The Instrumental Presence of Women in *Le Morte Darthur* as the Motifs of the Damsel in Distress, the Enchantress and the Seductress

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Abstract: In popular understanding, Arthurian literature is often remembered for its remarkable pairs (Lancelot and Guenevere, Tristan and Isolde, Arthur and Guenevere etc.) which have been the main subject of various romances within this literary tradition. However, both sides of such romantic pairings do not possess equal agency within these romances where the role of the ladies become relegated to being tools for or against (male) heroes' quest for self-realization in the chivalric social order that dominates the narratives. This article inquires into this instrumentalization of female characters for the advancement of the narrative progress of male characters in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth century compilation prose narrative of Arthurian romances *Le Morte Darthur* (1483). This article claims that this process of utilizing female characters is achieved through the portrayal of female characters through varying combinations of tropes it lists as the damsel in distress, the enchantress and the seductress in a way that determines the degree of adversity they pose to the chivalric order and the individual agency they possess. In order to illustrate this, various characters who embody these roles and among whom well-known characters such as Morgan le Fay, Guenevere, Isolde, Elaine of Astolat and other minor characters can be found are analyzed in light of this claim.

Keywords: *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Legend, Sir Thomas Malory, Courtly Romance, Chivalry, Gender Roles

Chivalric code of honour plays an important role in driving the narrative in Sir Thomas Malory's late fifteenth century compendium of Arthurian romances *Le Morte Darthur* (1485) with its idealized notions of knighthood, quests, and battles. While, like most of the medieval romance genre, such an engagement with the notions of knighthood and chivalry implies a narrative dominated by the actions of male characters, women function as the motivating force behind these chivalric acts. While they remain fewer in number when compared with the number of knights around the acts of which the narrative is centred, women are present in various ways that bolster these acts. The importance of women in Arthurian romances, a genre with a wide female readership that contains a focus on female beauty and the role they play in the chivalric tradition, has already been pointed out in existing research (Lacy et al. 524-6). Thelma Fenster associates the instrumental nature of women in Arthurian romances with what is termed the "chivalry topos", in which the knight's physical prowess and moral qualities are based on his pursuit of a noble lady (xx). This article argues that, both as a continuation of the larger Arthurian romance tradition, and as one such that draws its source material from existing romances, *Le Morte Darthur* employs female characters as instrumental tropes that play a role in the fulfilment of chivalric ideals. The portrayal and characterization of individual female characters depend on the nature of their relation to chivalric acts as facilitators, objects, or hindrances and can be categorized under the following tropes: The damsel in distress, who highlights the heroic deeds of the male characters; the enchantress, whose ambiguous nature can be helpful for or detrimental to the knight's quest, and the seductress whose trespasses of the conventions of the chivalric society act as a source of conflict.

This article argues that alongside unnamed damsels who are introduced in the quests, more influential women such as Guenevere, Morgan Le Fay, Morgause and Isolde are all subject to characterization through the employment of the tropes of the damsel in distress, the enchantress and the seductress. In addition, it further argues that while some characters have a leaning toward one interpretation, most women embody more than one of these tropes at different points of the narrative. In order to highlight this, first, existing literature on the role women embody in medieval Arthurian romance with a focus on Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* will be summarized. Then, the overall influence of the female characters as instigators of events that foreground the ideals of knighthood and chivalry will be analyzed in its historical context. Furthermore, how certain characters embody these motifs will be analyzed.

