UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane
Classe LM-37

"Thank me therefore": Social Prestige, Probity and Self-determination of Nymue's character in Malory's "Le Morte Darthur"

Relatore
Prof. Alessandra Petrina

Laureanda
Eva Baghin
n° matr. 606950 / LMLLA

Anno Accademico 2012/ 2013

Table of contents

Foreword

Le Morte Darthur portrays Malory's personal re-elaboration of the rise and fall of King Arthur's reign. The work's plot does not focus merely on Arthur's life (although the work begins with his conception and ends shortly after his death), but includes also the happenings concerning a wide variety of secondary characters, whose adventures contribute to the development and the decline of Camelot. Nymue, the Lady of the Lake, is one of Malory's most fascinating female figures: her characterization and her narrative functions will be the topic of the following pages.

In the first chapter I list the main differences in the content of the two surviving early modern exemplars of *Le Morte Darthur*. The only manuscript that scholars have at their disposal was discovered in 1947, and, until this date, the text had been known in its printed version only, whose first edition was published by William Caxton in 1485. The printer added a preface to the work, in which he briefly explained its topic and summarized its content. The legend of King Arthur and his court had been part of the English literary tradition for centuries, so Caxton relies on the popularity of the sovereign in order to captivate the attention of his possible customers. Malory's sources derive from old Welsh, Anglo-Norman and Latin texts, which were mainly pseudo-historical

narrations and contained the first records of a figure described as a warrior king. In the course of centuries, numerous re-elaborations enriched the character's story, adding to the events concerning Arthur also those related to his courtiers. Malory often refers to his work as a translation of a French book, but scholars agree in affirming that the author had, in reality, heterogeneous literary sources, written both in French and in English.

In the second section of the first chapter I analyze how the sources were combined together and how their plots and characters were altered, in order to include each relevant storyline into a wider narration. The drastic reduction of magical intervention is one of Malory's most relevant divergences from his sources, and is exemplified in the description of Merlin, who loses many of his occult powers. Lancelot's character is modified too: he becomes Malory's hero, despite his illicit liaison with Queen Guinevere (which is one of the determining factors of Camelot's downfall). Merlin and Lancelot represent the way in which Malory shows the tragic consequences of courtly love and sexual desire: while Lancelot contributes to the destruction of Arthur's reign, Merlin is entombed forever by the woman he attempts to seduce. The responsible for Merlin's segregation is Nymue, who will substitute the wizard in his role of king's counselor. Nymue appears on different occasions in the narration, creating thus links between episodes, reinforcing thus the textual consistency and unity.

The contradicting issues that generated the debate concerning the problem of narrative unity, and the consequent diverging positions about the work's internal divisions are explored in the second chapter. Both the manuscript and the printed exemplar of the *Morte* are partitioned into smaller literary units called *Tales*, but in the two texts the number of tales differs. Furthermore, each tale could be considered an independent literary unit or simply a part of a wider narration. Critics disagree also on the literary

genre of the *Morte*, whose definition varies from "tragedy" to "romance". The opposed positions on the work's genre, however, do not contradict the observation that a fundamental contribution to the text's unity is given by the consistency of its protagonists' characterization. Names are often hidden, modified or revealed at crucial moments of the plot, because they are significantly connected to the reputation of their bearer, and are almost always preceded or followed by appositions, which indicate the social rank of the characters. Lists of characters' names who participate to jousts, battles, or official events are not rare, and the apparition of known figures in different scenes of the work strengthens the references between its sections.

Malory has a peculiar attention for his figures' personal identity, which is demonstrated by his interest for assigning them names: many characters, who are often women left anonymous in the sources, are provided with a proper name. In the second section of the chapter, I examine how the author, in the process of rewriting, combined together the traits of different secondary characters of his sources, in order to create new figures. More identities, in this way, converge into a single one, as in the case of Nymue, the Lady of the Lake. The abundance of proper names, however, might create confusion in the determination of the various personal identities, because some characters are homonymous and others have closely resembling names; the variability of medieval spelling further entangles the problem.

The Lady of the Lake is not a character original to Malory, and her defining features change according to the narration in which she is inserted. The third chapter explores her name's spelling variations, which have been recorded not only in the *Morte*'s different sources but even inside Malory's text. Nymue's identity seems, at first sight, to be as variable as the possible orthographic fluctuations of her proper name, because her

apposition, Lady of the Lake, is used to indicate also another character. However, once the multiple reference of her title is disambiguated, the character shows a consistent essence in her numerous interventions. In the texts preceding Malory, the Lady of the Lake is the woman who raises Sir Lancelot and the one who seduces and segregates Merlin forever. While the link between her and the knight almost disappears in the *Morte*, the connection with Merlin remains, although the love between them is not mutual anymore. The woman who is loved by the wizard in the *Morte* is Nymue, while a second Lady of the Lake appears only in the first section of the work and gives the sword Excalibur to Arthur, but is soon killed by a knight: from this episode onward, the epithet "Lady of the Lake" indicates only Nymue.

My fourth chapter explains the origins of Nymue's figure, who is probably the result of a progressive inclusion of Celtic mythological material in the Arthurian legend. Malory inserted in his tale the impressive entrance of Nymue at Arthur's court contained in the sources: the woman is characterized as a lady huntress, who rides after her prey with a pack of hounds. In the first section of the chapter I analyze Nymue's role in the quest of Sir Pellinor, who, following the king's orders, rescues her from a kidnapper. On the way back to Arthur's court the woman demonstrates her authority on matters of knightly conduct, by condemning Pellinor for his little sensitiveness towards a woman in difficulty (who turns out to be his own daughter).

In the second section I examine Malory's characterization of Merlin as a lecher: he is an annoying suitor, and the woman bears his company only until he teaches her his magical arts. When Nymue becomes powerful enough, she imprisons him forever under a stone, in order to protect her virginity from his unwanted constant advances. After the wizard's disappearance, she gradually takes his place at the king's side, becoming thus the

sovereign's new protector. She is a meaningful example of how mastering supernatural elements could give to a female character both protection and freedom, making her less dependent from male aid.

In the third section of the fourth chapter I consider Nymue's role as the king's magic defender. Her powers allow her to save Arthur's life in battle against Accalon, Morgan's lover, by making the king's sword fall from the enemy's hand, allowing thus the sovereign to grab it and win the fight. On another occasion she warns the king to avoid wearing a magic mantle, sent to him by Morgan as a gift. After Nymue's suggestion the mantle is put on the shoulders of the woman who brought it to court. The woman dies immediately: the king owes his life to the sorceress for the second time. Nymue's link with Arthur is underlined also by the fact that she escorts the body of the dead sovereign to the Isle of Avalon, with other two queens (one of them is, significantly, Morgan le Fay). Nymue demonstrates to care not only for the king's safety but also for his knights' as well: she makes Lancelot swear to avoid fighting against another valiant warrior, Sir Servause le Breuse, because they might lose both their lives in the combat. The Lady of the Lake does not defend the king from Morgan's murdering attempts only, but indirectly helps Arthur also against another sorceress, Annowre, who wants to cut his head. Nymue brings Tristan to the woman's castle, and the knight defeats Annowre, freeing thus the king, but it is Nymue who carries, after the fight, the head of the woman on her saddle, as a symbol of victory, stressing in this way her contribution to the positive outcome of the adventure.

Nymue is also a reliable and equal judge, especially on matters of honourability, and this is the topic of the last section of the fourth chapter. The sorceress punishes a proud lady, Ettarde, who refuses a brave and loving knight, Sir Pelleas, as paramour. With

the aid of her enchantments, Nymue makes Ettarde desperately desire the man to whom she denied her affection and, as a consequence, she dies of remorse. Nymue choses the unfortunate knight as his man, and Pelleas reciprocates her feelings. They soon become an exemplary married couple, characterized by sincere attachment and love. The sorceress embodies therefore the superior nature of conjugal love over courtly relations, which Malory repeatedly condemns in his work.

The Lady of the Lake re-establishes equality after a trial by combat, by making Guinevere avoid the capital punishment to which she had been unjustly condemned. Nymue arrives to court after Guinevere had been accused of murder and consequently condemned to death. Although Lancelot has already defended his queen from the accusation by fighting for her sake, she is not officially exculpated until Nymue speaks in her favour. The enchantresses reveals also who the real murderer is, indicating to the king and the court who must be punished for the crime, demonstrating again to possess a high sense of honour and justice.

The way in which Nymue chooses and helps her allies, administrates justice and utters her opinions leads her to gain political authority and social respect. She defends the principles of the chivalric code but is also able to interpret them to her own advantage, demonstrating her multifaceted and complex nature. The author enriched her characterization, transforming her into a complex woman, who interacts repeatedly and meaningfully with the protagonists of the work and influences their choices.

1.

Le Morte Darthur and its Sources

There are three known surviving early modern exemplars of *Le Morte Darthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. The only complete one is a text printed by William Caxton, kept in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City.[1] An imperfect copy of the same edition, which lacks the last pages, is situated in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England. The third exemplar is known as the Winchester manuscript[2] and is preserved in the British Library in London (British Library, Add. MS 59678). The comparison between Caxton's edition and the manuscript has been possible since 1947, when the latter was discovered by Walter F. Oakeshott in the library of Winchester College, in England. The manuscript was compiled by two different hands and is deprived of its beginning and end, due to the lack of nineteen leaves.[3] After the discovery of the manuscript, Eugène Vinaver published its critical edition, titled *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*,[4] in order to indicate that he considered the *Morte* a collection of separate

[1] Malory, Thomas, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Westminster: William Caxton, 1485.
[2] Tieken-Boon Van Ostade, Ingrid, *The Two Versions of Malory's Morte D'Arthur: Multiple Negation and the Editing of the Text*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995, p. 1.
[3] Lumiansky, Robert M., "Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur, 1947-1987: Author, Title and Text", *Speculum*, 62 (1987), p. 878.
[4] *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, revised by P. J. C. Field, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

romances, rather than a single one. Even if Malory's conceiving of the text as a single narration is still discussed, the partition of the *Morte* is indisputable. The text is effectively divided into smaller portions, which are defined by the presence of an *explicit* at the end of each one. The sections are not preceded by titles in the Winchester Manuscript, but Vinaver indicated them in his edition, basing himself on the content of their *explicit*. According to the scholar, the eight books which constitute *Le Morte Darthur* are: *The Tale of King Arthur*, *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*, *The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake*, *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney*, *The Book of Sir Tristam*, *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, *The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere*, *The Morte Arthur*.[5] In the last *explicit* of the work, the author stated a precise date for the conclusion of his composition, 1469, indicated as "the ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the fourth".[6] In the printed version, a colophon by Caxton follows Malory's last words and specifies that "the yere of Our Lord 1485" (p. 819) is the book's publishing date.

Comparing the printed and the manuscript version of the *Morte*, numerous discrepancies have been identified and analyzed; although minor differences can be attributed to omissions or scribal errors, the reasons for major alterations are not easy to detect. Vinaver ascribed them mainly to Caxton's will, but some scholars do not share his view. Robert M. Lumiansky, for example, believes that

> despite the impressive industry and learning which Vinaver's work entailed, and despite the extraordinarily generous format and frequency provided for his editions, his views of […] Caxton as obscuring editor are not convincing.[7]

[5] *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver revised by P. J. C. Field, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. XXXVI-XXXVII.
[6] *Le Morte Darthur, or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of his Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, New York: Norton, 2004, p. 698. All the quotations to Malory's text refer to this edition.
[7] Lumiansky, p. 879.

Lumiansky considers the fact that the exemplars differ as the consequence of an authorial revision, rather than the result of the printer's editing. However, he agrees in observing that one of the most evident differences between the exemplars is their internal division: while the manuscript's sections correspond to those identified with Vinaver's above-mentioned titles, in Caxton's exemplar the narration is divided into 21 books and 506 chapters.[8] In its printed version the text of the *Morte* is followed by the above-mentioned colophon and is preceded by a table of contents, which illustrates thoroughly the development of the plot, indicating the number of chapters for each book as well.

Caxton added to his version a preface, in which he explained to the readers the reasons for his publishing choice. The printer underlined the importance of King Arthur, "whyche ought moost to be remembred emonge us Englysshemen tofore al other Crysten Kynges" (p. 815). Arthur is thus described as a historical national hero, whose existence is not only unquestionable but also deserving of being celebrated in a romance. The king is defined as "the moost renomed Crysten kyng, first and chyef of the thre best Crysten and Worthy" (p. 815). In inserting him – as tradition required – among the Nine Worthies (nine leaders who were judged the best examples possible in terms of Christian conduct) Caxton stressed Arthur's moral qualities.[9]

The printer wanted to present the *Morte* as the first complete collection of Arthurian material in his mother tongue, so he emphasized the lack of this kind of work in English, while King Arthur's popularity spread in foreign countries:

> he is more spoken of beyonde the see, moo books made if His noble actes, than there be in Englond; as well in Duche, Ytalyen, Spaynysshe, and Grykysshe as in Frensshe. […] And many noble volumes be made of hym and of his noble Knyghtes in Frensshe, which I have seen and redde beyond the see which been not had in our maternal tongue. But in Walsshe ben many, and also in Frensshe (pp. 816-17).

[8] Lumiansky, p. 887.
[9] Batt, Catherine, *Malory's 'Morte D'Arthur': Remaking Arthurian Tradition,* New York: Palgrave, 2002, p. 39.

As Stephen S. A. Shepherd affirms, the idea of gathering together preexisting Arthurian narrations in verse or in prose is not original: in Malory's time similar works had been already composed in the continent, especially in France, where the Vulgate Cycle, a series of Arthurian romances in prose, was completed between 1210 and 1230.[10] Although in the fifteenth century French Arthurian romance was seen as old-fashioned by English upper-class members, for the middle-class people, who were less acquainted with the French language, English adaptations were still in vogue.

Caxton's public is represented by

> middle-class readers already well-established through the increasingly commercialized production of manuscript-books. Caxton's tastes were conservative, but he understood the movements of taste, and he knew that in France and in Burgundy extended prose redactions of the older romances in prose and verse designed for readers with leisure and money, had become fashionable.[11]

With his preface the printer intended to give the *Morte* the best presentation possible, because he considered it a potentially remunerative business; therefore, the choice of topic should not be attributed only to his patriotism. In affirming that it was suggested to him by "many and dyverss gentylmen of thys royame of Englonde" (p. 814), he conveyed an idea of sophisticated allure to the reading of *Le Morte Darthur*, a title which was chosen in order to recall French phonetics. Caxton's allusion to French is due to the fact that it had been the aristocracy's language until the end of the fourteenth century, so the one in which Arthurian narrations were first read in England.[12]

The fame of the legendary king, who was first mentioned in the poems of the Welch bard Taliesin at the end of the sixth century A.D., grew in the following centuries in England and Europe. In the process of re-elaboration and enriching, Arthur's legend

[10] Shepherd, Stephen H.A., "Chronologies", in Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* New York: Norton, 2004, p. xviii.
[11] Pearsall, Derek A., *Arthurian Romance, a Short Introduction,* Oxford: Blackwell, 2009, pp. 84-85.
[12] Pearsall, p. 61.

obviously underwent several changes, which contributed to give it its complex and in some cases even contradictory characteristics. In the *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (1136) some details, which would form the basic narrative core of the Arthurian saga, were recorded for the first time. Its main constitutive elements are the presence of magic, the battle against Mordred and the king's departure to Avalon. In his *Brut,* an Anglo-Norman poem, Wace assigned to Arthur's story a chivalric setting, in order to actualize the narration; he added also the theme of the Round Table.[13] Until the end of 1100 Arthur remained a warrior king, whose brave military actions were the focus of the plot.

In the late fourteenth century, thanks mainly to the fortune of the romances of Chrétien de Troyes (*Erec et Enide, Cligés, Le chevalier de la charette, Le chevalier au lion, Le conte du Graal*), Arthur ceased to be the main protagonist of chivalric romance. His reign was primarily the setting of his knights' adventures and a great importance was given to courtly love, especially to the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. For a period the two main tendencies in treating Arthurian material coexisted in England: on the one hand the epic, patriotic trend, in which great attention was paid to descriptions of weapons and battle scenes, on the other the courtly narrations, in which the deeds of arms were usually performed in order to win a lady's favour.[14] The contemporary presence of both traditions gave to the author of *Le Morte Darthur* the possibility of analyzing a number of different sources, which were not only compiled in two languages but had non-homogeneous narrative features.

Malory had access to a great number of sources written in French and English, which he partly translated and partly adapted in order to compose his work. The majority

[13] Shepherd, "Chronologies", p. XVII.
[14] Pearsall, p. 60.

of the French texts were taken from the Vulgate Cycle: Malory adapted in English its *Suite du Merlin* for the first book, *Lancelot* for the third, *Queste du Graal* and *Morte du roi Artu* for the seventh and the last one respectively. For the episode of the "Chapel Perilous" and the book of Sir Tristan, Malory drew his inspiration from two other French books, the *Perlesvaus* and the prose *Tristan*.[15] *Perlesvaus* is one of the first extensive Arthurian prose narrations in French; its author is unknown and scholars do not agree on its possible date of composition, which is set approximately around 1220-25 or 1203-13.[16] The prose *Tristan* was composed around 1230; its authors are Luce de Gat and Hélie de Boron.[17]

Malory's known English sources are in verse: for the episode of the war against the roman emperor Lucius, he re-elaborated a chronicle of the history of England, written by the poet John Harding around 1460.[18] Another source for the roman war was the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, an anonymous epic narration of Arthur's battles, composed in the late fourteenth century.[19] The stanzaic *Morte* is a poem of eight-line stanzas, probably composed in the middle of the fourteenth century, and was used for Malory's last two books.[20] Since we do not have at our disposal surviving manuscripts of the author's sources, we must be aware that even significant alterations or omissions in *Le Morte Darthur* could be the result of modifications prior to Malory's intervention.[21]

---

[15] Shepherd, Stephen H.A., "Sources and Backgrounds", in Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*, pp. 701-2.
[16] Kelly, Thomas Edward, *Le Haut Livre du Graal, Perlesvaus: a Structural Study,* Geneve: Libraire Droz, 1974, p. 9.
[17] Nicholson, Helen, *Love, War and the Grail*, Köln: Brill, 2001, pp. 175-9.
[18] Cooper, Helen, "The *Cycle* in England", in Carol Dover, ed., *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003, p. 153.
[19] Krishna, Valerie, "Introduction", in Valerie Krishna, ed., *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, New York: Burt Franklin, 1976, pp. 10-12.
[20] Benson Larry D., "Introduction", in Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, p. XVII.
[21] Shepherd, "Sources and Backgrounds", p. 702.

The author's English sources are all in verse, but Malory's work is in prose. The choice can be explained by the fact that, in the fifteenth century, verse was frequently perceived as a narration with an inferior degree of truthfulness in comparison to prose. The formal change in the *Morte* suggests the desire of creating a more plausible narration.[22]

> Caxton's preface places the *Morte* as 'ystoyre' rather than stories that are 'fayned and fables', and claims historical and physical evidence for Arthur, as well as placing him as one of the Nine Worthies. Yet Caxton also promises 'many wonderful hystoyres and adventures', and Malory's matter-of-fact, pared-down use of sources and realist mode do not indicate the lack of interest in the supernatural that has sometimes been supposed: rather different facets of the supernatural are interwoven to create a multi-layered fictional world.[23]

1.1 Malory's Reworking of the Sources

As Corinne Saunders observes in the quotation above, the attitude of the author towards magic underlines a conscious narrative use of supernatural intervention. In the preface Caxton enumerated some objects which, in his opinion, proved the existence of King Arthur (as, for example, the impression of his seal and the presence of the Round Table at Winchester)[24], in order to show the truthfulness of Malory's work. Caxton considered the accounts of historical events (*hystoyre*) and the fictional (*fayned*) stories two different narrative categories, but the presence of magic in the *Morte* makes the boundary between fiction and historiography blurred.

In Saunders' opinion, Malory's work tended to be more linked to reality than his reference texts. Nevertheless, Terence McCarty notices that the author did not avoid

[22] Helen Cooper, "Counter Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romance", in Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* p. 820.
[23] Saunders, Corinne, *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010, pp. 234-5.
[24] Shepherd, Stephen H.A., "William Caxton, Prologue and Epilogue to the 1485 edition", in Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* p. 817.

mentioning powers that go beyond human understanding in the *Morte*, even if their presence in his work is less frequent than it is in his sources. The choice of the author underlines the will of creating a narrative context in which natural and supernatural coexist.[25] Magic is one of the major themes in Malory's sources and the reduction of its influence affects the descriptions of characters traditionally linked to it, as happens for example in the case of Merlin. In the *Morte Darthur* even Merlin's well-known otherworldly powers are transformed into a mere ability in shape-shifting, which is in some cases more similar to a capacity of disguising himself. The first time that the name of Merlin appears in the *Morte* is at the very beginning of the narration, before Arthur's birth. He is mentioned by sir Ulfius, a knight of Uther, the king who will be Arthur's father. The knight describes Merlin as the man who can help the king to lie with the woman he desires, Igraine: "he shalle do yow remedy, that youre herte shal be pleasyd" (p. 4). In his first apparition in the *Morte*, Merlin is described as a man "in a beggars aray" (p. 4), who is not immediately recognized by Ulfius, but knows already what is the wish of the king and offers his assistance: "Yf Kynge Uther wille wel rewarde me and be sworne unto me to fulfille my desyre, that shall be his honour and profite more than myn, for I shalle cause hym to have all his desyre" (p.4). Merlin asks to have the son of his king and Igraine as soon as he comes to life, as a reward for his service. Uther agrees, so Merlin helps him to deceive Igraine, who is married to the duke of Tintagel. Merlin's intervention makes Uther look like Igraine's husband, but on this occasion his powers resemble more those of a talented trickster than those of a proper wizard. Even if Merlin remains a helping and prophetic figure in Malory's work, his link with magic is definitively reduced. His "craftes" appear more similar to conjuring tricks than to

[25] McCarty, Terence, *An Introduction to Malory*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer,1991, p. 112.

enchantments. Nevertheless, there are manifestations of magic in Malory's work, but their presence is incorporated in the plot as a plausible component of a coherent narrative dimension.[26]

The presence of magical healings, love potions and enchanted objects reveals that to some characters of the *Morte* is ascribed the ability to use powers which pertain to the supernatural. Merlin is not therefore the character par excellence that can perform magic. Even Lancelot, who is commonly not involved into magical events, miraculously saves the life of a knight, Sir Urry, by healing his numerous wounds (p. 644). Before attending to his task, Lancelot prays the Holy Trinity to help him: his faith is rewarded with a sudden medical talent, which allows him to cure sir Urry. In most cases supernatural is associated with women and is perceived mainly not as an act that goes beyond human comprehension, but as a practical ability, which can be taught and learned. Arthur's half-sister Morgan le Fey, for example, acquires the knowledge of magical arts in a nunnery: "Morgan le Fey was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye." (p. 5-6).

