groves that look’d a paradise / Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth / That seem’d the heavens upbreking thro’ the earth” (G 386-388), all the world seemed to favor love—with Lancelot. However, the sign of the “Dragon of the great Pendragonship” (G

394), signifying Arthur's dominion over everything in sight, brings her out of her fantasy.

Arthur was "cold / High, self-contain'd, and passionless, not like him, / Not like my Lancelot," she remembers (G 402-403). Her love for Lancelot and her lack of response to Arthur are matters of fate.

Making Guinevere's passion for Lancelot almost fated is Tennyson's way of mitigating her guilt in the affair. It has its equivalent in Malory, in the story of the love potion consumed accidentally by Tristram and Isolde, which lessens their sin and emphasizes by comparison the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere. In Tennyson, says Rosenberg, there is no potion to throw Tristram and Isolt into "the raptures of transcendent passion" (116). Tennyson takes that unavoidable obsession from Tristram and Isolt, Rosenberg affirms, and gives it to Lancelot and Guinevere: "the love potion the former never taste becomes that fatal first meeting of Lancelot and Guinevere, which Tennyson never allows them or the reader to forget" (116).

Tennyson uses the story of Tristram and Isolt in other ways to soften the image of Lancelot and Guinevere. As in Malory, the story is a parallel that helps to develop the Lancelot-Guinevere affair while keeping them out of view—an indirect way of discussing infidelity without soiling the major characters. Tennyson's Tristram and Isolt story takes place in the final days of the Kingdom, when the Kingdom is almost lost, not before the Grail Quest story, as in Malory. Unlike Malory's Tristram and Isolde, Tennyson's pair is shameless. Tristram is a cad who is haughty and rude at the last tournament, seizing the prize and neglecting the ladies there. In his note to the text, Tennyson explains that "Tristram the courteous has lost his courtesy" (Notes 360). While Arthur is fighting the Red Knight up north, Tristram, who has married another Isolt in

Brittany, only hopes as he is riding to Cornwall that the Isolt he is meeting there has not heard the news. Isolt, “not meek, / Pale-blooded, prayerful” (LT 605-606), appreciates lies more than truth. Tennyson’s showing Tristram (in Malory one of the greatest knights) and Isolt (in Malory “La Beall Isolde”) in this light, say Taylor and Brewer, “maintains [Lancelot and Guinevere’s] dignity by keeping their crime offstage, allowing Tennyson in the following idyll [“Guinevere”] to depict a conversion in Guinevere we could never accept in the base Isolt” (119). Isolt “is a younger Guinevere,” says Rosenberg, “whose suffering renders her not tragic but neurotic” (117).

The poet continues to favor Lancelot and Guinevere. They do not deny their affair until the last and flee only when it becomes necessary, as Malory has them do. As Taylor and Brewer view Malory’s version,

Until their religious conversion after Arthur’s death, Malory’s lovers persistently deny their adultery, even though the narrative consistently reveals it. . . . Malory’s lovers separate only because circumstances force them to part. . . . Lancelot and Guinevere live together at Joyous Gard, seemingly troubled less by conscience than by Arthur’s extended siege.
(121)

In contrast, Tennyson’s Lancelot and Guinevere decide to meet one last time and part, for the good of the kingdom. In “Guinevere,” the penultimate Idyll, the Queen is a tormented soul: her feelings of remorse have begun “[t]o vex and plague her” (G 67). She fears that hers “[w]ould be for evermore a name of scorn” (G 60). In the “dead night,” she feels “a vague spiritual fear—/ Like to some doubtful noise of creaking doors” (G 69-71). She senses death, and the quiet hollowness that follows it. More,

though, she fears what her affair with Lancelot has done to the kingdom. She dreams “an awful dream,” in which

she seemed to stand
 On some vast plain before a setting sun,
 And from the sun there swiftly made at her
 A ghastly something, and its shadow flew
 Before it, till it touch'd her, and she turn'd—
 When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,
 And blackening, swallow'd all the land, and in it
 Far cities burnt. (G 75-82)

Having seen the destruction of the kingdom, she urges Lancelot to “get thee hence to thine own land” before the “smouldering scandal break[s] and blaze[s]” (G 90). She has become their conscience.

Lancelot procrastinates, and in “their last hour,” amidst a “madness of farewells,” Modred traps them in the tower. They escape, not to Lancelot’s kingdom, as he suggests, but away from each other forever. Guinevere’s confession and penance begin here, before they part. Lancelot tries to take the burden of guilt away, saying, “Mine be the shame; mine was the sin” (G 111). But Guinevere absolves him of the sin, replying, “Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou / Unwedded” (G 116). She flees to the convent, realizing that “[l]ured by the crimes and frailties of the court, / [the Saxons will] Begin to slay the folk, and spoil the land” (G 135-136). Murmuring “Too late! Too Late!” (G 131), she recalls the parable of the Virgins who were not ready for the Kingdom of Heaven—who did not remain pure or mend their ways in time to be received

by and to receive Christ. This is not a comment on Guinevere's sin; she knows she has recourse to confession and absolution at any time (although she refuses them at first). It is, instead, a parable for Arthur's earthly kingdom, which is now beyond salvation. Guinevere has waited too long, as she feared she would, to prevent her and Lancelot's affair from causing the destruction she has dreamed about.

In the Idylls, there is no reunion for Lancelot and Guinevere at the convent. Guinevere only hears a rumor that the King has returned and has been waging war on Lancelot; later Arthur tells her, in two lines, that Lancelot has refused to fight him. Instead, Guinevere spends days and weeks dealing with her past as described to her by the innocent novice who acts as her maid. The novice, not knowing Guinevere's identity, unwittingly tortures the queen with rumors she has heard from outside the gates:

This is all woman's grief
That she is woman, whose disloyal life
Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round
Which good King Arthur founded years ago
With signs and miracles and wonders there
At Camelot, ere the coming of the Queen. (G 216-221)

It is ironic that Guinevere's prophetic wisdom about the end of the kingdom and her part in it are affirmed by a novice who never leaves the convent. By the time the tale is told, it has expanded: Guinevere is guilty not only of adultery and of ruining the kingdom; she is guilty of changing the whole world, for "all the land [had been] full of life" before Guinevere's arrival (G257).

