

PAWNS, PREDATORS AND PARASITES: TEACHING THE ROLES OF WOMEN IN ARTHURIAN LITERATURE COURSES

More versions of the story of King Arthur, Queen Guenevere, and the knights of the Round Table have been produced since 1925 than in the entire medieval period.¹ A quick glance at new fiction shelves in public libraries and popular movie listings reveals the continued appeal of the legend to modern readers and film audiences. This revival, however, reflects the concerns of its late twentieth-century readership as well as its medieval originators; one such modern issue reflected in the ways that contemporary authors and filmmakers have reconstructed women characters in light of twentieth-century feminism is the role of women in an idealistic society. Given the popularity of Arthurian narratives, a King Arthur course is often chosen as a medium to introduce general education students to literary and medieval studies. However, it may also serve as a means by which students can ask questions of both past and present authors about the role and status of women in society. The purpose of this essay is to present strategies by which I have introduced students to a critical analysis of female characters and their status and function in both medieval and modern Arthurian stories based on my experience teaching a general education course entitled "King Arthur: Past and Present."

Women's Roles in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*

The role of women in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the work on which most post-medieval English-language versions of Arthurian legend are based, is a topic which remains relatively unexplored in scholarship. Much of the existing criticism focuses on the relationship of female characters to certain types of physical spaces and the comparison of different female characters with each other.² Undergraduate students, however, seem more interested in power relationships between female and male characters. Responding to this interest, I decided to use a structuralist approach to help students address the issue. The students and I used class time and journal assignments to develop a set of categories into which female characters, especially important characters such as Guenevere, Morgan le Fay, Dame Elaine, and Morgause, could be grouped. I asked students to categorize the effects that female characters had on Merlin, Arthur and his knights. After approximately twelve class hours, the students arrived at a tentative set of categories in which most women characters in the *Morte* could be classified. The class's hypothesis was that most female characters in Malory functioned either as pawns, predators, or parasites in relationship to the male characters.

A brief review of the primary women characters in Malory's narrative reveals the reasons for the class's categorization. Dame Elaine represents the many damosels who somehow provide a source of adventure for Arthur's knights or service to his kingdom. Specifically, Elaine is a pawn in a larger plan for Arthur's kingdom. Lancelot is tricked into sleeping with Elaine, the daughter of King Pelles, by Pelles

and his servant Dame Brisen, who by enchantment makes Elaine appear to be Guenevere. Pelles concocts the plot because he believes a prophecy stating that Lancelot and Elaine will conceive a son who will become Galahad, the best knight of the world and the only knight to discover fully the mysteries of the Grail (11.3.191–193).³ Elaine eventually falls in love with the knight, but when she reports the reason for her acquiescence in her father's plan to Lancelot, she says, "I have obeyed me unto the prophecy that my father told me" (11.3.193). Obedience, rather than love, is her motivation. Her unhappy fate as one who loved unwisely and too well results from having become a pawn in her father's plot.

Morgan le Fay is often students' favorite character. Of all Malory's women, she clearly has the most power, and is Arthur's only female rival. Although her motivations for undermining her brother are never made clear by Malory, her determination to do so is always apparent: as Arthur says, his sister is "always about to betray me" (4.17.143). Her machinations enliven almost every book of the romance. Furthermore, she elicits obedience and submission from many men. Unlike Guenevere, who commands only Lancelot, Morgan dominates no fewer than three knights, including her husband Sir Uriens and her lovers Sir Accolon of Gaul and Sir Hemison. Both of her lovers, furthermore, are killed in the execution of her plots against her brother, but Morgan always survives (4.11.134–135; 9.42.464–465). Morgan represents the female enchantresses, including Minue and Dame Brisen, who successfully outwit, dominate, and manipulate the men of Arthur's court. They are, however, for the most part destructive characters, searching for vengeance in the case of Morgan le Fay and mischief-making on the part of Dame Brisen.