Magical intervention is less relevant in Malory's work than in its sources. In the French version, an episode in which magic plays a key role is in the story of Sir Tristan, because the two protagonists fall in love just due to the effect of a potion.[27] In Malory's book of Sir Tristan it is not so: the knight "kyste grete love to La Beale Isode, for she was at that tyme the fyrest lady and maydyn in the worlde" (p. 238). The love potion is only a reinforcement of their feeling towards each other, because also Isode loves Tristan long before drinking it: she "kyste more love unto hym, for well she demed he was som man of worshyp" (p. 239). Another main change in the reworking of the sources was produced in

[26] McCarty, p. 114.
[27] Moorman, Charles, "Courtly Love in Malory", *English Literary History*, 27 (1960), p. 172.

the book of the *Noble Tale of the Sankgreal*, which was significantly shortened in length in comparison with its source – the *Queste du Graal* –, but followed more closely the original plot than the other sections of Malory's work. The aim of the *Vulgate* differs from the one of the *Morte*, because while the former is a symbolic and mystic narration, whose purpose is to describe the spiritual growth of the knights of the round table, the latter is a collective adventure with a religious setting. In *The Tale of the Sankgreal*, the explanations of hermits and monks and the importance given to dreams and visions are drastically reduced, because the focus of the quest is to display the knights' worldly and spiritual qualities.

Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal* shows on the one hand the superior purity and religiosity of Galahad, but reserves on the other a special role to his father Lancelot, who proves to be the best worldly knight, even remaining a sinner. [28] In the *Queste* Lancelot promises to a hermit that he will never commit adultery again, but forgets soon his declaration. In Malory's version, Lancelot's promise is easier for him to keep: he assures the holy man that he will avoid committing adultery as long as he can bear it. In this way, the hero can return to the queen with unaltered passion and keep his word too.[29]

The author attempts to soften Lancelot's guilt by modifying the hermit's warning, but if in this episode the knight's moral conduct appears almost justified, at the end of the *Morte* the consequences of his actions will damage his world irreversibly. Lancelot could be considered Malory's hero: the author grants him "the privileged status as *primus inter*

[28] Moorman, Charles, "Malory's Treatment of the Sankgreal", *PMLA*, 3 (1956), pp. 498-502.
[29] Windeatt, Barry, "The Fifteenth-Century Arthur" in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 94-95.

pares",[30] but Lancelot is nevertheless destined to contribute to the destruction of the Round Table.

> Malory cannot protect Launcelot since he is fully aware that by protecting him he will be defending the whole complex of adultery and strife which he had been preparing to indict all along […]**.** Seen in these terms, the Grail quest may be said to take on a new significance within the whole *Morte Darthur*. It would seem, in the light of these changes which Malory makes in his source, to represent to him the greatest of adventures, the final test of the Round Table, and if the Grail is to be attained, it must be attained by the finest knight the Round Table has to offer – Launcelot. In Launcelot's failure, then, lies the failure of the whole system.[31]

In the quotation above Charles Moorman notices that Lancelot becomes for Malory a symbol of the decay of the Round Table. Lancelot acts as a representative of the best values that the brotherhood of King Arthur can offer, but fails his last task: the achievement of the Saint Grail. Being the Grail an object which carries a mystic meaning, Lancelot's ineptitude is attributable to his moral corruptibility. His affair with Guinevere is a symbol of the decline of the Round Table. The theme of the love between the queen and Lancelot, which is considered by Moorman one of the reasons for the decline of Arthur and his virtuous idea of knighthood, is also an occasion for the author to offer a narration about courtly love. The illicit relationship of Lancelot and Guinevere was renowned among Malory's public. What could have remained a codified, regulated social behaviour, leads on this occasion to its predictable consequence: adultery.[32]

In the *Morte* the dangerous consequences of sexual desire concern not only Lancelot and Guinevere but also other characters that are dominated by passion. Merlin is among them: his "dotage"(p.78), caused by his sexual attraction for a lady called Nymue, leads him to his tragic end. After having "lerned of hym all maner of thynge that sche desyred" (p.78), Nymue traps him forever under a stone. In the process of re-adaptation of

[30] Nolan, Barbara, "The Tale of Sir Gareth and the Tale of Sir Lancelot" in Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Stockwell Garfield Edwards, eds., *A Companion to Malory*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996, p.155.
[31] Moorman, "Malory's Treatment of the Sankgreal", p. 501.
[32] Moorman, "Courtly Love in Malory", p. 268.

the material at his disposal, the author of the *Morte* omitted to report the details of Merlin's imprisonment, although Nymue remains responsible for his perpetual segregation. Nymue's part in the accomplishment of Merlin's destiny is much more notable in the French *Suite du Merlin* than in *Le Morte Darthur*. Merlin's story was considered by the author a common background for the readers, because the part played by Merlin in the Arthurian literature before Malory was already well-known by the public of the *Morte*.[33] While in the *Suite du Merlin* the author gave an account of his birth and supernatural conception (his mother is a mortal woman but his father is a demon)[34], when he appears for the first time in the *Morte* he is already adult. In the same way, the episode of his tragic end is just briefly reported:

> And so one a tyme Merlyon ded shew hir in a roche whereas was a grete wondir, and wrought by enchauntement, that went undir a grete stone. So by hir subtyle worchyng she made Merlyon to go undir that stone to latte hir wete of the mervayles there; but she wrought so there for hym that he come never oute for all the craufte he coude do – and so she departed and leffte Merlyon. (p. 79)

Nymue's presence permeates the work because her role is not limited merely to her relationship with Merlin. She is inserted in more episodes of the *Morte*, becoming in the course of the story a helping figure for Arthur and his knights.

Her role will be discussed extensively afterwards, because it provides a meaningful example of Malory's methods in the reworking of the original texts. The analysis of her figure shows not only the author's capability to invent a composite and elaborated female character, but also his intention of creating an organic narration.[35] As Fiona Tolhurst affirms, the narrative function of women in Malory's *Morte* inserts them in the process of creating a consistent and coherent work, in which they are often used to establish semantic connections between the various books: "the roles of female figures

[33] Batt, p. 55.
[34] Shepherd, "Sources and Backgrounds", pp. 705-7.
[35] Holbrook, Sue E., "Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's Le Morte Darthur", *Speculum*, 4 (1978), p. 762.

[…] create links among episodes- thereby contributing substantially to the text's cohesion".[36]

[36] Tolhurst, Fiona, "Why Every Knight Needs his Lady: Re-viewing Questions of Genre and Cohesion in Malory's Le Morte Dartuhr", in Raluca L. Radulescu and K. S. Whetter, eds., *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2005, p. 137.

2.

Proper Names as Unifying Means of Narration

One of the most debated topics related to the *Morte Darthur* is the text's unity. Some scholars, as for example Lumiansky, who edited *Malory's Originality, a Critical Study of 'Le Morte Darthur'*,[37] disagree with Vinaver's position concerning the fragmentary nature of the *Morte*.[38] Vinaver affirms that the reluctance of the critics to accept his theory is partly determined by the form in which Malory's work became popular: a single book – divided into smaller narrative units – with an all-embracing evocative title. Vinaver adds that the desire of proving the unity of what he titles *The Work of Sir Thomas Malory* is influenced by a neoclassical idea of narrative, which considers the category of unity a key feature to create a masterwork. In Vinaver's opinion, "when modern literary scholarship seeks to rehabilitate a literary masterpiece, it invariably resorts to the favourite classical criterion of perfection which is, of course, 'unity'".[39]

[37] Lumiansky, Robert M., ed., *Malory's Originality, a Critical Study of 'Le Morte Darthur'*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964.
[38] For further contributions on the issue, see Radulescu, Raluca L. and Whetter, Kevin S., eds., *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2005.
[39] Vinaver, Eugène, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, revised by P. J. C. Field, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p. XLIV.

The structure of the *Morte*, which is formed by a variety of interlaced plots, apparently contradicts the classical ideal, because the action does not develop in a single unity of time and place. Vinaver refers to the Aristotelean concept of unity, deriving from a neoclassical misinterpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. In his work Aristotle – referring specifically to the genre of drama –postulated that the only significant narrative unity is the one of action. The classicists expanded the notion of narrative unity to the concepts of time and place, and applied it not only to drama but to all narrative genres.[40]

The problem of choosing a method to establish the unity of the text is complex, but the need to identify general narratological criteria to define Malory's work persuaded the critics to formulate various hypotheses. Kevin S. Whetter connects the difficulty of defining the singleness of the *Morte* to the one of assigning a genre to it. In his view the two main difficulties that critics must address while analyzing the *Morte* are correlated.

> This is because just as our concepts of unity – especially the rigid neo-classical interpretation of Aristotelian unity, which deems Malory's 'Tristam' a blundered middle section – do not match *Le Morte Darthur*, neither do our concepts of genre. Nowhere is this more evident than in the problematic and sometimes contradictory nature of the relatively few arguments which do tackle the issue of the *Morte*'s genre.[41]

In Whetter's opinion, Malory inserted *The Book of Sir Tristam* in a wider and complex narration by a series of cross-references, so it is inaccurate to describe it simply as a middle section.[42] The aim of the scholar is to show that there is an effective risk of misinterpreting the original conception of Malory's work: the narrative categories of modern criticism are inadequate to classify the *Morte*, because the work refers to different standards.

[40] Halliwell, Stephen, "Epilogue: the Poetics and its Interpreters", in Amélie O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 415.
[41] Whetter, Kevin Sean, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, p. 102.
[42] Whetter, p. 126.

Vinaver defines the sections of Malory's work as "romances"[43] and "romance" is the literary genre that is often attributed to *Le Morte Darthur*, even by the critics who do not agree with the idea of its internal partition. Helen Cooper defines the pre-1500 English prose romances as "those prose narratives with a primarily secular focus; aristocratic protagonists; a main concern generally with chivalry or love; and an exotic setting, far away or long ago or both".[44] The structural and thematic characteristics of prose romances differ from those of the metrical romances and resemble more the features of their coeval vernacular epic, or those of the poems of the alliterative revival, as the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which was one of Malory's sources. Cooper recognizes the main themes and settings of the prose romances in the *Morte Darthur*, which is listed among them and is analyzed according to the peculiarities of its genre. Nevertheless, the categorization of the work as a romance is not considered valid by all scholars. Molly Martin contributes to the debate by observing that "although the *Morte* has been discussed in terms of many generic models, most critics categorize the text as a romance, a tragedy or a combination of the elements of those two genres".[45]

The tragic conception of the *Morte* represents an obstacle to the attribution of the term "romance" to the work. The knights' individual adventures converge to a fratricidal battle, which leads to the definitive destruction of Arthur's reign. The fatal epilogue persuaded some critics to reject the hypothesis of considering the work a romance, because of its unhappy ending. Nevertheless, as Neil Cartlidge explains in his contribution to the debate, romance has, in comparison to other genres, a more flexible structure, which could allow the inclusion of tragic elements in its ending. The difficulty

[43] Vinaver, p. XLI.
[44] Cooper, Helen, "Counter Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romance", in Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* p. 821.
[45] Martin, Molly, *Vision and Gender in Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010, p. 16.

in establishing the attributes of romance and consequently its limits does not imply that this genre represents an ingenuous narrative expression, deprived of any kind of internal narrative rule. On the contrary, romance

> is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, and considerably less amenable to generalization that it is often taken to be, so that understanding its boundaries is a process that both requires and repays detailed and sympathetic attention to individual texts.[46]

Even if the observations of many critics contrast with Vinaver's idea of partition, the scholar does not totally reject the considerations made about the inner cohesion and completeness of the *Morte*; he admits, for example, that the different sections of the work share a common characterization of the figures.[47] Vinaver shares the idea that minor characters appearing or acting in more than one episode, represent a connection between various passages of the work; separate tales are correlated by the presence of recognizable characters, who are not necessarily the main protagonists of the plot.[48] Malory seems conscious of the fact that reiteration can create consistency and uses the characters' names in a process of repetition, which involves his whole production.

In order to support the idea of unity of characterization, critics have examined the author's attitude towards the narrative treatment of proper names. The reworking of the sources allowed Malory to combine elements that pertained to different narrative contexts. One of the aspects of his re-elaboration is the operation of naming the numerous minor characters, whose actions influence the development of the complex plot. Many characters did not have a proper name in the original texts, because their marginal role did not necessarily require one.[49] The names that Malory assigned to minor figures provided them also with a specific identity.

---

[46] Cartlidge, Neil, "Introduction" in *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, p. 1.
[47] Vinaver, p. XLII-XLIII.
[48] Vinaver, p. 1665.
[49] Field, P. J. C., *Malory: Text and Sources*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998, p. 227.

As P.J.C. Fields explains, the author "often gives names from one source to anonymous characters in another".[50] The procedure that Malory chose consisted in selecting an already established individuality and attributing it to an otherwise unnamed figure, which originally belonged to a different source. The effect is the presence of

> names from the Vulgate Cycle or his English sources in incidents from the *Tristan*, and vice versa; and sometimes names from obscure romances that he may never have read, only heard of. The cumulative effect of this is the creation of a complete society, growing, flowering, and decaying.[51]

The result of Malory's rewriting is that many minor characters become recognizable throughout the story and develop their role in more than a single scene. The process of naming is a strategy that reinforces the work's internal references and helps the author to define in detail the chivalric community.

In Malory's world, characters attribute a considerable meaning to proper names. In more than one episode names are proudly declared, hidden or modified by their owners,[52] and the scenes in which a name is discovered or revealed often represents a turning point in the plot. Andrew Lynch analyzes the recurrence of the term "name" in the whole text and attests that

> eighty per cent of the occurrences of the word 'name' are in speech, though speech is less than half of the text as a whole. This is because the knights so frequently require each other's names, and reveal or guard their own with great care. The story makes much of its moments of identification, when names are disclosed.[53]

The characters' preoccupation with the issue of proper names demonstrates Malory's interest in the matter. The author's concern is confirmed by his frequent use of long name lists, which help the reader to remember the various identities of the Arthurian world. Some examples are the enumerations of knights, jousting in tournaments or fighting in

[50] Field, p. 72.
[51] Field, P. J. C., ed., *Le Morte Darthur: the Seventh and Eighth Tales*, London: Hackett Publishing, 2008, p. LXI.
[52] Lynch, Andrew, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997, p. 4.
[53] Lynch, p. 4.

battles: "so ever as Sir Launcelot Sir Gareth and Sir Lavayne fought on the tone syde, Sir Bors, Sir Ector de Marys, Sir Lyonell, Sir Bleoberys, Sir Galyhud, Sir Galyhodyn, and sir Pelleas and many mo other of Kinge Banys blood faught uppon another party" (p. 622). Malory did not need to invent names for new heroes, heroines or their helpers, because he chose his characters among the figures in his sources. Some of them increased or diminished their influence in the plot, but the act of preserving their names allowed the author to maintain also a trace of their original role.[54]

Jane Bliss analyzes the function of proper names in medieval romances, among which she lists also the *Morte Darthur*.[55] She observes that the etymological meaning of a proper name is frequently not a topic of crucial importance. In the texts examined by the scholar, the connection which appears to be substantial is not the one between an identity and a name as its descriptor, but the one between a name and what Bliss defines its performative use. Bliss notices that the *Morte Darthur* shares with the genre of romance the author's peculiar attention to personal names. In romance

> emphasis is on the performative function of names: what it can do to characters in the story and what effect it can have on audience. […] In this sense only romance is "realist": where the name of the knight *is* the knight – Launcelot, Tristam, *without* etymology.[56]

The meaning of a specific name is secondary to the communicatory role it develops. Bliss indicates as performative qualities the effects that owning a name creates on other characters and on the readers. Malory's frequent repetitions of proper names emphasize their pragmatic attributes: their mere presence is, for the public and for the other protagonists of the story, a constant reminder of the hero's importance.[57] The scholar

[54] Field, *Text and Sources*, p. 227.
[55] Bliss, Jane, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008, p. 197.
[56] Bliss, p. 15.
[57] Bliss, p. 168.

observes that Malory's figures are conscious of the consequences that possessing and declaring their own name produce.

To use a name means also to associate a reputation to a personal identity; the interest in good reputation is fundamental in Malory's Arthurian society and corresponds to the desire of possessing a respected name. The narrator contributes to give value to the characters' personal identities and his attitude towards them reinforces their relevance in the narration: in the *Morte* the protagonists are always identified with an indication of rank, which precedes their proper name and denotes a noble origin, for example "Sir Tristan" or "Queen Guinevere". They are also often followed by a brief judgment regarding moral or physical qualities: the first time Igraine, Arthur's mother, is presented, she is described as "a fair lady and a passynge wise" (p. 3). A similar narrative treatment is reserved also to Morgan, whose name is not preceded by a title but is followed by "le Fay", a noun used to signal her magical abilities.

There is more than one episode in the *Morte* in which proper names are discovered, changed or hidden, because a hero needs to remain anonymous or does not wish to be recognized. The narrator signals these modifications in the relationship between the name and its owner by adapting the way in which he refers to the character. An example could be represented by the episode in which Tristan wishes to conceal his true name and for this purpose changes it into "Tramtryst": "I am of the contrey of Lyones and my name is Sir Tramtryste" (p. 237). The narrator refers to him using his second identity, until the hero decides to reveal who he really is.[58]

Malory's concern with proper names is demonstrated also by his ability to insert them where their presence creates meaningful references between different episodes. His

[58] Mahoney, Dhira B., "Narrative Treatment of Name in Malory's Morte Darthur", *English Literary History*, 47 (1980), p. 649.

habit proves a conscious use of the process of naming,[59] but scholars admit that in some episodes the authorial interest in conferring names produced contradictions. The choice of inserting a recognizable secondary character in more than one scene is not always plausible in terms of time development: the knight called "Harleuse le Barbeuse" is killed by Garlande, but appears again, still alive, in a following episode.[60] Referring to the author's elaboration of the sources, Field affirms that

> Malory himself altered characters' names often enough to make the *Morte Darthur* an appreciably different kind of book and in doing so created some of the inconsistencies that have so exercised his modern critics.[61]

According to Vinaver, some incongruences found in minor episodes of the plot are ascribed to the fact that each tale is an independent romance.[62] In the case of Harleuse, the presence of the character in the episode that follows his death could be attributed to a scribe, whose task was to rubricate proper names: he probably chose a name from a precedent book and simply copied it in red ink in the second one.[63] The visual relevance given to proper names in the manuscript through rubrication disappeared in the monochrome printed copy, but the incongruence was perpetuated.

2.1 The Importance of Female Names in Terms of Narrative Cohesion

The main protagonists' names were copied directly from the sources; Malory chose to collect and unite a great number of tales, whose heroes and heroines were already recognizable by the public, because their names (Merlin, Guinevere, Isode, Gawain) were part of a long established tradition. The characters which modify most their original role

[59] Field, *Text and Sources*, p. 82.
[60] Field, *Text and Sources*, p. 74.
[61] Field, *Text and Sources*, p. 79.
[62] Vinaver, p. XXXVIII.
[63] Vinaver, p. 1667.

are those left anonymous in the sources: they are often women and obtain in the *Morte* a relevance that their authors did not attribute them. They originally acted as messengers, guides, opponents or helpers, always in relationship with one or more male characters, whose adventure was the core of the narration. In Malory, female figures maintain the narrative function that they had in the sources, but widen it. They participate substantially in the formation of the plot's structure, because they increase their influence on the story's development. Janet Jesmok notes that

> Malory's *Morte Darthur* is a work driven by male desire, will, and action, from its dramatic opening where Uther is willing to sacrifice everything for his lust for Igraine to Arthur's death where the king chooses vengeance on Mordred over preserving his kingdom and his own life. [64]

Even if male intentions and decisions define the construction of the story and can be considered the main causes for the final collapse of Arthurian society, in the *Morte* female figures enlarge their power and represent also what Jesmok defines the "voice of judgement"[65] in terms of the chivalric and moral conduct of their male counterparts.

The role of women in romance is briefly summarized by Bliss, who enumerates the various identities that female characters can assume. They are all exemplified in Malory's text, in which the contribution of its sources' different traditions allows the creation of complex female models. As a result of her analysis on the use of names in medieval texts, which includes the *Morte*, Bliss asserts that "women enable romance: they are necessary as guides and advisers, namers and enchanters (and as love objects)".[66]

The intention of the author to give prominence to secondary characters and the consequent narrative treatment of many minor female identities is exemplified by the queen of Orkney. The sources used by Malory to create this figure are the prose *Tristan*

[64] Jesmok, Janet, "Guiding Lights: Feminine Judgment and Wisdom in Malory's Morte Darthur", *Arthuriana*, 19 (2009), p. 34.
[65] Jesmok, p. 34.
[66] Bliss, p. 198.

and the *Suite du Merlin,* in which the woman is defined simply by her title or as the wife of the king of Orkney. Both in the sources and in Malory's work she is the mother of Sir Gareth, the protagonist of the fourth tale. In the *Morte* the author assigns her also a name, Morgause. Her wedding with the king of Orkney is celebrated shortly after the first time she is mentioned as one of Igraine's daughters (p.5). The Queen of Orkney becomes in this way not only the mother of one of the most famous knights of the Round Table, but also Arthur's half-sister. When Arthur meets her for the first time he desires "to ly by her. Ad so they were agreed, and he begate upon hir Sir Mordred. And she was syster on the modirs syde, Igrayne, unto Arthure" (p. 30). Morgause and Arthur, unconscious of being relatives, have a child, who is one of the main causes of Arthur's destruction.[67]

The example of Morgause is meaningful because it shows that even what could appear as a risible change in the treatment of the material (the mere attribution of a name to a character which is evidently not the protagonist), effectively influences the narration's progress. Morgause is both the one who reveals Gareth's lineage by indicating him as her son (the attempt of discovering his name is the core of the *Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney*) and embodies the mean through which Merlin's prophecy about Arthur's destruction is fulfilled:

> But ye have done a thynge late that God ys displesed with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of youre relame. (p. 32)

The construction of Morgause's identity and the handling of her name are part of the procedure that allowed the author to give his readers a sense of unity and completeness.[68] The same intention is realized also in the creation of the character of Nymue, the woman who imprisons Merlin and in the *Morte* takes his place as magic

[67] Mahoney, p. 648.
[68] Lynch, p. 4.

helper of Arthur and his knights. She is a meaningful example of a female figure whose role was limited to a specific field (the segregation of Merlin) in the sources but was developed by Malory, who created a elaborated character by fusing the narrative roles of different anonymous women. The overlapping of many identities causes some difficulties in the analysis of the character in which they converge: the case of Nymue is emblematic because it provides different interpretative possibilities.