The novice's mindless chatter emphasizes how much Camelot has come to operate on rumor and hearsay. In fact, gossip about Guinevere is responsible for more destruction in the kingdom than may be evident at first. Geraint and Enid leave the court because of rumors "about the Queen / Touching her guilty love for Lancelot," and Geraint fears "The world's loud whisper" (MG 24-25, 27). Vivien works her evil by rumor; she is shown "creeping" through "the peaceful court" and "whispering" (MV 137-138). She destroys Balin by rumor, telling him she has seen Guinevere run her fingers through Lancelot's hair and heard her calling him "my King" (BB 496-516). Taylor and Brewer confirm that "rumors about Camelot finally confirm rather than cure [Balin's] savagery" (101). He is an innocent and disturbed young man whom Guinevere has helped to civilize simply by her influence; Vivien's vicious lies undo all the good. Guinevere, herself, expresses to Lancelot more than once her fear of rumor-mongering courtiers. After Modred is discovered spying on her, she tells Lancelot about "the tiny trumpeting gnat [that] can break our dream / When sweetest, and the vermin voices here / May buzz so loud—we scorn them, but they sting" (LE 137-139).

This kingdom ruled by rumor is as James Kissane comments about "Geraint and Enid": "the poem's scale of moral priorities places almost more initial blame upon distrust and trafficking in rumors of wrongdoing than upon the wrong itself" (106). More than people's deeds, how other people perceive them makes or ruins their reputations. Rumor can both destroy a kingdom and build a myth about it. Indeed, the problem with rumor is that it becomes legend or myth. The wandering bard who tells of Arthur's origin in the sea, his grave, and the promise of changing the world, sings of a king, who, "could he find / A woman in her womanhood as great / As he was in his manhood . . . /

The twain together well might change the world” (G 296-300). Through the novice (who is telling these tales), Guinevere sees how she and Camelot will be remembered. Later, Arthur reminds her of her future, her “defeat of fame” (G 623). “The voices crying shame”—the novice’s, the nuns, the whole world—are ever present with Guinevere (G 666). Not until her death does she finally pass “To where beyond these voices there is peace” (G 692).

Before her death, however, Guinevere is to be shrived by Arthur. When Hallam Tennyson asked his father why he had not repeated part of Malory’s story, of Lancelot’s coming to the convent, parting from Guinevere, later burying her, and then “dying a holy man,” Tennyson responded, “Because it could not be done better than by Malory” (Notes 348). There is, however, another explanation. Malory’s Morte Darthur begins with Arthur and Guinevere and ends with Guinevere and Lancelot; Malory’s “favorite knight,” and perhaps his favorite character, is Lancelot. In his encomium to Arthur the King, Tennyson must make his work begin and end with Arthur. Idylls is not the story of Lancelot and Guinevere, as Malory’s came to be; Tennyson’s is the story of love, marriage, and fate, and how they ruined a dream: it is the story of Guinevere and Arthur.

Perhaps the most famous lines, and surely the most discussed, in Tennyson’s whole work are in “Guinevere,” when Arthur comes to the convent at Almesbury. After weeks of meditation on all her past life, Guinevere hears “a voice, / Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost’s / Denouncing judgment, but tho’ changed, the King’s” (G 417-418). Arthur is not raging; he will not scream the words. He will, instead, deliver a chilling judgment:

Well it is that no child is born of thee;

The children born of thee are sword and fire,
 Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,
 The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts
 Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea. (G 421-425)

He goes on to castigate her. She has “spoilt the purpose of [his] life” (G 450) and laid “waste to his ‘hearth and aching heart’” (G 522). He refuses to touch her “polluted” flesh (G 552). More than an adulterer, she is a murderer: “many a knight” has been slain in his battle with Lancelot (G 435). She is “like a new disease, unknown to men, / Creep[ing], no precaution used, among the crowd, / . . . [who] stirs the pulse / With devil’s leaps, and poisons half the young” (G 515-519). Two of her crimes, however, are greater: she destroys his dream of their ruling as a royal couple over his kingdom, “To serve as model for the mighty world, / And be the fair beginning of a time” (G 462-463); and she brings about Arthur’s disillusionment: “while I weigh’d thy heart with one / Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee” (G 539).

Literary criticism is rife with interpretations of this passage. Philip Eggers reveals that early critics sided with Arthur, “as if Arthur’s blindness and the whole social condition had nothing to do with the tragedy” (88). But later audiences and critics interpreted the passage much differently. To Clyde de L. Ryals, the speech is inconsistent with the character that Tennyson has established for Arthur; he remarks that “an ideal man simply does not talk like the usual cuckolded spouse” (87). Kissane adds, “There is no denying that parts of this sermon must stick in the craw of any sensitive reader” (114). Maureen Fries casts the most damning accusation, contending that “Tennyson’s Victorian male sensibility and idealization of Arthur required suppression of

the king's guilt in his own tragedy." Not content to let the Laureate off with that crime, Fries condemns Tennyson for diminishing all the female characters in *Idylls* and turning the whole poem into a "simple (not to say simplistic) tragedy" ("What" 52-53).

Of the passage that has Arthur saying to the prostrate Guinevere, clinging to his feet, "Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God / Forgives" (G 541), Wendell Stacy Johnson says that Arthur looks a "monumental and perhaps blasphemous prig" (176). Rosenberg explains that Tennyson cannot help but be inconsistent in this passage: Arthur cannot be god-like, passionate, and cuckolded all at once. It sounds, says Rosenberg, "a little like Milton's God absolving Himself of all responsibility for the Fall. Both poets falter at this point for similar reasons, but Milton has the advantage of putting his bad arguments in God's mouth, while Tennyson must put his in Arthur's" (130-131).

