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Mariana Feitosa de Campos Oliveira

On the two sides of the English channel: a comparison of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* to its French sources from a feminist perspective

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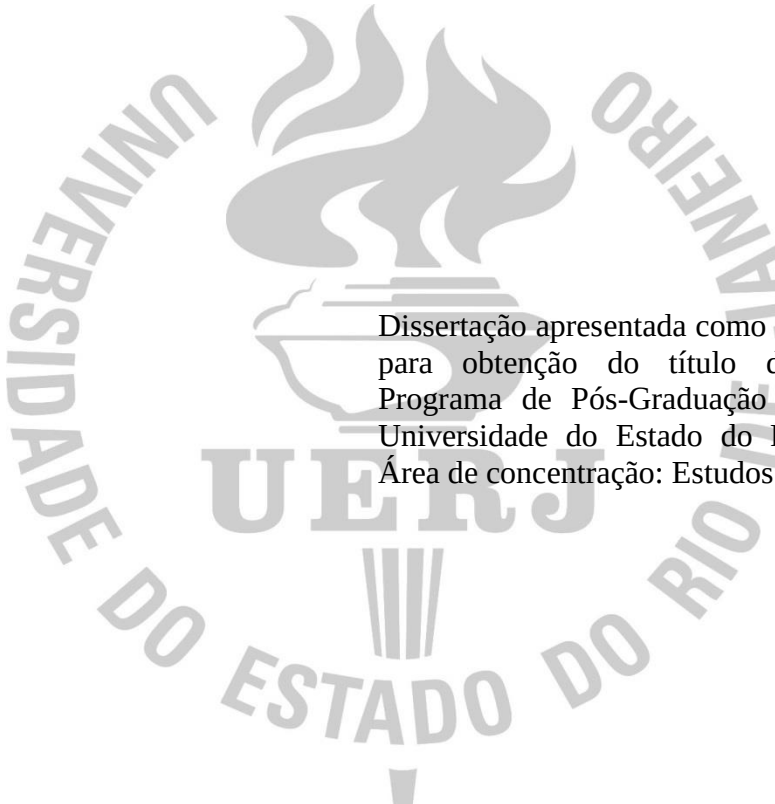

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Universidade Federal da Paraíba

Rio de Janeiro

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DEDICATÓRIA

Dedico este trabalho a todas as escritoras (romancistas, poetas, acadêmicas) que foram e ainda são silenciadas devido ao seu gênero e/ou raça, cujo dom foi suprimido, mas cuja poderosa voz poética ainda ecoa na literatura e reverbera na sociedade.

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Aos meus pais, ambos professores, que sempre colocaram a educação em primeiro lugar e sem os quais eu nada seria. Devo à minha mãe o amor pela leitura, pela escrita e pela língua inglesa, que ela nutriu em mim e que sempre compartilhamos. Ao meu pai, devo o acesso ao ensino de qualidade que ele financiou, muitas vezes com sacrifício, e que me deu as ferramentas necessárias para construir o meu futuro.

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RESUMO

OLIVEIRA, Mariana Feitosa de Campos. *On the two sides of the English channel:* a comparison of Malory's Morte d'Arthur to its French sources from a feminist perspective. 2022. 91 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2022.

Escrito no século 15 por Sir Thomas Malory, *Morte d'Arthur* é tradicionalmente interpretado por acadêmicos arturianos como Eugène Vinaver, como uma compilação e tradução dos ciclos da Vulgata e Pós-Vulgata francesas nos quais se baseou, em última instância sendo visto como se emulasse a concepção misógina de suas fontes acerca do papel feminino na sociedade. Seguindo o recente ímpeto pela revisão histórica de noções de gênero na Idade Média ilustrado pelo Gender and Medieval Studies Group no Reino Unido e a discussão de Dorsey Armstrong acerca da perspectiva particular de Malory sobre prescrições de gênero em *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur (2003),* esta dissertação produz uma reavaliação dessa obra literária para verificar um possível traço subversivo na apropriação de Malory de episódios dos romances franceses. Com tal propósito, este trabalho investigou dois precursores de Malory que são amplamente considerados como figuras centrais para a formação de uma literatura inglesa, a saber, o Poeta de *Beowulf* e Geoffrey Chaucer, em busca de uma linha em comum no que tange a discussão de questões de gênero na Idade Média, e conduziu um *close reading* e análise das seções de *Morte d'Arthur* atribuídas a Malory, como o Juramento de Pentecostes e o Livro de Sir Gareth, para em seguida comparar as seções derivadas com uma de suas maiores fontes, o Ciclo da Vulgata, focando no tratamento de três personagens femininas: a Rainha Guenevere, a Dama Lyonesse, e Morgan le Fay. Na análise das seções originais e estudo das personagens, esta pesquisa se fundamentou na concepção de Judith Butler de gênero como performance e do seu papel na formação de identidades sociais, discutidos em *Gender Trouble (1990)* e *The Force of Nonviolence (2020),* e nos ensaios de Maureen Fries — "*Feminae Populi*: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature" (1986) — e Luce Irigaray — "Women on the Market" (1980). Os critérios para o estudo das personagens foram as duas prescrições opostas de conduta feminina descritas por essas duas últimas autoras, respectivamente: o mandamento religioso de castidade feminina e fidelidade conjugal e o uso secular de mulheres como *commodities* comercializadas para viabilizar relações homosociais. As personagens foram avaliadas de acordo com seus níveis de observância a ambos os estatutos, que variaram entre total observância, observância parcial/transgressão parcial, ou transgressão completa. Considerando os resultados da investigação, do *close reading* e análise, e do estudo das personagens, este trabalho refutou com sucesso a suposição histórica e literária canônica sobre a homogeneidade da perspectiva de gênero na Idade Média. Esta dissertação demonstra, portanto, como a composição de Malory captura a posição ambígua dos modelos normativos de gênero, indicando uma consciência do impacto do gênero na sociedade medieval que contraria a interpretação já estabelecida.

Palavras-chave: *Le Morte d'Arthur* de Thomas Malory. Literatura medieval. Literatura arturiana. Estudos de gênero. Revisionismo literário. Feminismo.

ABSTRACT

OLIVEIRA, Mariana Feitosa de Campos. *On the two sides of the English channel:* a comparison of Malory's Morte d'Arthur to its French sources from a feminist perspective. 2022. 91 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2022.

Written in the 15th century by Sir Thomas Malory, *Morte d'Arthur* is traditionally construed by Arthurian scholars such as Eugène Vinaver as a compilation and translation of the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles it drew from, ultimately seen as emulating their misogynous conception of the female role in society. Following the recent urge for historical revision of gender notions in the Middle Ages illustrated by the Gender and Medieval Studies Group in the UK and Dorsey Armstrong's discussion of Malory's original view on gender prescriptions in *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (2003), this dissertation produces a reappraisal of this literary piece in order to verify a possible subversive strain in Malory's appropriation of episodes from the French romances. For that purpose, this study has investigated two of Malory's predecessors who are largely considered central figures in the construction of an English literature, namely the *Beowulf* Poet and Geoffrey Chaucer, in search of a common thread relating to the discussion of gender issues in the Middle Ages, and undertaken a close reading and analysis of the sections of *Morte d'Arthur* unique to Malory, such as the Pentecostal Oath and The Tale of Sir Gareth, to then compare the derivative sections to one of its major French sources, the Vulgate Cycle, focusing on its treatment of three female characters: Queen Guenevere, Dame Lyonesse and Morgan le Fay. In its analysis of the original sections and character studies, this research leans heavily on Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance and its role in the formation of social identities, as discussed in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), and on essays by Maureen Fries — "*Feminae Populi*: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature" (1986) — and Luce Irigaray — "Women on the Market" (1980). The criteria for the character study were the two opposing prescriptions of female behavior described by these last two authors, respectively: the religious commandment of female chastity and marital fidelity and the secular use of women as commodities exchanged to enable homosocial relations. The characters were measured on their level of compliance to both statutes, which varied from total compliance, to partial compliance/partial transgression, to complete transgression. Considering the results of the investigation, close reading and analysis, and character studies, this work has successfully refuted the canonical historical and literary assumption regarding the homogeneity of the perspective on gender in the Middle Ages. Thus, this dissertation demonstrates how Malory's composition captures the double-edged position of normative gender roles, indicating an awareness of the impact of gender in medieval society which goes against the established interpretation.

Keywords: Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Medieval literature. Arthurian literature. Gender studies. Literary revisionism. Feminism.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> [T]raditional notions of the historical past are both sexed and gendered, not only in the way evidence has been read, interpreted and re-membered, but also in the face of evidence that has *not* been read, has been *mis*interpreted or excluded and forgotten.
>
> *MCAVOY, 2015, p. 3; original emphasis*

Recent paradigmatic shifts in the field of medieval gender studies have led to a resurgence of historical and literary revision. While the general consensus once was that the Middle Ages, and consequently, its literature, were predominantly misogynous, with little space for subversive expressions of gender, that claim is now being contested. Fissures have since been found in the presumed homogeneity of the medieval gender ideology, through which pockets of criticism and resistance shine.

In that sense, it seems propitious to reassess the highly gendered cultural dynamics of Western medieval society, namely, chivalry and courtly love, which have been conceptualized as inherently misogynous by traditional criticism. Such reassessment, moreover, calls for a reappraisal of the literature centered around those cultural dynamics, that is, Arthurian literature.

Among the multitude of Arthurian works produced in the Middle Ages, one stands out due to its comprehensive account of the theme and its lasting impact on how chivalry and courtly love have been perceived since then: Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written in the latter half of the 15th century. One of the few Arthurian pieces, if not the only one, available in print at the time, it greatly influenced the perspective of future generations to date. This work, however, has been heavily criticized by traditional scholarship, both for its derivative content and its apparent subscription to the aforementioned gender ideology conceptualized as wholly misogynous.

Since it derived most of its content from the French cycle of romances from the 13th century known as the Vulgate, which was hailed for its hegemonic treatment of chivalry and courtly love, the assumption was that it lacked any critical perspective on such content and its

societal ramifications. The fact that it had presumably been written by a man who had no respect for women or the law further contributed to such criticism. Considering the aforementioned impetus of historical and literary revisionism, however, this dissertation has undertaken a reappraisal of the gender dynamics in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, by contrasting it with its major source, the Vulgate Cycle.

For that purpose, and in the spirit of breaking with the polarizing binary system which frames traditional conceptions of gender, this work has been divided into three parts. The first chapter is dedicated to establishing a precedent for the critical assessment of gender in the foundation stones of English medieval literature which preceded Malory's work, by analyzing the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* and a section of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The second chapter delves into the gendered intricacies of chivalry and courtly love in both the Vulgate Cycle and the *Morte*, supported by medieval, Arthurian, and gender theories. The third and final chapter presents a study of three female characters contrasting their portrayals in both works, in order to more accurately illustrate the issues brought to light in the previous chapters.

The goal of this undertaking is to investigate the possibility of revising traditional criticism of Malory's work and medieval literature, both in matters of skill and of social awareness of gender issues. It is our hope to unearth what has not been read and correct what has been misinterpreted, as Liz Herbert McAvoy puts it in the introduction to *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*. To achieve this goal, instead of the historical-biographic approach which has been traditionally employed in the interpretation of the *Morte d'Arthur*, a hermeneutic approach has been chosen, considering the unreliability of available information on the author. We will let the work speak for itself, possibly offering glimpses of the writer who composed it.

1 FROM *BEOWULF* TO GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S *THE CANTERBURY TALES*: THE THREADS OF GENDER WOVEN INTO THE ENGLISH SPIRIT

The present work consists of a critical investigation of the depiction of gender dynamics in Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, first published in 1485, in contrast to that of the French series of romances known as the Vulgate Cycle, composed in the 13th century. With this goal in mind, the specificities of each one will be pointed out in the course of this investigation, with greater focus on the English work, since Malory's opus is the primary object of this study. At first sight, readers may identify in this work a romantic critical trend heavily criticized by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), for here they may find a "tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else", an "endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed" (ELIOT, 1919, p. 2320). Nonetheless, rather in accordance with Eliot's notion of tradition, this chapter reveals an awareness that no work of literature springs from a vacuum, that each and every one of them are embedded in a literary tradition composed of both immediate and distant predecessors. After all,

> [n]o poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (ELIOT, 1919, p. 2320).

This understanding of art is essential and particularly true when working with pre-romantic literature, which had little concern for the individual originality of themes and formats, but was in fact based on reworking and attempting to perfect well-known plots and tropes through skill alone. Instead of listing all the new elements that they introduced, be it in regard to form or content, a medieval writer's talent and the worth of their work would have been measured by how well they refashioned well-known stories and poetic content through the use of the literary conventions and techniques established up to their time of composition. Their creative process, therefore, would have been different than that of modern writers, and thus the critical approach to the work of such writers must also be different, as Terence McCarthy suggests in "Malory and His Sources":

> Most twentieth century readers have literary assumptions that have been largely influenced by the novel — a name which in many ways says it all. We expect something new. But the premise that a writer's first duty is to invent, to create, to be original, must be modified when we deal with literature of earlier periods. […] Malory is much more a traditional writer, one for whom invention, as such, is not the prime concern. Instead, he borrows and assembles in order to recreate, to give

> new form to old stories in a way that does full justice to what he sees as their true significance. (MCCARTHY, 1996, p. 78)

Therefore, in order to better understand the 'true significance' of Malory's work in regard to gender, this study must necessarily begin by outlining that 'relation' with dead poets and artists valued by Eliot. Considering that the *Morte d'Arthur*, as McCarthy himself explains, makes use of many episodes, characters, tropes, and at times whole sections translated from the French Vulgate Cycle, the most obvious route to take would be to trace these many elements 'borrowed' from French literature in Malory's work. However, one must not forget that the *Morte* is foremost a work of English literature, written in English by an Englishman, and is, therefore, embedded in the English literary tradition which has both directly and indirectly influenced its composition as much as it was itself influenced by it, a fact which McCarthy himself points out when he expresses his regret that Malory's English sources are constantly overlooked:

> Since the vast majority of the *Morte Darthur* is based on French texts, the English sources tend to be studied only for the sections based directly on them and consequently to receive insufficient attention. This is to be regretted because the English influence, the general cultural traditions of English Arthurian literature, has left a much wider mark on Malory. (MCCARTHY, 1996, p. 94).

This 'mark' left on the *Morte*, according to McCarthy, is more subtle than any of Malory's direct borrowings from the French texts, but also much more pervasive. It is a distinct English trait that lies behind every borrowed element, every translated passage, behind every detail included and those left out, and which points to a particular focus on both the public and military aspects of Arthurian life, whereas the French texts demonstrate a preference for personal feelings and relationships. The length of combat scenes in comparison to that of those describing amorous exchanges, for instance, can be seen as evidence of this particular focus. Whereas the descriptions of combat often span pages, including extensive lists of movements and the combatants involved, the personal interactions between two lovers are usually summarized into a line or two — a significant change from the French texts, which are ridden with lengthy monologues expounding the characters' private sentiment and the actions derived from it. It is, however, important to note that, while sentimental themes have been greatly reduced, they have not been excised altogether, like in the 15th century English work the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, itself another of Malory's sources. The adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere, for example, is a major theme throughout the latter part of the *Morte*, at the very least. Such choice to keep these

interpersonal elements, however diminished, are yet another sign of Malory's authorial intention, which can be attributed to his aforementioned distinctly English focus.

To better understand Malory's creative process, therefore, it is imperative to start by tracing the possible origins of this military focus and partial exclusion of sentimental matter, not by looking into the French sources, but by regressing further, to those foundational works which are not directly referenced in the text itself, but have left their mark all the same, by having established the parameters of the English literary tradition. A challenging endeavor, given the extensive literary content produced in England in the medieval period alone, if it had not been inadvertently aided by McCarthy's very suggestion of where to begin, in one of his remarks about the particular ethos of Malory's opus: "… Malory's code, which in its ethics, its political and social ideals, its very utterances, sometimes reveals affinities with the world of Layamon and even the world of *Beowulf* and *Maldon*." (MCCARTHY, 1996, p. 94). Considering the significance of this 'code' referenced by McCarthy to this study, a topic which will be extensively covered in the part of the investigation which deals with the original sections of the *Morte*, and more specifically, with the Pentecostal Oath, it would be beneficial to pinpoint possible capillary influences on this element before moving on to its analysis. In addition to that, the fact that the long Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* is conventionally held as one of the landmarks of medieval English literature, being the usual point of departure of most courses on the literature of England, singles it out as the most advantageous work on which to begin this investigation.

1.1 ***Beowulf*: The Role of the Peace-Weaver**

Written in the Early Middle Ages, between the seventh and tenth centuries, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* is one that still sparks much controversy amongst scholars and critics. Given the presence of factual information such as the names of real historical figures and places and the description of events which have in fact taken place in the poem, coupled with a unique synthesis of elements from the Pre-Christian culture of Scandinavia and the Christian present of composition in Anglo-Saxon Britain, *Beowulf* has long been regarded as more of a historical document than a work of literature and appraised accordingly. For that reason, greater importance has been attributed to these glimpses of history, such as references

to the legends of other heroes or the stories of real kings and political conflicts, which in the poem can mostly be found in what are referred to as 'digressions' from the main narrative, that of a hero's, the title character Beowulf's, exploits. That core narrative of the poem, however, of the rise of a young warrior to glory through extraordinary deeds of prowess followed by his fall in battle against a nonhuman foe, is considered too trivial in comparison to those tidbits of history of the Scandinavian peoples mentioned in the poem, and regarded as the poem's greatest flaw. The poet is often faulted, by historians and critics alike, for placing the so-called most significant elements, the historical details, at the margins of the poem, while placing the story of the hero at its center. It is also due to such historical content and the fact that to a certain extent it deals with the history of nations such as the Danes, the Geats and the Swedes, that *Beowulf* is usually categorized as an example of the epic genre most famously represented by the *Odyssey*, albeit a lesser one. It is only in 1936 that this approach to the poem will change, with the publication of a paper by J. R. R. Tolkien.

In "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936), Tolkien outlines this critical trend of appraising and criticizing the Anglo-Saxon poem not as literature, as a work of art, but as a historical document, arguing instead that it is precisely the poet's choice and treatment of his theme, the rise and fall of a hero, that give the poem the aesthetic of a historical document that is so valued by historians and critics alike. What had been long criticized as the fatal flaw of the poem, its focus on the hero's battles against monsters that plague the courts of kings, is for Tolkien a mark of authorial intention, a strategy employed by the poet to create the sense of a mournful recollection of a remote past which is nonetheless still alive in the consciousness of a nation, of a way of life which is gone but cannot quite be forgotten; to create an elegy, or, as Tolkien defines it, a heroic-elegiac poem. To develop his argument, he proceeds to analyze the function of two of the monsters which Beowulf fights, Grendel and the dragon, as the two structural pillars of the poem, used to emphasize the hero's symmetrical rise to glory and later fall, all the while highlighting his extraordinary courage and valor. According to him, the fact that Beowulf is made to fight nonhuman foes, such as an ogre that devours men and a dragon that terrorizes his kingdom, instead of another warrior such as himself, a human enemy, widens the scope of the hero himself, who takes greater proportions by going toe-to-toe with these creatures of legend. Beowulf, the hero, becomes an example of the ideal man in that society which valued courage and martial prowess above all else, a role foreshadowed by his first appearance in the poem:

When he heard about Grendel, Hygelac's thane

was on home ground, over in Geatland.
There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
high-born and powerful. He ordered a boat
that would ply the waves. He announced his plan:
to sail the swan's road and search out that king,
the famous prince who needed defenders.
Nobody tried to keep him from going,
no elder denied him, dear as he was to them.
Instead, they inspected omens and spurred
his ambition to go, whilst he moved about
like the leader he was, enlisting men,
the best he could find; with fourteen others
the warrior boarded the boat as captain,
a canny pilot along coast and currents.
(l. 194-209)

Despite the poem's indisputable appreciation for genealogy, given its many lengthy descriptions of warriors' and kings' lineages elsewhere in the composition, Beowulf's name and kinship are not revealed in his introduction to the narrative. Instead, it is his might — "he was the mightiest man on earth" (l.197) — and his exemplary position — "There was no one else like him alive" (l. 196), "like the leader he was" (l. 206) — which are emphasized, even though he is first described as a thane, a warrior under the command of a lord and not a lord himself. Even then, he is regarded as peerless, showing such promise that nobody attempts to prevent him from fighting such an infamously powerful monster as Grendel. From the outset, then, two pieces of information are relayed: that physical strength and leadership, signs of 'might', are highly valued in Beowulf's society, and that the hero is the greatest example of these quintessential qualities. Furthermore, the reference made to his nobility after the mention to his might — "he was the mightiest man on earth, / highborn and powerful" (l. 197-198) — not only inextricably connects one attribute to the other, but seems to subordinate the first, 'nobility', to the second, 'might'. His physical strength, therefore, can be perceived as further evidence of his noble origins, especially considering the war-centered culture of the Scandinavian peoples, in which kings are first and foremost 'war-chiefs' and renown and wealth are obtained through combat. Such conceptualization of nobility is a concern that

Thomas Malory, five centuries later, seems to have inherited, as McCarthy declares: "Regularly, Malory exhorts us to know what constitutes male, noble behaviour and he does not hesitate to point it out if need be, in the way the *Beowulf* poet does too" (MCCARTHY, 1996, p. 95).