The fact that Malory creates a complex figure such as Nymue and assigns her a name and an identity does not imply that the character is consequently easily recognizable throughout the narration by the readers. The protagonists and co-protagonists of Malory's work are described not only by their proper name, their title or their abilities but also by their relationships, as in the case of Sir Lobel, "Idrus brothir" (p. 128), or Sir Bellangere le Bewse, that "was Sir Alysaundir le Orphelyne sone" (p. 652). References to the characters' past are also frequent: Sir Perymones, for example, "was called the Rede Knyght, that Sir Gareth wanne whan he was called Bewmayns" (p. 642). However, the events reported by the narrator concerning secondary figures do not always find a correspondence in other episodes of the work or of its sources. Sir Marrok is defined as "the good knight that was betrayed with his wiff, for she made hym seven yere a warwolff" (p. 642) but the story is attested neither in the *Morte*, nor in other medieval narrations.[69]

The specifications provided by the author could be considered an attempt to separate secondary characters clearly. The distinction between the figures is not always established by an evident spelling difference in their names, which can be very similar or even identical. In Malory's work, the fair maid of Ascolat and Galahad's mother share the

[69] Shepherd, *Le Morte Darthur*, p. 642.

same name, Elaine. They are both in love with Lancelot, who does not reciprocate them, but while the first dies after being refused by the knight, the second deceives him. The second Elaine makes Lancelot believe that she is Guinevere and with this subterfuge he fathers Galahad. While the first Elaine possessed already her name in Malory's sources, the second did not. *Le Mort le Roi Artu* and the stanzaic *Morte Artu*, which the author reworked for the episodes concerning the lady of Ascolat, did not refer to the woman as Elaine. The similitude between the two characters is probably the reason for Malory's choice to assign them the same name.[70] In this example, the different setting in which the women appear helps the reader to distinguish them, but the process of connecting names and identities in the *Morte* is not always so elementary.

Malory's perseverance in naming secondary figures creates some difficulties in disentangling their individualities, because there are cases in which two names are similar, as happens for example for those of Sir Pellinor and Sir Pelleas, both related to the figure of Nymue (the former saves her from her kidnapper, the latter is her husband).[71] The variability in the spelling of the same name represents an additional problem in the correct identification of the characters: Roger Loomis attests in his study on the use of proper names in medieval Arthurian romances that "neither precise phonetic equivalence nor close resemblance is a final test of the connection of one name with another".[72] The inconsistency of the spelling is attributed to different factors: one of them was the frequent variation caused by scribes, which led to a deep transformation of the word, to the point that

[70] Cherewatuk Karen, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006, pp. 56-57.
[71] Holbrook, Sue E., "Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's Le Morte Darthur", *Speculum*, 4 (1978) p. 183.
[72] Loomis, Roger S., "Some Names in Arthurian Romance Author(s)", *PMLA*, 45 (1930), p. 416.

> when scribal corruptions are taken into account, almost anything could happen to a name. For instance, Gazewilte in the Vulgate romances appears in the following variations: Galenice, Garohilde, Gaelicet, Grewilte and Gazel. The knight who appears in Malory as Ozanna le Cure Hardy may be traced back through the recorded forms Osanain, Osenain, Gosenain, Gornain.[73]

Loomis studies the spelling alterations in the course of time, but the phenomenon is recorded also inside the same text. In the *Morte*, for example, spelling variations can produce two names which denote the same character, as in the case of "Tristam" and "Tristams".

Another problem concerning the characters' identification is that most of them possess a title, which could not only precede the proper name but in some cases also substitute it. Nymue possesses a title too, which is "Lady of the Lake", a rank indication which is attested also in the French Vulgate Cycle.[74] However, the association of the epithet "Lady of the Lake" with the name Nymue creates narrative inconsistency in the *Morte*, because while the former is used for the episode of Sir Pellinor, the latter is employed before it, when King Arthur receives Excalibur. Soon after the scene involving the delivery of the sword, the character called "Lady of the Lake" is killed by Sir Balin. The attribution of the title to Nymue and the resulting problems in the study of the character have been explored by critics, who do not provide a single interpretation for its inconsistency. The issues concerning Nymue's name and identity will be discussed in the next chapter.

[73] Loomis, p. 417.

[74] Holbrook, p. 761.

3.

Nymue's Name

Sue E. Holbrook analyzes the figure of Nymue in Malory's work and declares that

> those who appraise *Le Morte Darthur* for its storytelling should benefit from an ampler acquaintance with Nymue, for she is a sturdy, memorable adjunct in the supporting cast that enriches this work's narrative world.[75]

One of the problems that scholars face in the study of Nymue's character involves the variety of epithets referring to her. Malory's use of different appellations prevents the critics from agreeing upon a single interpretation of the character: determining whether all labels refer to the same woman is still a challenging question. Holbrook provides a list of episodes in which a figure named Nymue appears, and the first one is in the *Tale of King Arthur*, in the section which Shepherd titles "After Thes Questis". On the day of Arthur's wedding, the king and his knights are sitting at the Round Table when a woman followed by a man rides into the hall. The mysterious lady is kidnapped by the man in front of Arthur and his knights, so the king orders Sir Pellinor to rescue her. Her name is revealed to Pellinor by one of her relatives, her cousin Meliot de Logurs, who thanks him for saving her. The woman follows Pellinor to Arthur's court, where Merlin teaches her magical arts and attempts to seduce her. After confining him under a stone, she appears in some of the crucial moments of the plot, and thanks to her intervention critical or

[75]Holbrook, Sue E., "Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's Le Morte Darthur", *Speculum*, 4 (1978), p. 761.

dangerous situations for Arthur and his knights are solved. She uses her magical powers to save the king's life in battle, by making Arthur's sword Excalibur fall from the enemy's hands. With her aid, the sword is recovered by its legitimate owner, who wins the fight.[76]

Her role as Arthur's helper is extended also to the protection and support of the knights of the Round Table. An example is given by the episode of Sir Pelleas' unreciprocated love for the proud lady Ettarde, in which Nymue intervenes as a judge. Her function is in this case to restore equality in love, by punishing the woman, who prefers Gawain to Pelleas. Nymue employs again magic, making Ettarde fall in love with the knight she refused, as he is no longer interested in her. Nymue "rejoised Sir Pelleas, and loved togedyrs during their lyfe" (p. 106).In the last book, Nymue's link with Arthur is reaffirmed by her presence on the boat which brings the wounded king to the Isle of Avalon.

As exemplified in the former passages, the figure of Nymue is employed to fulfill different narrative functions, which could appear contradictory: she is the one who imprisons Arthur's magical ally but becomes the king's protector after Merlin's disappearance. She follows the king to Avalon but on the boat there is also Morgan le Fay, who attempted on many occasions to kill Arthur and whose role in the *Morte* is of magical opponent of her stepbrother. In order to construct the character, Malory took his inspiration mainly from the *Suite du Merlin*, in which the episodes of Merlin's segregation, Arthur's recovery of his sword and Ettarde's punishment are recorded. In the *Suite* there is no mention of the king's travel to Avalon, but the scene is reported at the end of both the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. Malory

[76] Holbrook, p. 774.

originally inserts Nymue among the women who escort the king to his last destination: "Also there was Dame Nynyve, the chyff lady of the laake, whych had wedded Sir Pellyas, the good knight; and thys lady had done muche for Kynge Arthure. […]Thes ladyes brought hym to his grave" (p. 689).

The spelling of the woman's name in the quotation above is one of the three possible variations recorded in the Winchester manuscript. The other two are "Nenyve" and "Nynyue", which is used also in the printed version of the text. "Nymue" is the most common spelling in Caxton's copy, which was the only text that critics had at their disposal until the late forties.[77] In order to uncover the evolution of the multifaceted figure depicted by Malory, scholars studied the recurrence of her name and of the label "Lady of the Lake" in medieval Arthurian texts. The spelling of Nymue's name varies from "Viviane" to "Nymenche", according to the different traditions, but her character is always linked to Merlin's.[78]

In all surviving documents, the wizard's beloved is the responsible for his tragic end. Her first apparition is recorded in Chrétien's romance *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, from which derives also a prose version called *Lancelot*, written by an anonymous author before the Vulgate Cycle, in the early thirteenth century. Both poem and prose concern the knight's youth and narrate his adventures before his meeting with Arthur. Lancelot is a noble orphan, adopted and raised by the Lady of the Lake, who is his mentor and protector. She is described as a woman with supernatural powers, whose ability to perform magic derives from Merlin's teaching. Her relationship with Merlin, however, is less explored than in the Vulgate.[79] The allusion to the wizard in the pre-Vulgate accounts

[77] Holbrook, p. 765.
[78] Holbrook, p. 761.
[79] Corin, Corley, *Lancelot of the Lake*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. VII- XIV.

represents only the desire to give Lancelot's earlier adventures a precise Arthurian narrative frame, through

> the inclusion of episodes or other elements, echoing similar adventures or motifs in other romances, and through allusions to events taking place outside the story and contemporary with it. […] The magical tradition is characteristic of Arthurian romance and here usually evoked by references to Merlin and the time when the adventures began. [80]

The relationship between Merlin and the Lady of the Lake is not crucial in terms of plot development in both *Lancelot* and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. The role of the wizard is here almost irrelevant, because his name is simply a device for the contextualization of Lancelot's performances; naming Merlin means to offer a magical setting for the main action of the romance. In the pre-Vulgate, as in its following medieval re-elaborations, Merlin's apprentice is the one who condemns him to eternal confinement; Merlin's name is used to justify the supernatural abilities of the woman, whose part is more significant in the narration than the one of the wizard.

The material concerning Lancelot's childhood and youth was reworked to elaborate the third romance of the Vulgate Cycle. The Vulgate is known also as the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, because the re-elaboration of the knight's adventures narrated in Chrétien's romance and in the prose "Lancelot" is, together with the Saint Grail quest, the core of the narration. The relationship between the Lady of the Lake and Merlin, like the one between her and her adopted son, are based on those contained in the earlier works, but the figure of the wizard has a wider narrative relevance in the Vulgate. The story of Merlin's fatal love is reported in the *Estoire de Merlin*, the second of the five romances which constitute the Cycle. As indicated by the title, the Vulgate *Merlin* reserves a considerable space to the account of the events concerning the wizard's life, which include also his first meeting with Nymue and the details of their liaison. The *Estoire*

[80] Corley, p. XV.

Merlin is preceded by the *Estoire del Saint Graal* and followed by *Lancelot*, *La Queste del Saint Graal* and the *Morte Artu*; the authors of the texts are still unknown. Part of the material which was used to depict the character of the wizard in the *Estoire* derives from the poem *Merlin*, written around 1200 by Robert de Boron, a French cleric of Burgundy.[81] The content of the poem was reconstructed by scholars from its numerous prose adaptations, because the surviving text is only a fragment. In the *Merlin* – and in the *Estoire* too – the source of Merlin's otherworldly powers is the demonic nature of his father, but the wizard chooses to avoid employing them for evil uses. He becomes the protector of the young Arthur and the first part of the *Estoire* ends with the crowning of the king.[82]

In the Vulgate, the account of Merlin's life proceeds in the *Suite du Merlin*, (Merlin Continuation), which links the earlier events of King Arthur's life reported in the *Estoire de Merlin* with those following his ascent to the throne, recounted in the *Estoire de Lancelot.* The vulgate *Suite* is for the greatest part a pseudo-historical account of the wars which allowed young King Arthur to establish his domain; in the romance the love theme is marginal, apart from the episodes concerning the wizard and the woman he desires.[83]

Around 1220-40 the Vulgate Cycle was reshaped, and in the post-Vulgate *Suite* the role of Merlin is further enlarged. The content of the romance differs from the one of the first *Suite*, because it does not focus on Arhur's battles but on the individual

[81] Rosenberg, Samuel N., "The Prose Merlin and the Suite du Merlin", in Wilhelm, James J., ed., *The Romance of Arthur, New, Expanded Edition: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 305.
[82] Kilber, William W., *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle: Text and Transformations*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009, p. 2.
[83] Pearsall, Derek A., *Arthurian Romance, a Short Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2009, p.44.

adventures of his knights.[84] According to Vinaver, the post-Vulgate Suite was Malory's source for the final scene between Merlin and the Lady of the Lake, but the author of the Morte chose to omit many details concerning the relationship between the two characters. In the post-Vulgate Suite, Merlin tells his apprentice a legend about the goddess Diana and her unfortunate lover, Faunus, who was truculently killed by her. The story mirrors Merlin's destiny because he will be buried alive by his own magic, and condemned to death by the woman he desires. Malory did not report the story of the goddess, and abbreviated the whole passage, reducing it to a simple assertion concerning Merlin's teaching: "he shewed hir many wondirs".[85]

Almost all known medieval sources attribute to Merlin's beloved the responsibility for burying him alive, but her role can subsume more than one narrative function. The attribution of the term "Lady of the Lake" to the young apprentice of Merlin and to the magical creature who raises Lancelot creates perplexity, at least in terms of narrative consistency, because the features of the two female characters are not easily discernible. To the Lady of the Lake is dedicated a part of a work published in the early twentieth century by Allen Paton.[86] The main intent of the research was to describe the women with magical powers in the texts concerning Arthurian matter. Allen Paton's study of medieval Arthurian sources attests the ambiguities in the figure of Merlin's beloved. The scholar examines the intersection of the roles played by the character in the different traditions and explains the difficulty in unraveling her numerous characteristics. Referring to the woman whom Malory calls Nymue, Allen Paton asserts that

[84] Waite, Arthur Edward, *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 1993, p. 231.
[85] Vinaver, Eugène, ed., *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, revised by P. J. C. Field, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 1336-7.
[86] Allen Paton, Lucy, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, Boston: Ginn, 1903.

> she has become the victim of confusion in legend, which is at first perplexing to the student of her nature. In minor episodes and occasionally in those that contain the account of Merlin's love, she is, as I have said in the preceding chapter, identified with the Dame du Lac; except in the story of Pelleas and Ettard, however, in all those which are not connected with Merlin's love the fay plays a part that is consistent with the traits of Niniane as we shall find them emphasized in the principal story told of her.[87]

The scholar indicates with two different epithets the main narrative roles of the character: with the term "Lady of the Lake", she means the benevolent protector of Lancelot, with "Niniane" the young woman whom Merlin attempts to seduce. In the quotation above, the expression "fay" is referred to Nymue: it is used in order to denote a woman who does not necessary belong to the supernatural world, but simply acquired her powers through learning. Allen Paton hypothesizes that the roles may reflect two different characters, which, in the course of time, converged into a single identity.[88]

The identification between the woman loved by Merlin and the Lady of the Lake (despite the different narrative weight that the latter had in the different versions of Merlin's story) is attested in all medieval narrations preceding the *Morte Darthur*. Holbrook records only one exception, the Vulgate *Suite,* in which the two identities remain separate. The only known medieval text in which Merlin's apprentice remains anonymous is the *Prophecies de Merlin*,[89] a prose written around 1270, attributed to Maistre Richart d'Irlande. In the work, the narrator identifies himself with the wizard, who dictates his divinations to the scribes. The book is mainly a series of allusions to the political context of the thirteenth century,[90] and the Lady of the Lake is inserted among the characters as Merlin's object of desire. In this version the woman causes Morgan's

[87] Allen Paton, p. 204.
[88] Allen Paton, pp. 202-4.
[89] Holbrook, p. 761.
[90] Lacy, Norris J., "Prophecies de Merlin", in Kilber, William, *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1995, p. 763.

envy, because of her success in obtaining magical teaching without granting something in return (she did not surrender to Merlin but acquires supernatural abilities).[91]

The narrative details selected by the author to compose his version of Nymue's character can be traced back to the above-mentioned Arthurian medieval tradition. In Malory's *Morte Darthur* there are clear references to the Lady of the Lake as Arhur's protector or Merlin's beloved, but her part in Lancelot's rearing is not mentioned. The only allusion to their tie concerns the knight's confirmation: the Lady of the Lake "confermed hym Sir Launcelot du Lake" (p. 466). The episode, however, is merely reported in order to justify the choice of Galahad's name: "Galahad" was the name assigned to his father Lancelot when he was baptized "at the fountayne stone" (p. 466). Lancelot's name changes after his confirmation, when his godmother assigns him a new one, which is coupled with her epithet, "du Lake". Vinaver indicates two distinct figures corresponding to the appellation "Lady of the Lake" in the index of proper names of his critical edition: one of them corresponds to the lady killed by Balin, the other is Merlin's love, Nymue.[92]

In Malory, the words "Lady of the Lake" and "Nymue" have a non-homogeneous distribution, because they are not always linked: the first time in which the character of the Lady of the Lake appears, she is nameless. The term "Lady of the Lake" is found in the first section of the first tale of Malory's work, titled "How Uther Pendragon Gate the Noble Conqueror King Arthur"(p. 37); the proper name is not used until the account of Arthur's wedding feast (p.66). The name of Nymue and the epithet are connected when the woman's goes back to Arthur's court with Pellinor and from this point onwards the two denominations appear linked. As Holbrook observes, there are some possible variants

[91] Berthelot, Anne, "Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake", *Arthuriana*, 10 (2000), p. 60.
[92] Vinaver, p. 1336

of Nymue's appellation: she is designated as the "Lady of the Lake" (p. 37), the "damosel of the lake"(p. 77), or as "chief Lady of the Lake" (p. 641). A possible alternative is also "one of the damesels of the Lady of the Lake" (p. 78). The denomination indicates that the epithet "Lady of the Lake" implies a multiple reference. According to Holbrook, Nymue is only one of the ladies of the Lake, whose number is unspecified in the *Morte* but who are undoubtedly at least two. The narrator separates the ruler of the Lake from the members of her court, who share with her the indication of their place of dwelling in their alias. The scholar thinks that

> contrary to what has been thought, Malory has two Ladies of the Lake – not three or more and not one, who is now good, now bad, now dead, now alive – and one of them is indeed Nymue.[93]

Holbrook alludes to the difficulty of determining whether the woman in question is a single and consistent character in the *Morte*, or is simply the combination of more aspects that the same figure acquired in different traditions, summarized by Malory. A character called "Lady of the Lake" is beheaded by Balin, who "smote of hyr hede before Kynge Arthure" (p. 43); Balin's attack is considered an act of revenge against the person responsible for his mother's death, as the knight explains: "she was causer of my modir was brente, thorow hir falsehode and trechory" (p. 43). In the post-vulgate *Suite*, the narrator does not provide a name for the woman, which is identified with the Lady of the Lake only by Malory. In attributing the name, Malory creates one of the cases in which the story is inconsistent, because a character with an identical epithet re-appears later in the narration, combined with the name Nymue. Considering the fact that Malory does normally try to avoid evident supernatural intervention in his work, readers might assume that the first and the second lady simply share the same title but are separate characters.[94]

[93] Holbrook, p. 762.
[94] Holbrook, p. 764.

It is plausible that a minor figure does not follow the rules of narrative consistency in the *Morte*, as happens in the aforementioned example of Sir Harleuse le Barbeuse, but in the case of the Lady of the Lake there is another evidence in favour of the theory of double identity. Even if there are other characters whose presence in more than one scene of the work compromises the modern conception of textual consistency, this is not the case of the Lady of the Lake, if we assume that there is an homonymy between two figures. The idea of the double identity is reinforced by the fact that one of the references made by the narrator to the Lady of the Lake named Nymue is followed by the observation that she "ded grete goodness unto Kynge Arthure and to all his knygtes thorow her sorsery and enchauntemetns" (p. 597). Balin is inserted among Arthur's knights but he evidently did not obtain any benefit from the magic performed by the woman, who is on the contrary guilty of using it against the warriors: "by inchauntement and by sorcery she hath bene the destroyer of many good knightes" (p. 43). The attitude of the first and the second Lady of the Lake towards Arthur's knights is opposite: this reflection leads to consider the two women separate entities.

Patrick Ford agrees with Holbrook's observation concerning the fact that Nymue is not the only possessor of the title "Lady of the Lake".[95] The epithet does not denote her noble origins but rather a physical place of residence, which is not even a real lake in Malory's medieval sources, but merely an illusion, created in order to protect its sovereign and her court. In Malory's work, the lake is a natural element, although connected with supernatural aspects. The first time King Arthur sees Excalibur, the sword is brandished by an arm emerging from the water of the lake: "a laake the which was a fayre water and brode. And in the myddis Arthure was ware of an arme clothed in whyght

[95] Ford, Patrick K., "The Death of Merlin in the Chronicle of Elis Gruffydd", *Viator,* 7 (1976), p. 382.

samite, that helde a fayre swerde in that honed" (p. 37). Merlin indicates at this point the Lady of the Lake as the possessor of the sword, and explains to his king that "there ys a grete roche, and therein ys as fayre a paleyce as ony on erthe, and rychely besayne. And thys damesel woll com to you anone, and than speke ye fayre to hir, than she may giff you that swerde" (p. 37). The woman resides in the castle, which in Malory's sources is hidden by the lake, and in the *Morte* is placed outside the water. Although Merlin refers to her as "damesel" in this passage, he names her "Lady of the Lake" when his king questions him about her identity: "they saw a damesell goynge uppon the laake. «What damoysel is that?» said Arthur. «That is the Lady of the Lake» seyde Merlion" (p. 37).

In order to provide more evidence to the theory of the separation between the ruler of the lake and her courtiers (among which Nymue is inserted), Ford focuses his attention on the episode of the first meeting of Nymue and Merlin.

> It is striking that, in this account, it is not the Lady of the Lake herself, but one of her "damsels" who plays the leading part; clearly, some sort of re-analysis has taken place and "Lady" has become "ladies".[96]

Ford attributes the change in Nymue's status to the process of the sources' reworking. The woman is downgraded from her role of ruler of the Lake, a function which is assigned to her in the previous narrations, to a simple courtier. In Malory, however, the two indications of rank seem to be interchangeable, because the person responsible for Merlin's segregation is referred to both as "damsel" (p. 105) and as "lady" of the Lake (p. 106). Ford explains this slight semantic distinction as "internal confusion" in Malory's text.[97]

Ford's interpretation of the epithets' distribution does not convince Kim Hoyonjin, who is persuaded that the assignation of appositions is the result of a conscious process.

[96] Ford, p. 382.
[97] Ford, p. 382.

While the former attributes the different epithets to the lack of consistency of the work, the latter states that the convergence of the term "lady" and "damosel" to the same woman is always justified, because the two nouns are not casually distributed in the work. The first one is seen as a synonym of "dame" and their attribution varies according to the marital status of their bearer: he notices that the names of women are preceded by the term "damsel" when they are unmarried, and by "dame" when they have already a husband or are about to get married, as happens for example in the case of other minor female characters, named Fileloly and Lawrell. Therefore, according to Hoyonjin, "in Malory's Camelot there is, in fact, no dame who is simultaneously entitled to be a damsel or maiden".[98] The critic's observation, however, could not be applied to Nymue, even if she is listed among other female characters of the Morte who change their apposition in the course of the story. Nymue is defined as "damosel" even when there is a clear reference to her wedding with Pelleas: "the Damesell of the Lake that hyght Nynyve, which wedded the good knyght Sir Pelleas" (p. 577).