Perhaps, as many of his detractors seem to believe, Tennyson was simply a man of his time, "a Victorian gentleman in chivalric disguise," in Debra Mancoff's words (278). The poet may have been a repressed Victorian who worshipped hearth and home and wanted Arthur to have a proper Victorian wife. When Arthur says that he

know[s] of no more subtle master under heaven
 Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
 Not only to keep down the base in man,
 But teach high thought, and amiable words,
 And courtliness (G 474-479)

he may be referring to the creature described by Catherine Belsey thus: "Sexually passive, disembodied, the model wife has a restraining effect on the wayward desires of her husband and purges the relationship of its nastiness into the bargain" (120). The

Victorian wife was also held responsible for a man's tranquility, creating a haven from the world of enterprise. As Mancoff affirms, "[i]f the [Victorian] home failed to offer a sanctuary of tranquility and morality, it was the wife's fault, even if the husband's behavior was a contributory factor" (267).

On the other hand, Tennyson may be trying to illustrate the unfairness of a woman's position in life, by showing Guinevere's frustrated desire or fateful obsession, from which their marriage could not save her. It is Guinevere who must stay here and suffer. The poet may be speaking out against the very crime his detractors accuse him of. The case may be, as Philip Eggers points out that "Tennyson has deliberately thwarted the Victorian tendency toward rigid moralism" (82). Belsey advances this idea: "Tennyson's fictional women . . . feel intensely, speak for themselves, and push at the limits of a culture which apparently offers them no alternative to self-effacing absorption in the life and works, the dreams and aspirations of a husband" (122).

The real Tennyson may lie somewhere in the paradoxes with the rest of the Victorians, who, in Eggers' view, were "caught between old and new, trust and disbelief, authority and radicalism, progress and misery, peace and inner tension, spiritual enthusiasm and the cash nexus" (55). Besides, it is good to remember that Tennyson could not avoid the literary tradition he inherited; as Johnson reflects, the poet could "hardly alter his sources so as to end Arthur's married life happily . . . or avoid entirely the adulterous intrigues that Malory's predecessors . . . accepted easily" (150). Scientific discoveries that reminded the Victorians that humankind is not of divine matter—Darwin's theory about kinship with lesser forms, among others—were accompanied by revelations that societies as advanced as their own had risen and fallen countless times

through the millennia. Richard Altick tells of the excavations at Nineveh, Babylon, and other sites during the mid- to late-Victorian era, their “mutely eloquent ruins attesting to the heights they had once reached” (100). Such discoveries, says Altick, “profoundly affected the Victorians’ view of their own place in the cosmic sequence” (98). More significant to Tennyson’s work, these changes in theory and knowledge almost automatically led Victorians to consider how their achievements would be regarded by future generations.

The subsequent change in perspective is clearly evident in many of the characters of *Idylls*. It echoes through Balan’s recognition of how he and his brother will be remembered: “We two were born together, and we die / Together by one doom” (BB 617-619). It runs through Merlin and Vivien’s argument about “name and fame.” Indeed, Vivien pursues Merlin thinking “that her glory would be great / According to his greatness whom she quench’d” (MV 215-216). Himself contemplating the future in light of the present threat of Vivien, Merlin argues that he would rather have a purpose than future fame; he still has a job to do in this life—“Right well know I that Fame is half-disfame, / Yet needs must work my work” (MV 502-503). Guinevere ruefully considers what, as the “months . . . add to themselves and make the years, / [And] the years . . . roll into the centuries,” what future generations will think of her: “mine will ever be a name of scorn” (G 619-622). And, finally, Arthur reminds Bedivere of the time that he was given Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake

and how I row’d across

And took it, and have worn it, like a king;

And, wheresoever I am sung or told

In aftertime, this also shall be known. (PA 201-203)

The characters' concern for how they will be remembered thus reflects the concerns of Tennyson, the speaker for the Victorian age. If he is too bound up in his own age, as some have argued, his poetry does not suffer from any misogyny or narrowness of thinking, but benefits from the new vision of posterity that he conveys through Idylls of the King.

Aside from discussion of the influences on the poet in this work (whose effects can never really be determined, anyway), Arthur's speech has some redeeming moments. The King, battle-weary and knowing he will die, tells Guinevere that he will leave a number of men, greatly needed in the field of battle with Modred, to guard Guinevere, "[l]est but a hair of this low head be harm'd" (G 444). He shares with her his dream of a perfect world, with her as his "helpmate, one to feel / [His] purpose and rejoicing in [his] joy" (G 482-483). He tells her, "Let no man dream but that I love thee still" (G 557), and expresses the hope that they will meet in heaven, where she will recognize that he is her "husband—not a smaller soul, / Nor Lancelot, nor another." He pleads with her: "Leave me that, / I charge thee, my last hope" (G 563-567). Beaten, disillusioned, weary, the Arthur that towers over his wife has vented his rage and now asks for resolution. Far from sermonizing, Arthur is admitting defeat.

Guinevere is no less the tragic figure. To the sound of "the last echo born of a great cry, / Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice / Around a king returning from his wars," Arthur is taken into a heavenly city (PA 459-461). In contrast, Guinevere is doomed to a life of sorrow and guilt. She will "wear out in almsdeed and in prayer / The

sombre close of that voluptuous day, / Which wrought the ruin of [her] lord the King” (G 681-683). In effect, she agrees to pay for a sin that was not completely hers.

But how can guilt be assigned to any one of three people who do only what they must? The fault is not Guinevere’s, or Arthur’s, or Lancelot’s. The fault lies at the center of Arthur’s dream to make a perfect world in an imperfect one. In John Rosenberg’s words, “the Idylls represent Tennyson’s infinitely sad, Virgilian sense of the tears and tragic transience inherent in things” (9).

Through his female characters, Tennyson imparts this “sense of the tears and tragic transience.” While Vivien illustrates the need for vigilance against evil—in Tennyson’s age a deceptive, multifarious form born of the clash of new science and age-old religions—she also emphasizes the idea of transience by illustrating that even the greatest society cannot last. Were human perfection attainable, dreams would not die, nor would kingdoms like Arthur’s fall. On the other hand, human perfection is not even desirable, as Guinevere’s story attests. Alienated by the cold flawlessness of her husband, drawn to the warmth of Lancelot, and battered by rumor and hearsay, Guinevere is the heroine of a tale built on hopeless love and ending only in death, which brings peace from the dissonant voices that condemn her. Through Vivien and Guinevere, Tennyson’s Idylls tells a great story of love and marriage and good and evil. In making them significant participants in the story of Camelot, the poet raises them to the level of heroines in a grand tragedy.