The roles of women in medieval courtly romances, of which Arthurian romances constitute an important part, have been receiving belated attention since the second half of the twentieth century. This lack of prior attention to the role of female characters in the case of Arthurian literature can be attributed to the fact that women commenced writing about Arthurian literature no earlier than the nineteenth century (Wynne-Davies 2). The production of Arthurian works of fiction in print (a point that requires emphasis, for oral traditions function independently of the written) was achieved even later, in the second half of the twentieth century (Wynne-Davies 2). In the 1980s, the association of the historical period Arthurian works were assumed to have taken place with a pre-patriarchal, pre-Christian society of a pagan faith centred around the Mother Goddess took hold among academic and creative circles (Hutton 2006, 53). Despite the lack of archaeological or historical proof for such practices and a focus on female deities in Celtic or Britannic religions (Hutton 1998, 254), this led to an increased focus on female characters of Arthurian subject material from a feminist lens (2006, 53). In this article, the view put forward by Joan M. Ferrante that medieval literature engenders a double-sided view of the woman as the symbolic and the real will be adopted. According to Ferrante, on one hand, the female is exalted through feminine personifications of abstract concepts such as liberty, inspiration, and mercy, on the other, the feminine is viewed as the opposite of the masculine, its other half that can be united through marriage (2). However, the former praise contrasts this disembodied femininity with the worldly, carnal manifestation of it; like virtues, most vices are also female personifications. As for the latter dichotomy, it encompasses the Aristotelian claim that the female is an inferior form of the male form (Ferrante 2-3). In courtly romances, the female operates as a means for masculine realization by creating the conflict between love, which is embodied by, and directed toward the lady, and chivalry, the rules of conduct set and followed by men (Ferrante 65). One notable observation regarding the role and the voice of women in other works of Arthurian canon can be found in Maureen Fries' analysis of women in Arthurian literature as heroes, heroines and antiheroes, categories which are defined by the positioning of the characters in relation to the aims of male characters and the degree of their active participation in "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition". Mary Etta Scott analyzes the portrayal of Arthurian women in *Le Morte Darthur* by similarly grouping them under three categories in "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Study of Malory's Women". E. Jane Burns' observes that in Chretien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* (Erec and Enide), and in the medieval romance genre in general, the woman, with her body and presence, is utilized as a site on which the chivalric acts at the centre of courtly romance are performed (38). Krueger defines this role the female characters occupy in Arthurian romances as an object of exchange, or an "object of desire" as opposed to the role of the narrator whose focal point is used, or the protagonist whose actions move the narrative forward (142). Similarly, both Sheila Fisher in "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History and Revisionism in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'" and Geraldine Heng in "Feminine Knots and the Other Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" emphasize that, as its title suggests, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* focuses on the test of chivalry Gawain undergoes while women, as antagonists and instigators, remain essential to and yet situated in the margins of the narrative.

Thus, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* appears to be the successor of a tradition that foregrounds the chivalric ideal with its masculine hero at the centre. This centring left women with a paradoxical existence which meant that they remained in the centre of the chivalric ethos, yet their agency and the importance of the direct acts they

perform were, nevertheless, relegated to the periphery. Malory's focus on the notion of a chivalric order of knights and its interactions with the closely allied notion of courtly love through a lens of nostalgia and possible cynicism was, in part, a result of the text's background. While the exact identity of who Thomas Malory was is a subject of scholarly debate, the fact that he wrote *Le Morte Darthur* during a period of civil war, which was to be later called the Wars of the Roses, in a period of overall political and social instability, is widely accepted. Armstrong notes that during this period, a significant rise in the number of texts that dealt with chivalry is observable (75). It is safe to say that when Malory wrote about King Arthur's Round Table and their chivalric deeds, the ideals of chivalry and courtly love were already becoming a sort of antiquated nostalgia. In texts dealing with chivalry written during this period, the occupation with chivalry foregrounded a particular type of masculinity that is a culmination of regularly performed actions that are perceived as befitting a knight. Yet, these knighthood acts that establish a masculine identity do not render the presence of women unnecessary. On the contrary, like in the earlier texts of courtly romance, this nostalgia for an idealized order of knighthood meant that knighthood and combat are given a romanticized meaning which is at odds with the period of political instability. For this process of romanticization, the female characters are extensively utilized. Armstrong claims that knightly combat is given meaning through the text's interpretation and construction of female characters (2). In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the chivalry of the Round Table is impossible to represent "without the presence of the feminine, and indeed, *only* possible when the feminine is present in a subjugated position" (Armstrong 36)(emphasis original). Geraldine Heng also points out, "the feminine materialises in order to be inducted into providing the enabling conditions of the chivalric enterprise" (1991a, 250). In another article, Heng analyzes the ancillary role female characters in *Le Morte Darthur* play through their possessions, their role in chivalry ethos and the mastery of magic. The first of these makes use of female characters through what they give away; the possessions the ladies bestow upon men either aids or hinders them, such as swords, charms of magical protection, and Morgan's cloak and shield (Heng 2015, 97-9).