Despite the apparently indistinct use of the nouns "dame" and "damesel" before the specification "of the Lake", Holbrook notices that the narrative context in which the figure is inserted might help the readers to identify her with the right woman, along with Malory's frequent specifications concerning her proper name and her past actions. Holbrook enumerates seven separate occurrences of the phrase "Lady of the Lake", but are all coupled with the name "Nymue" and, when not differently specified, the term unequivocally substitutes the name "Nymue". The only exception is the scene in which the woman consigns the sword to Arthur,[99] where she is identified both by the setting (the

[98] Hyonjin, Kim, *The Economy of Love, The Knight Without the Sword: A Social Landscape of Malorian Chivalry*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000, p. 42.
[99] Holbrook, p. 764.

lake) and by her narrative function as the "fay" of Malory's sources, the Lady of the Lake of the French texts.

As happens in the sources, Excalibur is given by the woman to Arthur, and the king promises her whatever she desires in return. She does not immediately express her wish, but after a while she rides to the king's court in order to make him her request. Short before her arrival a damsel goes to Arthur's court, carrying a sword, which can be extracted from its scabbard only by a valiant knight. Balin succeeds in taking it, but according to the other knights he does not have the necessary attributes to keep it; the other warriors believe that he "dud nat this adventure only by might but by wycchecrauffte" (p. 43). At this point the Lady of the Lake makes her entrance, and asks Arthur "the hede of the knight that hath wonne the swerde other ellis the damesels hede that brought hir" (p. 43), but the king refuses to fulfill such a cruel request. When Balin hears that the woman wants him dead, he attacks and kills her. Holbrook refuses Vinaver's interpretation concerning the identity of the Ladies of the Lake: in her opinion, the character who is killed is the lake's supernatural ruler, to whom the king asks Excalibur. Considering the author's attitude towards otherworldly powers, in the *Morte Darthur* it is plausible, even for a woman who practices magical arts, to perish as the consequence of a trained warrior's attack. The fact that she can perform magic does not necessarily make her invulnerable. While in Vinaver's opinion Nymue and the Lady of the Lake correspond to a single identity, which differs from the figure murdered by the knight, Holbrook dissents. Referring to the Lady of the Lake killed by Balin, she observes that the author "takes pains to disassociate her from Nymue, perhaps as much because of Balin's accusation of falsity as because she has become a moribund character".[100]

[100] Holbrook, p. 754.

Despite his evident effort in characterizing the secondary figures of his story, it is still difficult to determine whether Malory had a precise and consistent set of attributes and actions in mind for each of them. The epithet "Lady of the Lake" is one of the cases in which there is an apparent contrast in the features ascribed to it. Field suggests that,

> since Malory would have had no intention either that the name-form should represent one character or that it should represent two, his reader must determine the question from the remainder of the *Morte Darthur*, including its sources insofar as they are implied in and consistent with it. […] Decisions about identity and difference would no longer require 'clear evidence' to override the normal presumption that the same name implies the same character, but could properly be distinguished on the basis of the smallest details.[101]

The authorial diligence in combining past events concerning the life of the characters with their names is an aspect that could be taken into consideration while analyzing the term "Lady of the Lake" and its multiple references. Malory's narrative technique helps the reader to separate definitively the individualities of Nymue and the first Lady of the Lake: while the former is described often as the lady who "wedded the good knight Sir Pelleas" (pp. 577; 597; 689) – a statement which makes her consistently recognizable throughout the story – there is no mention in the *Morte* of past events combined with the name of the latter. The significant episode of Excalibur's delivery, unlike Nymue's wedding, leaves no trace in the character's naming, because it is never mentioned in conjunction with its female protagonist. The proper name "Nymue" alludes to a more characterized and consistent figure, while Malory reserves to the first Lady of the Lake only a cursory apparition. Despite the fact that her contribution to the story is less relevant than the one of her namesake, the first Lady performs an important narrative function: she embodies for the first time – if we exclude a single statement concerning Morgan's studies of occult in a nunnery – the association between female characters and magic in the *Morte*.

[101] Field, Peter J. C., *Malory: Text and Sources*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998, p. 80.

Even if her epithet is not combined with the term "fay", which is Morgan's prerogative in the *Morte*, the first Lady of the Lake possesses otherworldly powers too, and in the previous literary tradition she is clearly identified with a magical figure. In the Arthurian works which preceded Malory's, she owes her powers to Merlin's teaching, because her character and Nymue are joined in a single identity. In Malory, the Lady of the Lake conserves her link with magic, although there is no indication of its derivation from the wizard. Malory's ruler of the Lake is not associated with the powers of occult as explicitly as she is in the sources, in which she

> maintains an elaborate disguise for her realm, a body of water which conceals her estate and its manors. In some texts (e.g. the Post-Vulgate *Suite de Merlin*) the illusion of the lake is established by Merlin; the *Lancelot* does not elaborate on its origin but it is clear here that the Lake's magic is controlled, if not originally generated, by the Dame and her agents. [102]

In Malory, her otherworldly "craftes" are represented by the lake itself, which does not conceal the woman's dwelling anymore, but is the place where Excalibur is safely kept. The tradition reserved to magic a more incisive part in defining her figure, but in the *Morte* her role as the fay that nourishes Lancelot and protects him is cancelled. I remind to the reader the scarce interest of the author in magic: Malory's attitude towards occult influenced significantly the narrative treatment of the Lady of the Lake. While in the French texts the Dame du Lac gives to his protégé a magical ring, an evident product of her witchcraft, which warns her when he is in danger, Malory eliminates the episodes concerning Lancelot's youth and with them her benign supernatural influence upon the knight's destiny. [103]

Her talent in the use of magic is shown merely in the scene of her first apparition, when King Arthur convinces her to give him the weapon. The link between her and the

[102] Larrington, Carolyne, "The Enchantress, the Knight and the Cleric: Authorial Surrogates in Arthurian Romance", in Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson, eds., *Arthurian Literature*, vol. 25, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008, p. 52.
[103] Allen Paton, p. 192.

lake is less clear than it is in the previous literary elaborations of the story. Apart from her epithet, and Merlin's declaration concerning her place of dwelling, which is near the water, her relationship with the lake is indicated by the sword itself. The narrator does not specify whom the arm belongs to, or how it had been placed inside the lake, but the woman knows how to take Excalibur from it, and explains to the king how to do it: "go ye into yondir barge and rowe youreselffe to the swerde, and take hit and the scawberde with you" (p. 37). Malory combines a common element of medieval military life with a fairy-tale setting and obtains a surreal image: an arm, which could be associated to a noble warrior, because it is covered by a precious white cloth, emerges from the water, so it clearly does not belong to a human being. As Allen Paton states in her study, in medieval tradition "Excalibur is always an other-world gift, whether Arthur draws it from an anvil of iron set in a stone, or whether he takes it from the land beneath the waves".[104] In the case of the *Morte*, the king simply rows to the middle of the lake in an ordinary boat, and the ruler of the place allows him to take the sword.

The figures of the two Ladies of the Lake are different, although their common origin makes them similar in some of their traits (their link with magic and their epithet). The first Lady of the Lake maintains a key function in Arthur's destiny, while it is thanks to the second that the king is protected from Morgan's murder attempts. Nymue and Morgan represent two opposing manifestations of the link between female characters and supernatural faculties, which is explicitly established by the Lake's ruler, because

> the bestowal of Excaleber occasions the first of otherworldly feminine interventions in Arthur's life, when his own sword, an early motif of his royal authority through its free acquisition from stone and anvil, shatters, failing him.[105]

[104] Allen Paton, p. 198.
[105] Heng, Geraldine, "Enchanted Ground, the Feminine Subtext in Malory", in Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* p. 836.

King Arthur is therefore indirectly linked to otherworldly powers, which he unconsciously exercises too, when he passes the test of extracting a sword from an anvil and a stone in order to ascend to the throne. Unfortunately, his effort is repaid by a magical token which does not fulfill his expectations. Therefore, he replaces it as soon as possible with a more suitable weapon, which is delivered to him by a woman. Despite her originally meaningful role in the Arthurian saga, the part of the lake's ruler is considerably reduced in Malory's work, because short after her first and only intervention as the king's helper she is eliminated. However, Nymue takes her role and title after her disappearance.

Even after having drawn the distinction between the two women which are referred to by the term "Lady of the Lake", Nymue remains an elaborate figure, to whom many actions and qualities are ascribed in the work. Holbrook reflects upon the different functions that her character fulfills in the narration and inspects their compatibility in terms of narrative development, taking into consideration Malory's sources, his authorial characteristics and the encyclopedic intent of the *Morte*. The scholar concludes that,

> within the obvious internal chronology and narrative sequence of *Le Morte Darthur*, Nymue develops with acceptable logic: initially a damsel in distress, transitionally a sorcerer's apprentice, finally a benevolent sorceress on the side of good knights and particularly Arthur's court. To be sure, we have a character who is not cut from whole cloth, and the seams are visible; nevertheless, Nymue emerges as a consistently sympathetic figure, memorable more as Pelleas's beloved wife than as Merlin's fatal lover.[106]

Nymue's character represents masterfully the result of Malory's process of creation, which allows his work to combine the elements previously contained in disparate narratives. Although Malory's work does not always respect the modern conception of narrative consistency, the systematic analysis of Nymue's acts and attributes allows his readers to appreciate the authorial virtuosity.

[106] Holbrook, p. 765.

4.

Main Narrative Functions of Nymue in the *Morte*

When Malory chose to compose his version of Arthur's story, Nymue's character – although variously named – had been part of its tradition for almost three centuries. The literary evolution of her figure was at least partly known to the author of the *Morte Darthur*, who selected some of the peculiar features usually attributed to her (her role in Merlin's unfortunate destiny and her link with magic, for example) in order to make her, if not an easily recognizable character, at least a figure with whom contemporary readers probably had a certain acquaintance. Malory worked on the creation of an extensive literary composition, which condensed the material concerning King Arthur's "noble hystoyre" (p. 815) into a single elaboration, including in its plot also the adventures of his most renowned knights. Malory's world is densely populated by a large number of minor figures and his multiple sources of inspiration create an innovative elaboration of secondary female characters. The narrative choices allow Nymue's literary development in terms of complexity in characterization, and increase the number of scenes in which she is involved. Her figure, however, did not originate in Malory's sources, but was the evolution of previous female characters, which were based on Arthurian and pre-Arthurian literature.

According to John Rhys, Nymue is an example of the traces left in the Arthurian tradition by Celtic narrative: the scholar identifies her with the character of Rhiannon, the wife of the prince Pwyll, who is the protagonist of a story inserted in a Welsh collection of folk tales, called "Four Branches of Mabinogi". The work is to be found in fourteenth-century manuscripts, and some of its fragments were discovered even in documents of the thirteenth century, although their origin is thought be even older.[107] The motivation which induces Rhys to draw a parallel between the two figures is clarified in his work, in which he explains that the name of Malory's heroine might derive (via the post-Merlin *Suite* and its sources) from the

> misreading and miscopying to that of Rhiannon, which in the 12th century and later would be written Riannon. As to the role of Rhiannon, she offers her hand to Pwyll, even as the Lake Damsel does to Pelleas. [108]

It is not merely Nymue's attitude towards her husband-to-be that induced Rhys to couple the two figures, but also their link with the supernatural, because Rhiannon is portrayed as an otherworldly creature. Allen Paton inserts her among the pre-Arthurian fays, who possess inexplicable and mysterious attributes. Rhiannon's magical white horse represents the woman's bond with magic: the animal gallops faster than any other mortal horse, so no human can reach her while she is riding it. Even Pwyil fails the challenge, and begs her to stop; at the prince's request she halts her horse. The woman declares her love to Pwyil, who immediately reciprocates her feeling, because he is stunned by her incomparable beauty.[109] The literary figure of a lady rider, who is also able to exercise otherworldly powers, originates from a mythological context. Rhiannon is considered a transfiguration of an ancient Celtic goddess named Rigantona, which means "great

[107] Ford, Patrick, ed., *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, Berkley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008, pp. 1-4.
[108] Rhys, John., ed., *Studies in Arthurian Legend*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004, p. 284.
[109] Allen Paton, Lucy, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, Boston: Ginn, 1903, p. 3-5.

queen", but her characteristics connect her also to the goddess Epona, whose figure was always associated with horses.[110] The two deities are transfigured in the *Mabinogi* into an earthly woman, who has a privileged contact with powers which do not pertain to mortals. This characteristic is revealed not only by the presence of Rhiannon's horse but also by her magical birds, whose tweeting is audible even in the distance and is able to bring the dead back to life.

From the early thirteenth century, Rhiannon's character is inserted in an Arthurian literary context and her name, altered by authors and clerics in a progression of continuous reworking becomes "Niniane" or "Nymue". Her nature of horsewoman remains, even when the character's derivation from the Celtic myth is less evident. The account of the first meeting of Nymue (Viviane) and Merlin in the post-Vulgate *Suite* seems to be based on a mythological archetype, due to the lady's characterization: she is defined as a "damoisele cacheresse", a hunting lady:

> she was one of the most beautiful who had ever entered King Arthur's court. She was dressed in a short, green robe and had a horn of ivory slung at her neck; she carried a bow and an arrow in her hand and was well equipped as a huntress.[111]

Not only are Viviane's dress and equipment described as meaningful attributes of her presence, but the first relevant item of information that the reader receives about her concerns her prettiness. Breuer studies the characters linked to the faerie world in medieval Arthurian romances and observes that they appear often as extremely attractive women. They use their immeasurable loveliness in order to seduce (and in some cases to manipulate) the men that they choose as their partners. The resoluteness in the choice of their lover characterizes the fairies, which do not remain passive objects of desire but act

[110] Monaghan, Patricia, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009, p. 394.
[111] Lacy, Norris J, ed., *Lancelot-Grail Cycle, the Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, vol. VIII, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010, p. 123.

enterprisingly to pursue their goal.[112] In the case of the post-Vulgate Viviane, the indication of her exceedingly pleasant appearance can be interpreted as a link with otherworldly powers, although at this point of the story she has not been in contact with Merlin. Another allusion to Vivian's origin is her association with animals whose colour is – not incidentally – the same as Rhiannon's magic horse. Viviane's horse is white too, as her dog and the stag they are pursuing. Her ivory horn is a further link between the colour and her figure. The only variation from the supernatural symbolism of white elements, apart from her green dress (whose colour probably had a realistic mimetic function in the forest) is a pack of black hounds, of whom the woman has lost control. Viviane's entrance is very noisy, because of the dogs' barking and her screams. The stag creates a great confusion among the king's hosts too, because it jumps on the table where they are sitting.

Allen Paton examines the scene of the lady's first impetuous contact with Arthur's court and observes that

> it is, however, clear at once that we are touching fairyland and […] in our study of fairy life we have by this time learned to suspect the vicinity of faërie when we find before our eyes a white stag and brachet. [113]

The scholar proves that the theme involving these animals and a beautiful huntress is found – even though organized in a less elaborated structure than in the post-Vulgate *Suite* – in other sources. Although the lady's pet is not explicitly marked as magic, in medieval literary imagery white dogs represent a connection with the supernatural, because in many narrations they "are sent to this world as messengers or gift to mortals". The fact that Viviane owns a white dog is another feature which expresses the derivation

[112] Breuer, Heidi, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 116.
[113] Allen Paton, p. 228.

of her figure from a magical archetype.[114] Malory maintains the allusion to fairyland in his elaboration of the episode by declaring the animals' colour, but his choice of omitting the details concerning the woman's physical aspect makes Nymue more similar to a mortal than to an otherworldly creature. Nymue is not characterized in this episode, but is simply defined as a lady rider:

> Ryght so as thet sate, there com renninge inne a whyght herte into the hall, and a whyght brachet nexte hym, and thirty couple of blacke renninge houndis com aftir with a grete cry. And the herte wente aboute the Rounde Table, and as he wente by the syde bourdis the brachet ever boote hym by the buttocks and pulde outte a pece, wherethorow the herte lope a grete lepe and overthrew a knight that sate at the syde bourde. […] Ryght so come in a lady on a whyght palfrey (p. 66).

Nymue's defining attributes are cancelled in Malory's redaction. Her horn and bow, which qualify her as a huntress in the post-Vulgate, are not mentioned. The only characterizing link with her occupation remains her chase of the wild animal, which causes a knight to fall from his seat. Nymue's main concern, however, is not the prey but her dog, because, as soon as it follows the prey on the table, it is captured and taken away by a knight: "a knyght arose and toke up the brachet, and so wente for the oute of the halle, and toke hys horse and rode hus way with the brachett" (p. 66).

Although Malory altered significantly Nymue's depiction as a huntress, her most notable characteristic is still her occupation, which remains – despite the lack of details – easily deducible. She is a woman who is involved in an activity which is not commonly associated, in medieval literary context, with her gender. Hunting was considered a typical male occupation, which is exercised occasionally also by Arthur's knights. In the description of Tristan's youth, for example, it is inserted among his interests:

> he laboured in huntynge and in hawking – never jantylman more than ever we herde rede of. And as the booke seyth, he began good mesures of blowynge of beestes of venery and beestes of chaace and all manner of vermaynes. (p. 231)

[114] Allen Paton, pp. 229- 30.

If compared to Nymue's, the quotation above is very meticulous in the description of the various hunting techniques handled by the hero. Not only is the reader informed about Tristan's ability in the hunt with the bow or with the hawk, but the terms referring to the hunt include also the kind of preys that the knight is able to chase: the nouns "venery", "chaace" and "vermaynes" include a great variety of animals, ranging from the boar to the fox.[115] The differences between Tristan's characterization and Nymue's can be explained by the fact that the description of the two figures focuses on different characteristics and has specific functions. Tristan's initiation to hunt defines his outstanding capacity in a typically male diversion, which determines his growth in "myght and strength" (p. 231): hunting can be interpreted in this passage as the meaningful formative experience of a young man. The details are expressed in this case in order to display the hero's distinctive attributes. In the *Morte* there is a peculiar link between Sir Tristan and the hunt, because he is also defined as the noble man who invented "all the tearmys we have yet of hawkinge and huntinge" (p. 231).

In the case of Nymue, as Anne Rooney observes while commenting on the passage concerning her entrance, the hunting theme represents a narrative device, which is used in order to announce a new adventure. Rooney believes that the technique employed by the narrator is not only a recognizable literary pattern, which is repeated throughout the *Morte*, but is also the representation of the medieval idea of adventure. Hunting is used, in association with the character of Nymue, to introduce

> not only a single adventure but the entire concept of *aventure*. The terms in which adventure is first defined in this early episode are to stand for the reminder of the work, augmented by later events, but unaltered in essence. […] This passage is to resound throughout the *Morte Darhur*, as the ensuing events establish the court's devotion to adventure.[116]

[115] Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* New York: Norton, 2004, p. 79.
[116] Rooney, Anne, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993, p. 59.

The function of Nymue's character in her first contact with Arthur's court is clarified by Merlin's premonition, which the wizard reveals to the court shortly before the woman's arrival: "Merlion wente to all the knyghtes of the Rounde Table and bade hem sitte stille – «that none of you remeve, for shall se a straunge and a mervailous adventure»" (p. 66). Adventure is presented here as one of the primary interests of knights: the expectation created by Merlins' words makes them obey his suggestion, so the entire court remains seated until the protagonist of the new adventure enter in the room. Merlin's speech creates expectations not only among the knights he is addressing, but also among the readers of the *Morte*, because precognition is one of the defining characteristics of his figure.

The first impression that the court's response gives to the reader, however, is passiveness; on the contrary, it is Merlin again who urges the knights' intervention, because none of them, even after witnessing the kidnapping of the woman, offers to rescue her. The king demonstrates his disinterest and emotional detachment from the situation too, because he denies his help to Nymue and he is also "gladde" for her abduction, "for she made such a noise" (p. 66). Merlin is the only person who exhorts the warriors and Arthur to intervene: "ye may nat leve hit so – this adventure – so lightly, for thes adventure muste be brought to an ende, othir ellis hit woll be disworshyp to you and to youre feste" (p. 66). The focus of Merlin's suggestion is honour, which is one of the main incentives for the knights' actions; after Merlin's second speech, King Arthur answers him "I woll […] that all be done by your advice", and finally orders to his men to rescue Nymue and bring back the animals. Sir Pellinor is designated for the purpose of saving the lady, while to Sir Gawain and Sir Torre the king asks to find the deer and the dog respectively.

It is not striking that the value of the woman is not considered higher than the one of her dog and prey. Nymue's presence provides to the court with the occasion to demonstrate its capacity to face risks and obtain glory. As Amy Kaufmann states, the distribution of knights

> to achieve three separate quests […] underscores the fact that women are seen as objects through which knightly prowess can be proved and the king's reputation upheld. To his errand court, Nynyve's personal value is equal to that of a dog or a deer.[117]

Kaufman's observation refers to a typical role of women in Arthurian medieval literature. In the great majority of cases, the importance of female characters lies in their value as objects of desire, so they do not normally have an active role in the narration, because it is reserved to male figures. Even if Nymue is represented in the scene of her kidnapping as a damsel in danger, her character is not depicted as passive: after the abduction of her dog she speaks directly to the king, asking for his help, because "the brachet ys myne that the knyght ladde away", and even if Arthur tries to avoid his involvement in the question, he is at the end almost morally obliged by his counselor to fulfill her plea. Moreover, the activity in which Nymue is absorbed implies the use of physical force and resistance, which are considered positive attributes in male characters, to whom is generally ascribed an active role in the *Morte*. Terms such as "hardy" (p. 45) and "might" are used in the text to describe knightly behaviour, so they are never applied to women, although Nymue demonstrates to be as strong and resistant as a man, at least in the first episode in which she is represented.

The characterization of Nymue's figure leads Amy Kaufmann to consider her irruption at Arthur's wedding feast as a test, which is not recognized as such by the king, who denies his help twice.

[117] Kaufman, Amy, "The Law of the Lake, Malory's Sovereign Lady", *Arthuriana*, 17 (2007), pp. 59.

> The Round Table may have been established as a protective force, but is unable to monitor itself. Nynyve feigns victimization in order to highlight, and then rectify, its shortcomings. Her 'helpless inaction' is therefore an action in and of itself.[118]

The idea that Nymue's entrance could be more intentional than it effectively appears to be does not change the main purpose of the character's presence in the scene. The lady's apparition is inserted at this point of the story in order to represent a challenge for the king and his court. Even if at first the warriors and their sovereign seem to fail the test, by almost ignoring the stunning events taking place in front of their eyes, they prove, in the end, their good reputation. The narrative pattern of a female character judging the respectability and gentleness of a man is common in the *Morte*, in which the opinion of women concerning knightly duties and attitudes is held in high esteem.[119] In the case of Nymue, the symbolism which characterizes her entrance is not considered by Arthur's court as a sign of a supernatural event, nor as a signal attesting the presence of a character which has the power and the right to judge its ineptitude. The warriors do not consider the lady rider's personal misfortunes as events concerning their responsibility, so they do not feel obliged to aid her.