Chapter 3

Sight, Sound, Time, and Fate:

Edwin Arlington Robinson's Lancelot and Merlin

Edwin Arlington Robinson published three long narrative Arthurian poems, Merlin, in 1917, Lancelot in 1920, and Tristram (for which Robinson won a third Pulitzer Prize) in 1927. Through these works, based on Malory's Morte Darthur, Arnold's Tristram and Iseult, Swinburne's Tristram of Lyonesse, and Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Robinson became the first major American poet to explore the whole of the legend and to bring it to modern America.

In this study of the evolution of female Arthurian characters, the field has narrowed down from Malory's dozens to Tennyson's few to two of Robinson's, Vivien and Guinevere, the only two female characters to have been presented in any significant way throughout the Malory's Morte Darthur, Tennyson's Idylls of the King, and Robinson's Lancelot and Merlin and their three time periods, Late Medieval, Victorian, and Modern. This chapter will thus explore Guinevere and Vivien in Robinson's Lancelot and Merlin.

Robinson gave Lancelot much of its meaning by showing how its characters understand their world and make decisions based on that understanding. Almost the whole work is about vision, in its many senses. (Words for vision—see, look, gaze, eye, sight, blind—appear almost 500 times in the poem.) The poem opens with Gawaine and Lancelot, whose ambivalence to what Gawaine is saying—or to the state of the collapsing kingdom, or to the world—is illustrated through his “weary-waiting eyes, cold and half-closed / Hard eyes, where doubts at war with memories / Fanned a sad wrath” (Robinson

Lancelot 365).³ Other characters speak in terms of sight and vision. Gawaine reminds Lancelot that their fathers would “shake their heads in sorrow / To see us as we are” (366). He leaves Guinevere and Lancelot alone in the garden so that the Queen can “prize / [her] final sight of him” (371). Later, “the Queen, with her blue eyes / Too bright for joy, still gazed on Lancelot” (372).

Arthur, in particular, has an impaired sense of sight. “Who is this King, this Arthur, who believes / That what has been, and is, will be for ever — / Who has no eyes for what he will not see?” Lancelot asks (383). Arthur’s visual sense leads him to sin with Lot’s wife, his sister. As Lancelot reminds Guinevere,

Lot of Orkney had a wife, a dark one,
And rumor says that no man who gazed at her,
Attentively, might say his prayers again
Without a penance or an absolution.
... the world knows
That Arthur prayed in vain once, if he prayed,
Or we should have no Modred watching us. (377)

Arthur’s sin through his “gaze” leads him to incest, which leads to the birth of Modred, who tries to usurp the throne, in turn causing, in part, the end of the kingdom. Arthur’s myopia, in the sense of not being able to understand or perceive danger, has been a problem from the beginning. Merlin warns Arthur before he marries Guinevere that she loves Lancelot; Arthur thinks his majesty is “inviolable,” and pays no heed. After Lancelot and Guinevere are discovered in her bedchamber and Guinevere is being

³ In Merlin and Lancelot, references will be to page numbers in Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

readied for the stake, Bedivere and Gawaine talk in hushed tones about the King's needing "a veil / Between him and the sight of what he does" (387). Arthur refuses to watch Guinevere's immolation: "I'll put clouts on my eyes, and I'll not see it" (392). Thinking she is burning, Arthur panics and reveals the true reason Guinevere's affair with Lancelot has hurt him so, crying, "she never did enough to make me see her / Like that, to make her look at me like that!" (392). Ellsworth Barnard asserts that "Arthur's sentencing of Guinevere to be burned, although legal, is an act far more immoral than any committed by her. It is the act of a person still ruled by 'self'" (Edwin 253). This Arthur, though, as opposed to Tennyson's Perfection Incarnate, is only human. He himself admits that "kings are men, / Take off their crowns and tear away their colors / And let them see with my eyes what I see" (Lancelot 390). Through Arthur, Robinson expresses the idea that the worst of shortcomings, but at the same time the most imminently human, is to be unable to see beyond the self. As Bedivere explains, "For seeing far, the fewest and the farthest / Of all we know go not beyond themselves" (389). To survive, humans need constantly to seek knowledge and understanding of their world, see change coming in time to learn to adapt, and be able to deal with what they discover. When that does not happen, when, as Louise Coxe says, "people do not see, do not put themselves in harmony with true change and destiny," the world falls apart; "love becomes hatred, peace war" (138). This is the case in Arthur's world, where the inability to see brings about destruction.

More than Arthur's, Lancelot's earthly existence is informed almost solely by his visual sense. As he and Guinevere sit together on that last afternoon before they are discovered by Arthur, Lancelot thinks only of what he sees, "oak leaves flashing in a

golden light / Over her face and over her golden hair.” He notices the “frown gathered slowly round her eyes” as she talks about threats to their relationship (372). He tells her that he can remember other “fair women’s eyes” and has seen their faces. “And I saw not one,” he reminds her, “To sever a tendril of my integrity” until he saw her. “I thought once again, to make myself / Believe a silent lie, ‘God save the King’ . . . / I saw your face, and there were no more kings” (376). She is, in that moment, at least, “his inventory of the world” (372).

But Lancelot has had another vision. Indeed, his obsession with his glimpse of the Grail (or something near to it) so permeates the work that Ivor Winters is moved to denounce the “Light” symbol as a “somewhat sentimental cliché” that weakens the work (78). It is true that Lancelot constantly reminds his fellow characters that he has seen a “Vision” or a “Light”:

When I came back from seeing what I saw

I saw no place for me in Camelot

There is no place for me in Camelot.