In fact, not only does Malory appear to emulate the *Beowulf*'s poet concern for pointing out what can be considered 'manly, noble behavior', but the strategy employed to create such an association between 'might' and '(male) nobility' is also similar, seeming to indicate a lingering literary device that will find its most widespread expression in the genre of romance centuries after *Beowulf*'s composition: the deferral of the identification of the hero, which enables him to prove himself worthy before his place in society is defined and his value is ratified. In her analysis of the traits that the Anglo-Saxon poem shares with courtly romances, " 'Beowulf' as Romance: Literary Interpretation as Quest" (1998), Natalia Breizmann pinpoints the use of such a technique in *Beowulf,* linking it with its usage in Arthurian romances:

> One of the most remarkable features of the introduction in *Beowulf* is that the narrative of the hero begins and continues for a long time, in the absence of that hero. Beowulf's arrival on the scene is anticipated but deferred. […] Moreover, even after Beowulf enters the narrative, he still travels nameless for some time. He finally reveals his name, and his full identity, in line 343, when introducing himself to Wulfgar. Deferral of identification is not uncommon among romance characters. Such is, for example, the case with many heroes in *Parzival*, where the act of naming has a profound symbolic significance and where the characters' proper names are seldomly revealed immediately after their introduction. (BREIZMANN, 1998, p. 1032-1033)

Considering the importance of the matter of (male) nobility for Malory, it is no wonder that he also not only employs such a technique, but extends it beyond introductions. In the *Morte d'Arthur's* "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was called Bewmaynes", for example, the hero's identity is only revealed midway through the narrative and the mystery surrounding it is in fact one of its major plot points. That is also the case with the episode of La Male Cote Tayle: both heroes are made to prove themselves in battle before their own noble lineage can be confirmed, indicating a similar connection between martial prowess, might, and a place of prestige in court, nobility, to that found in the Anglo-Saxon poem. In both *Beowulf* and the *Morte d'Arthur,* however, such a connection is highly gendered. Both Malory and the Beowulf poet not only exhort "us to know what constitutes manly, noble behaviour", like McCarthy states, but also what makes for the acceptable behavior of noble women as well. While the prescribed masculine ethos revolved around demonstrations of

might, normative feminine conduct can be said to be centered around its very opposite: docility.

In his seminal analysis of the function of the monsters in the structure and thematic unity of the Anglo-Saxon poem, Tolkien failed to address its middle section, centered around the attack and defeat of Grendel's mother, who attempts to avenge the death of her son by invading the great hall of Heorot and attacking one of its lord's most prized warriors, only to escape to her lair afterwards, where Beowulf finds her, fights her and eventually defeats her. If, as Tolkien argues, his fight with Grendel illustrates the hero's rise to glory through his might and his confrontation with the dragon depicts his downfall on account of old age, then Beowulf's altercation with the female ogre provides a link to these two sections, according to Jane C. Nitzsche. In her critical essay "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: the Problem of Grendel's Mother" (1980), Nitzsche argues that this monstrous female character not only recalls and foreshadows the other two monsters, but also suggests the root of the downfall of the Germanic society portrayed in *Beowulf*: its adherence to socially enforced gender roles based on the dichotomy of war (male) and peace (female), where men are celebrated for deeds in battle, but women are expected to ensure peace within their communities, as Nitzsche explains:

> The role of woman in *Beowulf* primarily depends upon "peace-making", either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace-pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psychologically as a cup-passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall. Wealthow becomes a peace-pledge or *friousibb folca* (2017) to unite the Danes and Helmings; Hildeburh similarly unites the Danes and Frisians through her marriage; and Frearu at least intends to pledge peace between the Danes and Heathobards. Such a role is predicated upon a woman's ability to bear children, to create blood ties, bonds to weave a "peace kinship".
>
> In addition, woman functions domestically within the nation as a cup-passer during hall-festivities of peace (freoþo) and joy (dr_am) after battle or contest. The mead-sharing ritual and the cup-passer herself come to symbolize peace-weaving and peace because they strengthen the societal and familial bonds between lord and retainers. (NITZSCHE, 1980, p. 288)

In the war-centered society depicted in *Beowulf*, then, women were responsible for creating and maintaining male homosocial bonds, be it between lords or between a lord and his warriors (retainers). They were expected to passively give their bodies over to men to forge political alliances between kingdoms and passively serve their husbands' warriors in every banquet to keep them content and satisfied, thus avoiding war within and without their courts. Despite the tradition of their culture to demand compensation whenever a member of

the family was slain, be it in gold or blood, the women were expected to only mourn the family member and wait for a male relative to make such demands. They had no right to seek vengeance, no right to seek access to other bodies or to display any form of aggression, but to make both guests and members of court feel welcomed, to make sure their needs were met and to offer counsel towards achieving or maintaining peace when required, as the actions of Wealhtheow both during the feast before Beowulf's fight with Grendel and the feast after his victory demonstrate:

> Then the grey-haired treasure-giver was glad;
> far-famed in battle, the prince of Bright-Danes
> and keeper of his people counted on Beowulf,
> on the warrior's steadfastness and his word.
> So the laughter started, the din got louder
> And the crowd was happy. Wealhtheow came in,
> Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies.
> Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted
> the men in hall, then handed the cup
> first to Hrothgar, their homeland's guardian,
> urging him to drink deep and enjoy it
> because he was dear to them. And he drank it down
> like the warlord he was, with festive cheer.
> So the Helming woman went on her rounds,
> queenly and dignified, decked out in rings,
> offering the goblet to all ranks,
> treating the household and the assembled troop
> until it was Beowulf's turn to take it from her hand.
> With measured words she welcomed the Geat
> and thanked God for granting her wish
> that a deliverer she could believe in would arrive
> to ease their afflictions. He accepted the cup,
> a daunting man, dangerous in action
> and eager for it always.
> […]
> The poem was over,
> the poet had performed, a pleasant murmur
> started on the benches, stewards did the rounds

with wine in splendid jugs, and Wealhtheow came to sit
in her gold crown between two good men,
uncle and nephew, each one of whom
still trusted the other; and the forthright Unferth,
admired by all for his mind and courage
although under a cloud for killing his brothers,
reclined near the king.
The queen spoke:
"Enjoy this drink, my most generous lord;
raise up your goblet, entertain the Geats
duly and gently, discourse with them,
be open-handed, happy and fond.
Relish their company, but recollect as well
all of the boons that have been bestowed on you.
The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed
and now the word is that you want to adopt
this warrior as a son. So, while you may,
bask in your fortune, and then bequeath
kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,
before your decease. I am certain of Hrothulf.
He is noble and will use the young ones well.
He will not let you down. Should you die before him,
he will treat our children truly and fairly.
He will honour, I am sure, our two sons,
repay them in kind when he recollects
all the good things we gave him once,
the favour and respect he found in his childhood."
(l. 607-630; 1158-1186)

By taking the cup to each warrior, from the one holding the highest rank to the one holding the lowest, Wealhtheow simultaneously reminds each man in attendance of their place in court and makes sure they are content with it, in an attempt to avoid any revolt; by advising the lord her husband to remember his duty toward his sons and make sure to appoint them as his heirs while expressing her trust that Hrothulf, the lord's nephew, will not attempt to usurp the throne after the lord has passed, she attempts to prevent future discord over who

will rule their kingdom after the lord's death. Similarly, the stories of Hildeburh and Frearu also demonstrate the appropriate behavior expected of noble women, with the former playing the part of grieving mother who merely mourns her son and awaits for a male relative to demand compensations for his death, and the latter the part of the daughter of a lord who is given away in marriage in an attempt to settle a feud between two kingdoms. However, if those female characters are illustrations of the docile, conciliatory and welcoming behavior expected and demanded of women, Grendel's mother is the very opposite: in her attack of Heorot and her ensuing fierce battle with Beowulf, she behaves as one would expect a man to behave in that society: she is aggressive, vengeful and confrontational, despite her given gender, which is constantly emphasized through the use of epithets like "hell-dam" (l. 1293).

Although she is often referred to as 'Grendel's mother' —as in her first appearance in the narrative: "Then it became clear,/ obvious to everyone once the fight was over,/ that an avenger lurked and was still alive,/ grimly biding time. Grendel's mother,/ monstrous hell-bride, brooded on her wrongs." (l.1255-1259)— , she does not behave as a mother is expected to, as Hildeburh does when her son is killed, waiting and mourning. Instead, this she-monster takes on the male part of the 'avenger', of an overlord seeking compensation for her retainer's death by attacking and killing one of Hrothgar's most valued retainers sleeping in the hall. Likewise, when Beowulf chases her into her lair, instead of being the welcoming host women were expected to be when receiving guests, like Wealhtheow is with Beowulf, she attacks him, once again transgressing the gender role assigned to her on account of her sex, an inversion which is emphasized by the erotic undertones of her fight with the hero, as Nitzsche points out:

> For during the passage describing their battle the poet exploits the basic resemblance between sexual intercourse and battle to emphasize the inversion of the feminine role of the queen or hall-ruler by Grendel's mother. This is achieved in three steps: first, the emphasis upon clutching, grasping and embracing while they fight; second, the contest for a dominant position astride the other; and third, the use of fingers, knife or sword to penetrate clothing or the body, the latter always accompanied by the implied figurative kinship between the sword and the phallus and between decapitation and castration. (NITZSCHE, 1980, p. 290)

While Beowulf illustrates the ideal of the noble man, mighty and brave, Grendel's mother reinforces the gendered nature of that association between might and nobility, emphasizing that aggression is a male prerogative, not to be misappropriated by women. It is a flawed system, as the poet makes clear: despite their adherence to the feminine role imputed to them, the other female characters in the poem fail to prevent war: Wealhtheow could not

prevent the fight for the throne which would ensue after her lord's passing, despite her conciliatory words; Frearu's attempt to secure an alliance between the Heathobards and Danes through her marriage fails; Beowulf dies in his last bid for more glory. By highlighting the impossibility of maintaining such a system, the *Beowulf* poet can be said to be calling into question the validity of enforcing such gender roles. Matters such as the objectification and use of women for male ends and the gendered connection between the use of force and masculinity are woven together in this Anglo-Saxon poem, much like in another paradigmatic work of medieval English literature, which deals with a different type of feminine weaving.

1.2 **"The Wife of Bath's Tale": a Story Told by the Weaver from Bath**

The matter of gender roles in literature was one that endured long after the composition of *Beowulf*, after the fall of the Anglo-Saxons and the introduction of Norman culture into English society. It is present in one of the other pillars of medieval English literature, written less than a century before the *Morte d'Arthur*: *The Canterbury Tales*. Composed by Geoffrey Chaucer in the latter half of the 14th century, this collection of tales told by a diverse group of pilgrims on their journey to the Canterbury Cathedral is revered in the field of English literature as the first work purported to be written in English, as opposed to Latin or French, which were the languages of the clergy and the aristocracy respectively and the usual languages employed in literary texts. Although that fact alone justifies its inclusion in this investigation of Malory's predecessors, there is another aspect of this work which renders it especially relevant to this study: not only does it give voice to an early bourgeois female character, however stereotypical, but it also has her tell a story which problematizes courtly gender roles and chivalric assumptions, in the section called "The Wife of Bath's Tale".

Narrated by a feisty outspoken woman from the rising middle class who hails from Bath and boldly declares, in her Prologue, that "Housbondes at chirche dore I have had fyve" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 102, l. 6), and that experience has made her an authority on the 'woes of marriage', her Tale is set "In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 122, l. 857) and recounts the story of a "lusty bacheler" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 122, l. 883), a knight in Arthur's court, who having encountered a maiden in the woods, raped her and for

that crime was sentenced to death by the king. The queen, who remains nameless, however, comes to his aid and says that if he answers a question correctly, he will be spared, the question being: "What thing is it that women most desyren" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 122, l. 905). Desperate to escape his death sentence, the knight travels far and wide, seeking the answer to his question, but everyone he encounters gives different answers as to what women most desire, among which are riches, flattery, sexual pleasure, and marriage. At last, he comes upon an old hag, who tells him that if he accepts to grant her one request, she can tell him the correct answer. He accepts and, coming once again into court and before the queen, he tells her the answer: "Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee / As wel over hir housbnd as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie him above" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 125, l. 1038-1040). Saved from being beheaded for his crime, the knight is then made to fulfill the hag's wish: for him to marry her, which, under heavy protest, he does. He becomes, however, in spite of his previous lusty proclivities, non-responsive in bed, which he attributes to the fact that his new wife is "foule and olde and pore" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 126, l. 1063), prompting the wife, after a lengthy speech, to offer him a choice: he can have her as she is and she will be a 'true humble wife' and 'never displease him in all his life', or he can have her as a beautiful young maiden, but will have to deal with hordes of men pursuing her also. Chastened by the wife's impassioned speech on the virtues of having an old, ugly, and poor wife, or perhaps merely weary of arguing with her, the knight gives her the choice, bidding she choose what suits her best and he will be content. Satisfied by his answer, the woman becomes young and fair and is said to always obey him thereafter.

Although the tale itself has an Arthurian setting and its main character is a member of a warrior class, that of knights, the story, unlike the Anglo-Saxon poem previously discussed, is not overtly concerned with deeds of prowess, or at all. There are no battles, jousts or tournaments where the 'lusty bachelor' can prove himself. The main character, being nameless, however, can be said to be a representative of his class and gender, as if he stood for any male knight in Arthurian lore. In a sense, then, despite his unremarkable reputation, he has a similar function to that of the hero Beowulf, that of illustrating what constitutes masculinity in a given society. Whereas the war-centered culture depicted in *Beowulf* associated male conduct with displays of strength that were seen in a positive light, in contrast, the chivalric culture of the tale associates it with a display of strength perceived in a negative light: that of sexual violence against women, given that the main character's sole feat which employed physical force described in the narrative was the sexual assault of a maiden.

In “The Wife of Bath’s Tale”, therefore, it can be said that masculinity is not only associated with violence but violence against a specific gender, which, seen as the victim, is depicted as vulnerable. In that regard, it can be argued that its discussion of gender dynamics is more critical than that of the Anglo-Saxon poem. It is also more ironic.

The typical progression of an Arthurian story, as this one is purported to be, is that a knight, through a display of strength and prowess, rescues a damsel that finds herself in distress and as a reward is offered her hand in marriage. In Chaucer’s Tale, however, the gendered roles are ironically reversed: it is the female character that, in a show of wit, rescues the ‘lusty’ knight from his death sentence in exchange for his hand in marriage. Not only that, but the woman in question is far from the ideal maiden of Arthurian romances, not young, fair and rich, but old, ugly and poor. As Esther C. Quinn states in “Chaucer’s Arthurian Romance” (1984), “In the context of this male-oriented literature, which celebrates knightly helpfulness, Chaucer reverses the tradition of the rescue of damsels. Moreover, in Chaucer the woman before whom the knight humbles himself is the antithesis of the courtly ideal” (QUINN, 1984, p. 216).

Considering the gender roles underscored by these literary tropes of rescuing damsels and giving beautiful women as rewards for martial accomplishments, of men as the powerful saviors of the vulnerable, helpless women, of male activity and dominance contrasted with female passivity and subservience, the Tale’s ironic reversal of those tropes can be said to question the validity of those gender dynamics. This critique is furthered by the nature of the question posed to the knight and its answer, which states that what women most desire is to have ‘sovereignty’, meaning control over themselves and men, which decisively shifts the power scales. Whereas the ideal portrayed by Arthurian romances is that of male dominance and female subservience, the tale suggests that these roles have been socially imposed, rather than the product of natural proclivities. Women do not want to be submissive, it says; they want control, autonomy — sexual, sociopolitical and subjective sovereignty. It is the acceptance of this fact as truth that grants the lusty bachelor the beautiful, young and obedient wife he desired, when the knight surrenders control to the hag, giving her the choice of whether to remain as she is or become fair and young. Furthermore, that ending in itself, despite appearances, presents yet another critique to the gendered roles of courtly society.

Although it may seem like the knight was not given enough of a punishment for his crime against women and that such an ending only reinforces the same gender roles it mocks

by having the hag choose to become beautiful and obedient for him instead of taking advantage of her newfound control over him, it is also possible to interpret that 'happy ending' as a form of further punishment in disguise. Taking into consideration the words that immediately precede her concession to fulfill the bachelor's "wordly appetyt" (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 129, l. 1218), where the old hag attempts to convince the knight that it is good to be married to an old ugly woman one last time, a negative consequence to her transformation can be pinpointed:

> Now ther ye seye that I am foul and old,
> Than drede you noght to been a cokewold,
> For filthe and elde, also moot I thee,
> Been, grete wardeyns upon chastitee.
> (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 129, l. 1213-1216)

By suggesting that her displeasing appearance and advanced age ensure that she will remain faithful to him on account of a likely lack of interested suitors, so that he would not need to worry about being cheated on, the old hag is associating beauty and youth to adultery, implying that if he had a beautiful and young wife like he so wished, he would be constantly dreading to become a cuckold, forever wondering if his wife was faithful to him or not. An association that is emphasized in her description of his options, when she says that he could have her as she is,

> Or ells ye wol han me yong and fair,
> And take youre adventure of the repair
> That shal be to youre hous, by cause of me,
> Or in som other place, may wel be.
> (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 130, l. 1223-1226)

When, despite her apparent belief that beauty and youth would only encourage hordes of men to pursue her, leaving her husband wondering whether she remains faithful to him or not, the old hag still chooses to become young and beautiful, she is resigning him to that fate, of always dreading to become a cuckold. Even if she remains faithful and true to him for the rest of their lives, as stated at the end of the tale, he will always be suspicious, he will live in constant fear. His own lust, his desire to possess beautiful women, which at the beginning of the story led him to rape a maiden, will be his own undoing. Thus, that ending can simultaneously be perceived as both reward and punishment. A punishment for objectifying

women, effected through that very objectification: by only valuing a woman for her ability to sexually entice men, he is encouraging her to do so, inviting suspicions surrounding her marital fidelity; by reducing women to sexual objects, he is imparting a sexual connotation to women's actions and men's reaction to them, sealing his own fate.

Taking into account the fact that the lusty knight, as previously suggested, may function as a representative of his class and gender within the narrative, an example of chivalric masculinity, it can be said that Chaucer, by having him punished in such an ambiguous fashion, is not only satirically criticizing the gender dynamics of courtly society, in which women are mere sexual objects to be taken by force or won as a reward, but also pointing out a flaw in that system which also affects the part of the population meant to benefit from it, men, when he conceptualizes adultery as a direct consequence of the sexual objectification of women. Moreover, to further emphasize these issues that are inherent to those dynamics, he chose to have this story narrated by a female character who takes pleasure and is very vocal about inverting that system, as she makes clear in her Prologue to the Tale:

> Lo, here the wyse king, daun Solomon;
> I trowe he hadde wyves mo than oon.
> As wolde God it leveful were unto me
> To be refreshed half so ofte as he!
> Which yifte of God hadde he for alle his wyvis!
> No man hath swich that in this world alyve is.
> God woot this noble king, as to my wit,
> The firste night had many a mery fit
> With ech of hem, so wel was him on lyve!
> Blessed be God that I have wedded fyve,
> Of whiche I have pyked out the beste,
> Bothe of here nether purs and of her cheste.
> Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
> And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes
> Maketh the workman parfyt sekirly:
> Of fyve husbondes scoleying am I.
> Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shall!
> For sothe I wal nat kepe me chast in al.
> Whan myn housbond is fro the world y-gon,
> Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon;

> For than th'Apostle seith that I am free
> To wedde, a Goddes half, where it lyketh me.
> He seith that to be wedded is no sinne:
> Bet is to be wedded than to brinne.
> What reketh me thogh folke seye vileinye
> Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamye?
> (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 103, l. 35-54)

Contrary to the feminine ideal of silence, chastity and docility imposed on women at the time, Alyson, the weaver from Bath, makes a stand against those gender dynamics embodied by her performance. She is outspoken and boastful about her sexual and marital experience, where women were expected to be quiet and humble. She is argumentative, reasoning against the prohibition on bigamy and firmly defending the, according to her, God-given right to have multiple sexual partners, using examples from the bible — not conciliatory as she was expected to be. Most importantly, she refuses to be chaste, despite acknowledging the value her society placed on female virginity, going as far as to openly declare that she selected her husbands by their amount of wealth and the size of their genitals — their 'nether purse' and their 'chest'. While the story she tells reveals the consequences of the male practice of sexually objectifying women, the impassioned speech with which she precedes it inverts that custom: she, the woman, is the one who openly sexually objectifies men, reducing them to a means to obtain money and sexual pleasure. The ironic reversal of gender roles, which in the story is effected through the inversion of established literary tropes of Arthurian romance, is mirrored and doubled by the character of the tale's female narrator, amplifying its problematization of medieval gender dynamics.

Moreover, the very choice of adopting a female perspective assigns a positive value and place to that perspective, in so much as it makes space for female storytellers, alluding to their existence among the many social types and classes depicted in the work as a whole. That value and place, furthermore, is described at one point in the Prologue as a counter to a male perspective, in the lines:

> But if it be of holy seintes lives,
> Ne of noon other womman never the mo.
> Who peyntede the leoun, tel me, who?
> By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,

> They wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse
> Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.
> (CHAUCER, 2005, p. 118, l. 690-696)

Not only does this passage denounce the partiality of the perspective of male authors, who fail to identify and portray the 'wickedness' of their fellow man in their stories, but it also makes use of an allegory written by a woman to emphasize the point, that of the 'painted lion', in reference to a story from an actual medieval female writer: Marie de France. In one of her *Fables,* a lion questions the accuracy of a painting of one of its kind devouring a man, by inquiring who painted it. The fact that the Wife chose to employ the words of another female author, indicating that she is herself a reader of De France, is further evidence of Chaucer's awareness of a different (feminine) literary tradition. Another evidence might be his possible use of another of De France's stories to formulate the Tale itself. One of De France's Breton lays, *Lanval*, written between 1170 and 1215, shares many similarities with the aforementioned Tale, especially its criticism of chivalrous society, as Quinn points out:

> Marie de France's *Lanval* is, like Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, a Breton lay, but like the Wife's tale, it has an Arthurian setting. Its hero, like Chaucer's, is a young knight who is enticed into or wanders into the realm of faërie, where he engages into an erotic encounter with a damsel. Both heroes are accused of a crime and condemned to death; both are rescued by a nameless lady, though the hero in the one instance has broken his promise and in the other been guilty of committing a crime; and in the end, each is reconciled with his lady and leaves happily with her. In Marie's Lanval, as in Chaucer's romance, there is a shift in focus from a masculine preoccupation with jousts and purposeful quests to a preoccupation with a female dominated fairy realm. Lanval, like Chaucer's hero, finds his identity not in knightly deeds but in his encounters with a woman who proves to be a fairy. (QUINN, 1984, p. 211-212)

The many points of convergence between the plots of the two stories support the hypothesis that Chaucer was inspired by Marie de France's story when writing his own: the sexual encounter with a damsel, followed by an accusation of unwanted advances on a woman, which prompts a test of the hero's word or wit which will either save him or condemn him to death, in which he is rescued by a woman which he then marries. There are several major differences, however, which indicate a particular treatment of this plot by Chaucer and suggest a different intent than that of De France. Firstly, in her lay, the sexual encounter is between two consenting adults: Lanval and his fay lover, to whom he promised secrecy about their affair. The accusation of unwanted advances in this case is made not by any damsel, but by Guenevere herself, after he rejects her and eventually declares that his lover is more beautiful than her. Thus, the only crimes the hero is guilty of are that of failing

to keep his promise to his lover and insulting the queen, who then accuses him of attempting to seduce her. The test that follows is a request for him to produce the lover he so praised, proving that he had no reason to proposition the queen and that she was in fact lying. All that his fay lover had to do in that situation, then, was to appear before court and beg him to be spared. No shows of wit or power are necessary for her to rescue the hero, no skill beyond that which is expected of women, despite the fact that she reveals herself as a powerful queen of the fairy realm. Finally, there is no ambiguity to the 'happy ending' of the tale: Lanval leaves to become the consort of a beautiful and powerful queen, where he is not expected to be anything other than himself.