Nymue's characterization and attributes do not help the knights of the Round Table to recognize her as an otherworldly entity, but Allen Paton recognizes that her figure carries a marked resemblance not only with the goddess Rhiannon, but with a deity of the Roman pantheon: Diana. There are some common features that the two goddesses share: their representation as huntresses, their love for horses and their link with natural elements as lakes or woods. The comparison between the "demoiselle chacheresse" of the medieval Arthurian romances and Diana is explored by Allen Paton, who links the Roman goddess to the fairies of medieval romances, and recognizes that in Nymue's case the

[118] Kaufmann, p. 59.
[119] Kaufmann, p. 60.

similarities are more notable.[120] In Malory, however, the link between the deity and Nymue is less evident than it is in his sources, where the allusions to the goddess' name in connection with Nymue's character are reiterated. In the Vulgate *Suite* Nymue (Niniane), is the daughter of Diana's godson, Dionas.[121] Diana's name is echoed also by the Lady of the Lake's place of dwelling in the post-Vulgate *Suite*, because the lake is called "Lake of Dyane", and Diana is the protagonist of the story narrated by Merlin to his pupil. Allen Paton recognizes in Nymue's proper name in the Vulgate a possible explanation for the parallel drawn between the deity and Merlin's beloved: the name "Niniane" was also known as "Niane" in France and the small spelling difference between the fay's name and the goddess's might have partially determined the overlapping of their identities and attributes.[122] In Arthurian French texts written before the *Morte*, the correspondence between the two women's qualities is more evident than in Malory; in the *Prophecies de Merlin*, for example, the narrator uses the adjective "chaste" to describe Merlin's beloved, and chastity is one of Diana's attributes in classical and medieval literature.[123] In the *Morte*, Nymue is depicted as a chaste character too, because she chooses to use her newly acquired magical powers in order to protect her virginity from Merlin's annoying advances: "allwayes he lay aboute to have hir maydynhode" (p. 79).

Even if the *Morte* does not include the legend of Faunus' ill-fated love for Diana, Merlin's attraction to Nymue follows the same narrative pattern, because both stories lead to the destruction or to the neutralization of an unwanted suitor by a powerful and determined woman. In classical and medieval literature vulnerability is a quality which is usually ascribed to Diana's lovers, because when the unlucky man ceases to represent the

[120] Allen Paton, p. 246.
[121] Berthelot, Anne, "Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake", *Arthuriana*, 10 (2000), p. 69.
[122] Allen Paton, pp. 246-7.
[123] Allen Paton, p. 238.

goddess' object of desire, he is usually killed or silenced. Even if Nymue's attitude towards Merlin is less aggressive than Diana's towards her suitor, it is clear that the result of the women's decision is similar, because both establish their power upon their men, who are unable or unwilling to defend themselves.[124] The similarities between the two female characters appear more evident if Nymue's entrance is read as a symbolic representation. Kaufmann interprets the hunting tableau by assigning an identity to the animals which are its main protagonists: the brachet and the stag. The critic recognizes in the stag the horned god of the Celtic mythology, while the brachet stands for

> an avatar of the divine feminine, especially of Diana. Nynyve herself has been linked repeatedly to the goddess Diana […] in the Vulgate romances, when Merlin pays a visit to the emperor of Rome, he 'first manifest himself in the form of a white stag'. As we watch the symbolic animals at play, we see that the bitch aims to harass, control and contain her free-running consort, the stag. These animal antics serve as a preview of what is to come when Nynyve works to reign in patriarchal excess at Arthur's court.[125]

The figures of the stag and the dog can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand they symbolize the deities which pertain to Roman mythology – the stag was also the animal sacred to Diana –, and on the other they stand for two Arthurian magic characters. In her depiction as a brachet, Nymue is the smallest though the prevailing animal (because the dog is able to bite its prey); she embodies thus the faculty of mighty women to warn their male counterparts. Nymue's characterization as a hunter and her transfiguration into the figure of a female dog, present her as a person who can judge and sanction a community dominated by men, which forgot its founding purpose: the respect of the knightly code. The woman experiences the court's lack of readiness in offering aid to a lady, and the king's indifference to the dramatic situation in which she is involved. At this point, the

[124] LaFarge, Catherine, "The Hand of the Huntress: Repetition and Malory's *Morte Darthur* ", in Isabel Armstrong, ed., *New Feminist Discourse*, New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 267.
[125] Kaufmann, p. 58.

entombment of Merlin – the king's counselor – and his substitution can be read as a measure to re-establish equality.

Nymue the huntress has an admonitory function for Arthur and his court. She is one of the female characters who evaluate the quality of men by providing them with new challenges, both physical and psychological. Nymue's role is reflected and amplified by the presence of a second hunting lady in the *Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queene Gwenyvere*. The second woman is the protagonist of a brief episode in which she hits Sir Lancelot (who is resting) with an arrow, while she is pursuing a prey:

> Ryght so cam that lady, the hunteres, that knew by her dogge that the hynde was at the soyle in that welle and thyther she cam streyte and I founde the hynde; and anone as she has spyed her she put a brode arow in her bowe and shot at the hynde – and so she overshotte the hynde, and so by myssefortune the arow smote Sir Launcelot in the thycke of the buttok, over the barbys. (p. 619)

Lancelot is described by Merlin as the "the moste man of worship of the worlde" (p. 78), and is renowned also for being unbeatable in fights, but in this scene, he is depicted as defenseless: for the first time in the *Morte*, the knight succumbs. What is even more notable is the fact that his adversary is a woman, although she evidently did not mean to injure him, because the arrow was unintentionally shot in the wrong direction. Lancelot is comprehensibly enraged and addresses the huntress rudely: "Lady, or damesell, whatsoever ye be, in an evyll tyme bare thys bowe – the devyll made you a shoter!" (p. 619). It is not only Lancelot's body which suffers because of the wound, but also his pride, because for the first time he is the victim of an attack (which could compromise his participation to a tournament), and his opponent is not another knight but a lady. The shooter's gender is relevant, because the symbolism of the hunting theme in medieval Arthurian literature is usually linked with a representation of gender roles. In this case the common depiction of gender stereotypes is subverted and the scene can be interpreted, as

Robert Kelly suggests, as a "judgment upon and a warning to Lancelot"[126] (referring to his illicit relationship with Guinevere), which he does not realize, as his fellow knights are not capable to grasp Nymue's symbolic attributes.

It is interesting to notice that the character of the second huntress is Malory's invention, because in the sources Lancelot is unwillingly hit by one of the king's knights.[127] The choice of attributing a different gender to the archer must be taken into account while discussing the figure of Lancelot's aggressor. According to LaFarge, the huntress' character derives from the fairies of the Arthurian tradition preceding Malory's work.[128] As fairies usually do, she "dwelled in that foreyste [...] and no man wente ever with her but allwayes women" (p. 619), because belonging to the fairy world means also excluding the male community from it. Although the huntress is not explicitly defined as a supernatural being,

> the existence of the Lady of the Lake and the fairy Diana of Arthurian romance in Malory's own literary tradition and direct sources can only lend to support to a reading of Lancelot's wounding as having a particular relevance to his gender, his knighthood and his relation with women and to gender and wholeness in Malory in general.[129]

Unlike many other minor characters, the huntress remains anonymous; she is nevertheless a meaningful presence, which reinforces Nymue's relevance through the repetition of a narrative pattern. As Nymue is able to overcome Merlin on his own field by displaying her extraordinary powers, the huntress casually succeeds in grounding the unrivalled Lancelot. Merlin's gift of precognition and Lancelot's fighting ability do not prevent them from being overpowered by a huntress, who "combines the features of feminine and

[126] Kelly, Robert L., "Wounds, Healing and Knighthood in Malory's 'Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere'", in James W. Spisak, ed., *Studies in Malory*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985, p. 186.
[127] Norris, Ralph C., *Malory's Library: the Sources of the Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008, p. 130.
[128] LaFarge, p. 267.
[129] LaFarge, p. 267.

masculine in an alarming fashion".[130] The second huntress is surrounded by her fellow women, and properly equipped for the chase, because, unlike Nymue, the narrator informs us that "they were all shooters and cowde well kylle a dere at the stalke and at the threste […] and they daily beare bowis, arowis, hornys and wood-knyves" (p. 619).

LaFarge states that Lancelot's wounding is significant in terms of gender roles, because in this episode the feminine and masculine narrative functions of the characters in medieval romances are reversed: on the one hand the woman is depicted as strong and capable of handling a dangerous weapon, which injures a knight; on the other hand the man is unable to protect himself, and is in evident need of help.[131] The place in which the knight is hit is important too, because the wound makes riding very painful for Lancelot, so his participation in the tournament (another activity reserved to male characters in the *Morte*) is possible only with a great effort. The description of the huntress and her behaviour provides her with a masculine characterization, but her unfortunate interaction with the warrior has another consequence: as Karen Cherewatuk observes, "Lancelot's injury involves a sexual feminization of the knight".[132] Nymue's description is less detailed than the huntress', but they both hint to similar themes, which include also the code of behaviour concerning the relationship between male and female characters and its possible subversions.

[130] LaFarge, p. 267.
[131] LaFarge, pp. 265-6.
[132] Cherewatuk, Karen, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2006.

4.1 Pellinor's Quest

Nymue's arrival abruptly interrupts Arthur's wedding feast, in which the guests appear as an almost paralyzed assembly of knights. At this point of the narration the king celebrates a favourable political situation, because his power has been established after "grete warre […] for to gete all Inglonde into hys honde, for there were many kyngis within the realme of Ingolonde and of Scotolonde, Walys and Cournwayle" (p. 40). The entire court is invited to the king's marriage and the narrator informs us that every knight "was sette as hys degré asked" (p. 66): this is the first time in the work in which the assembly of Arthur's warriors is united for a peaceful purpose, and the scene represents a static moment in the plot. The noisy entrance of the woman does not have any effect on the court, nor does her abduction shortly after her arrival. Critics argue on the possible motivation that led Malory to eliminate any kind of human sympathy in the episode, which was described more realistically in the sources.[133] Malory's knights seem not to be affected by a scene of violence in which is involved an almost helpless human being, and do not consider the possibility of offering their aid.

Even if Malory follows his sources in the development of the action determined by Nymue's kidnapping, he modifies slightly but significantly the quests of the three knights designated by Arthur and Merlin. The wizard suggests to call

> Sir Gawaine – "for he muste brynge agayne the wytght herte"."Also, sir, ye muste lette call Sir Torre , for he muste brynge agayne the brochette and the knyght, other ellis sle him; also lette calle Kynge Pellynor, for he muste brynge agayne the lady and the knight, other ellis sle hym" (p. 66).

In Merlin's insensitive speech, hunting a deer is considered as important as saving a woman. His intervention is however fundamental for the beginning of the knightly quests,

[133] Mann, Jill, "'Taking the adventure': Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*", in Derek Brewer and Toshiyuki Takamiya, eds., *Aspects of Malory*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Rowman & Littlefield, 1986, p. 74.

which, despite Nymue's original characterization, seem to follow the stereotyped pattern of a chivalric adventure: the knight, in this case King Pellinor, is the active figure, while the woman represents his passive counterpart. Although many female characters in medieval Arthurian literature are excluded from purposeful roles, this is not Nymue's case. As Kaufmann affirms, "she has rejected the passive role of the desired object that usually falls to «good» women".[134] Far from being a mere trophy for the knight destined to save her, she interacts with him during the return journey to Camelot and proves that "the traditional object of desire becomes an active subject".[135]

Pellinor's interest in Nymue is however limited to the happy conclusion of his quest: his motivation in saving her does not lie in his moral consciousness to do a positive action, but merely in his desire to fulfill a promise he made to his sovereign. As Pellinor himself declares, "thys lady shall go with me, other I shall dye therefore, for so have I promysed to Kynge Arthur" (p. 74). When the king finally reaches the place where the woman was brought, her kidnapper is already fighting with another knight. Pellinor addresses the knights after dividing them, and orders them "fyght ye no more, for none of you shall have parte of hir at thys tyme – and if ye lyst for to fyght for hir with me, I woll defende hir" (p. 74). Pellinor's speech is uttered after one of the contending men, Sir Meliot de Logurs, explains him that the woman is his relative, and he is already defending her from the man who took her away "magré hir hede" (p. 74). The verb "defende" used by Nymue's cousin and Pellinor has not only a positive meaning of protection, but implies also the concept of possession. The two knights consider the woman as their rightful property: for Pellinor the necessity of taking her with him is determined by his

[134] Kaufmann, p. 65.
[135] Kaufmann, p. 62.

king's order, while the woman's relative feels obliged to rescue her, due to their blood bound (Nymue is his "awntys doughtir").

Nymue's behaviour in the episode is effectively very different from the one of her entrance at court, and while the narrator concentrates on the fight between the warriors, she is never mentioned. The battlefield is a place reserved to male characters, and women are usually excluded from it, and, although there are some exceptions (and Nymue will be one of them), on this occasion the female figure remains out of the narrative focus. Kenneth Hodges affirms that,

> in some cases, women can act as chivalric agents instead of chivalric objects. Might-makes-right chivalry had little space for women to act. Not being trained to be strong, they serve as little more than battle prizes.[136]

In this view, Arthurian women must find an alternative instrument to physical combat, in order to exercise actively their will and power. Their strength lies in many cases in their knowledge of magic. It is quite common, for the female characters of the *Morte* to exercise "subtle craftes", whose use is ascribed merely to women: Merlin constitutes the only exception. When Nymue is saved by Pellinor, however, she has not met her mentor, so she cannot employ her magical arts, which she will master only later in the romance. Her position conveys at this point the impression of being similar to the one of other static female characters, who delegate to men the active role. When Pellinor addresses her for the first time, by saying "fayre Lady, ye muste go with me unto the courte of Kynge Arthure" (p. 74), he receives no answer, apart from that of the fighting knights' squires, who advise him that "youndir ar two knyghtes that fight for thys lady" (p. 74). The king kills one of the knights, and the other one surrenders; when the duel between Pellinor and the knights ends, Nymue does not even say her name, but lets her cousin speak for her:

[136] Hodges, Kenneth, "Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nyneve", *Arthuriana*, 2 (2002), p. 81.

"thys lady, my cosyn, hir name ys called Nenyve" (p. 75). It is her relative again who entrusts her into Pellinor's hands, and asks him to bring her to Arthur's court: "Take my cosyn, thys lady, with you, as ys youre queste, and I require you, as ye be a trew knyght, put hir to no shame nother vylony" (p. 74-5). Pellinor assures to the knight that "she shall have no vyllany by me, as I am a trew knight" (p. 75).

In Pellinor's speech, the fact of respecting a woman's physical integrity is linked to the chivalric code, and is considered a consequence of being an honourable knight, but the king's conduct is not very consistent with his praiseworthy declaration. It will be Nymue's duty to instruct the knight, and even to make him pay for his lack of sensitiveness towards women. On their way back to Camelot, Nymue will be Pellinor's fundamental guide, both in terms of practical suggestions and moral reflection. While Nymue's relative declares himself "glad […] that such a noble man sholde have the rule of my cousyn" (p. 75), referring to the fact that Nymue is under Pellinor's protection, the narrator suggests, with the aid of small but significant alteration of the text's sources, that the leading figure on the return journey is not the king, but his female companion.

Pellinor assures to Nymue's kinsman his exemplary conduct towards the lady by declaring proudly to be a "trew knyght", but there are some episodes which contradict his assertion. If the definition of a positively characterized warrior lies also – as Meliot's plea to Pellinor suggests – in his consideration and respect for women, Pellinor is certainly not an example of knightly conduct. Kaufmann observes how he is "dubiously distinguished in the world of women",[137] meaning that he proves his ignorance of the proper behaviour for a knight of the Round Table. After the conclusion of the quests of Pellinor and his fellow knights, Malory inserts an original passage, concerning an oath that the warriors

[137] Kaufmann, p. 60.

make to their king, who rewards them with "rychesse and londys" (p. 77). The vow is established also to state institutionally the role of men as defenders and rescuers of women.[138] The part concerning the relation between sexes derives from the necessity of admonishing the knights that did not consider their duty to protect ladies and damsels: this is also the case of King Pellinor. The little amount of information that the narrator gives about his figure does not induce the public to consider him a model of virtuous conduct; moreover, before Pellinor's quest, a woman questions the knight's respectability. The character who accuses him is Torre's mother, who denounces to Merlin his fault, by explaining that

> whan she was a mayde and wente to mylke hir kyne, "there mette with me a sterne knyght, and half be force he had my maydynhode; and at that tyme he begate my son Torre, and he toke awey fro me my grayhounde that I had that tyme with me, and seyde he wolde kepe the grayhounde for my love" (p. 65).

The "sterne knyght" is King Pellinor, and, in spite of Merlin's attempts to soften the fault of the knight, by asserting that Torre "ought to be a good man, for he ys com of good kynrede as ony on lyve – and of kynges bloode" (p. 64), the rape's account damages Pellinor's honour. Torre is concerned with the fact that his father's conduct might influence also his mother's reputation, so he orders to Merlin: "Dishonoure nat my modir". Merlin defends Pellinor again, and in the end placates also Torre's anger by answering him:

> hit ys more for your worship than hurte, for youre fadir ys a good knyght and a kynge, and he may ryght well avaunce you and youre modir both, for you were begotyn or evir she was wedded. (p. 65)

Merlin's judgement upon Torre's father refers to a set of values which does not consider feminine judgement. Torre's reaction to Merlin's speech, demonstrates the young man's knowledge of the most suitable behaviour for a knight: he immediately defends his

[138] Saunders, Corinne J., *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, Cambridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2001, p. 242.

mother from the accusation of having begotten an illegitimate child. Although for Merlin the responsibility of the woman in the conception is not relevant, it is so for Torre, who wants his mother's reputation upheld. Moreover, as Kaufmann points out, Pellinor does not limit his crime to rape, but "perhaps not incidentally, if hunting bitches are said to represent the sovereign feminine, adds insult to injury by stealing her grayhound".[139] Torre is adopted and raised by the man who marries his mother and wants to be a knight of the Round Table. At Arthur's court he meets for the first time his real father, but Pellinor's attitude towards women does not change after meeting his son: while Torre demonstrates sensitiveness and devotion to women's will, the same cannot be said of his father.

Despite his flaws, Pellinor is chosen for the mission of saving Nymue, but while he is pursuing the kidnapper, he meets a lady who is crying desperately over a dying man's body. Pellinor ignores her, but the consequences of his levity will be onerous for him. The woman, understanding that he is not willing to help her, wishes him that "he might feele hit or he deyed" (p. 37), and, although her curse is not going to be realized in his adventure, Pellinor will pay the consequences of his indifference. On their way to the court, Pellinor and Nymue find the bodies of the lady and her knight devoured by the wild beasts, because the woman, left alone without aid, committed suicide using her knight's sword. At the sight of the corpses Pellinor tries to explain to his companion why he did not help the woman: "hir lyff myght I have saved, but I was so ferse in my queste that I wolde nat abyde" (p. 76). The sentence seems more a justification than an act of repentance; after Nymue's questioning, however, Pellinor expresses his sorrow for the death of the woman who was "a passynge fayre lady and a yonge" (p. 76). According to

[139] Kaufmann, p. 60.

Nymue's judgement, Pellinor's expression of pain is not sufficient to make amends, so she suggests him a macabre penitence: "take thys ladyes hede and bere hit with you unto Kynge Arthur" (p. 76). Pellinor does not question Nymue's order and executes what she recommends; the effect of the knight's remorse is immediate, because the narrator informs the readers that "greved King Pellinor passynge sore, whan he loked on hit, for much hys herte caste unto that vysage" (p. 76). Even if apparently Pellinor's adventure ends positively, with the fulfillment of the task which was assigned him, after his arrival at court also Guinevere expresses her negative judgement upon his behaviour, approving thus the punishment established by Nymue. According to the queen and Nymue, the relevant accomplishment concerning Pellinor's quest is not only the knight's success in the enterprise, but also his respect of proper knightly manners. Kaufmann compares Malory's work to its sources and observes that "the queen, who has no voice in Pellinor's judgement in the *Suite du Merlin,* is the one who accuses him of failure in Malory's *Morte*".[140]

As a last dreadful consequence of ignoring the woman's plea, Pellinor discovers that she was his own daughter. Merlin informs the king about the lady's identity, and warns him about his tragic destiny:

> because ye wolde nat abyde and helpe hir, ye shall se youre beste frende fayle ye whan you be in the grettis distresse that ever ye were othir shalle be (p. 77).

Merlin's premonition is similar to what Pellinor's daughter wished to her father. Feminine judgement in the *Morte* cannot be considered merely the expression of a personal opinion, because it is an effective verdict, which has a visible outcome on the knightly world. Elizabeth Archibald studies the quests of Gawain, Pellinor and his son. She notices that

> each of Arthur's knights has disturbing experiences involving women during his quest […]. In view of these adventures is perhaps not surprising that when the three quests are ended and goods

[140] Kaufmann, p. 60.

> and land are distributed to all the knights of the Round Table, they are made to swear an important oath.[141]

Nymue's suggestion to make amend, therefore, is more an order than an advice, and is reinforced by the queen's statement and Pellinor's daughter's curse. The result is that the text of the oath – which consists for the main part in the duties of knights towards their sovereign, so of men towards men – includes also a part concerning the relationship between men and women. The oath obliges Arthur's knights to protect and respect every woman, and is a sign of the meaningful part played by female characters in the *Morte*.

Nymue represents an example of conduct for Pellinor, not only because she instructs him on knightly behaviour, but also because, unlike the king, she employs reasonableness in practical necessities. When the woman's horse stumbles, she hurts her arm badly, but, in comparison with the sources, Malory's Nymue is more capable of dominating physical pain and fear. As Holbrook notices, in the Vulgate *Suite* Niniane suffers more for the fall off the horse and does not have the same capacity of forbearance that Malory's lady demonstrates: in contrast to the character of the *Morte*, Niniane states that she is going to die for pain. Holbrook suggests that Nymue's characteristics are determined by Malory's shortening of the scene, but the abridgement of her figure improves her positive aspects and reiterates the idea conveyed by her apparition as a huntress: Nymue possesses both strength and endurance.[142] After her accident, the woman decides to rest and informs the knight that they should interrupt their journey in order to sleep. When they wake up it is night, but Pellinor does not consider the inconveniences and dangers of riding in the dark, and "whan he awooke he wolde have rydden forthe" (p.

[141] Archibald, Elizabeth, "Beginning: The Tale of King Arthur and the Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius", in Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Stockwell Garfield Edwards, eds., *A Companion to Malory*, Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1996, p. 141.
[142] Holbrook, Sue E.,"Nymue, "The Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's Le Morte Darthur", *Speculum*, 4 (1978), p. 768.

75). Nymue dissuades him, simply by observing that "Ye may as well ryde backwarde as forewarde, hit ys so durke" (p. 75). Pellinor agrees with Nymue's suggestion, and his reasonableness is rewarded because he overhears a conversation between two knights, concerning a conspiracy against King Arthur. The precious information would not have been discovered without Nymue's intervention. In Holbrook's opinion, Malory's handling of the sources makes Nymue's character in the *Morte* more enterprising and judicious. In the episode involving Sir Pellinor, she demonstrates for the first time her "unshrinking and practical nature, with the capacity to direct action",[143] which identifies her figure in the entire narration.