There is no place for me save where the Light

May lead me, and to that place I shall go. (Lancelot 369)

This passage, among several like it, is significant because it is Lancelot’s first real iteration of “the Light” and its implications for his life. In keeping with Arthurian tradition, he has not actually seen the Holy Grail—or has, as in Malory, seen it covered in samite—but as his words here indicate, he has experienced some kind of Divine vision. That vision has changed his behavior, as attested to by Gawaine’s earlier remark to Lancelot: “No man has known you for the man you were / Before you saw whatever ‘t

was you saw.” More, the experience has changed Lancelot’s life, or his perception of it; Lancelot no longer feels that he belongs in this world and is compelled to follow the Vision. Gawaine, complaining that it is Lancelot’s intent to “go south to find the fires of God” (367), foretells the ultimate result of his friend’s new sight.

What is this Vision that has changed Lancelot’s life? In Tennyson’s Idylls, Lancelot sees a holy vessel, covered in cloth and surrounded by “[G]reat angels, awful shapes, and wings and eyes” (HG 843-845). This is in keeping with Tennyson’s attempt to approximate a spiritual experience. In the same scene in Malory’s Morte Darthur, “there cam oute a grete clereness, and that the house was as bryght as all the tourcheis of the worlde had bene there” (596). Malory’s rendering of Lancelot’s Grail experience is also spiritual but emphasizes more the clarity of vision that comes with bright light. Robinson, who was well acquainted with Tennyson’s work and followed Malory’s closely, uses both the spiritual emphasis in Tennyson and the references to light in Malory to emphasize the idea of epiphany as a visual event. Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer suggest that in Robinson, Lancelot’s Vision symbolizes “moral and ethical virtue” (185). Hoyt Franchere asserts that it may stand for “knowledge, intelligence, wisdom, perspicacity, understanding—perhaps even an intuitive comprehension of the mystical” (122). As important as what it stands for is the experience itself, of Lancelot’s having seen it. He repeats and repeats the telling of it because the Light has become a great burning object of desire, greater than life itself and greater, even, than his love for Guinevere. Having seen beyond his self and beyond this world, he is unable to remain in this one with Guinevere. From the beginning of the poem, then, Robinson has given Lancelot an impossible conflict to resolve.

This conflict is played out, in part, in terms of vision. As they sit in the garden on that last day together, as twilight approaches, Guinevere reaches up toward the oak that towers over them and reminds him

Only a small time ago

The light was falling through it, and on me,

Another light, a longer time ago

Was living in your eyes, and we were happy. (Lancelot 378)

The light in his eyes for Guinevere has been replaced by the light of desire for the Vision. He cannot deny this new love, though he tries, telling her that his love is all for her: “my fear is all for you / Is all for love, which were the same to me / As life.” But he qualifies this declaration almost immediately: “had I not seen what I have seen” (377). Having seen the promise of something beyond self, beyond this world, Lancelot cannot continue his affair with Guinevere. He knows that “ruin” will come for both of them, “if I for one more day, / Assume that I see not what I have seen, / See now, and shall see” (Lancelot 375).

Lancelot’s vision is limited by the Vision he has experienced. Further, though—with tragic consequences, as well—his understanding of all of life is limited only to that which can be perceived through the visual sense. Vision is all that he has. In contrast, Guinevere, who only partly comprehends Lancelot’s “Light,” gains her understanding of life primarily through the auditory sense. Guinevere’s world is built on sound. Her initial appearance in the narrative is preceded by the sound of her voice, when Gawaine and Lancelot hear “the music of a woman / Laughing behind them, and a woman spoke.” Like Helen of Troy, Guinevere is a woman who moves armies; unlike Helen, Guinevere

is remembered not only for her beauty but for her voice: “the firm incisive languor of her speech, / Heard once, was heard through battles” (Lancelot 370). She operates through sound and needs it for her very existence: “Hear me and listen” (380), and “I must hear you tell me” (382), she keeps saying to Lancelot. During their argument, she places “[u]pon his cheek the warm sound of her words” (382).

Unlike Tennyson’s or Malory’s Guinevere, Robinson’s heroine is not “so new to courts” that she takes the “buzz” and “murmur” of the gossip seriously (373). But she needs the sound of Lancelot’s speech. “Once I believed you told me everything,” she says to him:

And what you may have hidden was no matter,
 For what you told was all I needed then.
 But crumbs that are a festival for joy
 Make a dry fare for sorrow; and the few
 Spared words that were enough to nourish faith,
 Are for our lonely fears a frugal poison.
 So, Lancelot, if only to bring back
 For once the ghost of a forgotten mercy,
 Say now, even though you strike me to the floor
 When you have said it, for what untold end
 All this goes on. (405-406)

It is here, in one of their last arguments, that sight and sound clash. She has “heard the woman” in herself, she tells him, which makes her question “how many thousand men / Are going to go to their deaths” in this war over her and Lancelot, which men are making

“so loud a shambles of” (405). Never having given her more than “spare” words, he admits that he cannot now offer her the “wealth of sound” that his nephew, Bors, can offer; he “look[s] off into the fog” (405-407). He has said, long before, all he was going to say:

Forgive me, if my lean words are for yours

Too bare an answer, and ascribe to them

No tinge of allegation or reproach.

What I said once to you I said for ever—

That I would pay the price of hell to save you. (408)

Still, he gives her little in the present, critical moment, promising only that after his death, she will receive “some writing wherein I beseech / For you the clemency of afterthought [from the King]” (408). To Guinevere, so hungry for words and sound, Lancelot gives “crumbs.” He refuses to respond to what he knows is her greatest need and instead pursues what he has determined reveals the truth. Words mean nothing to him, he tells her; “all this is language ; / And I know more than words have yet the scope / To show of what’s to come” (408). As in the beginning, Lancelot’s eyes are half-closed, his arms crossed over his chest. He is resolute.