It can be said that the presence of women as guides, or antagonists in pivotal events with far-reaching consequences is a consistent occurrence throughout the text, starting from Arthur's conception and leading up to Guenevere's affair with Lancelot being a reason for the dissolution of the Round Table and the death of King Arthur. Through the instrumentalization of women as crucial tools in the important events and the overarching narrative, the focus shifts from the intentions and individual acts of women to the role their actions fulfil in propelling the knights' stories forward. For example, while for modern audiences, the dubious consent of Igraine when Uther appears to her in the guise of her now late husband to beget Arthur might present itself as one of the focal points of the story, what Malory focuses on is not the violation of this "fair lady" (*Le Morte Darthur* I:1-3), but how this event affects the legitimacy of Arthur, who would otherwise be considered illegitimate. Sarah J. Hill points out that while Igraine is narrated to have "made grete joye whan she knewe who was the fader of her child" (I:4-6), a possible explanation for her feelings in relation of the fact that her current husband killed her late husband in pursuit of her despite her repeated refusals is not provided (269). Similarly, the formation of the Knights of the Round Table also becomes possible through his marriage to Guenevere, since it is through his marriage that he receives the table as a dowry. Likewise, while Morgan's reasons for suddenly turning into Arthur's enemy and wanting to rule Camelot remain unknown, her presence as an opposing force to both Arthur and his court remains important. The text is filled with such examples that it is not possible to enumerate them all; however, another important example that can be given is Elaine of Corbin's enchanting of Lancelot to have his child without his consent and the importance it has in the Grail Quest for the child is no other than Galahad. What the text deals with is not the experiences of female characters and what active role they play in the narrative, but instead, how they interact with the knights and, by association, ensure the continued application of the chivalric code.

While the figures mentioned above are considered among those that the readers can recall more easily due to the place they dominate in popular culture, they are outnumbered by women whose instrumentality in creating occasions for men to prove themselves is the only apparent trait they possess. The unnamed damsels seek help

for themselves in numerous instances. Their actual purpose in the narrative is to aid the knights in performing a series of acts and deeds associated with the chivalric conduct of knighthood. In fact, the guiding principle for the knights in such instances and for their interactions with women in general, is set from the start in Book III of the Caxton Manuscript, which originally constitutes a part of the first book.

> The kyng stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychssee and londys; and charged them never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their worship] and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore , and *allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and widowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them*, uppon payne of dethe./ Also that no man take noo batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldlis goodis. So unto thys were all the knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and younge, and every yere so were the[y] sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecoste. (*Le Morte Darthur* III: 15-75) (emphasis mine)

The group of women who are the easiest to define in their direct and subservient participation in the ideals of the chivalric society are thus those who are in need of succour. As it acknowledges their rights, the oath also highlights the fact that women lead an existence that makes them socially and "sexually vulnerable" (Batt 85).

This seminal compilation of Arthurian legend is filled with women directing men toward what might be considered their destinies. This occurs in the overarching narrative, through the role women play in the escalation of events. In specific instances, women also help the knights establish a reputation as a good knight by asking for their service as vulnerable subjects in need of help. Important examples to this are Lancelot's arrival to save Guenevere from Meliagaunt (*Le Morte Darthur* XIX: 4), Isolde's rescue by Tristan after Palomides kidnaps her (VIII: 31) and from the leper colony she is exiled by her husband, Tristan's uncle, King Mark (VIII: 35). Yet, other less significant examples of women who only appear as catalysts with no prominent role in the story can be easily found starting from the earliest sections of the text, in particular Book III, where Pentecostal Oath is sworn, and most knights set out in quests. Two examples that illustrate the far-reaching consequences of these women's instrumentality are the episode in which Gawain accidentally beheads a young lady because she "felle over [her lover]" (III:7-66) in an attempt to protect him, and another in which he and his brother, Gaheris, get rescued by four ladies in a reversal of chivalric roles (III: 8). These events function as a catalyst for Gawain's personal journey in which he dedicates himself to fighting for ladies' sake. In the last book of the *Morte*, it is this oath the ladies caused him to make that allows Gawain's ghost to warn Arthur before the final battle.

In numerous examples such as the above, women who do not participate in fighting and whose ownership of a sword "bisemeth [...] naught" (II:1-37) in Arthur's words are always at the heart of events that result in swordfight and bloodshed, which in turn help men prove or discredit their worth as a knight and more importantly, as an honourable one. However, if we go back to the prior question of their characterization, these women are defined by their need for help. Even the ones who are ready to insult the knights like Damsel Maledisant in *The Tale of La Cote Mal Taile* or the Damsel Lynet in *The Tale of Sir Gareth* come to Arthur's court to ask for help. These women need someone to step forward for them for they have no power in the world of courtly romance where their safety is constantly in danger despite being members of the nobility. This constant threat to women is one of the reasons why the Round Table has come into existence in the first place.