Taking into account Chaucer's departures from Marie de France's plot, it can be argued that he aimed for a more realistic, if grim, version of events: his hero, the knight, is a rapist, who forces himself on a maiden, in reference to the darker reality of chivalric behavior, as their historical reputation can attest; in contrast, his queen is benevolent, electing to rescue this horrible knight from the death sentence given by her husband despite his crime; the female love interest is not beautiful and wealthy but intelligent and powerful; his king, the mighty Arthur, is powerless, given that his decision is overruled by the queen's. Whereas the fantastic elements, the description of a faërie realm, for instance, takes center stage in Marie de France's lay but do not directly affect the plot, in Chaucer's tale they are reduced to the presence of 24 fairies when the knight meets the hag, and her final transformation, which, however, becomes a major plot point. In short, whereas De France paints the male-dominated Arthurian court in a negative light, praising the feminine world of the faërie by contrast, in a subtle criticism of chivalric and courtly gender dynamics, Chaucer is more blunt, depicting the male as villainous and incompetent and the female as benevolent and skillful, resorting only tangentially to a fantastic dimension to point out the flaws of the courtly gender system. His accomplishments where "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is concerned, therefore, cannot be questioned despite the possible origins of its plot, much like Marie de France's should not just because her treatment of it was different, especially considering the aforementioned collaborative nature of medieval literature and its means of circulation, as Julia Boffey is quick to point out in her essay "Women authors and women's literacy in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England":

> Modern preconceptions about literacy may lead us into false assumptions about earlier periods, and we do well to remember that our notions of what constitutes 'authorship' may similarly need to be revised in a medieval context. We talk about 'texts' and 'writings' and literature, in terms which all imply the embodiment of material in the form of written letters, but in many cases (most obviously those

> works which have not survived in autograph copies) we lack certain knowledge that the 'authors' responsible for the composition ever envisaged them in that way. (BOFFEY, 1993, p. 162)

It is also entirely possible, therefore, that both De France and Chaucer have actually been inspired by an oral folktale whose 'true' author cannot be determined given its means of circulation; or that the tale had in fact multiple 'authors', each adding a detail each time the story was told, as is often the case with oral narratives. Nevertheless, the fact of the matter remains that there were women weaving stories and philosophies out of female experience in the Middle Ages, as this detour into Marie de France's works makes evident. As does the famous works of Christine de Pizan, an Italian writer at the French court during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, whose criticism sparked centennial controversies surrounding gender roles and expectations known as the *Querelle des Femmes* or "The Woman Question" and whose works, as Boffey relates, had been amply translated into English on account of her connections to the English court, if not by women, as the scholar points out: "In view of Christine's efforts on behalf of her sex, it is ironic that all the surviving English version of her works were as far as is known produced by men" (BOFFEY, 1993, p. 161).

That is not to say, however, that there were not women writing in English as well, if not in the traditional sense criticized by Boffey. Some, like Margery Kempe, composed their works by employing a middleman, a scribe, to whom they dictated their religious experiences and meditations for the record, considering that the religious nature of their thoughts made it acceptable for them to be recorded. Others, possible storytellers or poets, might have remained in obscurity on account of the content of their creations, which might have been deemed unsuitable to be credited to a woman if recorded, as instruction manuals for women suggest, which might explain why the majority of known works by medieval English women are liturgical, instead of romantic, such as that of Julian of Norwich. It is, however, a vast field which is yet to be adequately explored, filled with traces of female authors that shall eventually be recovered, like the inclusion of a non-monastic female narrator in Chaucer's panoramic view of social types in medieval England. That inclusion itself, the questions and possibilities surrounding the interpretation of a tale told by a woman who was herself written by a man already touches upon this discussion of female authorship, however unintentionally perhaps, adding another layer to Chaucer's treatment of gender.

1.3 *Le Morte d'Arthur*: Unspooling the Thread

It is an indisputable fact that the two works analyzed above, *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*, are the landmarks of the literary tradition of medieval England. From the Anglo-Saxon mournful recollection of a culture lost, to the comedic panorama of the different social types that made up Plantagenet society, these two works encompass the whole of the Middle Ages in England from High to Low, from Old English to the East Midlands Dialect of London, in their treatment of the different phases that marked English history. There is, however, one other English work of significance from the medieval period, written on the cusp of a new era, which is the true object of study of this investigation: Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. That work is the reason for the undertaking of an analysis of the other two in search of a distinctly English thread that links the three, making up the fabric of the medieval English literary canon. Taking into account the aforementioned study, the conclusion reached is not as simplistic as claiming that such a thread is nothing but the fact that all three of them depict the costumes and experiences which make up English society, though they absolutely do; nor is it that they all share a common language, because they clearly do not. In actuality, what the evidence collected and presented in the previous pages suggest is that such a thread, that quintessential English quality which all three works possess, is their particular concern with and treatment of the way gender roles condition the necessary negotiation between violence and sex inherent to life in society.

It has been stated in the beginning of this chapter that, unlike the French literature from which Malory drew most of the material he used in his composition of his opus, the *Morte d'Arthur* prioritizes martial elements and public affairs instead of matters concerning the private sentiment of characters. In addition, it has also been noted that exceptions are made to include the latter in very specific situations, such as the details surrounding Lancelot and Guenevere's adulterous relationship, an authorial choice which has been linked to Malory's distinctly English perspective on his subject matter. A similar concern with those two topics and how they can be related can also be seen in both *Beowulf*, and Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale". In the Anglo-Saxon poem, all martial activities are not only an exclusively male prerogative, but also the means through which control and social hierarchy is asserted; that is, the public relations between individuals are regulated first by gender, then by their use or lack of martial prowess. The society depicted in *Beowulf*, therefore, is a

homosocial one, with the men as subjects and the women as the objects whose use support and mediate their interactions and alliances. Furthermore, the poet hints at the possibility that such a society is not sustainable precisely because of that simultaneous reliance on and exclusion of women.

Chaucer, however, decides to make such criticism more explicit. Masculinity is once again depicted in conjunction with the use of physical force, but this time the true tyranny behind the male prerogative on violence is exposed, along with the female desire for autonomy: the male character's sole physical action is to employ his force on women, to use them as sexual objects, for which he is punished by two different women, first the queen and then his wife. Women are depicted as more than what gendered expectations paint them as, and the consequences of such limited expectations are made explicit in the inevitability of adultery. In both works, the martial elements make the public relations, both of which are underlined by gender and sexual dynamics: social relations in *Beowulf* are built through battle, but sought to be maintained through the sexual exchange of women; in "The Wife of Bath's Tale", the knight's attempt to employ such a system fails, with his use of force to make sexual use of a woman leading to his punishment by the women he sought to objectify, first the queen, then his wife. Considering the repeated association between gender, violence and social dynamics in those three works, it is possible to suggest that such a link is a mark of English medieval literature. The next logical step, therefore, would be to unspool that thread within the textual fabric of the *Morte* in order to parse out its specificities, the myriad ways in which the connections between gender, violence and social relations are portrayed, and the effects of such a portrayal. That is the focus of the next two chapters, each on a different scale and with a distinct method, but both working towards that same goal. With the foundation provided by the punctual analysis of the two other works which along with Malory's opus figure at the center of the medieval canon of English literature, it is time to follow that thread and see where it leads.

2 **TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN**

The main source of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* belongs to thirteenth-century French literature. More specifically, as Terrence McCarthy states in "Malory and His Sources" (1999), the bulk of the *Morte* was drawn from a collection of French romances written around 1215: the Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian Romance, also known as the *Lancelot-Grail* or the Prose *Lancelot* and, on occasion, as the Pseudo-Map Cycle. This cycle consists of six romances, with the first three in order of composition comprising its core: the *Lancelot* or *Lancelot* Proper; *La Queste del saint Graal*; and *La Mort le roi Artu* or *La Mort Artu*. Of the other three, which are concerned with events that predate those in the aforementioned works, expanding them, the single most integral to Malory's composition is the *Suite du Merlin*, also known as the *Suite-Vulgate* or the *Merlin* Continuation, which he made exclusive use of in his recount of the earlier developments in the life of Arthur.

Regarding authorship, the author or authors of this cycle of romances remain unidentified, despite its earlier but now refuted attribution to Walter Map. The discrepancy between the depiction of one of the tenets of chivalry in the *Lancelot* in comparison with the one in the following two core romances, however, does suggest there was more than one author, as Norris J. Lacy explains in *The Lancelot-Grail Reader*:

> The *Lancelot* and *Queste* authors clearly contradict each other in their treatment of courtly love. The former offers at least a muted endorsement of the love of Lancelot and Guenevere, a love that seems both to inspire and to ennoble Lancelot. The *Queste*, on the other hand, is uncompromisingly hostile toward such love, which is seen as not only frivolous but as sinful and pernicious. (LACY, 2000, p. 10-11)

Nonetheless, the consistency in the cycle's overall treatment of women indicates at the very least a shared perspective on the matter. According to Maureen Fries in "*Feminae Populi*: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature" (1986), both courtly and popular portrayals of women were based on the biblical archetypes of the Virgin Mary, on one hand, and of Eve on the other. While the Courtly Lady could come "as close to perfection as can any human being" and, being "physically beautiful, admirably chaste, she draws men to goodness from the heights to which her poet has raised her", she could also be the "negative archetype of the Courtly Lady, the also beautiful, also inspirational, but ultimately destructive unchaste woman" (FRIES, 1986, p. 48).

The apparent contradiction in the Vulgate's treatment of courtly love could, as such, also be explained by this biblical duality imputed not only to fictional, but real women as well through the dominant clerical discourse of the period, as Georges Duby explains in *Women of the Twelfth Century* (2013); for behind this discourse is the belief in the natural proclivity of women to the 'sin' of sexual permissiveness. Such a belief is illustrated in the bible by Eve's temptation by the serpent, and its correlated consequence for men, who would by them be tempted, like Adam, into sin and ruin as well. Expressions of female sexuality were, thus, condemned, demonized, along with women themselves, not only by liturgical works but by the literature of the period, as Duby (2013) emphasizes (and as, much earlier, Chaucer's Wife of Bath had denounced). In this sense, Guenevere would stand for every woman who, like the Virgin, had the potential to do good by leading a chaste and faithful life, as seen in the first romance of the Vulgate, but who ultimately fell into temptation, as all women were believed to be "naturally" inclined to do, and thus tempted Lancelot himself into sin, ruining him. Such is the argument of Peter S. Noble in "Women in the Vulgate Cycle: From Saints to Sorceresses":

> The common theme, however, which is taken furthest in the *Queste* but is certainly there in all the other volumes is that women are temptation, just as Eve tempted Adam. They are a disruptive force in the masculine world of chivalry and knightly companionship, the source of many of the disputes between the knights. They are dangerous because of their beauty and, in many cases, their knowledge of and reliance on sorcery. They can weaken the resolve of men by giving poor advice which is contrary to their honour or, like Perceval 's mother, try to remove them from the world of knighthood altogether, which it is their destiny to enter. Beneath the superficial glorification of the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, then, which is one of the most striking themes of the Vulgate Cycle, it is easy to see the clerical misogyny which can be found in so many medieval texts. (NOBLE, 2004, p. 72)

More evidence of this constitutive duality in the depiction of women in the Vulgate is given by Roberta L. Krueger in "Questions of Gender in Old French Courtly Romance" (2000), through her remark on the virginal qualities of the only female character of importance in the second romance in the cycle:

> Even the moralistic *Queste* does not paint an unrelentingly negative image of women, however, for this same text portrays a woman who is a vehicle for the knight's redemption, a parallel to Mary, as Guenevere is to Eve. The narrator reminds us that if woman causes man's fall, she is also the agent of his salvation, "que par fame estoit vie perdue et par fame seroit restoree" (*Queste*, p. 213). Perceval's sister, daughter of King Pellehan, leads Galahad to Bors and Perceval so that they may board the ship that Solomon built, acting on the advice of his wife. Perceval's sister has cut off her hair to provide hangings for the Sword of Strange Hangings; in imitation of Christian sacrifice, she expires as her arm bleeds into an

> *escuele*, a bowl that recalls the Grail, thus healing a female leper and enabling her brother and his companions to complete their quest. (KRUEGER, 2000, p. 142)

Women, in other words, are only seen in a positive light if they abdicate their own individual needs and bodily integrity in favor of fulfilling the demands of others, of men — as martyrs, in the example of the Blessed Virgin; as a "vehicle for the knight's redemption", for men's redemption. After all, chivalry, in so much as it refers to knightly practice and behavior, is a gendered custom, one that can be said to prescribe heterosexual masculinity itself, when one considers its correlation to the belief in aristocratic superiority and the place of nobility in an exemplary position.

In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler presents gender as socially coded performances and one of the two axes that along with sexuality make up a matrix of intelligibility responsible for the construction of identity in society, with the masculine and the heterosexual as its standards. Using Butler's contemporary lenses to read the position that knights, kings and ladies held in relation to members of the lower ranks of society who held few privileges in comparison, the nature of both the chivalrous and courtly attitudes as regulators of gender roles and enforcers of compulsory heterosexuality in medieval society becomes clear. This is an operation that Krueger herself underlines:

> Chivalry imposed constraints on both men and women who would conform to courtly ideals. The ideal of the perfect knight which dictates that the best knight wins, necessitates that many men be losers, defeated in battle and shunned by the most beautiful lady. Ladies may wait as passive objects while knights fight to take possession of them, yet the knights who fail to win their sexual prize, like Calogrenant who loses at Laudine's fountain in Yvain, wear an unmistakable badge of *honte*, shame. Romance misogyny sometimes scape-goats women as the arbiters of a system in which men compete for scarce sexual and material resources and private needs must be sacrificed for public obligations. (KRUEGER, 2000, p. 143-144)

Even though men were also subjected to the imposition of gender roles, women were passive objects and scapegoats. In this respect, this society regulated by chivalry and courtly culture reverberates in Luce Irigaray's description of patriarchal societies in "Women on the Market" (1985) as a homosocial system upheld by women in a subjugated position, as enablers of relationships — platonic due to an interdiction on homosexuality — between men, an identification further corroborated by Perceval's sister role in gathering the three protagonists of the Grail Quest. There is, however, a marked tension between this function of women as 'scarce sexual resources' that ought to inspire competition between men, thus creating a homosocial bond between them, and the religious restrictions on both male and female sexualities, particularly focused on the relationships between ladies and knights —

between secular or courtly and religious chivalry. Such tension is the true point of contention between the *Lancelot* Proper and the *Queste* and *La Mort*, one that can be said to be more sharply developed in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, through his particular alterations of his sources, in spite of eminent Arthurian scholar Eugène Vinaver's criticism of such deviances from the cycle.

In his famous edition of *Morte d'Arthur*, *The Complete Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (1947), Vinaver argues that William Caxton had misunderstood or willingly ignored Malory's original conception of his opus as a collection of separate romances translated and compiled from the Vulgate and organized in chronological order. Taking the newly discovered Winchester Manuscript as his basis, he rearranged the 'tales', as he called them, in order to suit what he believed to be the author's original view, deferring, for example, what was supposed to be the second work in the collection, "The Tale Of The Noble King Arthur Who Was Emperor Himself Through Dignity Of His Hands", to the end, to match the sequence of events portrayed in the Vulgate. Not only did he make such alterations, in his edition's comparative analysis between Malory and his sources he continually belittled the former's treatment of the latter, arguing that by conceiving each episodic narrative as separate, Malory overlooked and erased the tapestry technique characteristic of the French romances, with its constant digressions and cross-references between each one. His point of view is evident, for instance, in his criticism of Malory's alterations to the episode of Balin, in "The Tale of King Arthur":

> In Malory this elaborate structure is broken at a vital point: the 'Dolorous Stroke' is not related to the violation of the Grail mysteries, it is a punishment for a totally different offence, namely the murder of the lady who came as a messenger from the Lady of the Isle of Avalon (the 'Lady of the Lake', as Malory calls her), to claim Balin's head. Balin is told that *because of the dethe of that lady* he will *stryke a stroke moste dolorous that ever man stroke*. As a result the Dolorous Stroke loses its original significance and acquires a new meaning which can be understood without reference to anything that lies beyond the Balin story proper." (VINAVER, 1947, p. 1274)

However, if one were to analyze such alteration not as a mistake but as deliberate, as Dorsey Armstrong does in *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (2003), a reference to a theme "that lies beyond the Balin story proper" could be perceived: the "original significance" of the Vulgate Cycle, which aforementioned scholars have pinpointed as the paradoxical representation of courtly love and religious chivalry. Refuting Vinaver's interpretation of the *Morte* as a collection of separate romances, thus lacking a unified thread, Armstrong identifies such thread in her analysis of the gender dynamics

depicted in the work through a close contrast of *Morte* to its French sources, which reveals that Malory's main addition to the contents of the Vulgate, the Pentecostal Oath, "acts as a 'master signifier' throughout the *Morte d'Arthur*", producing and mediating "the movement of the text, functioning as the master trope to which all the actions of the characters refer" and, furthermore, that this "act of chivalric legislation early in the *Morte d'Arthur* sets in motion an ideal of knightly behavior; the rest of the text tests that code in a variety of circumstances, revealing the tensions, shortcomings, and blind spots of the chivalric project" (ARMSTRONG, 2003, p. 29).

According to the critic, then, whereas the Vulgate reproduces a misogynistic conception of women, namely the dualistic view regulating female sexuality, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* can be said to question that very conception, by putting both it and chivalry itself to the test, precisely through those alterations that Vinaver looked down on and which, upon a closer analysis, expose what Armstrong calls "an economy of violence" (2003, p. 28) in direct association to a specific type of feminine presence.

2.1 **Of Sword and Scabbard: an Economy of Violence**

> Than kynge Arthure loked on the swerde and liked hit passynge well. Than seyde Merlion, 'Whethir lyke ye better the swerde othir the scawberde?'
> 'I lyke bettir the swerde,' seyde Arthure.
> 'Ye ar the more unwise, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde uppon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded. Therefore keep well the scawberde all-weyes with you.'
>
> *MALORY, 2014.*

Aside from the holy grail and the sword in the stone, both well-known fixtures in Arthurian lore, the sword Excalibur ranks as the most famous artifact in the story of Arthur, manifold and diverse as it is. As a matter of fact, it is no coincidence that two out of these

three staples of the popular legend happen to be swords. As the primary tool of every knight, swords are crucial not only to the fulfillment of their duties, but also to the knighting rite that bestows them this eminent position, where the king is handed the knight-to-be's blade and simulates a strike on each of his shoulders, thus welcoming him into the order. Where the institution of chivalry is concerned, then, swords are, as Geraldine Heng explains, "the instruments on which all masculine accomplishment must turn, and therefore pivotal to conceptions of male identity and personal force" (HENG, 1986, p. 98). A phallic object actively employed in combat, therefore conflating a phallogocentric sign with a gendered behavior, this weapon illustrates the centrality of violence not only for knighthood, but for the heteronormative ideal of masculinity in the Middle Ages, rooted, as both are, in physical displays of aggression.

According to Norbert Elias in chapter 10 of *The Civilizing Process* (1994), "On Changes in Aggressiveness", the order of knights, originally a warrior class, was founded on and initially exclusively revolved around aggressive behavior — violence:

> The warrior of the Middle Ages not only loved battle, he lived for it. He spent his youth preparing for battle. When he came of age he was knighted, and waged war as long as his strength permitted, into old age. His life had no other function. His dwelling-place was a watchtower, a fortress, at once a weapon of attack and defence. If by accident, by exception, he lived in peace, he needed at least the illusion of war. He fought in tournaments, and these tournaments often differed little from real battles. (ELIAS, 1994, p. 164)

Thus, the constant exertion of physical force was very much the male norm, not only for those who would become the highest class of men, but for the lower classes as well, as paradigmatic of heterosexual masculinity, embodied by the male model of the knight. In that sense, martial prowess was not only a requirement to ensure survival but would eventually be regarded as proof of affiliation with that esteemed order, since, as Elias points out, violent behavior by itself was present in all levels of the social hierarchy, after the example set by the medieval pinnacles of manhood, the warriors or knights. At the height of chivalry, therefore, it would not suffice to be competent in battle; to reinforce socio-economic differences, knights had to demonstrate both extraordinary skill and bravery in all combative scenarios, be it a mundane quest or a war; the more invincible they seemed the better. Accordingly, it can be said that the mark of nobility for them was the appearance of a male — God appointed — invulnerability, carefully curated through their well-developed expertise.

The increasing monopolization of power, however, brought on the need to subdue this constitutive aggressiveness of knighthood, subordinating its use of violence to a centralized

authority — the sovereign. Now active members of the court, part of the inner circle of rulers and powerful lords and dependent on for both protection and enforcement of their rules, their violent tendencies had to be sublimated so that they remained under control of these pockets of authority, summoned when needed, marshaled according to their demands, but otherwise discouraged, muted (ELIAS 1994, p. 169-170). It was in response to that need that, around the XII century, courtly culture was developed and promoted, as Georges Duby indicates in *Women of the Twelfth Century* (2013, p. 65- 67). The ideals of courtesy and courtly love, duly enacted in the romance stories of knights, kings and ladies that were performed in both the French and English courts of the Plantagenet king Henry II, were the means of domesticating these unruly knights, who must needs be brought into court. Nonetheless, the foundational value of martial prowess for the order of knighthood could not be completely purged, not when it was directly tied to conceptions of masculinity, heteronormativity and nobility: it remained necessary, for the maintenance of chivalry and the acquisition of prestige to the courts the knights took part in, for them to be able to display their extraordinary skill and bravery in combat, under threat of loss of status for this noble warrior class.