His resolution does little to make his dilemma less painful. Gazing at her beauty, caught like a “moth between a window and a star, / not wholly lured by one or led by the other,” he sees that “The more he gazed upon her beauty there, / The longer was he living in two kingdoms, / Not owning in his heart the king of either” (415). But as he looks upon “the glimmering face and hair / Of Guinevere—the glory of white and gold / That had been his, and were for the taking of it,” he realizes what the “taking of it” would

mean. If he claimed her now as his own, it would cloud his Divine vision with something earthly, carnal, and distinctly selfish. He decides what choices they have, and the only way he is able to answer her plea is with silence:

There was an end
 Of hours, he told her silent face again,
 In silence. On the morning when his fury
 Wrenched her from that foul fire in Camelot,
 Where blood paid irretrievably the toll
 Of her release, the whips of Time had fallen
 Upon them both. All this to Guinevere
 He told in silence and he told in vain. (415)

He has chosen to follow the Vision; despite her pleas for more time, he will return Guinevere to the prison of Camelot, where, he tells himself, she will be “free” (421). In her final moments with Lancelot, Guinevere cries out in rage and frustration:

Are you men never
 To know what words are? Do you doubt sometimes a
 Vision that lets you see so far away
 That you forget so lightly who it was
 You must have cared for once to be so kind? (418)

His response to her once again affirms the choice that he has made:

Your path is now
 As open as mine is dark—or would be dark,
 Without the Light that once had blinded me

To death, had I seen more. I shall see more,
 And I shall not be blind. I pray, moreover,
 That you shall not be so now. (425)

Without understanding Guinevere—refusing to understand her, because in that direction lies temptation—Lancelot can only wish for her the same Light and Vision that he seeks. In denying her need to hear him and removing her from his vision, he has detached himself from the cares of Camelot and all other earthly kingdoms and joys.

The rest of their story follows, generally, the tradition: spurred by Gawaine, Arthur attacks Lancelot in France and returns to England, where he loses his life to Modred; the kingdom falls. In Tennyson, the last encounter at the convent is between Arthur and Guinevere; in Malory and Robinson, it is between Lancelot and Guinevere. In Robinson's version, Lancelot hears of Arthur's death and begins searching desperately for Guinevere, whose image has begun "floating along before him," her "still white and gold . . . smiling at him" (438). He finds her dressed in the black of death; she had been waiting like Alcestis, the mythological wife of King Admetus of Thessaly who agrees to die in place of her husband and is rescued by Hercules before she reaches Hades. Guinevere has not been so fortunate:

she Alcestis-like,
 Had waited unaware for the one hand
 Availing, so he thought, that would have torn
 Off and away the last fell shred of doom
 That was destroying and dishonoring
 All the world held of beauty. (440)

Guinevere had been in need of rescue, and found no rescuer. No repentant sinner, like Tennyson's and Malory's Guinevere, this Queen has been imprisoned in a place built for the Church—"Rome"—"whose name to [Guinevere] was never music" (413).

Although Lancelot is the one who has stated Guinevere's dislike of the Church in this way—relating it to her perception of life through the auditory sense—he bases his impressions of her in this new environment strictly on visual clues. He notices first that her eyes are "no longer / Those that he had seen when first they had seen his . . . they were not the eyes / That he had followed all the way from Dover" (441). In the Tower, she tells him, she had seen a light (although she "may have dreamed" it) "that gave men the eyes of Time / To read themselves in silence" (445). It was not Lancelot's Light, though, and she never expects to see that, for, as she tells Lancelot, "I shall not have what you have, or much else— / In this place" (445). The Vision does not hold much for Guinevere after it has "faded" and "the men [have] faded." She is alone, though she assures Lancelot she could not be alone while surrounded by all those women in black and white, who are all tucked away from the world, safe and alone. He feels her cold hands and sees them "falling / Away from him like flowers into a grave" (446).

In her rejection of him, Guinevere does more for Lancelot than, as Hoyt Franchere asserts, "bring him to the full realization of the world he is losing" (125). As he leaves the convent, Lancelot is able to hear "the sound / Of reapers" and "the sound of thrushes far off" (447). And as he moves through the darkness, he is led by a "living Voice" that will help him find his way to the Light. Lancelot is given only a hint of explanation when he is told by the Voice: "a world has died / For you, that a world may

live” (448). Perhaps the knowledge of Camelot, embodied in Guinevere’s words and sounds, can be carried to that other time and place that exists in Lancelot’s Light.

Robinson’s Guinevere is nothing like Tennyson’s, who is given, according to Ivor Winters, all the burden of guilt for the downfall of Camelot (65). The Guinevere of Robinson’s Lancelot has entered into a living death for what has been, in part, the result of her husband’s fatal flaw—blindness, in all its meanings—and as a sacrifice to her lover’s Vision. Louise Coxe asserts that Robinson’s characters are “men and women who see too little and too late, but in most cases are redeemed by an understanding acceptance after their worlds have been shattered” (138). Coxe is describing tragedy at its most painful. In Lancelot, Guinevere’s world has been shattered, without doubt, but she shows determination to use all that she has left to her, her imagination: “I shall see in other places / What is not here . . . And I shall tell myself that you are seeing / All that I cannot see,” she tells Lancelot (Lancelot 445). Owen Gilman maintains that Robinson “believed in poetry . . . and he felt that the fabrication of the imagination would outlast the turmoil of a given human life” (140). Through Guinevere, Robinson expresses not the triumph but the solace of the imagination. If there is hope to be found in this story, it is contained in the lesson of Camelot, as rendered by Ellsworth Barnard:

From past failure men will learn to build on a firmer foundation. And if the new structure falls—as it must—knowledge will still survive, and those who rebuild will again know a little more than their predecessors. . . . Time and matter present us with both an illusion and an opportunity; in short, with a spiritual kindergarten where we are to learn our lessons as well as we can, however painful the process. . . . If sometimes we are

tempted to despair, there is a Word to hearten us and a Light to guide us, and we have, if we will, the power to understand and the strength to go forward. . . . Such is Robinson's vision first and last. (Edwin 271)

As unremitting in its display of human pain and limitations, Robinson's Merlin, published in 1917, is less complex in action and dialogue than Lancelot but the more profound of the two poems in its treatment of fate and time. It tells the story of another couple from Camelot, Merlin and Vivian, who brings a tarnished reputation from Tennyson's Idylls. Robinson rehabilitates Vivian from Tennyson's version and makes her affair with Merlin a story of mutual respect and love.