However, just as not all knights can always follow the chivalric code, not all women that seem to be damsels in distress actually are; the text is interspersed with women capable of pretending to be damsels in distress for personal gain. The woman Sir Lancelot wants to help turns out to be Hellawes, the Sorceress who wants to kill him in order to preserve his corpse as an object of her affections. As we move away from women whose helplessness is instrumentalized to women who instrumentalize helplessness, Hellawes deserves special attention. First meeting Sir Lancelot in her true form as the wife of Sir Gilbert the Bastard, and telling him a knight has slain her husband and he is also wounded, she changes forms and meets Lancelot deeper in the woods as the sister of the wounded knight. This sister sends Lancelot back to her true form as Hellawes for her brother

to recover a knight needs to go into Chapel Perilious and recover the sword and a piece of the bloody cloth which belonged to the now dead knight (VI:14). When Lancelot manages this quest successfully and is asked by Hellawes to kiss her, Lancelot refuses, and this simple refusal acts as an unravelling of the sorceress's plots. In love with Lancelot for the last seven years and jealous of his love for Guenevere, Hellawes has conspired to get Lancelot killed by her kiss and preserve his embalmed corpse by her side so that "dayly [she] sholde have clypped the and kyssed the, despyte of queene Gwenyvre" (VI:15-168). The concealment of such a calculating plan of obsessive love under the guise of innocent women who are caught in the affairs of knights is indicative that powerlessness can become instrumentalized back by female characters.

However, the moment a character is feigning to be powerless, the judgment she receives for possessing any type of power through sorcery, help of another knight or seduction is the condemnation that is repeatedly expressed with the accusations of falseness. The damsel to appear at Arthur's court with the sword is the first one to be called "the falsist damesell that lyveth" (II:4 42) after Arthur's mother Igraine, who is not a damsel, is also charged with falseness (I:21). Furthermore, it is remarkable that this damsel chooses to exact revenge for herself with the help of an enchantress rather than ask a knight. The wife of Sir Phelot is likewise blamed for her husband's subsequent death for "with falshede [she] wolde have had [...] slayne [Launcelot] with treson" (VI:16-170).

In *Morte*, even women who are previously beloved and respected as ideal representatives of female conduct are at the risk of declaration of falseness as evildoers. Interestingly, the more prominent of a role a woman has in the *Morte*, the more likely she is to be perceived as a character of ambiguous role and virtue. Even Guenevere, who, for the most part, embodies the ideal of "the Queen" (Fenster xxiv; Kennedy 37) and acts as a female representative who "confirm[s] and uphold[s] the same values and standards as the Round Table knights" (Holichek 114) can find herself charged with treason following a false accusation that she poisoned a knight with no knight to defend her except Sir Bors and Lancelot. Since this event takes place prior to her affair with Lancelot becoming public, as an individual instance, it contains contradictions regarding the position even ladies like the Queen hold in a chivalric system. While her innocence is soon proven like Igraine's, the accusation of falseness in regard to being in need of help appears to be a condemning crime; both women, despite being the king's wife and mother, almost get burned at the stake. Unlike the falsely accused, most of the women who feign being in distress possess qualities that would warrant the punishment of being burned according to medieval laws, as they are revealed to possess qualities can make them classified as a figure of the enchantress or the witch.

As a result of equating the role women are traditionally expected to perform to the tools that implement the chivalric ideal of knighthood, the perception of an enchantress is rooted in the notion of power. In defining the perception of the witch when Malory was writing *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Briggs claims that "witchcraft was a theory of power; it attributed secret and unnatural power to those who were formally powerless" (285). Enchantresses are different from witches to some extent and are often portrayed as sexually attractive women who use magic for personal gain. In *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, where she looks closely at the enchantress as a figure in Arthurian texts, Larrington argues that "alluring, intelligent and independent", these women sometimes choose to "support the aims of Arthurian chivalry, at other times they can be hostile and petty-minded" (2). The most well-known figure of the enchantress is Morgan Le Fay, however, if we look at an example that fits this definition of ambiguity the best, the figure who is helpful most of the time yet capable of being dangerous through the employment of magic is Nimue. Repeatedly helping Arthur's court in many instances by utilizing her magic, she does not seem to have a problem with the chivalric ideal Arthur's court stands to represent. In return, the chivalric society the margins of which she inhabits does not show a tendency to seek out and punish her. Her help is invaluable to the Round Table and Arthur's court, just like her predecessor Lady of the Lake. The previous Lady of the Lake grants Arthur Excalibur and its scabbard which renders him invulnerable, in addition, she also raises the knight who is considered to be the flower of all knighthood, Lancelot. However, both Lady of the Lake figures are dangerous challenges to the knightly authority when they