Considering that the bulk of the literature produced in the aforementioned courts was the so-called 'matter of Britain' —the collection of romances concerned with the story of Arthur and the Round Table — and that these romances are mirrors on which the conduct of their audience is reflected[1] (DUBY, 2013, p. 66), it stands to reason that both this dilemma and its applied solution would have been captured in the influential 15th century iteration of the matter of Britain, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. In fact, the most explicit elaboration of this paradoxical dynamic can be attributed solely to this work, absent everywhere else in medieval Arthurian literature, especially if we turn to The Pentecostal Oath. Inserted at the end of the Triple Quest of Torre and Pellinor (Book I, chapter III) and spurred on by its disastrous results, the Oath gives voice to the previously merely implied rules of the code of chivalry:

> Thus whan the queste was done of the whyght herte the whych folowed sir Gawayne, and the queste of the brachet whych folowed sir Torre, kynge Pellinors son, and the queste of the lady that the knyghte toke away, whych at that tyme folowed kynge Pellynor, than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and **charged them never to do outerage nothir morthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarrel for no love ne for no worldis goodis.** So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde,

[1] Translations, when not referenced, are mine.

> both olde and yonge, and every yere so were they sworne at the high feste of Pentecoste. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.; my emphasis)

Essentially a list of what not to do, mostly centered on condemning violent conduct, such as ‘outerage’, ‘morthir’ and the infliction of violence after surrender, and based on the ideal of courtesy above all else, this set of laws hinders the knights’ ability to prove themselves and their order worthy of the high rank they possess, making explicit the aforementioned dilemma between the need to prove martial prowess — and thus their own masculinity — and the interdiction on violence. Nevertheless, the Oath also includes a loophole, in the section aptly called ‘the ladies clause’: “and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour: strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe”. As one of the few directives that states what to do instead of what to avoid doing, this clause excuses any and all forms of violence as long as they are in the service of a woman and never against them, thus enabling knights to prove their prowess only when assisting women, as part of what is referred to by Dorsey Armstrong in *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory’s Morte d’Arthur* (2003) as “sanctioned forms of violence” (2003, p. 38). According to her,

> Embedded in the center of the Oath, the position of this particular rule reflects the similar embeddedness of gender in the formation and refinement of identity in Malory’s chivalric society, and thus, its imbrication in all aspects of the Arthurian community. An analysis of the forces and values operative in Malory’s text reveals that identities of self and community are inextricable both from one another and from the chivalric enterprise. While foregrounding masculine activity, chivalry reveals itself as an impossible project without the presence of the feminine, and indeed, *only* possible when the feminine is present in a subjugated position. […] Knights in Malory always read women as vulnerable, helpless, and ever in need of the services of a knight—in short, the object through and against which a knight affirms his masculine identity. Even as the Pentecostal Oath offers explicit protection to women in the ladies clause, it also simultaneously and deliberately constructs them as “feminine” in the chivalric sense—helpless, needy, rape-able. (ARMSTRONG, 2003, p. 36; original emphasis)

In sum, the appearance of male invulnerability perpetuated through martial prowess and displayed through violence requires the projection of that disavowed vulnerability onto the sphere of the feminine, while eradicating female agency and reinforcing the heteronormative conception of the masculine. Based on Judith Butler’s genealogical critique in *Gender Trouble* (1999), which conceives “identity categories” as “the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” and gender as “a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real” (BUTLER, 1999, p. 8-9), it can be said that the Oath actively enforces, if not actually produces, the normative performances of

gender in Arthurian society, inscribing agency and aggression into masculinity, and passivity and vulnerability into femininity, on account of the necessary excision of male vulnerability as a possibility among knights. In that respect and in addition to the socially binding nature of the code and its interdiction on self-serving violence, illustrated by its 'wrongful quarrel' section, the Oath can be read as a prototype of the social contract that would later be formulated by enlightenment philosophers Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as discussed by Butler's ethico-political critique in *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020).

As Butler points out, the social contract is unequivocally also a "sexual contract" (BUTLER, 2020, p. 8). Built on the foundational fiction of a 'state of nature' which would have preceded the inauguration of modern society, a condition of permanent conflict between two self-sufficient lone adult men who fought over resources and reproductive rights, the enlightenment theory of individualism not only conceives the modern subject rising from that state as exclusively male, but cuts this original individual from the relations that characterize their fundamental dependency on familial systems of support, excising that constitutive human vulnerability most evident in infancy and replacing it with a myth of individual (male) self-sufficiency, of (male) invulnerability. Similarly to what is demonstrated in the Pentecostal Oath, itself a contract between each individual knight and their sovereign — Arthur —, this fundamentally human vulnerability produced by a constitutive dependency on others is projected onto women and thus conceived as essentially feminine, in opposition to the essentially masculine would-be invulnerability, which is actually supported by and dependent on this conception of femininity founded on the contract, on the Oath.

Following that reasoning and considering the function of the 'state of nature' as a "retrospectively imagined" origin of the modern subject (BUTLER, 2020, p. 7), one can pinpoint two episodes in *Morte d'Arthur* that precede the Oath and operate similarly to that foundational fiction: The Triple Quest and Arthur's acquisition of Excalibur. As previously mentioned, The Triple Quest of Torre and Pellinor or The Quest of the White Hart as it is sometimes called, or more accurately, its results, were the motivation behind the institution of the Pentecostal Oath; the first after the consolidation of Arthur's centralized authority through his marriage and his acquisition of the Round Table, it reveals, through the violence perpetuated in its course, the need for the enforcement of a specific code of conduct, perfectly illustrating the conditions that led to the development of courtly practice, as described by Elias (1994) and Duby (2013). It begins with a white hart that is being hunted by a brachet that belongs to a damsel, when all three of them burst in quick succession into court, the hart

first and the woman last; both brachet and damsel are then separately kidnapped, one after the other, by two self-serving knights, and Gwayne, Torre and Pellinor are tasked with retrieving them and the hart, which had evaded capture.

Therefore, from the very start there is a conflict over possessions to which the parties feel entitled, living beings perceived as objects, a conflict eerily reminiscent — chronological precedence of the episode over the theory that formulates it notwithstanding — of the state of nature, in which there would have been, presumably, fights over food (the hart), resources (the brachet; a hunting dog) and reproductive rights (the damsel). The ending itself, moreover, only cements the constitutive violence of this condition and its relation to the preliminary inscription of vulnerability into the sphere of the feminine; two women die as a direct result of Gwayne and Pellinor's actions: the former's denial of a surrendering knight's request for mercy, which led to his accidental beheading of a lady seeking to protect her defeated lover; and the latter's indifference to a maiden's cry for help, which resulted in her suicide. In fact, the only one to grant a woman's request in the course of the quest was also the only one to succeed: Torre, himself the bastard child of Pellinor, conceived when the latter forced himself on a shepherd's wife — a product of violence against women.

Despite that victory, because of the other knights' violent neglect of the projected vulnerability of women, shame is brought into Arthur's court, as foreshadowed by Merlin at the beginning of said quest, upon the king's initial refusal to help the damsel: "'Nay,' seyde Merlion, 'ye may not leve hit so, thys adventure, so lyghtly, for thes adventures muste be brought to an ende, other ellis it woll be disworshyp to you and to youre feste'" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.). By 'thes adventures', his meaning can be understood as the quests brought about by women's requests for help, since they are the only ones to occupy this vulnerable position. Consequently, Merlin binds the prestige of Arthur's court to the fulfillment of women's demands, which demonstrates his awareness of the necessity of complying with this conception of womanhood for the maintenance of the order's renown and indeed, the patriarchal society as they know it. Such awareness of the interplay between an exclusively vulnerable femininity and the portrayal of a male invulnerability paramount to the preservation of the status quo can also be perceived in his reaction to Arthur's acquisition of Excalibur, as described by Geraldine Heng:

> 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. The meaning of this replacement is carefully elaborated in a deliberate pointing to the secret powers of

> the new weapon, contained not in blade, but in scabbard or sheath (Lat. *vagina*), a significance to which its royal custodian is at first insensitive. It takes Merlin, an authoritative reader of semiotic categories, to decipher the twin interlocking signs, and repeatedly tutor Arthur on the superior valor of the scabbard. (HENG, 1986, p. 98)

In this episode, itself another possible 'retrospectively imagined origin' to the gender dynamics enforced in the Pentecostal Oath, the relation between a specific feminine presence and the masculine disavowal of vulnerability is illustrated by the scabbard's — an object reminiscent of female genitalia — ability to make its wielder invulnerable. Once the sword that symbolized his right to rule and achievement of manhood, acquired through his use of brute force, becomes unsuitable to Arthur's needs, much like unrestrained aggression no longer fits courtly life, he is given, by a woman, not only the means to continue to employ that force in the (phallic) shape of a new blade, but also a way to hide his constitutive human vulnerability in the (yonic) form of the scabbard. Furthermore, in Merlin's comparison of these two components of Excalibur — seen in the epigraph to this section —, there is a clear subordination of the phallic to the yonic, of the masculine activity of sword fighting to the feminine condition of enveloping and thus veiling a bare vulnerability — not unlike that of that first sword unsheathed from stone and proven breakable —, of the male sense of invulnerability to the projection of a female vulnerability — of Arthur's will to that of the first Lady of the Lake, who asked for a favor in exchange for Excalibur.

According to Butler (2020), unmanageable forms of dependency can lead to conflict and aggression (p. 9). Considering her definitions of dependency as a "reliance on social and material structures" (BUTLER, 2020, p. 10) and vulnerability as a dependency on the actions of another or on a social institution (p. 13), it can be argued that it is precisely Arthur's — and the practice of chivalry's — dependency on this particular construction of the feminine that makes him and the homosocial community of the Round Table vulnerable, leading to the former's death and the latter's dissolution. By enforcing a conception of the feminine as exclusively passive and vulnerable, the Pentecostal Oath does not account for the possibility of female agency and aggression, in its "attempt to regulate the whole community by means of a select few" (ARMSTRONG, 2013, p. 34-35). Nonetheless, these unaccounted-for iterations of the feminine do appear in the course of Malory's narrative, always resulting in a precarious position for the men confronted by it and at times leading to their death, as is the case with Merlin himself. Despite his understanding of the importance of upkeeping an exclusively passive and vulnerable femininity to the integrity of the chivalrous patriarchal

order as a whole and because of his failure to anticipate female agency, the wizard is lured into a trap by the second Lady of the Lake, Nimue:

> And always he lay aboute to have hir maydynhode, and she was ever passynge wery of hym for cause he was a devyls son, and she cowde not be skyfte of hym by no meane. And so one a tyme Merlyon ded shew hir in a roche whereas was a grete wonder and wrought by enchauntement that went under a grete stone. So by hir subytle 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. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

Although the wizard never outright forces himself on Nimue, his unwavering pursuit of her virginity, as a prize to be conquered through his displays of magical prowess, is aggressive and suggests a sense of entitlement to the objectified female body, evocative of that kind of objectification of and claim on women ascribed to the state of nature, which can be said to have persisted in modern and, even before that, in feudal societies. The enchantress, however, refuses to be objectified any longer and, aware herself of the male mandate to always presume female vulnerability and passivity, she co-opts this normative feminine performance for her own gain: using her ‘subtyle worchyng’, i.e her feminine wiles, to persuade Merlin to go into the cave in an attempt to impress her, only to use the knowledge she had learned from his previous boastful displays of magical prowess to trap him there and leave him to die. Thus, in this act of resistance to male claims to her body — it can even be argued, in fact, that it is because Merlin is rumored to be the devil’s son that she rejects him, more than any lacking desire in the act itself —, Nimue illustrates the kind of ‘masquerading’ that according to Luce Irigaray in “Women on the Market” (1985) is regularly employed by women denied free reign of their desires:

> And if woman is asked to sustain, to revive, man's desire, the request neglects to spell out what it implies as to the value of her own desire. A desire of which she is not aware, moreover, at least not explicitly. But one whose force and continuity are capable of nurturing repeatedly and at length all the masquerades of "femininity" that are expected of her. (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 27)

Furthermore, by succeeding in placing an enchantment on the cave that not even Merlin himself could undo from having paid close attention to his earlier demonstrations of magical prowess, she also lays claim to his power, repossessing the agency and aggressiveness denied her because of her sex, all through her deliberate ‘masquerading’ of femininity. Considering the role of the Pentecostal Oath in the enforcement of that particular conception of the feminine, the code itself can be read, as it is by Armstrong, “as a site of

contestation, struggle, and resistance" (2003, p. 31), given that "feminine figures, whether or not their conduct is subsumed within a desire for the common good, are able to use the Pentecostal Oath and its understanding of the feminine as either a defense or a weapon against their socially constructed identities" (p. 44). If Nimue utilizes that understanding as a defense, Morgan le Fay, on the other hand, wields it like a weapon, striking at the foundation of such oppressive gender dynamics: the myth of male invulnerability, embodied by Excalibur's scabbard, which is, in fact, the pivotal element of her first assassination plot against King Arthur, her brother.

Before he hands her the scabbard for safekeeping, there had been no indication of Morgan's traitorous inclinations in the text; it is only after the transaction takes place, in Book I, Chapter III, that it is revealed that "she wolde have had Arthure hir brother slayne" for "she loved another knight bettir than hir husbande, Kynge Uriens, other Arthure" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.). Therefore, it can be argued that it is only after her brother's constitutive vulnerability is exposed to her and the source of his apparent invulnerability is found within her power, thus shattering the illusion of a male invulnerability, that she acts, guided by her own desires (for Accolon, the knight) instead of those of the men in her life (Uriens, Arthur, and even Uther, who gave her away in marriage in the first place). Following that reasoning, any future attack on Arthur or his knights can be read as an attack on the patriarchal institution of chivalry, which prescribes a restricted feminine performance which had erased Morgan's own agency.

In that sense, when she makes a counterfeit of the scabbard to give back to her brother, while handing the real one to her lover, she is exposing this myth of male invulnerability for what it is — an illusion, supported by the feminine —, thus eventually dismantling the whole patriarchal structure of the Arthurian community it is founded on. The ripple effect of her actions can be seen in the macro-narrative's ultimate conclusion, when Arthur is fatally wounded fighting Mordred in the last book (MALORY, 2014, n.p.) precisely because the scabbard which would have prevented any wounds had been lost in that one episode, thrown by Morgan back into the mythical waters of the lake from whence it came, once again a myth. Moreover, like Nimue, Morgan also reclaims her right to aggression, besides agency, not by usurping a wizard's magical powers, but a king's martial prowess, embodied by his sword:

> The meanewhyle Morgan le Fay had wente kynge Arthure had bene ded. So on a day she aspyed king Uryence lay on slepe on his bedde, than she callyd unto hir a mayden of her counseyle and sayde, 'Go fecche me my lordes swerde, for I saw never bettir tyme to sle hym than now.' […] **Anon the damesell brought the queen**

> **the swerde with quaking hondis. And lyghtly she toke the swerde and pullyd hit oute, and went boldely unto the beddis syde and awaited how and where she might sle hym beste**. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.; my emphasis)

If it can be argued that Morgan lost her agency when she was given away in marriage, thus being properly assimilated into the patriarchal structure of that society, the necromancer now seems to seek to restore it by murdering her husband, which she attempts to do not through enchantments, but with both her own hands and Uriens' sword, repossessing that aggression that had become an exclusively male prerogative through the very symbol of his masculinity. Furthermore, unlike the normative conception of the feminine glimpsed in the maiden's 'quakyng hondis', Morgan's own grip of that masculine instrument is 'lyghtly' as she takes it and 'boldely' as she moves into position, demonstrating an ease that, according to the Oath, does not suit her sex, but that seems to come naturally to her all the same. Aggression, this passage seems to suggest, is just as ingrained in women as it is in men. If taken a step further, here normative femininity and masculinity can be read as socially coded performances, not inherent traits. Such an implication is reinforced when, on the verge of striking her husband down, Morgan is caught by her son and immediately reverts to a normative feminine performance: "'A, fayre son Uwayne, have mercy upon me! I was tempted with a fende, wherefore I cry the mercy. I woll nevermore do so. And save my worship and discover me nat!'" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.). Bound twice by the Oath, on account of her sex and her request for mercy, Uwayne has no choice but to comply; Morgan's fluid gender performance both saves her and reveals the availability of gender categories through such performances, much like Nimue's masquerading helped her get rid of Merlin. Both acts, nevertheless, were made possible by the restrictive conception of an exclusively vulnerable femininity reinforced by the Oath, which, while enabling the male would-be invulnerability, also, in turn, makes men more vulnerable to women. Such dependence, however, goes beyond the sphere of aggression, beyond the economy of violence; it also, paraphrasing Irigaray (1986), enables a 'business of desire' (p. 177).

2.2 **The Scabbard, the Envelope: a Business of Desire**

Desire, as has been pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, is the crux of the matter of gender depicted in the Vulgate cycle. In fact, the absence or presence of female

desire is what qualifies characters as good or evil, as the literary counterparts to the stereotypes of the Virgin Mary or of Eve, according to the polarization underlined by Fries and illustrated in the characters of Perceval's sister and Queen Guenevere. Furthermore, the male desire of knights and kings for women, which has also been touched upon and will be expanded on in this section, can be seen as the sublimation of homosexual tendencies instigated by the regiment of semblance of the patriarchal Arthurian society of the Vulgate cycle. In Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, however, such distinctions between virgin and temptress, between knights and kings, only grow sharper, highlighting through them the infrastructure upholding the society depicted in its pages — not a meritocracy by far, but nonetheless based on conceptions of worth to determine value and of desire to establish bonds.

In essence, despite his genealogy and often in addition to such claims, every knight in this society must prove his valor and skill before he can be fully accepted into the order of chivalry, as elaborated in the previous section. Besides providing knights-to-be with the opportunity to prove themselves, nevertheless, the women that come to court with requests for help also serve a complementary function: to draw men away from the civilized sphere into the "forest of adventure" (EDWARDS, 1996, p. 38), as Elizabeth Edwards calls it in "The Place of Women in the *Morte DArthur*" (1996). According to her, those are the two opposite settings to the events in the *Morte*, namely the court and the wilderness, and each one possesses a specific feminine presence:

> Put another way, these two locations represent the centripetal force of the attraction of a centralized court (which we might call civilization) and the centrifugal force of adventure (which usually takes place in a wilderness). […] The queens, and landed women, are immobile, castle-bound, while the damsels roam about in the forest of adventure apparently at will. […] The contrast is, then, between what Catherine La Forge calls 'the inner and the utterly outside', the queens guarded inside strong walls, and those women associated with a world which is outside even the laws of nature, which is 'beyond the known and the social'. When queens leave their castles, it seems they become damsels, subject to the perils of quests, to the wager of strange knights, to abduction and danger. (EDWARDS, 1996, p. 38)

In Malory, then, when a knight embarks on a quest, he is being impelled outwards by this 'centrifugal force of adventure' encapsulated in the figure of the damsel who instigates the quest: he must leave the sphere of civilized behavior, court, to perform his deeds of prowess in service of women to acquire the prestige he so desires. There is, however, the opposing 'centripetal force of civilization', which Edwards further associates with the role of queens and married ladies that are meant to upkeep the prestige and attendance of the courts they preside over by organizing banquets and feasts and listening and passing judgement on

the deeds of prowess performed in quests. Building on that tension between these opposing forces regulating the mobility of men, Armstrong claims that it is that opposition which reveals the process of differentiation — and thus production — of two noble masculine identities: that of knights and kings.

Pointing out the many instances throughout the twenty-one books that comprise the *Morte* in which Lancelot, the paragon of knighthood and, therefore, of heterosexual masculinity, is described as a "knyght wyveles" (ARMSTRONG, 2003, p. 97), she makes the connection between the centrifugal force of adventure and the need of men to assert one's own masculinity. Based on Butler's conception of gender as performative, necessitating for its production and maintenance the repetitive enactment of masculine deeds, Armstrong argues that the quintessential masculine performance of knights would not only be impossible to carry out as a married man, but it also would not be required. With notions of gender and sexuality so intricately intertwined, to be married to a woman is to assert his own heterosexuality and by consequence, his masculinity, but also to be bound to his wife's side and devote his prowess to her protection, which precludes the choice of leaving court on quests. Such is King Arthur's character arc, who after marrying Guenevere abstains from going on quests and only fights in tournaments until his last battles, first against Lancelot, then against Mordred.

One can identify in *Morte d'Arthur*, then, four normative, two feminine and two masculine, roles underlining its courtly and its knightly dynamics: that of damsels and queens and knights and kings, all of them regulated by the conceptions of masculine and feminine enforced by the Pentecostal Oath. As the figurative and actual medium of production of masculine identities, however, women in this Arthurian society can also be seen as the display case of their heterosexual masculinity, especially considering their added roles as prizes, actualized or not, for the completion of quests, the reassertion of one's masculinity. For often throughout the narrative, these damsels who requested aid will be so impressed by the deeds of knights, that they will offer their hands in marriage, as is the case with Elaine after being rescued by Lancelot. As such, Arthurian women hold value because they embody the worth of the knight or king to whom they are beholden. In that sense, Malory's opus depicts the commodification process that Luce Irigaray describes in "Women on the Market":

> The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexuality in speculations, mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations, which defer its real practice. Reigning everywhere, although

> prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations among men. Whose "sociocultural endogamy" excludes the participation of that other, so foreign to the social order: woman. [...] The exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other "wealth" among groups of men. The economy-in both the narrow and the broad sense-that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities. (1985, p. 172)

According to Irigaray, patriarchal societies were founded by and still depend on the exchange of women between men as commodities, as the means to establish and maintain homosocial bonds and facilitate trade of other commodities. In this system, women are keepers of the masculinity of their fathers and husbands, as extensions of their identities. Since men, on account of the patriarchal interdiction on homosexuality, are not allowed to have sexual relations with other men, despite their narcissistic instinct to desire that to which they bear semblance, they use women's bodies to safely and properly enact their homosexual fantasies, be it in the form of an exchange between father and suitor, through competition for the same woman, or the actual trade of the sexual use of a woman. Such dynamic can be seen in the very beginning of the story of Arthur, in Malory's portrayal of his parents' complicated relationship in the first romance of *Morte d'Arthur*, "The Tale of King Arthur":

> HIT befel in the dayes of Uther Pendragon, when he was kynge of all Englond and so regned, that there was a myghty duke in Cornewaill that helde warre ageynst hym long tyme, and the duke was called the duke of Tyntagil. And so by meanes kynge Uther send for this duk charging hym to brynge his wyf with hym, for she was called a fair lady and a passynge wyse, and her name was called Igrayne. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

In the same paragraph, the very first of the book proper, the reader is told of a long-standing war between Arthur's father and the duke of Tintagil and the former's desire to have the latter and his wife brought to his court, without any explanation for this abrupt decision. Considering the Arthurian economy of violence elaborated in the previous section, in which martial prowess was the measure of nobility and masculinity and was assessed by engaging in violent acts, it can be argued that this war was the means for them to prove themselves equal in prowess and thus in nobility and masculinity. It can further be surmised that, finding an equal in the duke, a mirror version of himself, Uther immediately wants him near, in what can be described as an expression of the narcissistic homosexual desire mapped out by Irigaray. Since he cannot have a sexual relationship with the duke due to the interdiction on homosexuality, however, he appears to transfer that desire onto his wife, thus conceived as an

object that emblematizes “the materialization of relations among men” (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 185).