Robinson's Merlin is never sealed in a cave, as in Malory, or buried alive in an oak tree, as in Tennyson. Instead, weary of Camelot, Merlin chooses to "[go] down smiling to a smaller life"—Vivian's paradise in Broceliande (Merlin 251). He gladly shaves his beard, his "surviving ornament of office" (265) and smiles "to see himself in purple," rather than the somber black of a wizard (268). In Robinson, Merlin is "not an aged and mysterious magician such as we find in Tennyson and find parodied in Mark Twain," asserts Winters (63). He is a kingmaker, lonely and weary, who has seen that the problems of Arthur's court "[are] not for any mortal to undo" (Merlin 252). Merlin "ha[s] all too humanly become disillusioned with the very kingdom that he had created and with the king on whose head he had placed the crown," explains Hoyt Franchere (126).

Merlin's love, Vivian, is far removed from Tennyson's evil serpentine seductress who tricks and traps an old sage. Most critics attest to her value as Merlin's equal: Nathan Starr affirms that she is not the "petulant adventuress" from the romances (King

26); and Louise Coxe notes that Vivian “comes alive in all her beauty, wit, duplicity, and simple bitchiness” (135).

Vivian has been waiting all of her life for Merlin and asks him to help her play her role in his history, wondering to herself:

In an age
That has no plan for me that I can read
Without him, shall he tell me what I am,
And why I am, I wonder? (263)

Watching the now-beardless legend approach, Vivian “confesse[s] a tingling of more wonderment / Than all her five and twenty worldly years / Of waiting for this triumph could remember” (270). Barnard affirms that Vivian is as invested in their love as Merlin. Each of them comes into the relationship with only “half a life”; this applies to Vivian as much as to Merlin: “[W]ithout his love for her, Merlin’s wisdom would have been incomplete. . . . But hers is also only half a life—or even less” (Edwin 119).

Like Merlin, Vivian wants no more to do with the world. She has created an “Eden.” She asks Merlin to hold them both in that place she has made for them, to keep them out of the world where Time passes and Fate rules. “Like you,” she tells him,

I saw too much; and unlike you
I made no kingdom out of what I saw—
Or none save this one here that you must rule,
Believing you are ruled. (Merlin 280)

She reminds him that they are both “out of Time / And out of tune with Time. We have this place, / And you must hold us in it or we die” (Merlin 280-281). And so, for a

“golden moment,” in which, Barnard says, “the poet like the magician surrenders gladly to the sway of sense, and amid seductive lights and music yields himself to the total embrace of earthly love incarnate in Vivian” (“Robinson’s” 12), Merlin and Vivian are together, cups raised; Merlin cares not for kings and knows only beauty and happiness. Broceliande is “a refuge / Where two disheartened sinners may forget / A world that has today no place for them” (Merlin 291).

Merlin and Vivian are two famous and self-aware people, destined to meet but “mock[ing] their fate with easy pleasantries” (Merlin 265), trying together to avoid the roles that history and legend demand of them. Starr praises Robinson’s transformation of their relationship “from the tale of somewhat naïve self-indulgence [as it is in Tennyson] to a highly developed, credible portrayal of a man and woman who might well be living today” (King 24). It is not completely accurate to describe their love story as “of secondary interest in the poem,” as Winters does (63). It is a timeless love story and a tragedy in its own right, and does not, as Winters argues, weaken the “spectacle of Arthur’s downfall” (64-65). That said, it would be unfair not to explore Vivian and Merlin’s other contributions to the story of Camelot.

As much as Lancelot, or perhaps more, Merlin is concerned with vision, Fate, and Time. Merlin is, after all a “seer,” a prophet. He thinks he has seen the fate of Camelot spread out before him. Arthur, for whom even illusions have died, calls Merlin back because he believes that Merlin is “Fate”—that Merlin can govern and determine events. In Camelot, Merlin finds that Arthur “had forgotten the world and his example in it” and built a kingdom “on two pits of living sin”—Modred and Guinevere. Camelot had been awaiting “sure doom” in Merlin’s ten-year absence. When Merlin escapes again to

Broceliande, there is a “new fear” in his eyes (285). He realizes that in his whole journey he has never had a choice. The decisions he has made have never been his. Everything he has done, or left undone or dismissed, was part of Fate’s plan, and his ability to see all that beforehand has done no good except to cause him pain. He tells Vivian that he has realized that he cannot change his fate:

Whatever you or I may choose to name it
 The name of it is Fate, who played with me
 And gave me eyes to read of the unwritten
 More lines than I have read. (287)

Merlin has become, in Ellsworth Barnard’s words, “subject to Time and Change, age and disillusionment” (Edwin 109). Merlin is human; he is mortal, “neither Fate nor God,” just a man who “saw too much” (Merlin 313). In his humanity, he is thus like Lancelot, who sees or has seen something few other humans have—a vision, a prophecy, a Divinity—but lacks the power to act on it.

Just as Lancelot exclaims in pain and frustration, “God, what a rain of ashes falls on him / Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!” (Lancelot 385), Merlin laments the limitations of “the man who sees”: The man who sees / May see too far, and he may see too late / The path he takes unseen” (Merlin 294). The man who sees too much, he says, “must have an eye to see at last / Where Fate has marked the clay” for him to be buried. “Time’s hand,” he realizes, “that I have held away so long / Grips hard now on my shoulder. Time has won” (Merlin 295-296). Time, Fate, and Vision have caught up with Merlin. Worse, he is as guilty as Arthur of thinking he could bargain with either Fate or Time. He decides to tell Vivian “one more story: I am old” (296). He leaves her

again and starts on the road to nowhere with the court jester, Sir Dagonet, whom he comforts by saying that “in the end / Are more beginnings . . . than men / Shall name or know today” (305)

And what of Vivian? Merlin says that she will be known through the ages as “a fire, / Not shining only to consume itself / With what it burns” (Merlin 311). Louise Dauner tells of the real fate of the woman who has loved only Merlin:

[F]or Vivian we know that the world ends with the sound of Merlin’s departure. There are no dramatics for her—only the closing of a gate so quietly that ‘Merlin could have heard no sound of it’ (Robinson 298). . . . For one of her insistent, pleasure-loving, and vivid temperament, her commitment to loneliness can be only a kind of living death. And we know that she will be lonely; having known Merlin’s love, she can hardly hope for satisfaction from a merely mortal lover” (155).