utilize their powers against the wellbeing of the chivalric order. The first Lady of the Lake's request that Arthur grant her a wish in exchange for Excalibur seems harmless, yet she requests the head of a knight. Similarly, while it is true that Nimue's magic proves helpful to King Arthur's court and knights, she is also the one who traps Merlin under a stone, thus depriving them of Merlin's help and prophecies. As a good example of the nature of the motif of the enchantress, Nimue's ambiguous role in the text highlights that an enchantress is not instrumentalized against the chivalric order solely on the grounds of the practice of magic. Nevertheless, throughout the *Morte*, enchantresses and even a magician like Merlin remain unreliable figures. This lack of trust stems from the idea that they possess the kind of power that exists independently from the traditional manifestations of power that relies on one's gender, class, and battle skills, on which the notions of kingship, knighthood and chivalry are founded.

On the other hand, the most prominent antagonist and enchantress figure, Morgan, shifts from one extreme to another. She commits various acts that endanger the unity of the Round Table, such as encouraging regicide and sowing discord among them by making Arthur and his court question Guenevere's fidelity by sending them items as Heng points out. Among items she sends under the guise of presents are a horn from which only the wives who have been true to their husbands can drink, a shield that depicts Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot as "a kynge and a quene [...] and a knyght stondynge aboven them with hys one foote standynge uppon the kynges hede and the other uppon the quemys hede" (*Le Morte Darthur* IX: 41-340) to represent "kynge Arthure and que[ne] Gwenyver, and a knyght that holdith them bothe in bondage and in servage" (IX: 41-340). Yet at the same time, by the time the court and the Round Table are destroyed, she is the one who takes her mortally wounded brother to Avalon and mourns his demise and her inability to help him with the words "[a], my dere brother! Why [ha]ve ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas thys wounde on youre hede hath caught ouermoche coulde!" (XXI: 5-716), implying were it in her power, Morgan would put her magic to use to save him.

Similar to the other enchantress figures, Morgan is not hated for her magical powers from the start. Described by Arthur as "honoured" and "worshipped" "more than alle [his] kyn" and "more [...] trusted [...] than [his] wif and alle [his] kyn aftir" (IV: 11 88), Morgan starts her existence in *Morte* as fair a lady as any might be, and she is a friend to her brother's court until she commits inexplicable acts of treason in succession. By giving Excalibur and its sheath, which Arthur entrusted to her, to her paramour Sir Accolon, she aims to use another knight to kill Arthur and usurp the throne in a scheme that involves killing her husband as well. This act of treason is defined by her status as an enchantress right from the start, for it does not merely involve regicide and fratricide. Unlike guiding her lover to do the deed for him by solely relying on seduction, she does not devise to slay Arthur through the brute power of Sir Accolon. Refusing complete reliance on a knight-errant, she plans to achieve it "by hir false crauftis" (IV: 11-88). As for what these crafts entail, our only clue is the passing mention that she was sent to a school at a nunnery where she learned "so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (I: 2-5). By putting her husband, Uriens, in a vulnerable position to kill him, and Arthur and her paramour in a situation where they fall asleep under enchantment, she crafts the whole plot in a way that ensures the clash of Arthur and Accolon. By dispatching a maid in disguise to Arthur and a dwarf to Accolon, she sends the real Excalibur to Accolon. Yet strangely, expecting she would feel secure with the immunity Excalibur would give to Accolon, she nevertheless feigns love and fidelity to Arthur by sending him "a swerde lyke unto Excaliber and the scawberde" (IV: 8-85) with the message "She sendis here youre swerde for grete love" (IV: 8-85), which only strengthens her status as a traitor through magic and deceit. Here, the descriptor used to depict her is once again *false* and she is associated with the second sword which was "counterfete and brutyll and false" (IV: 8-85). Considering its previous usage to repeatedly refer to dishonourable people, this repetition of false looks down upon Morgan's deception is harsh.