It is this desire “to have lyen by her” (MALORY, 2014, n.p), itself a sublimation of his homosexual fantasy with the duke, that causes the king’s later love-sickness upon Igrayne’s rejection and departure from his court, leading Uther to request the help of Merlin; the reason for her refusal of his proposition being that “she was a passyng good woman” (MALORY, 2014, n.p). Such refusal cannot, nonetheless, be solely explained by the socio-religious ban on adultery in medieval society, when one takes into account how readily the king’s council accepts the possibility of his liaisons with a married woman and the duke’s own lack of reaction besides leaving his court, which indicates a lax posture on the matter, at the very least. Keeping to Irigaray’s model of the inner workings of a patriarchal society, however, it can be argued that it is not her marital status that compels Igrayne to refuse, but her role as a mother, since

> Mothers, reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange. The *incest taboo* represents this refusal to allow productive nature to enter into exchanges among men. As both natural and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order. (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 185; original emphasis)

Already the mother of three daughters by the duke at the time of Uther’s advances, as it is later disclosed, Igrayne could not take part in the homosocial exchange in effect in that society, for in that case she would not only be granting him use of her body as a surrogate for the duke’s, but also of the ‘means of production’, her reproductive nature, which by patriarchal law should belong solely to her husband. It is the reason both for her fear at finding herself pregnant by whom she assumed was her dead husband and her relief when Uther reveals that the child, Arthur, is his, despite the deception he admitted putting her through. For in order to lie with Igrayne, Uther had to assume, through Merlin’s enchantment, her husband’s appearance while the man in question was killed in battle, before the king married her. An illusion which, in fact, can be seen as the actual achievement of the narcissistic assimilation of the duke by the king, desired but sublimated, illustrating Irigaray’s formulations of the drives underlying the exchange process that structures patriarchal society. Arthur himself, then, born from this process, can be said to epitomize this regiment of semblance.

If the mother is excluded from exchange, however, Irigaray describes two other female roles in patriarchal society that fulfill the need for that transaction, namely that of the virgin

and that of the prostitute. In close alignment with the two female archetypes presented in the introduction to this chapter, those of the virgin Mary and of the seductress Eve, these social roles can also be identified in Malory through Edwards's distinction between the damsels in distress that inhabit the forest of adventure and the married ladies that are castle-bound, meant to hold court (EDWARDS, 1996, p. 38). Firstly, embodying the centrifugal force of adventure, the damsels are the facilitators and even enablers of the quests which allow the knight to prove his prowess and thus both enter and remain part of the homosocial bond of knighthood. Their virginity, moreover, is a given, indicated by their designation as damsels, occasionally maidens, and often reinforced by their own declarations, in addition to that of other characters; hence their identification with the social role of the virgin as described by Irigaray:

> The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. In this sense, her natural body disappears into its representative function. Red blood remains on the mother's side, but it has no price, as such, in the social order; woman, for her part, as medium of exchange, is no longer anything but semblance. The ritualized passage from woman to mother is accomplished by the violation of an envelope: the hymen, which has taken on the value of taboo, the taboo of virginity. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men. (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 186)

According to her application of Marx's formulations on commodities to feminist theory, the virgin embodies the potential relationships between father and suitor, by materializing through her body the energy the former would have spent in conceiving and raising her; a manifestation of his labor force and, consequently, of his identity, which would be exchanged for a monetary sum, consummating the homosocial bond between the two men. Transposed to the Arthurian society as depicted in *Morte d'Arthur*, this 'representative function' of the virgin is doubled: not only does she stand for her father's, but for her suitor's labor force as well, since to earn the right to her virginity and the access to her father's energy through it, the knight-suitor must also prove his worth through deeds of prowess, which, upon completion, she also comes to embody. The virgin is thus responsible for the formation of another homosocial bond besides that between father and suitor, that of the order of knighthood itself, as Dorsey Armstrong elaborates:

> In the patriarchal society of Malory's Arthurian community, noble wives are appropriately most often rescued and defended by their husbands, whereas single ladies in distress not only provide a questing knight with the chance to perform an

> act of rescue or service, but they also afford that knight an opportunity to repeat such actions through the establishment of an attachment, or what we might term a "love relationship." As the knight seeks to win the ultimate favor—the lady's hand in marriage—he is spurred to perform greater and more impressive feats of valor, thereby further enhancing and consolidating his chivalric reputation and that of the community he represents. (ARMSTRONG, 2003, p. 116)

The virgin in Arthurian society, therefore, upholds the social order of chivalry, by lending her body to commodification and exchange between noble men, as both motivator and reward, bringing prestige both to the men involved and the very order they are a part of, while veiling the homosexual desire that underlies the patriarchal chivalrous community portrayed in the *Morte*. As Armstrong also points out, such dynamics are best exemplified by the "Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney", the fourth romance in the book. The son of King Lot of Orkney and Arthur's sister Morgause, Gareth seeks to make a name for himself unaided by kinship ties, by disguising his identity — a well-known trope in medieval romance, referred to as the Fair Unknown.

Relegated to work in the kitchens by Sir Kay, where he is called Beaumains, his chance to prove himself worthy of knighthood comes in the form of a damsel requesting help in the name of her sister, who she describes as "a lady of grete worshyp" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.) that has been besieged by a miscreant knight who is after both her virginity and the opportunity to duel any knight of prowess who comes to her aid. It is in response to her need that Gareth is knighted and in her service that he does battle against any knight who gets in his way, earning the respect of both defeated enemies and her sister, who was initially skeptical about his skill. As if the depiction of a pursuit of the lady's virginity as a pretext for the evil knight to challenge famous knights were not enough to cement the function this virgin lady occupies in the narrative, her role as a mere token, a symbol of both male energy and nobility, of potential homosocial relations between suitors, between those and male family members, and finally between the knights of the order themselves, is further illustrated by Malory's portrayal of her first meeting with Gareth:

> 'Sir', seyde the damesell Lynet unto sir Bewmaynes, 'loke ye be glad and lyght, for yondir is your dedley enemy, and at yondir wyndow is my lady, my sistir dame Lyones.'
> 'Where?' seyde Bewmaynes.
> 'Yondir', seyde the damesell, and poynted with her fyngir,
> 'That is trouth' seyde Bewmaynes, she besemyth afarre the fayryst lady that ever I loked uppon, and truly,' he seyde, 'I aske no better quarrel than now for to do batayle, for truly she shall be my lady and for hir woll I fight.' (MALORY, 2014)

Seen from afar, a figure in the window of a castle, her unparalleled beauty is indistinguishable from her family's state. Nevertheless, Gareth swears his immediate devotion

to her and declares his desire to take her for himself. More of an idealization than a proper appraisal, then, this first meeting demonstrates the necessary distance and indeed abstraction of the beloved lady in courtly culture, the quintessential characteristic of courtly love as depicted in medieval romance, which Irigaray also regards as the definitive trait of commodified women:

> —just as, in commodities, natural utility is overridden by the exchange function, so the properties of a woman's body have to be suppressed and subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men;
> —just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body; (1985, p. 187)

Such an abstraction, as a necessary process in the commodification of women, can also be observed in the other female role that lends itself to the foundational exchange described by Irigaray, albeit in a different manner: the prostitute. Diametrically opposed to both the virgin and the mother in that the use of her body has not only already been claimed, but is also continually exchanged, forging relations between past, present and future suitors, this illicit but elementary role finds its expression in Arthurian literature in the figure of the Courtly Lady, as Maureen Fries (1986) calls her; as the married woman who seduces the knights in her husband's court in order to obtain their protection, which in turn is then extended to said court, she serves to upkeep in this manner its homosocial relations.

For adultery, as Duby discloses, was an effective, if precarious, mechanism to establish and maintain the loyalty of knights to their lords in the Middle Ages, by offering the bodies of their wives in exchange.

The adulterous seduction that underlies the social relations of fealty in medieval society, moreover, is also recognized by Edwards as the structure which upholds Arthurian society in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, epitomized in the complex relationship between Arthur, his greatest knight Lancelot, and, particularly, his queen Guenevere: "Guinevere, like the Round Table that was her marriage portion, holds the knights at court and is culpable if she drives them away. Guinevere's role is not to uphold the court, but to uphold the 'homosocial' bonds between men who uphold the court" (EDWARDS, 1996, p. 45). According to both Edwards and Armstrong, it is through her illicit affair with Lancelot that Guenevere holds the most distinguished knight at Arthur's court, solidifying the relationship between her husband, the past suitor, and the knight, her current suitor, through the exchanged use of her body, itself a surrogate for the male body instinctively desired, as Irigaray contends:

> The *prostitute* remains to be considered. Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. […] In her case, the qualities of woman's body are "useful." However, these qualities have "value" only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they serve as the locus of relations —hidden ones— between men. Prostitution amounts to *usage that is exchanged*. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The woman's body is valuable because it has already been used. (1985, p. 186; original emphasis)

Married to Arthur but not yet a mother, Guenevere can be said to occupy this liminal position attributed to the prostitute. As the object of desire of both Arthur and Lancelot, she enables the sublimation of the homosexual fantasies of her husband with her lover through the medium of her body, as the focus and holder of both their energies. The very same exchange, in fact, proposed to Arthur's mother by his father and which, given the lack of outright censure until the latter part of the *Morte*, could be seen as a common practice — "explicitly condemned" but "implicitly tolerated", as Irigaray puts it. Much like in actual medieval society, where there was an official religious ban on adultery on one hand, but, on the other, there was the culture of courtly love, which in and of itself was centered in the romanticization of the illicit relationship between a knight and his lord's lady (DUBY, 2013); religious aspirations clashing with the secular needs of patriarchal society.

Such a paradoxical attitude towards adultery, which in practice can be seen as the exchange of the 'prostitutes' as a necessary social operation, can be regarded as the core of that contradictory depiction of women and courtly culture attributed to the Vulgate Cycle. In that sense, moreover, it can be said of Malory that, with his emphasis on gender dynamics and exposure of the importance of female roles to the inner workings of Arthurian society as detailed so far, he attempts to elucidate such paradoxical discourses on women as found in his French sources. This interpretation of Malory's creative principle is further corroborated by his portrayal of non-commodified women, such as Morgan le Fay.

As Irigaray states: "The economy of exchange —of desire— is man's business" (1985, p. 177). As objects to be traded among men, the subjects, women ought to be excluded from this business and men cannot, thus, be objectified. As the greatest antagonist of Arthur and the patriarchal order which he comes to represent, however, Morgan rejects the objectified role of commodity imposed on her to take on that of consumer, of subject. Throughout the *Morte*, she collects lovers, not to reinforce or even forge any homosocial bonds of father, brother or husband, but to use the men which she seduces herself, to sate her own desires and further her own ambition. Such is the case with Accolon, whom she loved but employed in her first attempt to kill her brother; with Alexander the Orphan, in the "Tale of Sir Tristam de

Lyones", whom she specifically healed and persuaded to reject a maiden's hand in marriage "for none other entente but for to do hir plesure whan hit lykyth her" (MALORY, 2014, n.p); with Lancelot himself, when, in "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot Du Lake", she, along with her retinue of queens, kidnapped him:

> And the quenys rode on four whyghte mulys.
> Thus as they rode they herde a grete horse besyde them grymly nyghe. Than they loked and were ware of a slepynge knyght lay all armed undir an appil-tre. And anone as they loked on his face they knew well hit was sir Lancelot, and began to stryve for that knyght, and every of hem seyde they wolde have hym to hir love.
> 'We shall not stryve,' seyde Morgan le Fay, that was kyng Arthurs sister. 'I shall put an inchauntement uppon hym that he shall not awake of all this seven owres, and than I woll lede hym away unto my castell. And whan he is surely within my holde, I shall take the inchauntement frome hym, and than lette hym chose which of us he woll have unto peramour.' (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

In this scene, the patriarchal system of exchange is reversed: women, as the consumer-subjects, enact their homosocial rivalries through their desire for the commodified man, who remains alienated from the dispute, until the one with the highest social standing on account of her magical prowess, Morgan, takes over the exchange, which she then negotiates with her peers in their own regime of semblance — a lusty sorority. For as subjects, consumers, they are able to foster the kind of homosocial relations denied women-as-commodities, as Irigaray argues:

> That ek-static reference separates them radically from each other. *An abstract and universal value preserves them from use and exchange among themselves*. They are, as it were, transformed into value-invested idealities. Their concrete forms, their specific qualities, and all the possibilities of "real" relations with them or among them are reduced to their common character as products of man's labor and desire. (1985, p. 181; original emphasis)

In this manner, Malory's depiction of Morgan is that of a radically transgressive woman, not merely in the conventional sense, as the seductress embodied by the stereotype of Eve, or as a usurper of male prerogatives on violence as previously discussed, but also as a subverting agent for the patriarchal Arthurian society which precluded the participation of women in homosocial exchanges, despite the fact that it was these women's bodies which were being commercialized. By portraying Morgan as the head of a society of women acting on their desires as subjects, commandeering the exchange process of male bodies instead of lending their own to it, Malory presents an alternative to the patriarchal regime of semblance instated in Arthurian and, by extension, medieval society, intentionally or not, while simultaneously delineating the dynamics in place in these societies.

Therefore, from his depiction of the chivalrous society of Arthur and the Round Table, two opposing regulating systems of belief and behavior can be said to emerge: that of secular or courtly chivalry and that of religious chivalry, with paradoxically different but complementary views on women and on their social roles. On one hand, religious discourse sought to ban earthly pleasures and exert control over female bodies by enforcing an idealized, metaphysical image of knights as divinely appointed, which implied a chaste, devout behavior, a commitment to the designs of God alone. In this perspective, women were conceived as the embodiment of temptation, leading knights astray from the virtuous path much like Eve would have done with Adam in the bible, and only able to be redeemed if they led chaste lives, after the example of the Virgin Mary.

On the other hand, the reality of courtly culture, in which knights and ladies were embedded, revolved around desire as the driving force behind every social interaction and relationship, masking male homosexuality through the projection of a heterosexual desire onto women, who were conceived as sexual objects. Although there was also a cult of virginity, it was of female virginity only and merely to motivate knights by delaying the consummation of their desires, concurrent to a cult of adultery meant to uphold and maintain homosocial relations. These can be pinpointed as the opposing forces acting on female characters in the Vulgate Cycle, brought to light and detailed by Malory's reworking of his sources, and coalesced in the characters of Dame Lyonesse, Queen Guenevere and Morgan le Fay.

Furthermore, by taking into account these two regulating systems, secular and religious, and the codes of conduct enforced by each in an analysis of these three characters in *Morte d'Arthur*, preliminary findings thus indicate different degrees of conformation to both sets of societal norms. While Lyonesse conforms completely to both religious and secular expectations, securing her virginity until it could be traded in a marital exchange between her male family members and Gareth, Guenevere is forced to transgress the religious commandment of female chastity and marital fidelity in order to comply with the secular demands of patriarchal courtly society. Lastly, Morgan preemptively transgresses both religious and secular norms, refusing to be subjected to the role of object for men, either responsible for their failure or their success, choosing instead to act according to her own designs.

In furtherance of a more comprehensive elucidation of how Malory achieved this depiction of Arthurian society through his use of the Vulgate Cycle as his main source,

therefore, it is beneficial to study the development of Dame Lyonesse, Queen Guenevere and Morgan le Fay in the *Morte* in comparison to that in the Vulgate, now that the forces responsible for their basic structure have been thus described. This is the focus of the following chapter, which delineates the two arcs of each character, pointing out the similarities and the points of divergence in each one and conjecturing both the reasoning behind them and their effects on Malory's opus.

3 AN ENGLISH PATCHWORK MADE OF FRENCH KNOTS: A COMPARATIVE CHARACATER STUDY BETWEEN THE VULGATE CYCLE AND THE *MORTE D'ARTHUR*

The conclusions reached in the previous chapter about the role of women in the Arthurian societies depicted in the two separate works analyzed, namely the Vulgate Cycle and the *Morte d'Arthur*, can be summarized in three statements: 1) there are both courtly and religious expectations where the performance of womanhood is concerned; 2) the fulfillment of courtly expectations is essential to the maintenance of the patriarchal Arthurian society; 3) religious expectations clash with courtly ones.

While the religious model to qualify female conduct as good or evil, as normative or transgressive, is based on the Virgin Mary/Eve, chastity/lasciviousness dualities, the courtly model employs both figures, both approaches to sexuality depending on the situation. An unmarried lady — a damsel — should remain a virgin to motivate knights to try and win her hand in marriage; as soon as the exchange between father and husband occurs, however, she then must make her body sexually available in order to keep other knights close to court.

Without the motivation of winning the damsel's prized virginity, the Arthurian economy based on the fulfillment of quests to gain prestige would crumble; without the possibility of earning the married lady's affections, the relationships of fealty between knights and their lords would be dissolved. What would qualify as a transgression of courtly female behavior, then, would be a refusal on the part of the women to act according to these roles: that of damsel, the virgin, and that of married lady, the prostitute, to borrow the terms from Luce Irigaray (1985) — a refusal to be commodified.

It has been stated that the paradox created by the clash of these two different approaches to female conduct is the central theme of both Arthurian works under scrutiny. It has also been suggested that the *Morte d'Arthur*, although heavily based on the Vulgate Cycle, strives to better explain the dynamics behind this paradox, which are merely implied in its source. In order to evaluate the accuracy of such suggestions, it only makes sense to shift focus to the literary elements usually employed to illustrate female performances in a narrative, the characters themselves. With that purpose in mind, three characters were selected for further analysis, taking into consideration their prominence in the overall story of Arthur and their adequacy to such a study: Dame Lyonesse, Queen Guenevere and Morgan le Fay.

Although the basis of this study is a comparison between the Vulgate Cycle and the *Morte d'Arthur*, the first character analyzed is not present in the former work. Dame Lyonesse is the love interest of Gareth of Orkney, the hero of one of the earlier sections of the *Morte*, "The Tale of Gareth of Orkney who was called Bewmaynes". Inspired by a folk motif commonly employed in Arthurian narratives, this section lacks a direct source, so that it can be stated that the character of Lyonesse, much like the Pentecostal Oath so amply discussed in the previous chapter, is wholly original to Malory. Therefore, despite being less prominent a character than the other two selected, it is believed that she can offer valuable insight to the overall composition of the *Morte* and is thus relevant to this study.

Considering her lack of a counterpart in the Vulgate, however, the method of analysis of this first character is different from that of the other two. Whereas Guenevere and Morgan each have two separate depictions, one in the Vulgate and one in the *Morte*, which enables a direct comparison between the French and English works, the originality of Lyonesse's character makes it impossible for such a comparison to be made in her case. In her character study, therefore, her development was assessed in comparison to that of her male counterpart in Malory's narrative, taking into consideration Irigaray's theory on the female as a means of 'specularization' of the male, which will be explored further in the course of the analysis of her character. Nonetheless, information about the folk motif which inspired the section of the *Morte* she appears in has been taken into account and will be touched upon as well.

As for Guenevere, arguably the most prominent female character in Arthurian lore, the method of analysis employed was as previously described: a direct comparison between her character arcs in the Vulgate and in the *Morte*. To conduct such a comparison, once again Irigaray's theories on the social function of women as commodities were applied, in addition to its implications in Arthurian society as discussed in the previous chapter. With both Lyonesse and Guenevere, it was possible to draw comparisons between the social roles of 'virgin' and 'prostitute' formulated by Irigaray and previously expanded on into 'damsel' and 'courtly lady', and their respective developments in the narrative.

The character of Morgan le Fay, however, demanded a different theoretical foundation. Preliminary analysis of her development both in the Vulgate and in the *Morte* indicated a strong transgressive element, suggesting that she could be appointed as the example of a rare non-commodified Arthurian woman. In the course of the analysis itself, nonetheless, it was found that such a transgressive element was intricately tied to the

depiction of a monstrous female, considering her identification with the figure of the witch, which in itself carried gendered ramifications that Irigaray's theories did not cover. For that reason, it was necessary to employ the studies of teratologists Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) and Margrit Shildrick (2002) in the assessment of her characterization, in addition to Judith Butler's (1990) theories on the performativity of gender which already informed the previous chapter. Although it can be argued that, because of such a difference in foundation, the cohesive unity of the three character analyses is broken, that difference also further highlights the non-conformist nature of her character in comparison to the other two where gendered societal norms are concerned, providing further intel on the intricacies of Malory's composition.

What follows, therefore, is by no means purported to be a comprehensive analysis of each character selected but, as it were, more like three separate case studies meant to be representative of the intra-/intertextual dynamics found in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Nevertheless, the questions guiding each one of these studies were essentially the same, all based on the previous assessment of the macro-narrative as a whole. Can any evidence of the gendered social constrictions as previously described be observed in their development? Do the characters abide by them? How and why?