Although Dauner has missed one of the major ideas of the work, that Merlin realizes that he is “merely mortal,” she does aptly describe Vivian’s fate. Like Guinevere, Vivian is destined to spend the rest of her life alone: Guinevere alone in the company of brides of Rome, with the sounds of matins in her ears, and Vivian alone in the beautiful garden she created for her and Merlin. How sad that a woman “warm and kind, and over-wise / For woman in a world where men see not / Beyond themselves” should suffer such a fate (Merlin 310)!

“The world has paid enough for Camelot,” Gawaine tells Bedivere (Lancelot 433). It could be said that the women of Camelot have paid enough for the fall of a kingdom. In Robinson, as in Malory and Tennyson, there is no exception to this harsh

rule. While Merlin praises Vivian for her kindness, and Lancelot praises Guinevere for being “too brave / And kind and fair for men to cheer with lies” (Lancelot 425-426), both men abandon their women for a vision or a realization. As she suffered humiliation at Arthur’s feet in the Idylls, Guinevere is punished by Robinson in a like manner; she throws herself upon Lancelot in desperate supplication. Nathan Comfort Starr observes that, “[i]n one of the most harrowing scenes in modern poetry, Guinevere finally is forced to accept the humiliation of being returned to Arthur. Her spirit is broken against the rock of Lancelot’s agonized, stubborn, and laconic determination” (“Edwin” 258).

There must be a better way to look at the fate of these Arthurian heroines. Are their roles, as Barnard contends, destined to “involve an undue share of the suffering of humanity as a whole”? (Edwin 250). Are Arthurian women “doomed by nature to [a] kind of living death,” and must they always “make the ultimate concession,” as Dauner asserts (147-148)? Unlike Tennyson, Robinson has his male characters share the burden of the Arthurian tragedy with the women. Lancelot, Guinevere, Merlin, and Vivian all “sacrific[e] the limited life to the great, passion to wisdom, the personal to the general,” says Winters (85). If Lancelot is the love of Guinevere’s life, she is Lancelot’s; neither will be without pain and loneliness. So it is with Merlin and Vivian—both ending up alone and apart from love. “No poet ever understood loneliness or separateness better than Robinson,” affirms James Dickey,

or knew the self-consuming furnace that the brain can become in isolation,
the suicidal hellishness of it, doomed as it is to feed on itself in answerless
frustration, fated to this condition by the accident of human birth, which

carries with it the hunger for certainty and the intolerable load of personal recollections. (86)

In Robinson's world, everyone ends up lonely; some do not survive it. Guinevere and Vivian, however, do, if survival takes all the strength, intelligence, and imagination they possess. If they are partly responsible for the fate of Camelot, they may also, from the ruins of a "wrecked empire," become the women, "who, together with the light / That Galahad found, [are] yet to light the world" (Merlin 307).

Conclusion

Women and the Kingdom

The basic plot of the Arthurian legend is almost universally known. A king rises to power with the help of a sorcerer; he establishes a great kingdom and a brotherhood of knights; many undertake a quest for enlightenment through a grail or other sacred object and for earthly glory or heavenly reward; the king's wife and his favorite knight share an illicit love; and the great kingdom falls through treachery and adultery, serving as an example to the ages of the fate of human enterprise when it is corrupted.

As the Arthurian legend passed from Malory through Tennyson to Robinson, it became more intimate and sharply focused, while each author rendered the story in the idiom of his time. Drawing from Medieval sources, Thomas Malory brought together many of the various legends and texts, adding his own contributions to the tradition; the resulting prose romance has passed to the hands of scores of writers and artists and been carried down through the ages. The purpose of Malory's work, though, was the glorification of King Arthur and his knights; many of his female characters exist only for that purpose. From these emerge Nyneve and Guinevere, women connected to Merlin, Lancelot, and Arthur. Nyneve evolves through Malory's work into a kind of good spirit of the kingdom; Guinevere is given at least part of the blame for the kingdom's demise.

In his turn, the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson culled from various sources, predominantly Malory, to refine the legend and render immortal his Idylls of the King. The issue for Tennyson, as it had been for Malory, was the fall of the Kingdom. More than Malory, however, Tennyson assigned the blame to the women in the legend: Vivien, who seduces and renders Merlin invalid; and Guinevere, who is blamed for the lovers'

triangle that scandalizes the kingdom and leads to its destruction. Tennyson was perhaps limited in his view of human issues, seeing right and wrong through Victorian morality and pessimism.

Coming at the very beginning of the Modern Era of literature—in fact, one of its vanguards—Edwin Arlington Robinson began publishing his Arthurian poems in the midst of World War I. Although the age and its difficulties must have affected his work, Robinson was truly a writer of the inner person. His rendering of the legend is tightly focused on two people at a time, with the ruin and carnage of Arthur's kingdom serving as background for personal struggles against selfishness and self-indulgence. Robinson shows how individuals exist in any particular time, in all times. As a result, his female characters are, first, individuals, trying to sort out the issues of living on Earth, just as their male counterparts must. Vivian, not a temptress but a refuge for and equal partner with Merlin, and Guinevere, arguing brilliantly for the plight of women in the world while sacrificing her self to a man's dream, emerge as fully realized characters, intelligent and strong.

The evolution of women characters—and a woman's point of view—in Arthurian legend does not simply change the narratives from war stories to love stories; it allows the expression of issues in the whole range of human existence. The women tell not simply of soldiers and war, sacred quests, political intrigue, vengeance, and the ruination of kingdoms. The woman's part of the story shows what happens between friends, lovers, husbands, and wives: what happens between people. Their tragedy, about the ruination not of kingdoms but of the human spirit, is what makes the legend timeless, purposeful, and unforgettable.

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