This event begs the question of whether magic and enchantments are viewed as equally evil in possession of everyone because the difference between the Lady of the Lake giving the sword to Arthur and Morgan giving it to Accolon is that Morgan does not utilize her magic to strengthen the claims of men who have a more socially

legitimate claim to power. After all, Arthur's possession of Excalibur and the scabbard in the first place is through a magical encounter, and the immunity Accolon steals from Arthur in this instance, which leads to his win until Arthur gets Excalibur back, is what Arthur possesses as an advantage in all of his battles. Morgan also plans to "sle hir hosbande kynge Uryence lyghtely" (IV: 11-88), and this instance highlights the distrust women can garner quite easily. The attempt is thwarted by her son Uwain, who does not hesitate to say: "A fende, what wolt thou do? And thou were nat my modir with this swerde I sholde smyte of thyne hede / A [...] men seyde that Merlyon was begotyn of a fende / but I may sey an erthely fende bare me." (IV:13 90). While it is possible this might not be the first instance Morgan acted with animosity toward her husband, her son Uwain's treatment of her, which associates her with evil before considering anything else, is very similar to the treatment of Guenevere based on the assumption that she poisoned a knight or Igraine, whose ignorance is thought to be falseness.

Cynthia Scott remarks on the complexity of Morgan's paradoxical portrayal as a woman belonging to the same gender as the unnamed damsels who need rescuing but exhibits an active presence similar or challenging of even the most masculine characters (2-3). A metaphorical presence in the male domain is what she exercises following her failure to kill Arthur. Failing to steal Excalibur, a symbol of masculinity, through both its association as a phallic symbol in psychoanalytic theories and its actual use in warfare, she takes the scabbard, which shapes the rest of the events, including the final battle Arthur has with his son, Mordred, by stripping him of his invulnerability. After such a trespass with lasting ramifications, she turns herself to stone in order to hide from Arthur's men, a passive, unmoving object that might be likened to the more traditional role she is expected to fulfil. Yet her guise of passivity is only temporary. Unlike the majority of women in the text, she continues to trespass into the masculine territory as an antagonistic agent by residing over the castle Arthur has given her at one point, where she plans her attacks with men performing her deeds as if she were a feudal lord.

From that point onwards, she continuously tries to sow seeds of discord in everyone's lives if they are important to Arthur, and the only exception to that, Sir Lancelot, receives his share of enmity when the lines between Morgan the Enchantress and Morgan the Seductress blur. In her interaction with knights, she displays traits that would qualify her under the trope of the seductress. Beforehand, it is implied that Morgan's relationship with Accolon is founded on her bewitchment of the knight. In another instance, she and three other queens see Lancelot sleeping "alle armed undir an appil-tre" (*Le Morte Darthur* VI: 3-151) and "began to stryve for that knyght, and every of hem seyde they wolde have hym to hir love" (VI: 3-151). Morgan provides a magical solution to this dispute which consists of enchanting Lancelot in order to kidnap him to her castle, and afterwards, forcing him into choosing one of them. This does not go according to plan, and Lancelot chooses death over any of these four women, on the basis of their characters "for [they] be false enchaunters" (VI: 3-152). Yet, even this transgressive act on the part of Morgan and the other three queens cannot stand on its own; instead, it functions as a catalyst for future events. It is during this incidence that we first witness that people around the court are aware of Lancelot's feelings for Guenevere through the explicit acknowledgement of it by the women. Similarly, Lancelot compares their falseness with Guenevere, who "is the treweste lady unto her lorde lyvynge" (VI: 3-152) in an attempt to cast away doubts that are clearly already in place regarding Guenevere and his relationship. From that point onwards, instead of gaining Lancelot's love, she declares him an enemy that she sends thirty of her men to ambush and kill Sir Lancelot. In other instances, she kidnaps and attempts to harm him multiple times.

Another figure who combines the enchantress and the seductress in her person yet dies from unrequited love or lust like other women who are portrayed as honest maidens is Hellawess the Sorceress, whose encounter with Lancelot has been described above when detailing her instrumentalization of helplessness. Luring Lancelot into Chapel Perilous, where he would have died if he had not refused to kiss her, this witch aims to gain his love through the preservation of his embalmed corpse beside her as a lover since she is aware of his feelings for Guenevere. This is a direct yet inverted parallel to other figures who are spurned and die from it. Yet, in contrast to Hellawes, the infatuation of these women with knights is not a direct extension of lust, and their untimely