4.2 Merlin's Entombment

The attitude of Nymue's character in the *Morte Darthur* is represented masterfully in her relationship with Merlin. As stated in the previous chapter, the episodes concerning Merlin's passionate love for Nymue, his lessons in magic and his final death or entombment are inserted in all the sources which inspired Malory's work. Holbrook believes that Nymue has "more to excuse than to blame her",[144] because, although the sequence of events is similar in the various medieval texts, every narrator connotes its protagonists in different ways, and Malory's story induces the readers to be sympathetic to Nymue. In the *Morte*, when Nymue arrives to court, Merlin "felle in dotage" (p. 78). While in the sources the relationship between the wizard and the lady is of reciprocal love, in Malory it is not so. In the Vulgate *Suite*, for example, Merlin is a "young

[143] Holbrook, p. 768.
[144] Holbrook, p. 769.

magician who happens to meet a radiant fairy in the forest",[145] and the cruelty of the lady's enchantment upon him is lessened by the fact that he submits to his lover's will and accepts his destiny. Moreover, his pupil creates an illusion to imprison him: she makes Merlin believe that he is in a wonderful tower, with a comfortable bed and beautiful furniture. He is a prisoner, but she promises him that she will return to visit him as soon as possible. In the post-vulgate *Suite*, Viviane is far less interested in him, and simply uses her influence upon Merlin to learn how to perform magic.[146]

In Malory, the first approach of the wizard towards Nymue is not courteous: as soon as she arrives to court with Pellinor, he "wolde nat letter her have no reste, but allwayes he wolde be wyth her" (p. 78). Although the reader is not informed about Nymue's thoughts or feelings, it is clear that her suitor represents for her simply a way to acquire knowledge. She does not force him to reveal her all his secrets, but manipulates him, by making "Merlion good chere tylle sche had lerned of hym all maner of thynge that sche desyred" (p. 78). In her decision of entombing her lover, she is similar to the faeries of medieval Arthurian literature but the motivations that lead her to entomb her suitor are almost justifiable, in contrast with those of the inconstant magic creatures of the precedent literary tradition. Malory's Nymue does not surrender to Merlin's advances, nor does she demonstrate to appreciate them. Although her gentleness towards the wizard has the precise motivation of obtaining what she desires, she cannot be fully condemned for having segregated him in order to avoid his sexual assaults:

> she was ever passynge wery of hym and wolde have bene delyverde of hym, for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son and she coulde nat be skyfte of hym by no means (p. 79).

Although in need of defending herself from the wizard's undesired advances, Nymue's first thought is not to entomb him. Before imprisoning her suitor, she makes him

[145] Berthelot, p. 68.
[146] Berthelot, p. 71.

swear not to enchant her. Her plea is determined by the fact that "oftyntymes Merlion wolde have hir prevayly away by hys subtle crauftes" (p. 78). Although the wizard agrees to fulfill her request, she does not feel completely secure, because the danger does not lie merely in his otherworldly powers, but also in his disrespectful behaviour. After his meeting with Nymue, Merlin is transformed from a wise counselor of the king into a lecher.

Kenneth Hodges examines the fact that Nymue is not considered guilty by Arthur and his court for having entombed the wizard and ascribes the court's reaction to the introduction of the oath, which establishes the new chivalric values. In the episode of the wizard's imprisonment, Nymue does not play merely the role of judge, as happens in the episode concerning Sir Pellinor. In her relationship with Merlin, Nymue can be compared to a virtuous warrior, who can dispose for the life or death of his adversary, according to the principles of the knightly code.

> Nymue is not only innocent, she has just demonstrated two points of the new code: that the loyalty to ideals is real, so that even friends of the king are not exempt from justice and that women, if they are strong enough, can act according to the new standards of chivalry.[147]

According to the scholar, Nymue's intervention makes the new establishment concerning the politic status of women and their relevance in the chivalric community effective. In Hodges's view, the knightly rule codified in the oath affects the scale of values conveyed by the *Morte*, and alters in particular the consideration for women's intentions and wishes.

Hodges notices that, in the course of narration, women's relevance in the knightly community is strengthened; the scholar refers specifically to female consent to sexual intercourse, which is not considered important by the narrator in the case of Igraine, for

[147] Hodges, p. 84.

example, but has a greater relevance for other women who lay with her son, Arthur.[148] The narrator informs the readers that, before his marriage, Arthur knew "an erlis doughter" (p. 28), whose name was Lyonors; the king fell in love with her, "and so ded she upon hym, and so the Kynge had ado with hir and gate on hir a chylde." (p. 28). The fact that Lyonors reciprocates the king's feelings is meaningful, because she proves that Malory's female figures can express their desires and intentions. Nymue choses to reject Merlin because of his insistence and since her purpose is to preserve her maidenhood. As Corinne Saunders affirms, the crime of rape has a great relevance in the *Morte*, and is condemned as a very dishonourable act towards women's integrity,[149] so the imprisonment of Merlin is not considered an action deserving punishment. The consequence of the wizard's entombment is that King Arthur is deprived of his magical protector, and Nymue, fully instructed about the "subtle worchinge", takes Merlin's place.

Nymue is only one of the women who possess the knowledge of magical arts in Malory's work. The association between female characters and occult powers is common in the *Morte*, and, according to Andrew Lynch, is a way to express feminine authority: women do not receive military training and are not normally able to handle weapons, so they cannot use combat to defend themselves (and their honour), or to attack their enemies, as male characters normally do. The choice of performing magic is determined by the women's desire to pursue actively their interests. Malory's women employ magic as an alternative to physical and direct violence, in order to obtain what they desire, but their choice is not considered honourable by male society, because they often use magic with treacherous intents. Although they are almost always prevented from doing harm,

[148] Hodges, p. 81.
[149] Saunders, p. 242.

they are condemned by their male counterparts, and their behaviour is compared by the narrator to that of male traitors. Lynch notices that

> the sense of grievance that breeds praiseworthy anger in battle, where knights routinely become "wood wrothe out of mesure" seems to breed only capable ill will for the women kept outside the fighting.[150]

In Nymue's case, however, the situation is different, because her behaviour is not judged destructive or evil. She is not accused of damaging the king through her otherworldly abilities – unlike to what happens to Morgan, for example – although she imprisons Arthur's most powerful friend. Nymue's occult knowledge is an effective weapon, because it demonstrates its usefulness when she needs to protect herself from Merlin, but makes also possible her role as Arthur's ally and becomes necessary for her to obtain the man she desires, Pelleas.

The themes of love and magic are indissolubly linked to feminine presence in the *Morte*, and are often also intertwined. Geraldine Heng draws a parallel between the effects that these two powers, which are usually exercised by women, have on male protagonists. In Malory's courtly society, love is the force that pushes the knights to perform enterprises, which are successfully brought to an end for the sake of a beloved lady or damsel. The devotion to a woman affects deeply the behaviour of a knight, but it usually leads to glorious deeds of arms and praiseworthy adventures only if the love is returned. On the one hand, reciprocal love provides Arthurian women with a way to impose their will and defend their honour through their suitors; on the other hand, magic

[150] Lynch, Andrew, "Gesture and Gender in Malory's Le Morte Darthur" in *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the 17.th International Arthurian Congress*, F. Wolfzettel, ed., Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995, p. 287.

represents the only possibility for women to act directly in the plot, and, in contrast with love, it does not even require reciprocity.[151]

In Malory's work the role played by magic is drastically reduced, if compared to the sources; nevertheless, occult powers reveal their presence throughout the text. Although the effects of magical intervention is often inefficient, as in the case of Morgan's numerous murdering attempts towards King Arthur, the knowledge and exercise of otherworldly powers confers to those who properly master them an "extraordinary autonomy".[152] Nymue demonstrates through the use of her powers her independence from male intermediation. Although her role as Arthur's protector remains unquestionable, her attention is far more concentrated on herself than on her protégé: as opposed to Merlin, Nymue choses to support Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, but conveys the impression of being not completely devoted to her mission, as the wizard was.[153]

Nevertheless, Nymue demonstrates to be a reliable ally, especially when her intervention is aimed at contrasting Morgan's killing attempts. Arthur's stepsister is represented as one of the court's most fearful enemies, because the king and his knights are not immune to her enchantments, but thanks to Nymue's wise suggestions and her providential use of magic, Morgan's attacks are avoided. The two enchantresses are often described as opponents, in relation to their attitude towards Arthur, but their similarities are more numerous than their differences and do not lie merely in their capacity of performing magic. In Malory's sources the parallel between them is more evident,

[151] Heng, Geraldine, "Enchanted Ground: the Feminine Subtext in Malory ", in Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* New York: Norton, 2004, p. 844.
[152] Heng, p. 845.
[153] Heng, p. 846.

because they both appear as Merlin's pupils and lovers,[154] but a comparison between them is possible also in the *Morte*. Heng inserts among their defining characteristics the fact that "both have a capacity for force that is not containable by knightly society alone, and therefore a level of independence which establishes them as unique".[155]

Even if Nymue choses to help the king, she is not at his service, because her first concern is not Arthur or his court, but her personal interest, which consists, for example, in learning occult powers in order to defend herself from an annoying old wizard. Her contrast with Morgan is partly determined by the fact that female figures in the *Morte* seem to be bound to the dichotomy of interpreting a positive or negative role in their disposition towards knights. As Lynch notices, positively connoted women are those who "inform, liberate, cure and «maintain» knights, often countering other female figures who try to «destroy» them".[156] According to this definition, Nymue and Morgan are inevitably categorized as antagonist characters, but the distinction between their narrative functions is actually more blurred.

Although the outcome of their actions appears divergent, Morgan and Nymue both testify to the fact that they are free to decide, in contrast with many women in the *Morte.* As Hodges argues, the two enchantresses demonstrate their independence from a role of submission, which is imposed by the literary context to other female figures. The scholar observes that the occasions in which Malory's women can act freely are usually very few, because the main decisions are taken by their male counterparts. Nymue and Morgan represent an exception, because the possibilities of choosing and obtaining what they desire are wider than those of any other female figure. The failure of Morgan's murdering

[154] Berthelot, pp. 61-62.
[155] Heng, p. 847.
[156] Lynch, p. 288.

attempts must not be considered a sign of vulnerability. According to Hodges, the ineffective enterprises of Malory's women and their necessity of creating alliances do not necessarily connote them as impotent figures, because even the most powerful male protagonists need help on some occasions, as in scene in which Lancelot is hit by the lady huntress and is unable to ride. Some knights do not fully succeed in their enterprises too, as happens for example to Pellinor, who is reproached by the queen because he ignored his daughter's plea, while he was following Nymue's kidnapper. The support of men in terms of protection or mutual aid is requested in the *Morte* not only by female figures, but also by other men and the creation of alliances is appreciated also by the king, who creates the fellowship of the Round Table.[157] In this view, the power of Nymue and Morgan can be identified not merely with their performances of supernatural actions, but also with their active participation to the courtly society.

The presence of these two mighty women produces tangible effects in the chivalric community portrayed by Malory, but their interventions are not as conflicting as they might seem. Heng examines the last scene in which they appear together (on the boat that leads King Arthur to Avalon) and notices that the tones of Morgan's last greeting to her stepbrother are

> not those of a mortal enemy, and in them may be discerned a suggestion of the final instability and impermanence of all constructed identity. An affinity between them is at once suggested: the bond perhaps of two actors finally away from the pageant, who need no longer play their temporarily assigned roles.[158]

The roles of Nymue and Morgan are undoubtedly connected, but are not necessarily opposed. Morgan's determination in trying to destroy the king and Nymue's choice to defend him create a narrative tension which is part of the rise and fall of Arthur's reign and ends with his death.

[157] Hodges, p. 88.
[158] Heng, p. 849.

4.3 The Court's Magic Protector

Nymue's first intervention as Arthur's ally consists in saving his life in the battle against Accolon, Morgan's lover. While Morgan does not fight directly, thus respecting the gender stereotype which limits the woman's field of agency, confining it outside the world of combat, Nymue goes personally to the battlefield. Her providential intervention is determined by her observation of the fight: when she realizes that the enemy's forces are superior just due to a "false treson" (p. 87), and that, despite his bravery, the king is going to succumb, she decides to make an enchantment upon Excalibur. Nymue's role of judge is inserted in the scene by Malory, who added to his sources the part concerning the enchantress's evaluation of the duel.[159]

Morgan asks Accolon to fight "that batayle to the uttirmoste withoute ony mercy" (p. 86) and sends a damsel to his stepbrother, with the order of consigning him a fake Excalibur. The real sword is given to Accolon, who becomes unbeatable thanks to its magical powers; he is aware that Morgan "hath made all this crauftis and enchauntemente for this batayle" (p. 86). Morgan's presence is signaled by meaningful objects connected to her, in this case the sword that her servant gives to King Arthur and Excalibur, which becomes a dangerous weapon in Accolon's hands. Heng considers the gifts given by Arthurian women to their lovers as objects that enable action:[160] the two swords possess this literary function, because they represent Morgan's intention to prod her paramour. Nymue is personally involved in the opposition to Arthur's enemy and, in contrast with Morgan's propensity to operate in secrecy , she acts publicly:

> The meanewhyle they were thys at the batayle com the Damesel of the Lake into the felde, that put Merlyon undir the stone. And she com thidir for the love of King Arthur, for she knew how

[159] Hodges, p. 84.
[160] Heng, p. 836.

> Morgan le Fay had ordayned for Arthur shold have bene slayne that day, and therefore she com to save his lyff (p. 87).

The verbs used by the narrator to indicate the behaviour of the two women underline their different adhesion to gender roles: while Morgan "ordained for Arthur sholde have bene slayne", Nymue "com thidir". Morgan le Fay operates by means of Accolon, to whom she delegates the task of defeating Arthur; Nymue choses to save the king personally. Morgan exercises her will in a way that is common to female characters: she does not appear on the battlefield but sends her man there, unlike Nymue. While Morgan's magic acts covertly, Nymue's is performed openly, and is rewarded by the king, who, after the positive conclusion of the battle, decides to follow her advice.

When Excalibur falls from the hands of the enemy, thanks to Nymue's enchantment, Arthur takes his sword and pulls its scabbard out of Accolon's belt. The king is eager to take the scabbard, because he knows that it has supernatural powers too. When the king received the sword from the Lady of the Lake, Merlin explained to him the properties of its container: "the scawberde is worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded" (p. 38). Heng stresses the king's inability to interpret the magical objects' symbolic meaning – a fault which was evident also in the first meeting between the king and Nymue –. On the contrary, Merlin, Nymue and Morgan perceive the occult significance of the objects, which, as in the case of the sword, are often linked to female characters, and have a great influence upon the king's destiny. According to their pacific or bellicose intents towards Arthur, the wizard and the enchantresses try to warn him or to subtract him his property.[161]

[161] Heng, p. 837.

Morgan's character follows more closely the pattern of gender stereotyped function during the battle between Arthur and Accolon. As Elizabeth Edwards notices, the static nature of female characters is determined also by their relegation into their place of dwelling, while male figures explore different settings by going on adventure, so by moving from one place to another. The only exception are female servants or messengers, which are sent by their mistresses and, unlike them, interact with the knights outside their home. In this view, Morgan is perfectly inserted into her role of queen, who remains safely in her house, after having ordered her lover to fights for her sake, and her servant to deliver him Excalibur. Edwards observes that the apparently wider freedom of minor female character is on some occasions combined with their ability to perform magic, as in the case of Lynette, for example, who escorts Sir Garret to her sister Lyonesse.[162]

Unlike Morgan, there are no auxiliary figures who help Nymue to obtain what she wants, and she is physically present where her aid is required. In contrast with Lynette, who plays a restricted part in a single adventure, Nymue's pervasive presence in Malory's work allows for a more detailed critical analysis. In the episode of Accolon, her presence on the battlefield includes her in a place which is usually the setting for chivalric performances. Nymue has the capacity of spontaneous and independent action, both in terms of self-defense or attack, but can also recognize and appreciate or condemn the behaviour of other characters. These features make her a captivating figure, because her role does not completely submit to masculine or feminine attitudes – at least according to the medieval Arthurian literary universe. Her efficacious intervention against Accolon has the same effect of a warrior's stroke against an opposing knight: in contrast to what

[162] Edwards, Elizabeth, "The Place of Women in the 'Morte Darthur'", *A Companion to Malory,* in Elizabeth Archibald, Anthony Stockwell Garfield Edwards, eds., Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996, p. 37.

happens in the source, Nymue's magic does not immobilize Arthur's adversary, but simply makes Excalibur slip from Accolon's hands. Hodges compares her role in the *Morte* to that of a knight, and defines her a "sorceress-errant".[163] The adjective that the critic uses is usually referred to warriors, who ride in and outside Arthur's reign, seeking adventure. Malory's knights wander because their domain is not the inner space of their dwellings, but the open space of woods and battlefields.

Despite the similarities that link Nymue to Malory's knightly figures, there are some differences between them, which are worth considering. Edwards explores the perception that Arthurian warriors have of the setting into which they move. The scholar argues that the choice of crossing the various kingdoms provides the knights with almost infinite glorious adventures, but exposes them to dangers, among which enchantments are considered the most fearful (because they involve powers that knights are usually not able to handle).[164] While knights are impotent against otherworldly forces, magic does not represent a threat for Nymue. After Merlin's segregation, the sorceress employs cunningly her capacity in order to face external supernatural forces with equal powers. While her independence and her gender-crossing characteristics give her a privileged position among the other Arthurian female protagonists, her knowledge of occult forces makes her a dreadful enemy or a precious ally for male figures.

Nymue saves the king's life again when she warns him against wearing a mantle which is sent to him by his stepsister after the battle against Accalon. Arthur considers the gift an attempt to ask his forgiveness; yet the function of the object is not so innocent, because the garment has been enchanted in order to harm the person who wears it. Nymue suggests to put the mantle on the shoulders of the maiden who brought it to the court: in

[163] Hodges, p. 86.
[164] Edwards, p. 39.

this way the terrible secret of the gift is disclosed, because the woman dies immediately. Nymue does not reveal the evil enchantment that Morgan has made upon the present, but advises Arthur to avoid wearing it:

> putt nat uppon you this mantell, tylle ye have sene more – and in no wyse lat hit nat com on you, nother on no knyght of youres, tyll ye commaunde the brynger thereof to putt hit uppon hir. (p. 95)

Nymue does not forget the knights' security in her suggestion, showing in this way her concern for the safety of the entire court. Her intervention is not aimed merely at the recognition of a possible danger, but also at its neutralization. Although she does not personally execute Morgan's servant, she prompts the king to pronounce the words which lead to the lady's death, because she specifies that the mantle should be worn by the woman who gave it to Arthur. The king's reaction to the sorceress's words states officially her position as his new advisor, because the king's answer to her speech resembles those he usually gave to Merlin's suggestions: "hit shall be as ye counseyle me" (p. 95).

In this episode, the king demonstrates again his inability to identify the meaning of objects connected with magic, because he appreciates the mantle for his rich decoration (it is covered by precious stones), but he does not imagine its true function. The narrator describes Arthur's positive reaction to the gift: "whan the kyng beheld this mantell hit pleased hym much; hit seyde but lyttyll" (p. 95). The ingenuous evaluation of the mantle provides Arthur only with a superficial knowledge of its characteristics: in this way, his hasty judgement leads him to consider Morgan's present only a valuable garment, and not a possible threat; he therefore thinks what his sister expects him to. Even the members the court do not reflect on the significance of the present more thoughtfully than their king. Surprisingly, Arthur's knights do not warn him about the possible consequences that wearing the mantle of an enemy who employs magic powers might cause. According to Roberta Davidson, the male characters of the *Morte* (apart from Merlin and the holy men

in the *Tale of the Sankgreal*) seem to share a low degree of acquaintance with the logic and the rules of the narrative world in which they are inserted.

> The inability to know the identity of one's father, brother, friend, mistress, enemy, to know the right course of action, one's own stature and spiritual state, or ultimately one's place in the collective destiny of Arthur's kingdom, is a constant condition for Malory's knights. Not knowing can bring about destruction.[165]

Nymue's intervention avoids the mortal consequences of the court's ignorance, but the king does not escape from his destiny.

Arthur's wrong evaluation of the mantle is followed by another erroneous judgement, because the king chooses to punish Morgan's son, Sir Uwayne, for the plot developed by his mother. Uwayne is a positive figure, who prevents his treacherous mother from killing his father and afterwards even forgives her for the murdering attempt; nevertheless, the king banishes Uwayne from the court by saying to his father: "I holde you excused. But as for your son Sir Uwayne I holde hym suspecte; therefore I charge you, putt hym oute of my courte" (p. 96). According to Nicole Dentzien, the unjust condemnation of a member of the Round Table by his king forecasts the beginning of a strife among the knights, which will undermine their fellowship. In this view, Arthur's insufficient sagacity is one of the reasons which leads to his definitive destruction.[166] Nymue's reaction to Morgan's present contrasts with Arthur's naïve one: her awareness of the laws which he ignores allow her to advice and save him and his court.

In the above-mentioned episode, Nymue's benevolent protection is directed towards the entire knightly community, but on another scene she advises Lancelot alone, thus saving him from a mortal fight against Sir Servause le Breuse: this is the only occasion on which Nymue offers her help to a single knight. Holbrook notices that the

[165] Davidson, Roberta, "Reading Like a Woman in Malory's Morte Darthur", in *Arthuriana*, 16 (2006), p. 23.

[166] Dentzien, Nicole, *The Openness of Myth: The Arthurian Tradition in the Middle Ages and Today*, Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2004, p. 185.

sorceress's intervention might derive from the link that the character called "Lady of the Lake" has with Lancelot in Malory's sources. The function of Nymue as Lancelot's mentor is almost ignored in the *Morte*, apart from some brief allusions, among which could be inserted also her plea to avoid the duel with Servause. As Holbrook observes, Servause is a figure created by Malory, although the characteristics of the warrior (as, for example, his strength and his desire to fight against dragons or wild animals) make him similar to Sir Segurant le Brun, a character of the *Prophecies de Merlin*.[167] Nymue appears concerned with the health of both knights, because the narrator affirms that "she prayde hem to gyff her a done, and anone they graunted her" (p. 641): the term "done" belongs to the language of courtly love, and indicates a love token, which symbolizes the link shared by a courtly couple. In this case, Lancelot and Serveuse demonstrate their knowledge of knightly behaviour by submitting their will to a woman. They both agree to give a present to Nymue, even if they ignore what it might be. The gift that the enchantress asks them in order to prove their affection to her is a promise: she requires them to swear that they will never be opponents in a duel. Lancelot's main characteristic is to resolve conflicts by fighting (his great ability in combat is renowned), but Nymue attributes a higher importance to his safety than to his desire to duel. The danger that each warrior represents for the other does probably not matter for the two men, but does for the sorceress. Nymue's interventions do not include only well timed aid in case of need, but also prevent her friends from engaging themselves in risky performances, which might endanger their lives.