3. 1 **Dame Lyonesse: the Mirror**

As established in the previous chapter, there is an intrinsic connection between a knight's nobility and their skill in battle in Arthurian societies. In order to prove the former, one must demonstrate their possession of the latter, by performing great deeds of prowess, preferably in front of witnesses that can recount such deeds. The superiority of one's lineage is subordinated to their martial prowess, with greater prestige given to those known for performing the greatest deeds in battle, as is the case with Lancelot. In light of such social dynamics, it is no wonder that a popular Arthurian motif is that of the *Bel Inconnu* or the "Fair Unknown" narrative, in which a young man of unknown origins repeatedly proves their prowess in battle before their noble identity is revealed. According to its entry in *The Camelot Project* database written by Leah Haught,

> The "Fair Unknown" is a universally popular folk motif with strong Arthurian connections in which a young man of questionable lineage becomes an integral part

> of society. Initially appearing in court without an established identity, the Fair Unknown nevertheless boldly demands to be knighted. […] Although he is quickly knighted, the Fair Unknown must prove his worth through an extended series of adventures before finally cementing his position within society through marriage and the acquisition of property. Within the Arthurian tradition specifically, the Fair Unknown is usually discovered to be a relative of Gawain and, thus, related to Arthur himself. He must, therefore, prove himself worthy of being not only an .Arthurian knight, but also Gawain and Arthur's kinsman. (HAUGHT, p. 1)

In its essence, then, this popular motif demonstrates the aforementioned dynamics: ultimately, it is the knight's martial prowess, proven in the adventures he undergoes, that enables him to become a part of Arthurian society, the later discovery of his lineage a mere confirmation of his inherent and now apparent nobility. A similar technique of delayed identification as the one employed in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, where the hero is only identified fully after his martial prowess has been duly stated, as explained in Chapter 1. That Arthurian storyline makes clear the role of martial prowess and the importance of quests for that society, not to mention the understated part of women in the process of integration into court, considering the association between that and marriage. It makes sense, then, that such a motif would be employed by Malory in his version of the story of Arthur and his knights, considering his many efforts — detailed extensively in the previous chapter — to make not only this connection between martial prowess and proof of nobility but the role of women in such dynamics explicit. Such a feat is accomplished in what Eugéne Vinaver refers to as "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney who was called Bewmaynes", the fourth section of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, which was heavily based on the "Fair Unknown" narrative, despite lacking a singular direct source, unlike other sections.

This section follows the basic structure of the popular narrative: Gareth, brother of Gawain and nephew to Arthur, shows up in court without any fanfare or adornments that might indicate his social station and asks for three boons, reserving the right to demand the last two at a later date. Although he is taken for a poor man without any social relevance, Arthur is impressed by his physical build and grants him his requests, of which the first is to be harbored for a year under his roof. Put into the care of Sir Kay, he is constantly mocked, made to sleep in the kitchens with the other servants, and given the nickname Bewmaynes, in reference to his fair hands. Biding his time, it is only when a damsel arrives at court seeking help for her sister that Gareth decides to make his other requests: to be the one to undertake the quest of rescuing the damsel's sister and to be knighted by Lancelot after he departs, both of which are granted. Through this adventure, Gareth, under the guise of Bewmaynes, proves

both his might and his courtesy, since he is made to endure the constant mocking and derision of the damsel, his traveling companion, who does not believe him capable of fulfilling the quest on account of his apparent low station in life. Despite his success, he is then rejected by the damsel's sister because of his questionable origins, which merely prompts him to prove himself further. Through a series of mishaps, he and the lady get to know each other better and fall deeply in love, but they are prevented from consummating that love before marriage. It is not until after he wins a tournament that he returns to Arthur's court and marries her, his true identity then revealed by his mother, the king's sister, who comes to court looking for him.

Thus, a lot of the most common elements found in "Fair Unknown" narratives are present in this tale: undisclosed identities, the request for boons, unpleasant ladies, the series of adventures through which a young man can prove himself, tournaments, and a "happy" ending in the form of marriage. There are a few other elements also commonly found in such narratives, however, that are absent. No giants are fought, for instance; there are no fairies and the hero does not cure a lady from a curse, turning her from serpent into maiden with a "daring kiss"; there are no curses and hardly any enchantments — all elements usually found within the "Fair Unknown" motif, according to Haught. It would appear, in fact, that Malory has removed most fantastical elements from the narrative, and it can be argued that it was another of his efforts to emphasize physical acts of prowess instead of magical deeds, and the ordinary roles of knights and ladies instead of metaphysical allegories. Such emphasis can also be perceived in his choice to delay the conclusion of the narrative, adding more opportunities for Gareth to prove himself, another marked difference between this section of the *Morte* and most other iterations of the "Fair Unknown" motif, as Haught herself states:

> Malory's tale, however, postpones the "happy" ending much longer than most Fair Unknown narratives. Lyones refuses to let Gareth enter her castle after he defeats her foe who, it is worth noting, is not an enchanter or an enchantment. Even after the would-be lovers are united, a series of bed tests continue to delay the expected resolution. Thus, Malory seems to be conflating a variety of sources, complicating already existing narrative models to suggest that there is more to Gareth's story than simply proving his prowess. He not only develops into a strong knight, but also grows to embody idealized values such as courteousness in words and deeds, respect for the prowess of others, and reverence for marriage — the widespread lack of which ultimately contributes to the downfall of Arthurian society. (HAUGHT, p. 5)

According to her, then, Malory's Gareth is an embodiment of those conflicting notions amply discussed in the previous chapter: martial prowess, courtesy, and the exchange of women as commodities through marriage. In this tale, however, such a conflict is understated,

since everything works out perfectly: courtesy and martial prowess are balanced and the exchange of women goes off without a hitch, as if the goal was to demonstrate the perfect scenario, the ideal social process at work. In that sense, Gareth is presented as the model knight: of the most noble of lineages, he nevertheless strives to prove that nobility through both his martial prowess and courtesy, earning himself a place at the homosocial fellowship of the Round Table; he illustrates the masculine social role of the knight at work. Nonetheless, such harmony between violence and courtliness is only made possible by Gareth's female counterpart, Dame Lyonesse, the sister who needs rescuing, the virgin who is married off to the noble knight who rescued her. Taking into account the aforementioned alterations Malory made to the "Fair Unknown" narrative and how those are related to the gendered social dynamics covered in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that, as a central piece of this section, further analysis of Dame Lyonesse's character development is needed to refine our understanding of Malory's composition.

If every knight must demonstrate his ability in combat to prove nobility, there must be opportunities for such demonstrations; for a knight to fight honorably, there must be someone to fight for — or rather, something. A "woman-commodity" (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 173), as Irigaray put it, to fulfill the female role of damsel, of both instigator and prize for daring quests. Such is the role of Dame Lyonesse, the love-interest of Gareth, Malory's "Fair Unknown", and thus her first mention in the *Morte* describes her as the victim of an evil knight who has besieged her castle and is holding her hostage. Given the circumstances, it is not she but her sister Lynet who goes to Arthur's court to request aid in her name, prompting the quest which will then be undertaken by Gareth as Bewmaynes, providing him his first opportunity to prove himself. From the beginning, therefore, the inherent passivity of her character is emphasized, especially when compared to Gareth's first appearance in the narrative (1), in which his true identity remains markedly undisclosed, much like in hers (2):

> (1) 'Well,' seyde the kynge, ye shall have mete and drynk inowe, I nevir forbade hit my frynde nother my foo. But what's thy name, I wolde wete?'
>
> 'Sir, I can nat tell you.'
>
> 'That is mervayle,' seyde the kynge, 'that thou knowyste nat thy name, and thou arte one of the goodlyest yonge men that ever I saw.'
>
> […]
>
> (2) 'What is youre lady called, and where dwellyth she? And who is he and what is his name that hath beseged her?'
>
> 'Sir kynge,' she seyde, 'as for my ladyes name that shall nat ye know for me as at thys tyme, but I lette you wette she is a lady off grete worshyp and of grete londys;

> and as for that tyrraunte that besegyth her and destroyeth hir londys, he is kallyd the Rede Knight of the Rede Laundys.' (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

While both their individual identities are kept under wraps even after the king's direct questioning, save the general descriptors of "goodlyest yonge men" and "lady off grete worshyp and of grete londys", the fact that he is speaking for himself while she is being spoken of, that he is physically there taking action while she is locked away in a castle, demonstrates their different positions in the gendered dynamics of their society: his as the active subject and hers as the passive object, as exchangeable commodity. It is worth noting, furthermore, that one of the main features of every commodity, according to Irigaray, is the erasure of their physical attributes in favor of their social function. Thus, the usage of 'goodliest' and 'young' to describe Gareth, a repetition of the earlier description of him as "the goodlyest yonge man and the fayreste that ever they all sawe" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.) which precedes a list of his physical attributes — "large" and "brode" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.), for instance —, qualities immanent to him, while Lyonesse is qualified by material worth external to her — 'of great worship' and 'of great lands' —, can be seen as an example of such erasure, providing further evidence of her commodification. Such "abstraction" of Lyonesse's attributes, their reduction to "some common feature — their current price in gold or phalluses" (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 175), in this case, the wealth of her lands and the nobility of her station, can also be perceived in her first proper appearance in the narrative, that is, the first time Gareth, as Bewmaynes, actually sees her, upon arrival at her castle:

> 'Sir,' seyde the damesell Lynet unto sir Bewmaynes, 'loke ye be glad and lyght for yondir is your dedley enemy, and at yondir wyndow is my lady, my sistir dame Lyones.'
>
> 'Where?' seyde Bewmaynes.
>
> 'Yondir,' seyde the damesell, and poynted with her fyngir.
>
> 'That is trouth,' seyde Bewmaynes, she besemyth afarre the fayryst lady that ever I lokyd uppon, and truly' he seyde, 'I aske no better quarrel than now for to do batayle, for truly she shall be my lady and for hir woll I fyght.'
>
> And ever he loked up to the wyndow with glad countenaunce, and this lady dame Lyones made curtesy to hym downe to the erth, holdynge up bothe her hondys." (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

Unlike Gareth's entrance into the narrative, in which his physical features such as the broadness of his shoulders and the fairness of his hands are emphasized, no reference is made to Lyonesse's appearance, save for a general 'fairness', dubiously ascertained

from what can be surmised as a significant distance. Greater detail, instead, is paid to her actions upon noticing Gareth: a deep curtesy, 'down to the earth', emphasizing her good manners and suggesting a noble, proper upbringing. An upbringing, it can be said, for which her father or other male relatives would take the credit, so that it can be perceived as a reflection of the (male) energy employed in raising her, his "labor" (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 175). Such an emphasis on her actions rather than her appearance, therefore, seems to perfectly illustrate the gendered social dynamics formulated by Irigaray; that, in patriarchal societies such as the Arthurian court, "woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man's 'labor'" (IRIGARAY 1985, p. 175) and that

> *In other words, for the commodity, there is no mirror that copies it so that it may be at once itself and its "own" reflection.* One commodity cannot be mirrored in another, as man is mirrored in his fellow man. For when we are dealing with commodities the self-same, mirrored, is not "its" own likeness, contains nothing of its properties, its qualities, its "skin and hair". The likeness here is only a measure expressing the fabricated character of the commodity, its trans-formation by man's (social, symbolic) "labor". The mirror that envelops and paralyzes the commodity specularizes, speculates (on) man's "labor". *Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man*. In order to serve as such, they give up their bodies to men as the supporting material of specularization, of speculation. They yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks and mirage of his activity." (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 176-177; original emphasis)

Thus, it can be argued that, when looking at Lyonesse, Gareth does not see her, but the nobility imparted on her by others, a demonstration of nobility that he himself aspires to, which in his case can be achieved through a specific type of battle, that is, the fight for a lady's honor, endorsed by the Pentecostal Oath, the means which the lady in question also comes to embody. At once, then, Lyonesse stands for both her male relative's (past) and Gareth's (future) labor: the former's effort expended in raising her, as shown by her good manners, and the latter's effort to rescue her, to be shown when he defeats his foe and takes her as his prize. As such, the effort demanded of her as a commodity that has yet to be exchanged, as the virgin damsel, is to perfectly reflect, as mirror of man's projections, male labor, past and future, by simultaneously displaying her good breeding and enticing knights to fight for her, both of which can mainly be achieved by safeguarding her virginity until it can be exchanged by a male relative and claimed by a knight who has sufficiently proved his worth. Taking such demands into account, her unexpected rejection of Gareth after he has defeated the evil knight threatening her makes perfect sense:

> Than he mervayled why they wolde nat suffir hym to entir, and than he loked up to a wyndow and there he sawe fayre dame Lyones that seyde on hyght, ‘Go thy way, sir Bewmaynes, for as yet thou shalt nat have holy my love unto the tyme that thou be called one of the numbir of the worthy knyghtes. And therefore go and laboure in worshyp this twelve-monthe, and than ye shall hyre newe tydyngis.’
>
> ‘Alas! Fayre lady,’ seyde sir Bewmaynes, ‘I have nat deserved that ye sholde shew me this straungeness. And I hadde wente I sholde have had ryght good chere with you, and unto my power I have deserved thanke. And well I am sure I have bought your love with parte of the beste bloode within my body.’
>
> ‘Fayre curteyse knyghte,’ seyde dame Lyonesse, ‘be nat displeased, nother be nat over-hasty, for wete you well youre grete travayle nother your good love shall nat be loste, for I consyder your grete laboure and your hardynesse, your bounté and your goodnesse as me ought to do. And therefore go on your way and loke that ye be of good comforte, for all shall be for your worshyp and for the best; and, pardé, a twelve-monthe woll sone be done. And trust me, fayre knyght, I shall be trewe to you and never betray you, but to my deth I shall love you and none other.’ (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

As she “ought to do”, Lyonesse persuades Gareth to seek to perform even greater deeds of prowess to gain access to her body, which she swears to deny all others while he ‘labors in worship’ for a year, claiming that it is all for his own good, his ‘worship’. Without confirmation of his nobility by a third (male) party, which she would get when he was “called one of the numbir of the worthy knyghtes”, she cannot give him her maidenhead, so, acting in accordance with the gendered social customs of that society, she sends him away to gain the necessary confirmation. Her actions are, therefore, an illustration of the expected behavior of a lady of her station and marital status in that situation in Arthurian society. Just as Gareth has proven his martial prowess by successfully defeating his foes so far, Lyonesse proves her proper upbringing by denying him and making sure to keep her virginity intact. Once again, there is a similarity in a stage of their character development, much like there was in their respective introductions to the narrative: both keep their identities hidden at first, then both have opportunities to prove their adequacy to the gendered social customs of their society, which they do. Like the mirror Irigaray claims all women-commodities to be, Lyonesse mirrors Gareth; her actions seem to be a feminine — passive, reactionary — reflection of his masculine — active — ones. A tendency which can be perceived throughout the rest of the narrative.

After proving their compliance to their gendered roles, comes the confirmation of their inherent nobility. Eager to know the true identity of the noble knight who rescued his sister, Sir Gringamore, Dame Lyonesse’s brother, kidnaps Gareth’s dwarf and makes him reveal the knight’s name and kinship. Once his noble lineage is confirmed, Sir Gringamore appears to

have no qualms introducing the man to his sister, albeit he does not reveal that she is the very same lady Gareth rescued at the Castle Perilous. This disclosure of her true identity will come later, only after her brother has explicitly given his permission for such, in accordance with his duties as the male relative responsible for the lady:

> And so sir Gryngamoure toke hym by the honde and ledde hym into the halle where his owne wyff was. And than com forth dame Lyones arayde lyke a prynces, and there she made hym passyng good chere and he hir agayne, and they had goodly langage and lovely countenaunce.
>
> And sir Gareth thought many tymes: 'Jesus, wolde that the lady of this Castell Perelus were so fayre as she is!' And there was all maner of gamys and playes, of daunsyng and syngynge, and evermore sir Gareth behelde that lady. And the more he loked on her, the more he brenned in love, that he passed himself farre in his reason. And forth towards nyght they yode unto souper, and sir Gareth myght nat ete, for his love was so hoote that he wyst nat were he was.
>
> And these lokys aspyed sir Gryngamoure, and than aftir souper he called his sistir dame Lyonesse untyll a chambir and sayde, 'Fayre sistir, I have well aspyed your countenaunce betwyxte you and this knyght, and yf ye can make hym to abyde here I woll do hym all the plesure that I can, for and ye were bettir than ye ar, ye were well bewared uppon hym.' […] Ryght so sir Gryngamoure wente unto sir Gareth and seyde, 'Sir, make ye good chere, for ye shall have none other cause, for this lady my sistir is youres at all tymes, hir worshyp saved, for wete you well she lovyth you as well as ye do hir and better, yf bettir may be.' 'And I wyste that,' seyde sir Gareth, there lyved nat a gladder man than I wolde be.'
>
> […]
>
> And than sir Gareth wente unto the lady dame Lyonesse and kyssed hir many tymes, and eythir made grete joy of other, and there she promised hym hir love, sertaynly to love hym and none other dayes of hir lyff. Than this lady dame Lyonesse by the assent of hir brother tolde sir Gareth all the trouthe what she was, and how she was the same lady that he dud batayle fore, and how she was lady of the Castell Perelus. (MALORY, 2014, n.p)

On two different fronts, this passage cements Lyonesse's status as a commodity. Firstly, the aforementioned abstraction of her physical features is recalled, when not only does Gareth fail to recognize her as the lady he rescued but goes as far as to wish that she were that lady. In Gareth's apparent perception, the rescued lady and Sir Gringamore's sister are interchangeable, for they are valued not for any physical attributes that they might have, but for their social function as mirrors of male nobility: as the former, Lyonesse reflected Gareth's; as the latter, she reflects her brother's. In the strictest sense, both sides of Dame Lyonesse's character, the lady to be rescued and the sister of a lord, depict her relation to a man, Gareth and Gringamore respectively, and in the convergence of these sides upon her revelation, she becomes the vessel through which these men can have relations with each other. Secondly, as his sister — the commodity — 's keeper, sir Gringamore is the one who

decides to exchange her with Gareth, in a simulation of the exchange of women-commodities which occurs through marriage. Eager to do Gareth ‘all the pleasure that he can’, as he tells his sister when encouraging her to humor the knight’s attentions, Sir Gringamore then gives Gareth partial access to her body, ‘her worship saved’, in a premeditation of the official exchange to come. Through her sister’s physical contact with Gareth, Gringamore sublimates his own desire for a relationship with the knight, a sublimation which will only remain effective while her virginity is preserved, for the moment it is breached, she will become Gareth’s property and her social role will change. A fact which both Malory and his characters seem to be highly aware of.

As Haught has pointed out, Malory appears to have intentionally delayed the resolution of the narrative, mainly by adding what she refers to as “bed tests”, which are essentially more opportunities for both Gareth and Lyonesse to prove themselves, to demonstrate their suitability to the social roles ascribed to them. After disclosing their identities to one another and declaring their undying love for each other, they decide to consummate that love. Lyonesse’s sister, Lynet, however, prevents them from doing so by sending knights after Gareth just as they are about to have sex:

> Wherefore the damesell Lyonett was a lytyll dysplesed; and she thought hir sister dame Lyonesse was a lytyll overhasty that she myght nat abyde hir tyme of maryage, and for savyng of hir worshyp she thought to abate their hoote lustis. And she lete ordeyne by hir subtyle craufftes that they had nat theire intentys neythir with other as in her delytes untyll they were maryed.
>
> And so hit paste on. At aftir souper was made a clene avoydaunce, that every lorde and lady sholde go unto his reste. But sir Gareth seyde playnly he wolde go no farther than the halle, for in suche placis, he seyde, was convenyaunte for an arraunte knyght to take his reste in. And so there was ordained grete cowchis and thereon fethir beddis, and there he leyde hym downe to slepe. And within a whyle came dame Lyonesse wrapped in a mantell furred with ermyne, and leyde hir downe by the sydys of sir Gareth. And therewithal he began to clyppe hir and to kysse hir.
>
> And therewithal! he loked before hym and sawe an armed knyght with many lyghtes aboute hym, and this knyght had a longe gysarne in his honde and made a grymme countenaunce to smyte hym.
>
> Whan sir Gareth sawe hym com in that wyse he lepte oute of his bedde and gate in his hande a swerde and lepte towarde that knyght. And whan the knyght sawe sir Gareth com so fersly uppon hym he smote hym with a foyne thorow the thycke of the thigh, that the wounde was a shafftemonde brode and had cutte a-too many vaynes and synewys. And therewithal sir Gareth smote hym uppon the helme suche a buffette that he felle grovelyng, and than he lepe over hym and unlaced his helme and smote off his hede from the body. And than he bled so faste that he myght not stonde, but so he leyde hym downe uppon his bedde and there he sowned and lay as he had bene dede. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

Up to this point in the narrative, both Gareth and Lyonesse had behaved according to the gendered social customs of their society, but now they falter, succumbing to lust. Far from damaging their model conduct, however, that slip-up only emphasizes their most valued qualities: her virginity and his martial prowess. The fact that Lynet went as far as to cast a spell on a knight to attack Gareth, their guest, in order to keep her sister from having sex draws attention to Lyonesse's virgin status and reenforces the importance of preserving it until marriage. It is also worth considering that Lynet's part in correcting the lusty lovers' improper conduct can imply how much the practice of celibacy was seen as a women's responsibility. Meanwhile, Gareth's victory over an opponent who had had his prowess enhanced by magic — alluded to by the lights surrounding him — only highlights his extraordinary skill in battle. As if that was not enough, the same events are repeated the next night, with more knights interrupting Gareth and Lyonesse this time, amplifying and reiterating both the social mandate to abstain from sex until marriage and Gareth and Lyonesse's roles as skilled knight and virgin damsel, roles that they will play one more time before the narrative's resolution. In a final demonstration of the gendered social dynamics of Arthurian society, Malory has Gareth delay his return to Arthur's court until he can prove himself one more time, despite the fact that his uncle had sent for Dame Lyonesse to learn of his whereabouts:

> 'My lady and my love,' seyde sir Gareth, 'I pray you in no wyse be ye aknowyn where I am. But well I wote my modir is there and all my bretherne, and they woll take uppon hem to seke me: I woll that they do. But this, madam, I woll ye sey and avyse the kynge whan he questyons with you of me: that may ye sey this is your avyse, that and hit lyke his good grace, ye woll do make a cry ayenst the Assumpcion of Oure Lady, that what knyght prevuth hym beste, he shall welde you and all your lande. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

Once again, Lyonesse is made to provide Gareth with an opportunity for him to display his martial prowess and prove his worth, this time with the explicit advertisement of herself as the prize: a tournament for her hand in marriage. At this final stage of their development before taking on different roles in their society, both present themselves once again as the ideal knight and damsel, with her arranging the tournament and him being its victor. After that final demonstration before the whole of Arthur's court, Malory's "Fair Unknown" narrative finally reaches its expected resolution, with the integration of Gareth into the homosocial fellowship of the Round Table through his marriage to Dame Lyonesse, at which point both cease being damsel and knight and become wife and lord, different roles with different demands.