Guenevere functions as a parasite, a female presence who distracts both Lancelot and Arthur from their larger purpose of establishing a system of governance that promulgates economic justice, the protection of weak and defenseless members of society (including, ironically, women), and punishment of those who transgress just laws.⁴ Before his involvement with Guenevere, for example, Lancelot states that he prefers to have no wife or paramours. Sex with his wife would reduce his vigor in pursuing tournaments and combats, and an adulterous courtly love relationship might result in the displeasure of God and consequent failure in combat:

"Fair damosel," said Sir Launcelot, "I may not warn people to speak of me what it pleaseth them; but for to be a wedded man, I think it not; for then I must couch with her, and leave arms and tournaments, battles and adventures; and as for to say for to take my plesance with paramours, that will I refuse in principle for dread of God; for knights that be adventurous or lecherous shall not be happy ne fortunate unto the wars . . ." (6.11.212).

Despite the fact that the Round Table oath requires him to protect and defend women, it is Lancelot's love for a woman that causes him to fail on the quest for the Holy Grail.⁵ Because the affair provides an excuse for factions at Arthur's court to sow discord, it also ultimately leads to civil war and the destruction of Arthur's plan for just governance embodied in the Round Table.⁶

Filling in the Gaps

After examining the roles of women in the *Morte Darthur*, students immediately notice three things: 1) that while few of Malory's characters are fully motivated, the women are even less developed than the men; 2) that the functions of female characters are defined by their relationships with men; and 3) that none of the women in Malory's work seems to be intended to be admired by the audience. Malory's representation of women resembles a photographic negative, and students invariably wish to develop a positive image. During the remainder of the King Arthur course, I have used two multi-step assignments to help them do so: the first begins as a traditional critical essay comparing Malory's treatment of women to that of another Arthurian author, and the second results in the composition of an Original Arthurian Adventure.

The easiest technique is to use an examination of the work of other writers, both medieval and modern, to plug the gaps in Malory. A comparison of the roles of women in Malory's *Morte* to those of women in other Arthurian versions is a helpful exercise for students exploring this issue. The Guenevere of Chrétien de Troyes' "Knight of the Cart," for example, is perhaps not sympathetic but certainly more powerful in her command of Lancelot than Malory's queen is; she also serves as a unifying rather than divisive force for Arthur's court.⁷ Her rescue from Meleageant gives Gawain, Kay and Lancelot a common quest; destroys Meleageant, the knight who causes the most disorder in the realm; and leads to the freeing of the damosels and knights trapped in Meleageant's kingdom. Certainly modern writers create more fully realized female characters. William Morris' *Defence of Guenevere* remains a primary psychological and ethical reappraisal of Malory's misogynistic treatment.⁸ T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* presents a Guenevere developed in response to a Freudian understanding of the human psyche. Certainly re-tellings such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, which narrates Malory's story from Morgan le Fay's point of view, and Laurel Phelan's unusual *Guinevere: The True Story of One Woman's Quest for her Past Life Identity and the Healing of her Eternal Soul*, present provocative treatments of the traditional place of women and the values of chivalry for student analysis.⁹ One option is for students to write a traditional critical essay comparing the treatment of women in Malory to the roles of women characters in another Arthurian work, medieval or modern. In

class presentations of their papers, students are responsible for summarizing their research and eliciting discussion on the differences point of view and historical context can make in the characterization of women in literature.