Magic allows Nymue to know whether the king and the court need her help. The narrator explicitly declares that she is warned by her supernatural powers when someone

[167] Holbrook, p. 774.

menaces her allies: "she undirstood by her suttyle crauftes that Kynge Arthure was lykely to be destroyed" (p. 297). Nymue does not share with Merlin the capacity to predict in detail the destiny of other characters, but in some cases she demonstrates to have at least a partial ability to know the future in advance, because she perceives when a dangerous event is going to take place. In the episode in which the king is about to be beheaded by another sorceress, Annowre, Nymue foresees that her efforts will be insufficient to overcome the enemy, unless she asks for the help of a warrior. Nymue knows that, in order to defeat the woman, Tristan or Lancelot must intervene, so she rides in the woods to find one of them, "for at that same day she knew well that Kynge Arthur sholde be slayne onles that he had helpe of one of thes two knyghtes" (p. 297). Nymue does not participate to the battle, but leads Tristan to the place where the king is kept. She explains to the knight that the king's rescue will make him "the moste worshipfullyst knight in the worlde harde bestadde" (p. 298). Excalibur is for the second time in the hands of an enemy, but in contrast with Accalon, Annowre does not desire it for its magic powers. She wants to use the sword as a common weapon, and behead the king with it. The evil sorceress is in her castle, and two knights are helping her to overcome Arthur when Tristan and Nymue arrive. After Tristan kills both opponents, Arthur recovers his weapon and inflicts to Annowre the same death that she has planned for him.

Holbrook argues that Nymue's actions are in this case the means through which Tristan's bravery is displayed, because she could have employed her supernatural arts instead of asking for the knight's intervention.[168] Tristan is undoubtedly the main protagonist of the episode, which is structured in order to demonstrate his valour: he is chosen to save the king because he is an excellent swordsman. The knight's performance

[168] Holbrook, p. 774.

is up to the readers' expectations: he defeats two enemies at once, but, despite the efficacy of Tristan's attack, Nymue does not leave the battleground. Although the enemy is not a knight but a sorceress, she does not interact with Nymue. One of Annowre's men unlaces Arthur's helm, and the woman's only contribution to the battle is to brandish "King Arthurs swerde in her honde to have strykyn of his hede" (p. 289). Nymue's participation to the fight is as marginal as Annowre's: there is no supernatural intervention in the scene, so the knights are the only characters which act directly. The sorceresses' attitude towards their men is very different: while Annowre acts as their commander, Nymue plays the role of their benefactor.

Allen Paton affirms that the malign enchantress might have been Morgan in the Arthurian literature preceding Malory. The scholar's belief is determined by the presence of Nymue in the episode of Tristan and Annowre: the Lady of the Lake has already ruined twice Morgan's plans against the king, so it is plausible to suppose that even on this occasion her opponent might have corresponded to Morgan le Fay.[169] The name assigned to the woman in the *Morte* and in its sources, however, states clearly that the identity of the two sorceresses is not the same. Annowre and Morgan have a common origin, but their differentiation in Malory's work improves Nymue's role: in the *Morte*, Nymue is not interested merely in defeating her own enemy (who is incidentally also her king's), but also in protecting Arthur from the attack of different people, demonstrating thus to care for his safety.

According to Davidson, Nymue has the ability to interpret correctly the signals of the world that surrounds her, and can also influence the events at her own by using both magic and persuasion. However, even for a conscious and powerful character as she is, it

[169] Allen Paton, p. 21.

is not possible to change the circumstances determined by destiny.[170] In the episode of Tristan and Annowre, the indication for the path to follow in order to bring the adventure to a successful ending lies in the words with whom the narrator describes Nymue's premonition: the king will die unless one of the best knights saves him. Nymue's choice of leaving to Tristan alone the task of aiding the king, therefore, could be ascribed to her desire to follow the right behaviour in order to save Arthur.

Another reason for the lack of magic performances in the episode might be attributed to Malory's disposition towards the portrayal of otherworldly manifestations: despite the presence of two sorceresses in the scene, he prefers to describe the excellent deeds of arms performed by the hero. Although Nymue does not employ her occult knowledge to defeat the enemy directly, she incites the king to take revenge upon Annowre, by saying to him: "Lat nat that false lady ascape!" (p. 289). After Arthur obeys her order, she takes the woman's head and ties it to her saddle; her gesture reminds the reader of Pellinor's punishment and Holbrook considers it

> a fitting sign of the benevolent sorceress's victory over the malevolent one who wanted the king's head. Sorceresses and severed heads are, again, remnants of the myth material woven Arthurian narrative.[171]

Surprisingly it is Nymue, and not Arthur or Tristan, who takes Annowre's head. The king has just overcome a dangerous enemy, but he does not express his satisfaction for his victory and shows no relief for his allies' providential arrival. In contrast with the sovereign's absence of emotions, it is plausible to consider Nymue's behaviour as a celebratory action. Her macabre trophy demonstrates that she desires to display the triumph of her protégé as her own.

[170] Davidson, p. 23.
[171] Holbrook, p. 775.

4.4 Nymue as Judge

Short after Arthur establishes his domain over his reign, he loses his most valuable counselor, Merlin, who is immediately substituted by the Lady of the Lake. Merlin and Nymue, however, do not have the same attitude towards the king. Merlin is a constant presence at Arthur's side; the wizard educates the young king and acts as his mentor until the day of his fatal entombment. Instead, Nymue offers her aid to Arthur only when he is in deathly danger. Her choice to become the king's protector is determined by the sovereign's bravery in the battle against Accolon, who has unfairly stolen the king's sword. Arthur demonstrates his courage against an enemy who is almost invulnerable, thanks to the magic sword and its scabbard. The king's valour leads Nymue to consider him someone deserving her help.

The abilities of a knight in fights are crucial for his social consideration; together with the respect for the principles contained in the Oath of the Round Table, being a good warrior is often a synonym of being a proper knight. In Malory, the term "chivalry" designates the ethic of positively connoted knights, but includes also the rules that govern the relations between men and women. Moorman observes that, in the *Morte*, the fields of love and chivalry are interconnected, because a good knight is expected to be a good lover:

> Love […] 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; he is required to demonstrate the sincerity and depth of his love by displays of unusual courtesy, generosity, and bravery.[172]

Malory's female characters are interested in the knights' public demonstrations of physical and moral qualities. Women are involved in the determination of the knights'

[172] Moorman, Charles, "Courtly Love in Malory", *English Literary History*, 27 (1960), p. 165.

degree of chivalry, because deeds of arms are often performed in order to prove the truthfulness of their men's devotion towards them. Chivalric actions are displayed to obtain attention and possibly love; therefore, it is usually the women's judgement on the knight's behaviour that establishes whether a man is honourable or not, and if his deeds deserve praise or blame. Male performance and female judgement are fundamental components of courtly love.[173]

Moorman notices that the treatment of courtly love in Malory differs deeply from the sources: while in the French Arthurian romances courtly relations are considered a necessary component of the chivalric code, in the *Morte* they are condemned and lose their positive allure. Some of Malory's most renowned protagonists (Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isode) form courtly couples, and their stories, although not altered in their essence, are modified in order to show the superiority of chastity or marriage upon illicit relationships, which are described as the degeneration of courtly behaviour. The corruption of the high ideals of chivalry is one of the reasons which determine Camelot's destruction, and courtly love is depicted as one of its manifestations.[174] Malory's re-elaboration of the original texts produces a variation in the characters' perception of rightful and inappropriate actions. Some characters, as Guinevere for example, admit their guilt and freely chose to make amends:

> she lete make herselff a nunne, and wered whyght clothis and blak, and grete peneaunce she tooke uppon her as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe. […] all manner of people mervayled how vertuously she was chaunged. (p. 690)

The people's reaction to the queen's new life is a manifestation of approval, which is indirectly also the narrator's positive comment on the conclusion of her shameful liaison.

[173] Mahoney, Dhira B., "Ar ye a Knyght and ar no Lovear? The Chivalry Topos in Malory's Book of Sir Tristam" in K. Busby and J. L. Norris, eds., *Conjunctures: Medieval Studies in Honor of Douglas Kelly*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995, p. 311.
[174] Moorman, p. 164.

The author's opinion concerning the appropriate kind of interaction between knights and ladies is developed in the main plot and its numerous subdivisions; however, not all protagonists demonstrate Guinevere's consciousness. In the episode of Sir Pelleas and Lady Ettarde, the woman refuses and repeatedly humiliates her suitor. She does not regret her cruel behaviour until Nymue's magic forces her to do so, but, even then, there is no hope for the woman to be forgiven by Pelleas.

The first scene in which Pelleas and Ettarde appear together is during a joust, in which the knight proves to be the best fighter. He declares his love for the woman, who refuses to reciprocate him, because "she was so proude that she had scorne of hym and seyde that she woll nevir love hym thoughe he wolde dye for hir" (p. 103). In the *Morte*, female characters contribute to shape knightly identity by expressing their opinions on men's performances and by rewarding them with love. Ettarde does not repay Pelleas for his brilliant result at the joust, so her answer to him is considered disdainful and inappropriate: the narrator (who is, in this episode, an anonymous knight speaking with Gawain), condemns her by affirming that she is "proude". As Dhira Mahoney notices, "love inspires prowess, certainly, but prowess is also expected to arouse love in return".[175] Ettarde fails to recognize the man's fighting capacities, and also refuses him as paramour, but her choice is immediately questioned by other gentlewomen, who

> had scorne of hir that she was so prowde […] and there was none that was there but, and Sir Pelleas wolde have profyrde hem love, they wolde have shewed hym the same for his noble prouesse (p. 102).

The reaction of other female characters to Ettarde's response confirms the narrator's opinion, and Pelleas's beloved is reproached for what they judge an unjustifiable attitude

[175] Mahoney, p. 313.

towards the knight. Ettarde, however, does not give importance to her companions' disagreement and constantly mortifies her suitor.

After hearing the story of Pelleas's unfortunate love, Gawain decides to help him; his intentions, however, contrast with his actions, which prove his lack of chivalry. Gawain's intervention represents a turning point in the plot, because he promises to intercede for Pelleas, but does not keep his word and even goes to bed with Ettarde. Pelleas discovers their liaison and plans at first to kill them both, but afterward changes his mind and prefers to place his sword across the lovers' throats, while they are sleeping together. Moorman notices that in the sources the sword is a symbol of forgiveness (because Pelleas spares the lover's lives), but in the *Morte* the weapon could be interpreted as a "promise of vengeance to come".[176] Pelleas does not want to "dystroy the hyghe order of knyghtehode" (p. 105) by hitting his enemy while he is sleeping defenseless, so he withdraws the idea of to kill him. Pelleas is desperate, and desires only to die, but Nymue saves him from his suicidal purpose by casting a spell that causes Ettarde to fall in love with him. The sorceress enchants Pelleas too, and makes him sleep; when Ettarde sees him, she thinks he is dead and she becomes suddenly ashamed of the sufferance she caused him. When the knight wakes up and sees Ettarde, however, he declares that he has lost interest in her and even "hated hir more than ony woman on lyve" (p. 106). Ettarde is thus repaid for her heartlessness, because when Pelleas refuses her she "wepte and made grete sorow oute of mynde" (p. 106). Nymue's magic reverses the roles of the loving suitor and the contemptuous beloved, and offers thus to Pelleas a subtler form of vengeance than the chop of a sword. The narrator suggests also that Nymue's magic might have a role in determining Pelleas sudden indifference to Ettarde:

[176] Moorman, p. 175.

when Pelleas thanks God for having been freed from his love for the woman, Nymue immodestly answers him "thank me therefore" (p. 106).

Malory wants to show the tragic consequences of courtly love, and to do so he alters a story which is, in his sources, a celebration of courtly relationships. According to Moorman, "the great cause of the downfall of Arthur's court is a failure of love, or rather the triumph of the wrong kind of love".[177] This idea is exemplified in Malory's redaction of the tale, in which the characters who act according to the courtly code are negatively connoted, while those who infringe it appear more praiseworthy. The relation between Ettarde and Gawain is characterized by dishonourable actions: the knight wins the lady by lying to her, because, in order to obtain her favour, he affirms it was "another knyght that have slayne Sir Pelleas" (p. 104). Gawain is deceitful, and not only with Ettarde but also with his fellow knight, whom he has sworn to aid. Instead of interceding for Pelleas, he decides to keep the woman for himself and Ettarde, who does not demonstrate any benevolence to Pelleas, is pleased to hear that her suitor is dead, and immediately assents to give herself to Gawain.

While in the sources Ettarde and Pelleas are in the end appeased and united, in the *Morte* it is not so. One of Malory's main changes is the story's conclusion: in the French text, Ettarde decides to accept Pelleas as paramour, but only because Gawain asked her to do so. In this way, although Ettarde represents Pelleas' reward for his indulgence and patience, the lady's affection towards him is not sincere nor spontaneous.[178] In the *Morte*, the author choses to stress the supremacy of genuine love over courtly relationships, so Nymue's intervention is aimed at repaying Pelleas equally for his knighthood. The sorceress avenges Pelleas by causing Ettarde's death, and provides him with a kinder

[177] Moorman, p. 166.
[178] Davidson, p. 25.

lover: herself. The narrator informs us that "lady Ettarde dyed for sorow; and the Damsel of the Lake rejoysed Sir Pelleas, and loved togedyrs duryng their life" (p. 106).

Nymue freely choses her husband-to-be, because she admires him, and considers him a "valyaunte knyght" (p. 106). She probably casts a spell on Pelleas too, in order to obtain his love in return, but the mutual feeling between her and the knight in the *Morte* is an example of admirable relationship. Moorman explains the definition of positively connoted love in Malory and argues that

> "Vertuouse" love is the way things might have been: its virtues are stability and chastity, and it is perfectly compatible with the chivalric ideals of honor and loyalty and with marriage.[179]

The union of Pelleas and Nymue is used as a model of solidity, because their marriage lasts even after Arthur's death (and the consequent destruction of his reign). Unlike other Arthurian knights, Pelleas does not choose to become a monk after his sovereign's departure: when his wife follows Arthur on the boat which leads the king to Avalon, the narrator specifies that she does not leave her beloved, and adds that Pelleas "lyved unto the uttermuste of hys dayes with her" (p. 689). The fact of being Pelleas' wife becomes Nymue's apposition from the episode of Ettarde onwards, so her condition of wedded lady is evidently relevant for the narrator, and is original to Malory.[180]

Geraldine Heng observes that the couple appears on more than one occasion at Arthur's court and their names are always listed together. The scholar makes a significant consideration by saying that the woman is always named before her husband; the traditional auxiliary role of female characters in the Arthurian Medieval literature is here reversed, because, as Heng argues (referring to Pelleas),

> there are occasions when he accompanies Nyneve to court as her consort, described in much the same way as when wives or mistresses accompany male personages on celebratory occasions.[181]

[179] Moorman, p. 167.
[180] Hodges, 91.
[181] Heng, p. 847.

Nymue is Arthur's counselor, so her position at court is obviously more relevant than her husband's, who is a knight of the Round Table but has no meaningful direct contact with the king. The narrator prefers to characterize Pelleas not for his political role, but for his moral qualities: he is defined as "a full noble knight" (p. 642) and as "the good knight" (p.689), in order to underline his deep loyalty to the founding principles of Arthurian knighthood.

Although Nymue shares the view that a man's prowess is a fundamental component of chivalry, she does not want her husband to be in mortal danger. Her desire to protect Pelleas reminds the readers of her attitude towards Lancelot and Serveuse, because she prefers to preserve the knights instead of inciting their pugnacity, which has, in most cases, deathly consequences. The narrator stresses her preoccupation for her husband's security by observing that "thys Dame Nynyve wolde never suffir Sir Pelleas to be in no place where he shulde be in daungere of his lyff" (p. 689) and explains also that the knight agrees to stay with her "in grete reste" (p. 689). Nymue also asks her husband also to avoid jousting against Lancelot, because she knows that Pelleas would probably loose (and be consequently injured), so,

> when Launcelot was at ony justis or at ony tournemente, she wolde not suffir hym to be there that day but yf hit were on the syde of Sir Launcelot (p. 112).

The natural affection which leads Nymue to asks her husband to avoid the battlefield has also other important implications, because it is a mean through which the sorceress is fully accepted as a member of the knightly society. Nymue's love for Pelleas and its institutionalization through their wedding suggest her respect for the principles which give social stability to Malory's world. As Heng underlines, in the *Morte* even a woman who possesses magic powers is judged according to her acceptance of the rules of

courtly society. Although Nymue shares many characteristics with Morgan, she is more integrated into Arthur's society than Arthur's sister. Heng observes that Morgan le Fay "desires not one, but several lovers, and not only magical powers but the temporal authority of the king",[182] adopting thus an egoistic and greedy behaviour. The fact that Morgan desires more than one man is compared, by Heng, to her insatiable yearning for political power. Nymue, on the other hand, prefers to concentrate on her husband, and her choice is considered favourably by the chivalric society.

Nymue does not express her authoritative opinion on matters of knightly behaviour only. In the *Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Gwenyvere*, she intervenes to save the queen's life: Guinevere is wrongly accused of having poisoned an apple, which kills Sir Patrice, "a knight of Irelonde" (p. 590), the cousin of Sir Mador de la Porte. The true responsible for the murder is Sir Pinel, who wants to revenge the death of a cousin, killed by Gawain's brother, so the apple has not been poisoned in order to harm Patrice, who is only an innocent victim of a plot against Gawain. Mador asks justice for his cousins' murder, and publicly accuses the queen. The whole court is convinced of Guinevere's guilt and nobody suspects Pinel, because the queen prepared the "feste and the dyner" (p. 591). Arthur declares that he does not believe Mador, but agrees to entrust his wife's life to the result of a trial by combat. The king affirms he is convinced of the queen's innocence, but adds that he must be the judge in the trial, so he cannot defend his wife from the accusation. Arthur invites therefore his knights to take Guinevere's part by fighting against Sir Mador, but no one agrees to combat for the queen's sake. Only Lancelot accepts to "put his body in jouperté" (p. 591) in order to prove, through his victory in a fight, that the queen has nothing to do with the homicide.

[182] Heng, p. 848.

In the original redaction (the *Morte Artu*) Lancelot's intervention is fundamental, and no other proof is requested to demonstrate the queen's innocence, because the knight's superiority at dueling is sufficient to free her. In the *Morte*, Lancelot's success seems not enough to convince the court of the queen's innocence, so Guinevere is not fully exculpated until the Lady of the Lake' s arrival.[183] Nymue affirms that the queen must not be blamed for the poisoning: "she told hit opynly that she was never gylty" (p. 598). The sorceress's belief in Guinevere's innocence, however, is not motivated by any evidence in the text; what is considered relevant is Nymue's presence after the combat, and the reason that urges her to court: the news that "the Quene was greved for the dethe of Sir Patryse" (p. 598). In order to dismiss the accusation, Nymue does not employ her magic powers but her political weight, which allows her judgement to be held in high regard by the court. Even if the royal couple thanks Lancelot for his aid, it is only after Nymue's speech that the queen's accusation is formally dismissed, and not after the knight's performance. When the sorceress explains to the court that Pinel is the responsible for the intrigue, the trial ends with Guinevere's discharge, which is expressed by the narrator as a consequence of Nymue's accusation against Pinel, because after her revelation the plot "was opynly disclosed, and so the Queene was excused" (p. 598). The part played by Nymue in the trial should have been the king's, because it should have been the sovereign's duty to administrate justice (as Arthur himself declares immediately after Sir Mador's accusation), but he does not utter any formal decision concerning his wife's destiny. On the other hand, Nymue indicates who the real murderer is, confirming thus her role of benevolent and equal judge.

[183] Holbrook, p. 776.

There are two more occasions in which Guinevere is sentenced to death, and Lancelot is always her defender, because he "promised her […] ever to be her knight, in right othir in wronge" (p. 597). Lancelot's intervention is not based on a critical evaluation of the queen's possible involvement in each treacherous event, but on a promise, which morally obliges the knight to offer his offices in any case. In order to keep his word, and demonstrate therefore his love and loyalty to his paramour, Lancelot defends Guinevere every time she is menaced. His help, therefore, does not fully demonstrate the queen's innocence, at least in the court's eyes, because defending her is a vow that the affectionate knight takes seriously, disregarding the position of Guinevere in each situation. Lancelot declares to the king that he

> ought of ryght ever to be in youre quarrell and in my ladyes the Quenys quarrel to do batayle; for ye ar the man that gaff me the hygh orded of knyghthode (p. 597).

Lancelot's offer to be Guinevere's champion is probably considered by the court a confirmation of his feelings towards the queen, as well as a demonstration of devotion to his king, whose reputation would have been spotted too by Guinevere's condemnation.

Lancelot proves that the bold defence of an armed male figure does not always have more effectiveness than the speech of a woman; on the contrary, in this episode it is a woman's intervention that solves the dramatic situation. Moreover, even if the victory in the combat would have been sufficient to exculpate the queen, Lancelot would not have been capable of indicating to the court the identity of the real murderer, so the knight's aid would have been limited to Guinevere's defence, with no contribution to the identification of the killer. Kaufmann notices that

> Nynyve's intervention in this episode undercuts the paradigm of trial by combat, in which a woman requires a man to speak for her; she supplants the man's word with a woman's words. Her role as Guinevere's savior is unique to Malory, but it is consistent with his use of her character to reinforce female authority as the voice of verdict in an otherwise patriarchal system.[184]

[184] Kaufman, p. 61.

The knight's abilities are a symbol of male power, which is often expressed through physical force and a duelling attitude. The employment of a trial by combat should have been the instrument to determine, through the display of abilities which are considered typically masculine, the responsibility of the accused in a quarrel. In this episode, however, the trial by combat becomes inadequate to solve the case, and Lancelot's abilities, although celebrated in more than one occasion in the *Morte* by the narrator and other characters, appear useless even to protect the woman he loves from the court's possible insinuations. The traditional division between active male figures and static female figures in medieval Arthurian romances is no longer valid here, because the sorceress demonstrates again to be capable of employing fruitfully the political influence that she achieved.

Although Nymue's speech confers a positive end to the episode, the sorceress needs a different motivation than Lancelot's to aid the queen: when Nymue declares to the entire court that Guinevere is innocent, she does so because she knows (although the readers are not informed about how she gets the information) that Arthur's wife is telling the truth. The queen is accused of treason three times in the *Morte*, and consequently condemned to death; however, she is always saved by Lancelot's proud deeds of arms. Holbrook notices that there is a fundamental difference concerning Guinevere's position in each trial, and the queen's various degree of involvement in each situation is relevant for Nymue, who decides to exculpate her only once. While in the tale of the poisoned apple the queen is not implied in the treachery, her responsibility in the other two trials is more questionable. Although Guinevere's favourite knight is always ready to prove in a duel her non-involvement in the facts, the readers (and probably the court too) do not fully share Lancelot's view. As Holbrook argues,

> in Lancelot's two subsequent rescues of Guinevere from alleged treason her innocence is a degree more ambiguous in each; this structural gradation fits into the pattern of increasing conflict enmeshing the characters in this part of the Arthuriad. [185]

Guinevere's passionate liaison is one the causes of the feud among the knights of the Round Table, because when the nature of her link with Lancelot is discovered, some warriors side with her lover, but others decide to remain faithful to the king, who declares war to Lancelot.