It can be stated, therefore, that "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney who was called Bewmaynes" covers the development of a knight into a lord, emphasizing the mirrored female development from damsel to wife which is imperative for the working of Arthurian society. If the character of Gareth is, as Haught has stated, the embodiment of idealized knightly (male) behavior, then that of Lyonesse is that of the mirror described by Irigaray, with every step of his development mirrored by hers: their mysterious introduction to the narrative, their proof of compliance with gendered expectations, rewarded with the revelation of their noble identities, followed by their thwarted attempt to deviate from such expectations, and, lastly, their reiteration of their compliance right before the advancement of their positions. While he depicts everything that a (male) subject in Arthurian society should be, his perfection is amplified through and mirrored in her depiction of everything that a woman should be: the perfect commodity. Through his alterations to the "Fair Unknown" motif, Malory seems to have attempted to illustrate the social forces compelling the behavior of men and women in Arthurian society through the depiction of the ideal scenario. As Gareth's female counterpart, Dame Lyonesse as a character is essential to demonstrate the dynamics between knight and damsel. As the end of their narrative shows, however, those are not the only social roles in Arthur's court, as the following character study will explain.

3.2 **Queen Guenevere: the Possession**

The figure of the adulterous lady abounds in Arthurian lore and literature. Unattainable through lawful means due to her married status, she nonetheless seduces knights, inspiring them to accomplish even greater deeds in exchange for her affection. Although she encourages them to achieve greatness, she is often also held responsible for their ruin, for tempting them away from the godly path and into carnal sin. In that sense, the archetype of the adulterous Courtly Lady follows the biblical model of Eve, herself deemed responsible for tempting Adam into committing the original sin, causing the fall of mankind from paradise, as Maureen Fries points out in "*Feminae Populi*: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature" (1986). According to her, however, there is an inherent duality to this archetype: while from a religious standpoint, she is held responsible for the corruption of the moral character of knights, from a secular perspective, she leads them to perform the deeds of

prowess for which the order of knighthood is known, thus being responsible for the production and maintenance of the practice of chivalry itself, as Fries suggests: “As Frederick Goldin has demonstrated, the composite Courtly Lady is a mixed mirror of matter and spirit, the ambivalent *speculum* in which the aristocratic male may picture his own potential for moral achievement or failure, an essentially passive figure” (FRIES, 1986, p. 49; original emphasis). As inspiration for deeds of prowess or temptation into carnal sin, she remains a “passive figure”, though, an essential cog in the machinery of courtly chivalrous society. That passivity extends to her other social function.

It is not only as a mirror for knightly identity that the archetype of the Courtly Lady acts, but also as the medium for the establishment and maintenance of the knightly community itself. As Georges Duby explains in *Women of the Twelfth Century* (2013), courtly culture revolved around the promise of adultery in order to keep unruly knights in check. The wives of lords were encouraged to seduce knights to gain their loyalty, which would then be extended to their husbands and their courts. Much like a king would exchange his daughter with another king in marriage in order to secure a political alliance, so would kings covertly exchange their wives with knights in order to forge and maintain relations of fealty. As it were, both processes involved a passive female figure, objectified, functioning as the means to produce homosocial bonds through the transformation of their material bodies into commodities, to be traded between men as surrogates of their own male bodies, which could not be commodified or exchanged, as Luce Irigaray argues in “Women on the Market” (1985). According to her, this system of exchange was and still is the cornerstone of patriarchal societies, accounting for the different —though equally passive— social roles women were and still are prescribed: that of the virgin, that of the mother and that of the prostitute. While the untouched daughter traded between king-father and king-husband fulfills the role of the virgin, that of the prostitute inevitably falls on the adulterous married lady. Already marked by sexual activity, when the prostitute takes a new lover she establishes a homosocial connection between the previous and current suitors; already claimed by her king-husband on her wedding night, by making her body available to the knight-lover, the Courtly Lady is fulfilling the same role. As such can the function of the wives of lords and kings in the Middle Ages be described, according to Duby, but also that of the queens in Arthurian Literature, according to Elizabeth Edwards in “The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*” (1996):

> I am suggesting that for the Arthurian Cycle, adultery is the structure of structure. It is what sustains the court, and what drives the plot towards its ending on Salisbury

> Plain. I do not mean to suggest that adultery is morally sanctioned by the characters in, or authors of, these works (though at places in the *Book of Sir Tristam* it seems that it is). On the contrary, adultery is the great danger to the society which houses it. That adultery is transgressive, that the peril to the Arthurian kingdom consists in the private room of love being broken open and exposed to the world is hardly surprising. What is more surprising is that the socially beneficial effects of that adultery are barely repressed, and sometimes openly acknowledged. (EDWARDS, 1996, p. 47)

Nowhere is that paradoxical relationship with adultery, embodied by the archetype of the Courtly Lady, better depicted than in the character of Arthur's wife, Queen Guenevere. In the 13th century French Vulgate Cycle, her influence is felt throughout most of the romances, first as Arthur's object of affection turned wife in the *Suite du Merlin*, then as the focus of Lancelot's undying devotion and motivation behind his deeds of prowess in the *Prose Lancelot*, and lastly as the cause for his failure to achieve the grail quest in *The Holy Grail Quest* and his war with Arthur in *La Mort le Roi Artu*. Throughout the cycle, she is always the cause for the actions and reactions of male characters, but seldom an agent. She is the objectified woman, the passive receptacle of both Arthur and Lancelot's affections, forging a homosocial bond between them; the prostitute, as Irigaray would put it. In the 15th century book *Morte d'Arthur* written by Thomas Malory, however, her social function in the chivalrous Arthurian community is made more explicit. Malory's many alterations of his source material, chiefly of which was the Vulgate Cycle, gave the character of Guenevere a complexity hitherto unforeseen. In order to better ascertain the effects of such changes in her character development and on the narrative at large, a comparison of Queen Guenevere's key scenes in the Vulgate and the *Morte* was conducted.

It is not as the 'prostitute' that Guenevere first appears in the aforementioned works, but as the 'virgin': the highborn daughter of a king, soon to be given away in marriage in order to secure political alliances. Such purpose is heavily implied in her first meeting with Arthur in the Vulgate's *Suite du Merlin*, during the celebration of his victory against the Saxons who had been attacking her father's kingdom. At that time, she is not the only one impressed by the young king, for, although neither knows his identity, his father also openly admires him:

> "No sooner had the tables been set up than the food was ready, and the knights all sat down. But the knights of the Round Table sat side by side at a table off to themselves with the knights whom the king had engaged, and King Bors and King Ban seated Arthur between themselves, for they did him the highest honors they could. And King Leodagan took notice of who was sitting beside whom at that table, and in his heart he thought, from the honor they bore Arthur and the service they did him, that he was lord over them all, and he wondered mightily who he could be; he

> would have given anything to know who he was. "And may it please you now. Lord God," he said, "that he should wed my daughter!" (LACY et al, 2000, p. 77)

Upon recognition of Arthur's political importance, King Leodagan's first reaction is to pray that his daughter may come to marry him. Although the *Suite* emphasizes Arthur's attraction to Guenevere along with her physical and moral attributes, the direct association of the discovery of a potentially powerful ally with the prospect of bestowing him with his daughter's hand in marriage suggests the use of women to create homosocial bonds between men through the exchange of their bodies, bonds like the one later highlighted by Leodegan himself upon Arthur's betrothal to Guenevere: "And above all else, dear Lord God," he said, "it does not bother me that you have made me your agent, since my daughter and my land are bound over to the worthiest man in the world" (LACY et al, 2000, p. 83). Both his daughter and his lands are given the same position: as possessions of the king, given away in exchange for a powerful alliance. Such association between woman and object, however, is drawn even further in the *Morte d'Arthur*, shifting what was merely the suggestion of the commodification of women into an explicit exposition.

Although most of the initial section of the *Morte*, dubbed by Eugène Vinaver "The Tale of King Arthur", was directly drawn from the French *Suite*, significant alterations were made, including one about the origin of the item that gives Arthur's fellowship of knights its famous title: the Round Table itself. While in the Vulgate romance, Arthur's band of knights is not only already formed but also identified by the piece of furniture inherited from his father, in the *Morte*, it is through his marriage to Guenevere that he would acquire both the item and most of the knights to compose the homosocial community named after it:

> So hit felle on a tyme kyng Arthur seyde unto Merlion, 'My barownes woll let me have no reste but nedis I muste take a wyff, and I wolde none take but by thy counceile and advice.'
>
> 'Hit ys well done', seyde Merlyon, 'that ye take a wyff, for a man of youre bounté and nobles sholde not be without a wyff. Now is there ony,' seyde Marlyon, 'that ye love more than another?'
>
> 'Ye,' seyde king Arthure, I love Gwenyvere, the kynges doughtir of Lodegrean, of the land of Camelerde, the whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde that ye tolde me he had hit of my fadir Uther…'
>
> […]
>
> And so kyng Lodgreaunce delyverd hys doughtir Gwenyver unto Merlion, and the Table Rounde with the hondred knyghtes; and so they rode freysshly with grete royalté, what by watir and by londe, tyll that they come nyghe unto London.
>
> Whan kynge Arthure herde of the commynge of quene Gwenyver and the hondred knyghtes with the Table Rounde, than kynge Arthure made grete joy for hir coming

> and that ryche presente, and seyde opynly, 'Thys fayre lady ys passingly Wellcome to me, for I have loved hir longe and therefore there ys nothynge so leeff to me. And thes knyghtes with the Table Rownde pleasith me more than right grete rychesse.'" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

While in Malory's source there is a lengthy description of Guenevere's appeal, of Arthur's pleasure while looking at her "because her breasts were firm and hard like little apples, and her skin was whiter than new-fallen snow, and she was neither too plump nor too thin" (LACY et al, 2000, p. 78), indicating that it was his attraction to her that brought on his desire to marry her, in the *Morte* it is exclusively political pressure that leads Arthur into marriage. If not for his barons' insistence, he would never have inquired Merlin about it. Not only that, but the repeated association of Guenevere's name both to her lineage and to the Round Table creates, as Edwards describes, "a kind of symbolic equivalence between Guinevere and the Round Table", leading the Arthurian scholar to claim that "she has a profound and ambivalent role in the fellowship which holds the knightly order together" (EDWARDS, 1996, p. 44). Indeed, it is through the exchange of Guenevere between her father and Arthur that the fellowship of the Round Table is formed. As her dowry, Arthur receives both the iconic piece of furniture and a hundred knights to compose the order, in a passage absent from the *Suite*. With his juxtaposition of Arthur's acquisition of the Round Table with that of his wife, Malory explicitly establishes a link between the creation of homosocial bonds — the chivalrous community of the Round Table — and the male-dominated exchange of women as commodities. From the very beginning, then, Guenevere's social function in the Arthurian community is defined: with the homosocial order of the Round Table founded, it is her job to maintain it, by lending her body to a new exchange.

For most of the *Morte*, Guenevere complies with her role in the patriarchal Arthurian society depicted in its pages. Throughout the book, there are multiple references made to her affair with Lancelot, including attempts to reveal the illicit relationship by Morgan le Fay and Tristam's uncle, King Mark. By seducing the most revered knight, Lancelot, Guenevere made sure that he and his kin would always return to Arthur's court and be ready to defend it; by giving Lancelot repeated access to her body, she created a strong homosocial bond between him and her husband, to the point where the latter encouraged his wife to entertain the knight's affections. Indeed, Arthur goes as far as to scold Guenevere when she fails to do so, in "The Poisoned Apple" episode, in which she is wrongfully accused of poisoning a knight:

> So whan the kynge and the quene were togidirs the kynge asked the quene how this case befelle. Than the quene seyde, ‘Sir, as Jesu be my helpe!’ She wyst nat how, nother in what manere.
>
> ‘Where ys Sir Launcelot?’ seyde kynge Arthure. ‘And he were here he wolde nat grucched to do batayle for you.’
>
> ‘Sir,’ seyde the quene, ‘I wote nat where he ys, but hys brother and hys kynessmen deme that he be nat within thys realme.’
>
> ‘That me repentith,’ seyde kyng Arthure, ‘for and he were here, he wolde sone stynte thys stryffe. […] What aylith you,’ seyde the kynge, ‘that ye can nat kepe sir Launcelot uppon youre syde? For wot you well,’ seyde the kynge, ‘who that hath sir Launcelot uppon his party hath the moste man of worship in thys worlde uppon hys syde.’ (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

The first in “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenevere”, the second to last section of the *Morte*, this episode depicts the first sign of the queen’s dissatisfaction with the role ascribed to her. When Lancelot, worried about the whispers in court surrounding their affair, decides to distance himself from her and spend his time in service of other ladies, Guenevere becomes jealous and shuns him, drawing him away from court. In order to get back at him, she decides to host a feast for the other knights at Arthur’s court, where one of them eats a poisoned apple that was meant for Gwayne. A departure from Malory’s source, the Vulgate *La Mort le Roi Artu*, where Guenevere’s fit of jealousy is brought on by Lancelot’s attention to one specific lady, the Maid of Astolat, this episode reveals Guenevere’s desire to claim Lancelot for herself, against the code of chivalry dictated by the Pentecostal Oath, which states that knights should always answer every lady’s request for help, without distinction. No longer satisfied with being a mere possession, however, she wants to possess, if not Lancelot, then another knight. Instead of passively waiting for knights to show their devotion to her, she actively chases it, not only by holding the feast, but in a later episode, by taking ten knights of the Round Table in a picnic, again right after sending Lancelot away in another fit of jealousy, this time caused by the Maid of Astolat as it first did in the Vulgate. What in the French *La Mort le Roi Artu* is a single episode composed both of Guenevere’s jealousy of the Maid of Astolat, whose token Lancelot bore in a tournament, and the false accusation made against the queen, was stretched into two different episodes where Guenevere acts out in jealousy and decides to entertain other knights, each followed by a dangerous consequence: first the accusation made against her, then her kidnapping by Meleagant, part of the well-known episode of “The Knight of the Cart”, itself considerably reduced and displaced from before the grail quest to this point in the narrative.

As Dorsey Armstrong suggests in *Gender and the Chivalrous Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (2003), the alterations made by Malory to "The Knight of the Cart" seem to effect a change in Guenevere's character in comparison to the Vulgate. While in the *Prose Lancelot* the famous knight hesitates to climb in the cart because of the humiliation it entails, thus delaying his rescue of Guenevere, a fact which upon reaching the queen's ears invokes her wrath, in the *Morte* there is no such hesitance. Guenevere's disdainful reception of Lancelot in Meleagant's castle, therefore, lacks its original justification:

> Than the quene and hir ladyes wente downe unto sir Launcelot that stood wood wrothe oute of mesure in the inner courte to abyde batayle, and ever he seyde, 'Thou traytour knyght, com forthe!' Than the quene cam unto hym and seyde, 'Sir Launcelot, why be ye so amoved?'
>
> 'A! madame,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'why aske ye me that questyon? For mesemyth ye oughte to be more wrotther than I am, for ye have the hurte and the dishonour.' (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

Instead of showing herself appreciative of all the trouble Lancelot went through to rescue her, she acts as though he is overreacting and she has been in complete control this entire time, as if it had been her choice to stay with Meleagant, which incurs Lancelot's jealousy. By removing the Vulgate's original justification for this reaction, Malory suggests that she might be acting out in response to something else; by electing to place this episode after that of the Maid of Astolat, he implies that it is Lancelot's courtly attitude of agreeing to wear another maid's sleeve on a tournament that angers her, reenforcing her possessiveness of Lancelot and, consequently, her attempt to lay claim to him as her sexual object, instead of the other way around. That seems to indicate Guenevere's growing resistance to the role of commodity, of a mere sexual object herself, along with an aspiration to that of desiring subject, of the one who claims bodies for themselves — an exclusively male role in patriarchal societies, according to Irigaray. Taking that evidence into consideration, it can be argued that by refusing to play the courtly part of 'damsel in distress' allotted to her in the event of her kidnapping, of the object of dispute between the two knights to be given to the victor as reward for his prowess in battle, Guenevere is rebelling against her own objectification, acting out in her desire to not only get revenge against Lancelot, but against the courtly system which objectified her in the first place, especially when one considers Pietro Marongiu and Graeme Newman's conceptualization of vengeance in *Vengeance* (2019):

> All acts of vengeance arise from an elementary sense of injustice, a primitive feeling that one has been arbitrarily subjected to a tyrannical power against which one is

> powerless to act. The sense of injustice is essentially a product of the interplay between domination and subordination. Vengeance is a punitive act of coercion motivated by an elementary sense of injustice. (MARONGIU; NEWMAN, 2019, p. 27)

According to Marongiu and Newman, beneath the patriarchal model of obedience, in which one part of society is subordinated to another, there lies the elementary desire for reciprocity, for equality in treatment, by the subordinated party. Applying this view to the patriarchal model of courtly culture in the Arthurian community, in which women are forced into obedience to the whims of kings and knights, to the code of chivalry and of exchange of women as commodities, Guenevere's small revenge against Lancelot can be seen as an act of rebellion against that society. Subjected to the tyrannical power of the patriarchal courtly system, which forces her to lend her body to male-centered exchanges and disputes without being able to express and act on her own desires, Guenevere acts out, not only when she depreciates and invalidates Lancelot's efforts to rescue her, but also when later, after she is accused of sleeping with one of the injured knights that were staying in her quarters by Meleagant, she commands her loyal champion, Lancelot, to ignore the other knight's requests for mercy and kill him. After all, the code of chivalry made explicit in the Pentecostal Oath sworn by every member of the Round Table dictates that all knights should always "gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.).

When she commands Lancelot to break his oath, she is not only showing a blatant disregard for the code of chivalry which regulates courtly culture, the same code which prescribed her role as passive sexual object and encouraged her lover to pledge his service to ladies other than her, but she is also testing her own power over Lancelot and, most importantly, her own life, against that of courtly society. Left dissatisfied with the role of passive object imposed on her, she had slowly been gaining access to an agency denied her thus far: sending Lancelot away not once, but twice, holding feasts and picnics to actively seek the attention of other knights, inviting Lancelot into her chambers in Meleagant's castle and, finally, ordering his death; all actions that brought on the courtly system's own retribution against her: two accusations made against her, a kidnapping and the growing suspicion of her affair with Lancelot throughout court. A suspicion which eventually leads Arthur's nephews, Mordred and Aggravaine, to bring their concerns to the king himself. Arthur's response to the men's vow to find proof of the affair, however, contains another alteration made by Malory on his source:

> ‘Gyff hit be so’, seyde the kynge, ‘wyte you well, he ys non other. But I wolde be lothe to begyn such a thynge but I myght have prevys of hit, for sir Launcelot ys an hardy knyght, and all ye know that he ys the beste knyght amonge us all, and but if he be takyn with the dede he woll fight with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I knows no knyght that ys able to macch hym. Therefore, and hit be sothe as ye say, I wolde that he were takyn with the dede.’
>
> For, as the Freynshe book seyth, the kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kynge had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereoff, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kynge loved hym passyngly well. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

While in the Vulgate’s *La Mort le Roi Artu* Arthur reacts with shock and bewilderment at the revelation of the affair, declaring that he never suspected it (LACY et al, 2000, p. 372-373), in the *Morte* it is told that he had his suspicions, but refrained from acting on them in fear of damaging his relationship with Lancelot. In other words, he allows the knight to lie with his wife in order to keep their and the order of the Round Table’s male homosocial bond intact. Such alteration, therefore, reinforces both Guenevere’s role as a commodity and the significance of her compliance with that role to the maintenance of the homosocial fellowship of the Round Table. As long as she remained passive in the exchange of her body for Lancelot’s allegiance, that bond was preserved, but the moment she starts to resist that prescribed passivity and claim some sort of agency regarding her own relationships — with Lancelot, with the other knights —, the whole system crumbles: Lancelot is caught in Guenevere’s chambers by Mordred and Aggravaine, who is killed in the ensuing scuffle; the queen must be rescued by her lover or she will face execution, but during that rescue, the knight kills Gwayne’s brother, Arthur’s nephew, Sir Gareth, starting the war between the king and Lancelot which would lead to the former’s death and the dissolution of the Round Table. Thus, Guenevere’s attempts to claim some sort of agency from within the courtly system prove a complete failure. Her only alternative is to forsake courtly society altogether, which she accomplishes by turning into a nun. Yet another major departure of Malory from his source.

In *La Mort le Roi Artu*, Guenevere escapes to the Almsbury convent after hearing of Arthur’s on-going battle with Mordred, who had usurped his father’s throne while he had been away fighting Lancelot and claimed her as his wife. In the Vulgate, it is a reaction born out of fear: whoever wins that final battle would not be satisfied with her upon their return; Arthur would think she had betrayed him with Mordred, while the latter would be angry at her continuous refusal of his advances — so she flees to the convent, where she dies without ever

meeting Lancelot again. In the *Morte*, however, there is no reason for her to flee, for she already knows both Mordred and Arthur are dead when she decides to leave for the nunnery. It is a deliberate choice she makes, then, to leave courtly life and all that it entails — her objectification — behind. A choice she reinforces when Lancelot comes looking for her at Almsbury and offers to take her with him to his castle and she refuses. Given the chance to return to courtly life and once again take up her passive role as commodity, she exercises her new-found agency as the convent's abbess and rejects his proposition, electing to remain in the company of the nuns she now looks after, in her own newly established homosocial community, as Armstrong explains:

> She recognizes that the chivalric enterprise — and the homosocial community that has been its center — has failed. Guenevere has entered into her own homosocial community, one markedly different from the masculine Round Table society in the lack of manifest anxiety over the border between homosociality and homosexuality. The distinction of this homosocial community from the homosocial order of the Round Table reveals the striking incongruity of anxiety over masculine and feminine gender identities. It is the pressing need to distinguish the homosocial from the homosexual that has driven much of the masculine chivalric activity of the narrative of the *Morte d'Arthur* forward; within the feminine homosocial world of the convent, there is no parallel manifestation of anxiety. (ARMSTRONG, 2003, p. 202)

Considering Irigaray's statement that commodities "can have no relationships except from the perspective of speculating third parties" (IRIGARAY, 1985, p. 177), it can be said that by forging a homosocial bond with the nuns at the convent Guenevere has finally surpassed the role of commodity, of object, and has ascended to the status of subject, of someone in control of her body and life. That she had to give up her latent sexuality and pursue a chaste religious life to achieve it is a consequence of the male monopoly of sex which marks the Arthurian courtly system and, according to Irigaray, which still structures patriarchal societies. Indeed, Malory's treatment of her character seems to highlight both the inner workings of the patriarchal chivalrous society of Arthurian lore, its dependence on a passive female figure, and its shortcomings, stemming precisely from such dependence, which does not account for the possibility of female agency.