A second strategy, however, accommodates students who may not be literature majors or who may simply want to attempt a more creative approach to filling in the gaps left by Malory's treatment of female characters. Students may choose to craft their own Original Arthurian Adventure, in which they imitate the style and structure of one of the Arthurian narratives included in the course, but in which they are free to develop their own setting and characterization. Since the class is not taken as a creative writing credit, I usually tell students that they will be graded on whether I can recognize the work or episode being parodied and on its originality and interest. Often these stories re-create masculine and feminine characters. I have received Original Adventures, for example, in which the *chevalier* who reaches the Grail is not Galahad, but a knight named "Lesa" who rides the ebony steed called "Harley Davidson" and talks like Jimmy Cagney and Malory's Lancelot combined. (Sample dialogue: "You dirty rat! You think you can stop me? Hah, hah! No one crosses Babyface Meliagaunt!") Another student writer created an Arthur who behaves suspiciously like Elvis Presley and a Guenevere who resembles Priscilla; Guenevere ends up with Arthur's estate, Camelot, after the High King's death. Yet another student's Adventure recalls the O.J. Simpson murder trial, in which Queen Nicole becomes a victim of the Civil War between factions.¹⁰ After these are drafted and revised, the class creates its own collection of Arthurian Adventures. These stories in turn serve as bases for further discussion of women's roles in both medieval and modern cultures. A female Harley-Davidson biker who destroys her competition for the Grail is a strong female figure probably unimaginable to Malory's fifteenth-century audience; Nicole Brown Simpson, however, fulfills the Malorian roles for women identified by the class as a pawn and a parasite. In short, these original stories help students play with de-gendering characters, adding power to female characters, or making connections with modern women who also have some cultural power but are ultimately victims.

One Step Further

At the end of the course, I try to "publish" in some fashion both the critical comparative essays and the Original Arthurian Adventures, usually by the following means: 1) by creating a class "book" of Arthurian fiction and criticism; 2) by submitting Original Adventures to our Department's literary magazine; 3) by developing a "mini-conference" on Arthurian literature (for the comparative essays); and 4) by performing the Original Adventures as reader's theatre. Both

the analytical and creative assignments, however, help students to develop a sense of the alterity of the Middle Ages while still perceiving a continuity in the treatment of women, as well as an increased ability in being able to read the past against the present and the present against the past.

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¹ Rosemary Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature*, Arthurian Studies, No. 4 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 3.

² For the relationship between women characters and space in *Le Morte Darthur*, see Catherine La Farge, "The Hand of the Huntress: Repetition and Malory's *Morte Darthur*," in *New Feminist Discourse*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), 263-80, and Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987). For more on the roles of Arthurian women, see Maureen Fries, "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Fiction," in *Popular Arthurian Traditions*, ed. Sally K. Stocum (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1992). For a survey of recent scholarship on women in Malory, see Elizabeth Edwards, "The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*," in *A Companion to Malory Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1996), 37-54. For excerpts of important criticism on women in Arthurian narrative, see Thelma S. Fenster, *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1499 (New York: Garland, 1995).

³ All references to the *Morte Darthur* are from the Penguin edition based on Caxton's version (Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Janet Cowen, 2 vols. [London: Penguin, 1969]), rather than Vinaver's edition (Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2d ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971]), which is based on the Winchester manuscript.

⁴ At the foundation of the Round Table, King Arthur requires each knight to swear an oath including the following charges:
... never to do outrageously nor murder . . . by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy
... and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentle women succour, upon pain of death. (3.15.115-116)

⁵ For the reasons that Lancelot never directly sees the Grail, see Caxton's Book 17.14.353-360.

⁶ For the role of Lancelot's and Guenevere's affair in intensifying divisions that lead to the final civil war, see Caxton's Book 18.373-426.

⁷ Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, ed. D.D.R. Owen (London: Dent, 1987).

⁸ William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, ed. Margaret Lourie, Garland English Texts, no. 2 (New York: Garland, 1981). The list of modern treatments of Arthurian legend is too long to survey here. For a brief overview of some of the more significant works, see the index of Modern [Arthurian] literature in English in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, No. 931, rev. paperback ed. (New York: Garland, 1983), xvi-xx.

⁹ T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: Ace, 1996); Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Knopf, 1983); Laurel Phelan, *Guinevere: The True Story of One Woman's Quest for her Past Life Identity and the Healing of her Eternal Soul* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books, 1996).

¹⁰ My thanks to student writers Jessica Johnson, Darrin Fox, and Josh Gillespie for permission to refer to their papers.