In the description of the trials in which Guinevere is involved, she is always sentenced to be burned at the stake. Her rescues follow a recognizable pattern, which includes: a formal accusation, Guinevere's impossibility to defend herself, Lancelot's display of superior battling talent and the avoidance of the queen's capital punishment. Kaufman believes that the reiteration of this series of events has the purpose of showing the queen's increasing involvement in the moral corruption characterizing Malory's interpretation of Camelot's ruin. Kaufmann analyzes the evolution of the queen's character throughout the work and notices that Guinevere's

> multiple possible immolations symbolize her growing identity, the trials by fire that mark moments in the development of her consciousness, her journey toward redefining herself.[186]

Guinevere demonstrates to be capable of evolving by abandoning her initial role of courtly queen, in order to become a pious and inspiring example for her former lover, to whom she indicates the best way to expiate the sins they committed together: "I require thee […] that you never se me no more […] and I pray the hartely to pray for me" (p. 692). Isode, who shares with Guinevere the condition of being a courtly lover, compares her own feelings towards Tristan to those that link the queen and Lancelot, by affirming: "there be within this londe but four lovers, and that is Sir Launcelot and Dame Gwenyver, and Sir Trystames and Quene Isode" (p. 226). According to Isode, the affection and

[185] Holbrook, p. 775.
[186] Kaufman, Amy S., "Guenevere Burning", *Arthuriana*, 1 (2010), p. 79.

passion that constitute courtly relationships are the only form of true love in the country, but the reader perceives that the author probably did not share this view: courtly love in the *Morte* undermines the stability of marriages, and of society in general, as the final battle of Lancelot and Arthur demonstrates.

Kaufman argues that Guinevere's affection and care for Lancelot are sincere and deep (as Isode recognizes in her speech) but play nevertheless a crucial role in Arthur's destruction.[187] Guinevere's abandonment to love is one of her defining features and is exemplified throughout the work mainly in its courtly manifestations. Malory's Guinevere, however, shows that the love towards her knight has in the final part of the work also a positive, redemptive effect. The queen is portrayed in the text as a true lover, who demonstrates in the end to regret the suffering she has caused. She is therefore used with Nymue as a positive example of loving heroine.

The parallel between Guinevere and Nymue is explored by Holbrook, who asserts that

> it is very appropriate for Nymue to aid Guenevere, whom Malory defends as a true lover, for Nymue's relationship with Pelleas exemplifies true love, and, in a telling detail, "sire Pelleas the louer" is one of Guenevere's special retinue of knights who fight for her in the subsequent episode of Melygant's abduction.[188]

The battle in which Pelleas defends the queen from Melygant is the knight's last fight, in which he has the possibility to demonstrate his valour, because while some of his companions "were smytten to the erthe with grimly woundis" (p. 627) he resists the enemies' attacks. Pelleas is not mortally injured, but is "sore wounded" (p. 627). From this episode onwards, Pelleas' name is never listed again among fighting warriors.

[187] Kaufman, "Guinevere Burning", p. 80.
[188] Holbrook, p. 776.

Pelleas' absence from the battlefield could be motivated simply by observing the result of Malory's concern for his character's identity: the huge number of Arthurian knights in the *Morte* does not allow the repetition of all their names in the description of each tournament or battle, so Pelleas is in some cases excluded from the lists of the Round Table's heroes. This observation, however, does not contradict the effectiveness of his wife's request to avoid combat, because the reader is informed about it only at the end of the *Death of Arthur*, when Nymue is on the boat to Avalon. Nymue's plea to her husband could have been likely made after Pelleas' defence of the queen, and his consequent wounding, because the narrator does not give any indication concerning the moment in which Pelleas swears to his wife to live with her in peace.

Conclusion

The comparison between Malory's work and his sources allows readers to understand to what extent the author reshaped the original material: Nymue, the Lady of the Lake, is one of the characters that increase significantly their prominence in the story, and her interventions are mainly aimed at re-establishing equality and justice in human relationships, according to the principles of the knightly code. After her kidnapping, she indirectly obliges the king to send his men to aid her, although the sovereign would have gladly ignored her abduction. Her saviour, Pellinor, lacks sensitivity, in particular towards women, and Nymue makes him repent his faults.

The Lady of the Lake entertains close relations with some of the most powerful male figures of the work, on whom she exercises her influence, as she does with the annoying Merlin, who sees his own magic retorting against himself. She also saves the king's life in various ways, both by performing an enchantment and by wisely advising him against the fearful consequences of his harsh judgement. She appears as a mighty and resolute figure, who asks the help of men only to test their degree of gentleness and bravery. Nymue freely chooses to become the king's protector and this role improves her social position, because her speeches are always listened to with great respect. The decisions that she takes in the story exemplify her belief that truthful feelings and honesty must be rewarded with mutuality, as she does in the case of her husband-to-be Pelleas, by freeing him from his hopeless devotion for the proud Ettarde. Pelleas is noticeably not the man who choses Nymue as his wife, but the one who is chosen by her.

The sorceress's last active participation to the court's life as Guinevere's advocate,

is an eloquent example of how female judgement can supplant male physical performance in the *Morte.* After having discharged the queen from a false murder accusation, Nymue does not interfere with the events concerning the court anymore. Arthur's last apparition in the work is also hers, because she is never mentioned again after the sovereign's departure, while the last days of Lancelot, his fellow knights and Guinevere are described in the last section of the *Morte*. Nymue is included by Malory among the queens that hold the wake over the king's body on the boat to Avalon. The gentlewomen that escort the king – Morgan Le Fay and the queen of Orkneys – are both his sisters, so the presence of Nymue, who does not have any blood relationship with the sovereign, attests to her relevance in the political life of the reign.

Nymue's role is not submitted to the canons of the *Morte*'s typical female characters, which have, in most cases, an ancillary function, and are usually strongly dependent on male jurisdiction. The enchantress's autonomy in taking decisions and pursuing her own interests without male interference leads critics such as Kenneth Hodges to define Nymue a knightly figure,[189] but even if some of the activities that she performs are characteristically masculine in Malory, such as the haunt or the king's protection, some others are usually associated to the world of women, as for example the employment of magic, which is considered a female art (with the only exception of Merlin, who, according to Scott Littleton, might share with the Lady of the Lake even a common literary prototype).[190]

Nymue's influence on Camelot's courtly society derives both from her knowledge of occult arts and from a cunning use of her wit; the combination of these two

[189] Hodges, Kenneth, "Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nyneve", *Arthuriana*, 2 (2002), p. 86.
[190] Littleton, Scott, "Some Notes on Merlin", *Arthuriana*, 5 (1995), p. 89.

characteristics entitles her to treat even the king as her peer, because her attitude towards him is not of submission. She is considered by Arthur not one of his courtiers but an ally, who spontaneously offers him precious advice. In her relation with the sovereign Nymue does not act to pursue personal profit, but in the course of the story she approaches the court in a way that allows her to gain more political power in each intervention, until her last appearance on the boat to Avalon. She survives Camelot's destruction with no sins to expiate, in contrast with the knights of the Round Table (who opt for an acetic life, following Lancelot's example) and Guinevere (who spends her last days in a nunnery), and with no enemies, because once Arthur is dead there is no reason to oppose Morgan, who is one of her companions on the boat.

Malory connotes Nymue as a character that crosses the boundaries between feminine and masculine, human and supernatural representation: she embodies thus a conjunction between different worlds. Maureen Fries defines the roles of medieval Arthurian heroines and female counter-heroes as the opposing manifestations of the auxiliary function reserved to women in Arthur's legends. Although Nymue supports and aids the king and the knights of the Round Table, she possesses some of the characteristics which, according to the scholar, are peculiar to female counter-heroes, as, for example, an "indifference to patriarchal values and a sexual freedom unknown or unknowable to the other types of women".[191]

The attitude of the Lady of the Lake towards her man demonstrates a sexual emancipation which does not belong to the gender characterization of any other positive female figure in the work, because women are usually the object of chivalric love and do not choose to seduce the man they prefer, but are rather seduced by his chivalry and

[191] Fries, Maureen, "What Tennyson Really Did to Malory's Women", *Quondam et Futurus*, 1(1991), p. 47.

courtesy. Another feature that Fries indicates as typical of female villains is the fact that they question the rules of the patriarchal society in which they live, and Nymue's actions undermine too some manifestations of a chivalric universe dominated by men. The sorceress's qualities testify that she is not a proper heroine, nor a proper villain. Her privileged social position, the power deriving from her knowledge of occult arts, but most of all her moral principles reflecting the highest values of Malory's courtly world connote her as an example of the female figures' evolution that signals the passage from medieval to early modern characterization.

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table: The Text of Caxton, ed. by Edward Strachey, London: Macmillan, 1925.

Caxton's Malory: A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur Based on the Pierpont Morgan Copy of William Caxton's Edition of 1485, ed. by James W. Spisak, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, revised by P. J. C. Field, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Le Morte Darthur, or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of his Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism, ed. by Stephen H. A. Shepherd, New York: Norton, 2004.

Secondary sources:

Ackerman, Felicia N., " 'Your Charge Is to Me a Plesure': Manipulation, Gareth, Lynet, and Malory", *Arthuriana*, 3 (2009), pp. 8-14.

Allen Paton, Lucy, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*, Boston: Ginn, 1903.

Archibald, Elizabeth, "Beginning: The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius", in Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Stockwell Garfield Edwards, eds., *A Companion to Malory*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996, pp. 133-152.

Barron, William R.J., *English Medieval Romance*, London; New York: Longman, 1987.

Batt, Catherine, *Malory's 'Morte D'Arthur': Remaking Arthurian Tradition,* New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Benson Larry D., "Introduction" in Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994, pp. XV-XVII.

Bliss, Jane, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008.

Boffey, Julia, "Women Authors and Women's Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England", in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 119-182.

Berthelot, Anne, "Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake", *Arthuriana*, 10 (2000), pp. 55-81.

Breuer, Heidi, *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Brewer, Derek, "The Paradoxes of Honor in Malory", in A. Lupack, ed., *New Directions in Arthurian Studies*, Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2002, pp. 33-48.

Burrow, J.A., "The Fourteenth-Century Arthur", in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 69-83.

Cartlidge Neil, "Introduction" in Neil Cartlidge ed., *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008, p. 1.

Caughey, Anna, "Virginity, Sexuality Repression and Return in the 'Tale of the Sankgreal'", *Arthurian Literature*, 28 (2011), pp. 155-179.

Chambers, Edmund K., *Malory and Fifteenth-Century Drama, Lyrics and Ballad*s, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Cherewatuk Karen, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2006.

Cooper, Helen, "The *Cycle* in England", in Carol Dover, ed., *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003, pp. 147-172.

Cooper, Helen, "Counter Romance: Civil Strife and Father-Killing in the Prose Romance", in Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*, New York: Norton, 2004 pp. 819-829.

Cooper, Helen, "Malory's Language of Love" in B. Wheeler, ed., *Arthurian Studies in Honor of P. J. C. Field*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, pp. 297-306.

Corin, Corley, ed., *Lancelot of the Lake*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Classen, Albrecht, "Introduction", in Albrecht Classen, ed., *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004, pp. 1-42.

Cristoph, Siegfried, "Honor, Shame and Gender" in F. Wolfzettel, ed., *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the 17.th International Arthurian Congress*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995, pp. 26-33.

Davidson, Roberta, "Reading Like a Woman in Malory's Morte Darthur", in *Arthuriana*, 16 (2006), pp. 21-34.

Dentzien, Nicole, *The Openness of Myth: The Arthurian Tradition in the Middle Ages and Today*, Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2004.

Edwards, Elizabeth, "The Place of Women in the 'Morte Darthur'", in Elizabeth Archibald, Anthony Stockwell Garfield Edwards, eds., *A Companion to Malory,* Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996, pp. 37-54.

Elliott, Dyan, "Marriage", in Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 40-57.

Evans, Ruth, "Virginities", in Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 21-39.

Fellows, Jennifer, "Mothers in Middle English Romance", in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 41-60.

Fenster, Thelma S. and Lees, Clare A., "Introduction", in Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees, eds., *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance,* New York: Palgrave, 2002 , pp.1-18.

Field, Peter J.C., "Description and Narration in Malory", *Speculum*, 3 (1968), pp. 476-486.

Field, Peter J.C., "Time and Elaine of Astolat", in James W. Spisak, ed., *Studies in Malory*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985, pp. 231-235.

Field, Peter J. C., *Malory: Text and Sources*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998.

Field, P.J.C., ed., *Le Morte Darthur: the Seventh and Eighth Tales*, London: Hackett Publishing, 2008.

Ford, Patrick K., "The Death of Merlin in the Chronicle of Elis Gruffydd", *Viator,* 7 (1976), pp. 379-390.

Ford, Patrick K., ed., *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008.

Francis, Christina, "Reading Malory's Bloody Bedrooms", *Arthurian Literature* 28 (2011), pp. 1-19.

Fries, Maureen, "Indiscreet Objects of Desire: Malory's Tristam and the Necessity of Deceit", in James W. Spisak, ed., *Studies in Malory*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985, pp. 87-108.

Fries, Maureen, "What Tennyson Really Did to Malory's Women", *Quondam et Futurus*, 1 (1991), pp. 44-55.

Fries, Maureen, "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Fiction," in Thelma S. Fenster, ed., *Arthurian Women: a Casebook*, New York; London: Garland, 1996, pp. 59-72.

Gaylord, Alan, "Back from the Queste: Malory's Launcelot Enrages Gwenyvere", *Arthuriana*, 2 (2006), pp. 78-83.

Guiducci, Armanda, *Medioevo inquieto: storia delle donne dall'8. al 15. secolo d. C.*, Firenze: Sansoni, 1990.

Halliwell, Stephen, "Epilogue: the Poetics and its Interpreters", in Amélie O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 409-424.

Hellinga, Lotte, "The Malory Manuscript and Caxton", in Derek Brewer and Toshiyuki Takamiya, eds., *Aspects of Malory*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Rowman and Littlefield, 1986, pp. 127-141.

Heng, Geraldine, "Enchanted Ground: the Feminine Subtext in Malory", in Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur*, New York: Norton, 2004, pp. 835-849.

Hodges, Kenneth, "Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nyneve, *Arthuriana*, 2 (2002), pp. 78-96.

Holbrook, Sue E., "Nymue, the Chief Lady of the Lake in Malory's Le Morte Darthur", *Speculum*, 4 (1978), pp. 761-777.

Holbrook, Sue E., "Guenevere: The Abbess of Amesbury and the Mark of Reparation", *Arthuriana*, 1 (2010), pp. 25-51.

Hyonjin, Kim, *The Economy of Love, The Knight Without the Sword: A Social Landscape of Malorian Chivalry*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000.

Jesmok, Janet, "Guiding Lights: Feminine Judgment and Wisdom in Malory's Morte Darthur", *Arthuriana*, 3, (2009), pp. 34-42.

Kaufman, Amy S., "The Law of the Lake, Malory's Sovereign Lady", *Arthuriana*, 17 (2007), pp. 56-73.

Kaufman, Amy S., "Guenevere Burning", *Arthuriana*, 1 (2010), pp. 76-94.

Kelly, Robert L., "Wounds, Healing, and Knighthood in Lancelot in Malory's Tale of Lancelot and Guenevere", in James W. Spisak, ed., *Studies in Malory*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985, pp. 173-197.

Kelly, Thomas Edward, ed., *Le Haut Livre du Graal, Perlesvaus: a Structural Study*, Geneve: Libraire Droz, 1974.

Kent, Elizabeth, "Reflecting and Creating Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe", in Megan Cassidy-Welch and Peter Sherlock, eds., *Practices of Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2008, pp. 317-326.

Kilber, William W., "Introduction", in William W. Kilber, ed., *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle: Text and Transformations*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009, pp. 1-13.

Krishna, Valerie, "Introduction" in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, Valerie Krishna, ed., New York: Burt Franklin, 1976, pp. 1-34.

Lacy, Norris J., "Prophecies de Merlin", in William Kilber, *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*, New York: Garland, 1995, p. 763.

Lacy, Norris J., ed., *Lancelot-Grail Cycle, the Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in translation*, vol. VIII, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010.

LaFarge, Catherine, "The Hand of the Huntress: Repetition and Malory's *Morte Darthur*", in Isabel Armstrong, ed., *New Feminist Discourse*, New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 263-280.

Larrington, Carolyne, "The Enchantress, the Knight and the Cleric: Authorial Surrogates in Arthurian Romance", in Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson, eds., *Arthurian Literature*, vol. 25, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008, pp. 43- 66.

Larrington, Carolyne, "Sibling Relations in Malory's Morte Darthur", *Arthurian Literature*, 28 (2011), pp. 57-74.

Lees, Clare A. and Overing, Gillian, "The Clerics and the Critics: Misogyny and the Social Symbolic in Anglo-Saxon England", in Thelma S. Fenster, and Clare A. Lees, eds., *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, pp. 19-40.

Leitch, Megan G., "(Dis)Figuring Transgressive Desire: Blood, Sex, and Stained Sheets in Malory's Morte Darthur", *Arthurian Literature*, 28 (2011), pp. 21-38.

Loomis, Roger S. "Some Names in Arthurian Romance Author(s)", *PMLA*, 2 (1930), pp. 416-443.

Lumiansky, Robert M., "The Relationship of Lancelot and Guenevere in Malory's Tale of Lancelot", *Modern Language Notes*, 2 (1953), pp. 86-91.

Lumiansky, Robert M., ed., *Malory's Originality, a Critical Study of 'Le Morte Darthur'*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1964.

Lumiansky, Robert M., "Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur, 1847-1987: Author, Title and Text", *Speculum*, 4 (1987), pp. 878-897.

Lynch, Andrew, "Gesture and Gender in Malory's Le Morte Darthur" in F. Wolfzettel, ed., *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the 17.th International Arthurian Congress*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995, pp. 285-29.

Lynch, Andrew, *Malory's Book of Arms: The Narrative of Combat in Le Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1997.

Lupack, Alan, *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Mann, Jill, "'Taking the adventure': Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*", in Derek Brewer and Toshiyuki Takamiya, eds., *Aspects of Malory*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Rowman and Littlefield, 1986, pp. 71-92.

McClune, Kate, " 'The Vengeaunce of My Brethirne': Blood Ties in Malory's Morte Darthur", *Arthurian Literature*, 28 (2011), pp. 89-106.

McCarty, Terence, *An Introduction to Malory,* Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991.

Mahoney, Dhira B., "Narrative Treatment of Name in Malory's Morte D'Arthur", *English Literary History*, 47 (1980), pp. 646-656.

Mahoney, Dhira B., "Ar ye a Knyght and ar no Lovear? The Chivalry Topos in Malory's Book of Sir Tristam" in K. Busby and J. L. Norris, eds., *Conjunctures: Medieval Studies in Honor of Douglas Kelly*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995, pp. 311-324.

Martin, Molly, *Vision and Gender in Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010.

Monaghan, Patricia, ed., "Rhiannon", in Patrica Monaghan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009, p. 394.

Moorman, Charles, "Malory's Treatment of the Sankgreal", *PMLA*, 3 (1956), pp. 496-509.

Moorman, Charles, "Courtly Love in Malory", *English Literary History*, 27 (1960), pp. 163-176.

Newstead, Helaine, "The Besieged Ladies in Arthurian Romance", *PMLA*, 63 (1948), pp. 803-830.

Nicholson, Helen, *Love, War and the Grail*, Köln: Brill, 2001.

Nolan, Barbara, "The Tale of Sir Gareth and the Tale of Sir Lancelot" in Elizabeth Archibald and Anthony Stockwell Garfield Edwards, eds., *A Companion to Malory*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1996, pp.153-182.

Norris, Ralph C., *Malory's Library: the Sources of the Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008.

Pearsall, Derek A., *Arthurian Romance, a Short Introduction,* Oxford: Blackwell, 2009.

Regnier-Bohler, Danielle, "La fonction symbolique du féminin" in F. Wolfzettel, ed., *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the 17.th International Arthurian Congress*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995, pp. 14-25.

Rhys, John., *Studies in Arthurian Legend,* Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

Rooney, Anne, *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1993.

Rosenberg, Samuel N., "The Prose Merlin and the Suite du Merlin", in Wilhelm, James J., *The Romance of Arthur, New, Expanded Edition: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, New York: Routledge, 1994, pp. 305-364.

Ruff, Joseph R., "Malory's Gareth and Fifteenth-Century Chivalry", in Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle, eds., *Chivalric Literature: Essays on Relations between Literature and Life in the Later Middle Ages*, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1980, pp. 101-116.

Sandidge, Marilyn, "Constructing New Women in the Early Modern English Literature", in *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Albrecht Classen, ed., Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004, pp. 337-349.

Saunders, Corinne J., *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, Cambridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2001.

Shepherd, Stephen H.A., "Chronologies", in Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* New York: Norton, 2004, pp. XVII-XXVII.

Shepherd, Stephen H.A., "William Caxton, Prologue and Epilogue to the 1485 edition", in Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* New York: Norton, 2004, pp. 814-818.

Shepherd, Stephen H.A., "Sources and Backgrounds", in Stephen H. A. Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur,* New York: Norton, 2004, pp. 699-757.

Silver, Carole G., "The Defence of Guenevere: A Further Interpretation, Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900", *Nineteenth Century*, 9 (1969), pp. 695-702.

Spisak, James W., "Recent Trends in Malory's Studies", in *Studies in Malory*, James W. Spisak, ed., Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985, pp. 1-12.

Sweeney, Mickey, "Divine Love or Loving Divinely?: The Ending of Malory's Morte Darthur", *Arthuriana*, 16 (2006), pp. 73-77.

Tieken-Boon Van Ostade, Ingrid, *The Two Versions of Malory's Morte D'Arthur: Multiple Negation and the Editing of the Text*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995.

Tolhurst, Fiona, "Why Every Knight Needs his Lady: Re-viewing Questions of Genre and Cohesion in Malory's Le Morte Dartuhr", in Raluca L. Radulescu and K. S. Whetter, eds., *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, Cambridge: Brewer, 2005, pp. 133-47.

Waite, Arthur Edward, *The Holy Grail: The Galahad Quest in Arthurian Literature*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 1993.

Whetter, Kevin Sean, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, Adelshot: Ashgate, 1998.

Whitaker, Muriel, *Arthur's Kingdom of Adventure: The World of Malory's Morte Darthur*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984.

Windeatt, Barry, "The Fifteenth-century Arthur", in Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 84-102.