Unlike the Vulgate's Guenevere, the one in the *Morte* acts: she tests the boundaries of her societal restrictions and eventually manages to overcome them somewhat. Unlike her character in the French cycle, Malory's Guenevere experiences an actual development of her character: she goes from complying with her social function in a patriarchal society to rebelling against it, to finding agency in religious life; she goes from sexual object exchanged

in order to maintain homosocial bonds to chaste subject capable of forging her own. Not only that, but such a development also embodies the central paradox of Arthurian lore, that of religious doctrine against secular demands: she goes from transgressing the religious edict against adultery in order to comply with the courtly role of commodity prescribed to her, to transgressing both in her attempt to command control of her own body and explore her sexuality, only to eventually settle for conforming to religious expectations of chastity and abnegation while transgressing courtly demands to lend her body to exchange. As such, Guenevere's character in the *Morte* demonstrates the impossibility of complying with both religious and secular expectations for women. By rearranging and multiplying Guenevere's bouts of jealousy, Malory imparts a greater depth to her character and, by consequence, to the Arthurian narrative in which it is embedded itself. Where Guenevere fails to break the bonds of gendered social demands, however, there is a character who not only rejects them but seeks to destroy the patriarchal structure that maintains them.

3.3 **Morgan le Fay: the Monster**

Recorded both in religion and literature in all shapes, colors and sizes, the figure of the monster is a staple of our social imaginary. A complex cultural phenomenon, however, the monster, as a social construct, as a literary device, is never fully captured by one culture, one period, or even one purpose. Ranging from dragons to vampires to aliens and reappearing across history, the monstrous figures as what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment" (COHEN, 1996, p. 4). Monsters are, after all, cultural products and in that sense, they reflect the particular set of beliefs and anxieties not only of the cultures that created them, but of the many that reinvented them throughout history. As such, as Cohen states in "Monster culture (seven theses)" (1996), an investigation of what constitutes the monster in a given context is an effective method of cultural analysis of the society it emerged (or reemerged) from.

Before it lends itself to historical analysis, however, the figure of the monster serves different, more foundational purposes. More than a cultural index to be read centuries later, each monstrous iteration makes a synchronous but lasting impact on the society it stems from, shaping their point of view and their very reality, from its position deep within the psyche of

the people. Much like the dual response of fascination and fear it evokes, its dubious social role encompasses two conflicting and complementary results: the maintenance of sociocultural norms and their simultaneous disruption. By incorporating in and exaggerating through their monstrous bodies those physical traits — the marks of sexual or racial difference, for example, or some morphological deformity — and social behaviors that do not fit the standard but exclusionary conceptualization of the human, the monster clearly illustrates what is socially acceptable and what is condemned. On the other hand, it is precisely in their embodiment of difference, of deviation from the norm, that their disruptive potential lies: the monster's very existence exposes the arbitrary nature of those social imperatives while simultaneously suggesting possible alternatives. An example of such duality can be found in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, embodied by the monster known as Grendel's mother, who both illustrates through her aggressive behavior what is considered transgressive in that society and makes it known that such transgression is possible, if punishable.

That dual function can be seen in the most widely accepted etymology of the word 'monster' from the Latin word *mostrum*, which designates something that reveals or warns. When the monster warns, it is referred to by Cohen as 'the monster of prohibition', that which "polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others" (COHEN, 1996, p. 13). In that sense, it validates and justifies the system of values which regulates life in the particular society that created it, such as the superiority of one gender, one race, one religion etc., by vilifying those that do not match such parameters. One clear example of this process is the monstrous figure of the witch, with its association of what was, and in many senses still is, considered deviant female conduct to the quintessential personification of evil, the devil, as one of its most faithful servants. It is no coincidence that the undesirable traits most often ascribed to witches, besides deformity, are that of latent sexuality, the command of speech (use of incantations, curses) and a violent temperament, considering that at least as early as the Middle Ages, the basis of normative behavior for women has been the polar opposite: chastity, silence and docility. In fact, it is that process which is referenced by Virginia Woolf when she makes an association between the suppression of female creativity and the hunting of witches in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Conversely, when it comes to men, those undesirable traits are not only accepted but prescribed; as proof of virility, intelligence and strength.

Therefore, it can be argued that it is the perceived appropriation of what has been conceptualized as male prerogatives that is condemned and consequently 'monsterized' (COHEN, 1996, p. 14) through the persona of the witch. By realizing in her monstrous body the possibility of such appropriation, however, she also questions the applicability of the imposition of separate and biologically assigned gender roles on the socially constructed subject. In this respect, the witch also exemplifies the monster's inherent potential for disruption and transformation. According to Margrit Shildrick, the latter's innate hybridity demystifies the stability of those ontological categories that enable the intelligibility of the autonomous subject:

> Monsters, then, are deeply disturbing; neither good nor evil, inside nor outside, not self or other. On the contrary, they are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order, and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject. (SHILDRICK, 2002, p. 4)

The monster then not only warns but reveals: through its seemingly incongruous constitution and behavior, it exposes the shortcomings of sociocultural norms. More than that, it shows us where to go from there. Drawing from Derrida's conception of a 'monstrous *arrivant*' and Donna Harraway's 'cyborg' as the herald of a new ethical position that incorporates alterity and embraces the flexibilization of ontological categories, Shildrick postulates the conception of the monster

> as hopeful, the potential site of both a reconceived ontology, and a new form of ethics. To let go of determinacy and of the impulse to master the undecidable is to embrace the possibility of reconfiguring relational economies. It is an opening onto becoming-in-the-world-with-others which sustains alterity as *différance*. (SHILDRICK, 2002, p. 131)

The figure of the witch, therefore, as a monstrous woman, consequently imbued with conceptions of gender and femininity, has resurfaced countless times throughout history in diverse configurations, at times lending itself to the enforcement of normativity and at others to possibilities of disruption and social transformation. Consequently, the famous witches of history and literature carry different sociocultural implications in each context and body of work in which they appear, as is the case of the Arthurian character Morgan le Fay. From her inception as the beatific and wise ruler and healer of the idyllic island of Avalon in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150) to Étienne de Rouen's first depiction of her as Arthur's dutybound sister in *Draco Normannicus* (c. (1167-1169), to the monsterization of her

character in the French Vulgate (c. 1215) and Post-Vulgate cycles (c. 1235 - 1240), and finally to Thomas Malory's ambiguous characterization in *Morte d'Arthur* (1478), Morgan has suffered numerous transformations within the medieval period alone, each with its own reverberations. Applying Cohen's proposition of "a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (COHEN, 1996, p. 3) to both Arthurian and medieval studies, an investigation of how the normative/disruptive functions of the monster operate in Morgan's character was conducted, through two distinct but connected texts, the French Vulgate Cycle and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

The first romance of the French Vulgate Cycle, alternatively referred to as the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, is the *Lancelot Proper*, which is concerned with the life of the famous knight and his illicit affair with Arthur's queen, Guenevere. As such, it is only in the last third of the romance that Morgan first appears, when Lancelot is led to her cursed castle, from which no knight had ever returned, and is subsequently imprisoned. Therefore, it can be said that her subversive behavior, intricately tied with her use of magic, is the first aspect of her character introduced in the narrative. She has, after all, out of her own volition, cast a spell over a castle to prevent knights from escaping, in direct infringement of the aforementioned submissive conduct prescribed for women. Her motivations, however, fit the stereotypical inclinations of female characters in medieval romances, laid bare in her argument to Lancelot upon their first meeting: "There are beautiful and loving young ladies in this place who have been fully satisfied by their lovers, because these knights could go nowhere else. Once they are out, things would change and they won't ever again spend so much time with their ladies" (LACY ET AL, 2000, p. 173). According to her, then, all she wanted was to prevent the separation of lovers in her court. In that sense, Morgan's condemnable conduct can be said to align with the traditional conception of (highborn) women as keepers of courtly love, as referred to by Elizabeth Edwards in her essay "The Place of Women in *Morte Darthur*" (1996).

The ascription of Morgan's subversive actions to the conventionally feminine sphere of love and courtship, as opposed to the masculine sphere of martial prowess and adventure, is further realized once the root of her conflict with King Arthur is unveiled. In that same episode, it is revealed that the true object of her hatred is not her brother but his wife, for interfering in Morgan's relationship with the queen's cousin, Guyomar of Carmelide. It is this hatred against the woman, fueled by Lancelot's repeated rejection of her in favor of the queen, that drives her to expose their adulterous relationship throughout later romances of the cycle,

finally culminating in the death of Arthur and dissolution of his round table in *La Mort Artu*. Romantic intrigue, then, is the cause of her destructive behavior, the latter a stereotypical depiction of the extreme lengths undertaken by a woman scorned. Thus, there are clear limitations to her deviance of gender norms, since Morgan still acts within the boundaries of what is conceptualized as female, borders that circumscribe even her pattern of transgression.

As Maureen Fries explains in "Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature", such modes of female deviance not only were accounted for in the medieval conceptualization of women, but were also the official justification for the enforcement of normative behavior: "As daughters of Eve, women were said to tend naturally to disobedience, vanity, cupidity, indeed to all sin. Because of Adam's failure properly to guide his (properly) weak and inferior wife, all women should be obedient and submissive; because the Fall had brought about the necessity for sexual intercourse […], all women should be impeccably chaste" (FRIES, 1986, p. 49). Predictably, this view of women and their expected pattern of transgression is extensively covered in the medieval witch-hunting manuals such as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, as observed by MaryLynn Saul in "Malory's Morgan le Fay: The Dangers of Unrestrained Feminine Power":

> Although misogyny is evident throughout the treatise, it is most explicit in the section explaining "why a larger number of sorcerers is found among the delicate female sex than among men." The double standard and interest in controlling women dominates the reasons given in answer to this question. Primarily, women transgress medieval limitations on feminine behavior when they act on ambition or desire, in women called "avarice" and "lust." Kramer and Sprenger, the authors of the *Malleus*, say, "For the basis of all the faults of women is greed." (SAUL, 2010, p. 88)

According to Saul, then, throughout the Middle Ages the categories of the witch and of the feminine became intricately intertwined, making the figure of the deviant woman readily identifiable not as a viable mode of being, but as the embodiment of evil. In consequence, her body became the site of the abject, often bearing some deformity which signaled her negative position. Conscripted to the realm of monsters, she is assimilated into the symbolic system to serve as a clear warning against any dissenting conduct. Incidentally, in the first proper description of Morgan as a character in that same episode, both her appearance and her sexual voracity are mentioned: she is both "ugly" and "so lustful and wanton that a looser woman could not have been found" (LACY ET AL, 2000, p. 173).

Compounded with her use of sorcery, these traits solidify her position in the narrative as a monstrous figure and suggest that her purpose was to illustrate what constituted

normative female behavior by opposition. In that sense, Morgan as depicted in the French Vulgate Cycle demonstrates the role of Cohen's monster of prohibition, functioning as a normative force through predictable modes of deviance which justify the imposed submission and regulation of women. As such, however, she fails to disrupt the categorical distinctions of male and female roles and, consequently, to fully effect the kind of category crisis embodied by Shildrick's monstrous *arrivant*; her gender and all that it entails is never questioned, to the point that Lancelot refrains from harming her "because she was a woman" (LACY ET AL, 2000, p. 265).

Two of the main sources to Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* were the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, from which he drew many of the episodes found in the twenty-one books that comprise his opus. Nevertheless, as Dorsey Armstrong defends in *Gender and Chivalry in the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (2003), significant alterations were made, especially where gender dynamics are concerned. That significance becomes clear when we contrast Morgan's depiction in the *Lancelot Proper* with Malory's. Unlike her introduction in the Vulgate romance, the first mention of her in *Morte d'Arthur* is fairly innocuous: "And the third syster, Morgan le Fey, was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she learned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye. And after she was wedded to kynge Uryens of the lond of Gore that was syre Ewayns le Blaunche Maynys fader" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.). As a highborn lady, she is said to have received an appropriate education and then to have been given away in marriage in order to secure political alliances, as was the custom. Whereas in the Vulgate she is immediately associated with danger and subversion, then, in Malory she initially demonstrates the normative conduct and treatment expected of women of her station. Albeit the reference to her acquired skill in necromancy could be interpreted as an indication of her future insurgence, its connection to the religious institution of the convent does not suggest a negative connotation. Similarly to the Vulgate, though, this initial impression is also misleading.

From chapter five of Book I to Arthur's death in chapter four of Book VIII, Morgan repeatedly attempts against the life of Arthur, his knights, and her own husband, taking many lovers both for her own pleasure and for her cause, as exemplified by her first assassination plot. In this first attempt, Morgan, having been entrusted with Excalibur's scabbard for safekeeping and aware that it makes whoever carries it invulnerable to any wounds, makes a counterfeit, which she gives back to Arthur, granting both the original and the sword to one of Arthur's knights, Accolon of Gaul, so that he may kill Arthur in combat as he "promysed hir"

when they “spoke togedir in prevyté” (MALORY, 2014, n.p.). It can be said, then, that Morgan perverts the prescribed female prerogative of requesting a knight’s aid in their endeavors, which in Malory is made explicit in the Pentecostal Oath to which all knights are sworn, by using her feminine wiles and body to persuade him to commit treason, as indicated by the reference to their intimate conversation. When it comes to killing her husband, however, Morgan does not shy from taking actions into her own hands:

> The meanewhyle Morgan le Fay had wente kynge Arthure had bene dede. So on a day she aspyed kynge Uryence lay on slepe on his bedde, than she callyd unto hir a mayden of her counseyle and sayde, ‘Go fecche me my lordes swerde, for I saw never bettir tyme to sle hym than now.’[…] Anone the damesell brought the quene the swerde with quaking hondis. And lyghtly she toke the swerde and pullyd hit oute, and wente boldely unto the beddis syde and awayted how and where she myght sle hym beste. (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

In contrast with her maiden’s ‘quaking hands’ while handling the weapon, her grip is sure and ‘boldly’ she readies herself for its use; the abnormality of her ease made all the more obvious juxtaposed to the maiden’s squeamish behavior. No longer conducting herself as the lady beseeching her lover to fight for her, Morgan not only exhibits an aggression unbecoming of her assigned gender, but she does so through the quintessentially phallic symbol of the sword, that according to Geraldine Heng in “Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory” is “the instrument on which all masculine accomplishment must turn, and therefore pivotal to conceptions of male identity and personal force” (HENG, 1990, p. 98). If in her plot against Arthur she made use of a perverted feminine performance, to kill her husband Morgan adopts the epitome of masculine behavior, her claim to what had been prescribed as an exclusively male action made clear by her appropriation of her husband’s sword and, by extension, his male identity. Therefore, in that episode alone, Morgan displays a remarkable fluidity of gender, further emphasized by her quick switch back to a feminine display of innocence and frailty when caught in the murderous act by her son, begging for mercy while claiming that she had been under demonic influence.

Not only does Malory’s Morgan deviate from the normative female behavior based on chastity, silence and docility, then, but she does so in a completely unexpected manner, as evidenced by her son Uwain’s astonished comparison of her to a ‘fiend’ upon catching her, in opposition to Lancelot’s aforementioned recognition of her frail position as a woman in the Vulgate. While in the French romance Morgan stays within the boundaries of what is conceptualized female, if deviant, Malory’s Morgan appears not only to trespass such

boundaries but to abolish the binary division of gender all together, taking on both conventionally masculine and feminine performances at will. In that sense, she calls attention to the inherent performativity of such sociocultural categories in opposition to the essentialist conception of gender and its traditional association to biological sex, as postulated by feminist scholar Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Furthermore, extrapolating on the semiotic of the sword and considering the complementary connotation of the scabbard as the yonic counterpart to that phallic symbol, as posited by Heng, her possession of both in the beginning of the episode and her delivery of them to Accolon illustrates this confluence and flux of the feminine with the masculine; a fluidity ultimately demonstrated by her later transformation to stone and back again in order to elude her captors at the end of the episode. It is precisely this fluidity that makes Morgan a difficult character to pin down.

Whereas the Vulgate's Morgan is described as ugly, ensuring a negative perception of her character, Malory describes her as "passyngly well besene" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.) in one of the few references made to her physical appearance, when her treachery is already well established and she and her retinue of queens kidnap Lancelot, in Book VI. Moreover, her actions are not always that of a heartless villain, despite what her reputation as "the false sorseres and wycche moste that is now lyvyng" and "an enemy to all trew lovers" would suggest (MALORY, 2014, n.p.), as evidenced by her reaction to the death of Accolon after her failed assassination plot: "But when quene Morgan wyste that Accolon was dede, she was so sorowfull that nye hir herte to-braste" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.). The most significant of her demonstrations of tender affection and positive emotion, however, is given at the end, when Arthur is dying, and she is to escort him to the idyllic island of Avalon:

> And so he dede sofftely, and there resceyved hym three ladyes with grete mournyng. And so they sette hem downe, and in one of their lappis kyng Arthure layde hys hede. And than the quene sayde, 'A, my dere brother! Why have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coulde!' (MALORY, 2014, n.p.)

While in the Vulgate she is also among those that escort him, there are no overt displays of affection or sympathy, no conversation between the reunited siblings, just the perfunctory statement of her presence in the occasion. It is not as sudden and unexpected as in *Morte d'Arthur* either, since an amiable interaction between the two had already taken place in the third romance in the cycle, when she revealed to him the nature of Lancelot and Guenevere's relationship. Compounded with her pleasant appearance and her previous expressions of love, this final act of nurture towards a man she supposedly "hatyth moste" (MALORY, 2014, n.p.) lend a previously unseen ambiguity to her character, especially

considering the lack of any justification for such hatred or later change of opinion. It remains unclear whether she is meant to be perceived as a threat or a relatable character, so that it can be argued that this depiction of her is not as effective a warning against non-normative behavior as the Vulgate's. That same ambiguity, however, is the defining trait of Shildrick's monstrous *arrivant*, "those undecidable and fluid forms of embodiment that mark out the monstrous" (SHIKDRICK, 2002, p. 132). By disregarding the established separation between female and male behavior and attacking male figures of authority, Malory's Morgan not only questions the validity of a binary conception of gender based on biological determinism but also challenges the patriarchal structure underlying it, embodied by her own brother.

Both the monstrous and the character of Morgan le Fay are ever-changing complex literary and cultural phenomena, carrying different implications depending on the context in which they appear. They are also intricately connected through their claim to the figure of the witch: the inscription of the monstrous into the female body, realized in Morgan's character. As such, both the normative function of Cohen's monster of prohibition and the transformative disruption of Shildrick's monstrous *arrivant* can be observed in her development from the French Vulgate Cycle to Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, the prominence of each varying from one text to the other.

In the Vulgate, Morgan is essentially the monster of prohibition. Embodying the medieval conception of women as naturally prone to evil and sin through her monstrous body and sexual voracity, she acts in accordance with the expected behavior of women if left unchecked by male authority, without ever going beyond the established social and literary boundaries of her sex, both warning against deviance and justifying the imposition of gendered norms of behavior.

In the *Morte d'Arthur*, on the other hand, she is the monstrous *arrivant*. Crossing over the established boundaries that separate female and male behavior in her attack of male figures of authority and the very institution that authorizes them, she demonstrates the inherent fragility of such gender categories and embodies the fluidity defended by Shildrick as the key to a new relational economy founded on alterity and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

It is an indisputable fact that Thomas Malory has made extensive use of episodes from the French Vulgate Cycle in his composition of the *Morte d'Arthur*. Whereas the general consensus once was that his careful 'de-tanglement' of the Arthurian tapestry woven by the French was crude, the result of his subpar skills as a writer and translator, this work has successfully refuted such a claim. The evidence presented in the chapters above makes clear that he had a vision and that every change, every closely translated passage, and every addition made by him had a purpose.

The Pentecostal Oath, for instance, reframes the whole story as recounted by the French. It becomes the thread that unites the diverse assembly of episodes and storylines, the "master signifier" (ARMSTRONG, 2013, p. 29) as Dorsey Armstrong puts it, despite Eugène Vinaver's argument that each section was meant to be read separately. It is an impossible feat, considering that in every single one, every few chapters, there is a reference to that Oath, to that ideal behavior prescribed not only to knights, but to all of courtly society. The whole of the book, then, can be described as an empiric experiment on the viability — or fallibility — of the enforcement of such an ideal.

That creative principle is made evident once the arcs of the three female characters analyzed are taken into account, in comparison to their depiction in the French Vulgate. While that work made both Guenevere and Morgan unequivocally and solely responsible for their transgressive actions, which were painted in a negative light that cannot be disputed, the *Morte* reveals how their actions and progression through the macro-narrative were connected to the gendered social imperative that regulated Arthurian courtly society. Through his alterations of his source material, Malory employed these characters to illustrate the shortcomings of the patriarchal system which structured chivalric society, which were disclosed as the true origins of their presumably 'evil' and 'sinful' deeds. Not only that, but he also created an additional character, Dame Lyonesse, to illustrate that gendered ideal, throwing the other characters' actions and motives into sharp relief.

In light of such evidences, it becomes clear that Malory had an acute sense of how fixed gender roles shaped society, for better or for worse, and that he sought to make such influence explicit. Writing from a point in time when chivalry itself was in decline, he had the advantage of knowing about the impending fall of knighthood, which might have prompted

him to look for its causes where the French, who wrote at the height of chivalry, did not. In addition, Malory also benefitted from an English literary tradition which often tackled gender issues, as the analyses of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf* have shown. The confluence of such factors results in a detailed diagnosis of the pitfalls of a patriarchal system which enforced fixed gender roles and depended on the exchange of women to enable homosocial relations.

Considering the general interpretation among medievalists once defaulted to the hegemony of a misogynous gender ideology, in which women were subjugated to men while simultaneously being held responsible for every malady that befell them in medieval society, the fact that a man from that very society not only criticized such an ideology, but did so through a type of literature that has since then been seen as didactic and moralizing in purpose, debunks the long-held assumption of the homogeneity of perspectives on gender in the Middle Ages. It opens the door for further pursuit of dissenting voices on the matter, women's voices in literature and in the literature that they wrote perhaps, like that of Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Marie de France's, who have long been suppressed and ignored.

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