deaths, while upsetting, serve to highlight the knights' loyalty to their lovers or, the inverse, their devotion to knighthood. King Faramon of France's daughter dies "for sorrou" because Tristan does not return her feelings, although her letters were "peteous" (VIII: 5-234). Similarly, Elaine of Astolat (before her death, called Elaine le Blank), dies for Lancelot's love after telling him she must die for it unless he becomes her husband or paramour. Having nurtured Lancelot back to health, a role that is the exact opposite of Hellawes's, Elaine gives him a token from her to wear while fighting. Since she takes Lancelot' acceptance to wear only her colours as a sign of love, she dies of disillusionment when he explains to her that he cannot be her lover in any way. While this event in itself appears to be centred on Elaine's feelings for Lancelot, her feelings and the subsequent confusion that arises as a result of Lancelot wearing the token she has given him, and his refusal of her love, function as plot points that emphasize Lancelot's love for Guenevere and his own qualities. In failing to be the seductress, Elaine falls into the category of a damsel in distress who is fondly remembered. For her to not be an antagonist to the symbol of chivalry in the figure of Lancelot, her love is required to be thwarted, thus leading to her early death.

Known less than the other Elaine (of Astolat) in the present day, Elaine of Corbin, employs a more dominant role in various stories as the mother of Galahad and the bearer of the Grail. She walks a fine line between all three tropes of characterization as a woman spurned yet capable of seducing Lancelot through the employment of magic. Elizabeth Sklar claims that Elaine of Corbin's more sexually charged, and magically deceptive portrayal made her a less conventional and inadvertently less desirable character than Elaine of Astolat (59). Yet, she still conventionally furthers Lancelot's and other knights' narrative by leading to Lancelot's falling out with Guenevere and consequent madness, in addition to the role she plays in the Grail Quest by giving birth to Galahad. Regardless, the fact that she makes her maid use magic to get Lancelot into her bed twice, and that this magic functions as a deception spell remains. The solution Malory utilizes in order to portray Elaine as a woman of ambiguous morality rather than purely malicious is the inclusion of the prophecy of Elaine's father that foretells Galahad's birth from their union while for a contemporary readership, her actions in themselves are worthy of analysis and criticism.

This intermingling of roles in Elaine is not an exception; Wyatt argues that despite the additional attributes that might make her appear enigmatic and unconventional, Elaine of Corbin's function is similar to most female characters in the *Morte* in that it creates opportunities for the participation of women in chivalric society (115). In addition, for most female characters, their moral and social ambiguity lies in the added power they achieve through the role of an enchantress or seductress over the knight. In Elaine's case, she reflects that ambiguity when she causes Lancelot to kiss her, right after he threatens her with his sword, once he learns she is pregnant.

Furthermore, like in the character of Elaine, participation in adultery or seduction and the use of magic are often in direct correlation. Of the other two women who engage in adulterous affairs while being held in high regard as ideals of womanhood, Isolde's adultery is closely linked to magic. Although she and Tristan express affection for each other, their relationship takes an adulterous turn after they drink the love potion Dame Brusen prepared for her and King Mark. While Isolde is adulterous, the inclusion of magic puts her on equal footing with Lancelot or Igraine, and to some extent, renders her incapable of changing her status as the seductress. Also, King Mark's cruelty and her overall desirable qualities as a lady who continually needs rescuing by Tristan protect some of her conventional standing as a damsel in distress.

The second and most pivotal pair to the narrative that Isolde counts among the four lovers within this land is doubtless Queen Guenevere and Sir Lancelot. Until her partial departure from that role through her relationship with Lancelot, Guenevere is the culmination of the courtly feminine ideal of a queen as the damsel "moste valyaunte" (*Le Morte Darthur* III: 1-59). As the lady "fayryst on lyve" (III: 1-59), she governs over the justice in Arthur's court as a force that regulates knights' adherence to the principles of fairness to the ladies and the weak. For the most part of Malory's text, the nature of the relationship between these two remains unclear, and Lancelot always attempts to portray their attachment as that of a queen and her knight so much that he deliberately fights for the causes of other women to dissipate suspicion. Yet, the implications that start by the

acknowledgment of their bond by Morgan and the other three queens when they kidnap him reach full clarity in the story of the birth of Galahad, which at the same time reveals that Guenevere and Lancelot's relationship has a sexual dimension to it. The love he feels for Guenevere is the reason behind his refusal to marry any other lady, not even Elaine of Astolat, who displays a pure but consuming love for him; or Elaine of Corbin, who, while deceptive, is acknowledged as the mother of Lancelot's son. This refusal and the difficulty they experience hiding their affair lead Lancelot's rivals, Mordred and Agravain, to want to unearth their affair if they want to ruin Lancelot. His relationship with Guenevere, Elaine of Astolat, Elaine of Corbin, and Morgan's efforts are instrumental in this discovery, but it is the direct action of male characters that proves capable of bringing about a change.

Guenevere's instrumentality is emphasized in the central yet passive role she plays in the events that unfold. While after the Battle of Camlann and the death of Arthur, she takes the veil as a nun who takes "grete penaunce" (XXI: 7-717) and remains viewed as "noble a quene" (XX: 8-683) who does not deserve "a shameful ende" (XX: 8-683), it is the punishment she is sentenced to for adultery that causes the collapse of the chivalric order of the Round Table, described as "the fayrest felyshyp of noble knyghtes that ever hylde Crystyn kynge togydirs" (XX: 9-685). This collapse of the notion of chivalry as the knights' war with each other is the main source of the unrest that allows Mordred to seize the throne. The revelation of their tryst is lamented by the narrator as the event by which "the floure of chyvalry of [alle] the worlde was destroyed and slayne" (XX: 1-673), highlighting the impact adultery and seduction can have on communities based on patriarchal ideals of chivalry. Within the narrative, Arthur similarly blames Agravain and Mordred for the evil they harbour. In the case of Guenevere and Lancelot, while the narrative does not condemn them, once again, what proves disastrous to the chivalric establishment that is embodied by the Round Table is not the acts of the female character but their far-reaching consequences. In addition, the reason why the narrative is sympathetic to the plight of Guenevere is because she is viewed capable of performing an important function in the fast-dissolving society of Arthur's court and kingdom. Through her act of penance in a reversal of the role she has played in both the Grail Quest as an obstacle that stopped Lancelot from achieving it, and in the war that ensued, she restores some of the values the Round Table sought to protect and to propagate. Kennedy explains the role Guenevere plays in the end of *Le Morte* as serving as an example in repentance, thus helping Lancelot achieve what he could not during the Grail Quest (42-3). No longer a lady in distress who needs to be rescued by Lancelot or his lover, Guenevere still plays an instrumental role in the fate of one of the central protagonists of the narrative.

Morgause, who gives birth to Mordred after an incestuous affair of which she was unaware with her brother Arthur, is yet another figure of the seductress or "the Adulterous Queen" in Wyatt's terms (139), yet she does not receive any of the rather positive treatment both Guenevere and Isolde receive. While the revelation of Guenevere's affair is disastrous, the enabler of its revelation is someone born of Morgause's adultery. Her position as the mother of Mordred, who not only unearths that Guenevere and Lancelot are not faithful, but usurps the throne, portrays her in a more negative light. Since both Arthur and Morgause are unaware they are siblings at the point of their affair, yet they know such an affair would still be adulterous because Morgause is married, "her willing participation in the conception of Mordred" establishes a background for Mordred's wickedness (Wyatt 140). The figure of the seductress who willingly participates in sexual intercourse is further at odds with the chivalric notions of morality than other figures whom the text represents with extenuating circumstances. Igraine, who lies with someone out of wedlock out of ignorance and trickery, Elaine of Corbin, whose seduction, and in contemporary terms rape, of someone is first prophesized by a knight and no less her father, or even Guenevere whose loyalty to her husband after his demise and the function she plays in Lancelot's reformation act as a redemptive force, are portrayed as women who lack, yet not solely through their own fault.

To conclude, this article has set out to explore the role women play in *Le Morte Darthur* by reading numerous examples of women whose existence serves to establish the chivalric ideal of knighthood through which male characters define themselves. The means used for this was a close reading of the reoccurring female characters according to the tropes of the conventional damsel in distress, the seductress, and the enchantress.

Furthermore, this article proposed that instead of the representation of a trope through a single character, Malory offers a varied portrayal of women who employ these traits with different levels of moral ambiguity or shaping force in the text. While the trope of the damsel in distress constitutes the majority of female portrayals from unnamed ones to its contribution to the overall portrayal of important characters such as Guenevere and Isolde, the enchantress' existence as someone who possesses power that is distinct from the traditional manifestation of it makes her unconventional and a potential threat. Furthermore, women who embody the motif of the seductress function as catalysts to disastrous events or big changes, and the fact that in most cases, the magic of the enchantress is what enables the seductress to operate connects the two in their position as threats to the chivalric community with established power structures from which women are barred.

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