

**Chicks with Swords:
Power and Agency in the *Morte Darthur***

By Amy McLay

Upon first glance, Malory's *Morte Darthur* appears to be a boy's book. It is packed with blood, sword fighting, kings, knights, battles and more battles. The good guys fight the evil guys and rescue the damosels in distress. Overall, the story is concerned with the deeds, whether they be noble or not, of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Because of this preoccupation with knightly deeds, it may be easy to view the women in the novel as very minor characters, existing in the novel only to be prizes, cheerleaders or, alternatively, temptresses. This view may suffice for those who choose to read the novel for plot only; however, it becomes very reductionist when one starts to look at the messages Malory is sending through the text.

Andrew Lynch, in his essay, "Gesture and Gender in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*" says that the "Malorian woman typically has an ancillary function, existing...in the service of a male-centered tale" (286). It is not particularly wrong to say that women have purely functional presences: they have little to no history; some of them are even deprived of a name. They are present very little and speak even less; only when the story requires their presence are they granted a voice. However, this, if anything, only increases their significance. Because women are present only when necessary, even the

most trivial details about them are important. They may only be pawns, but they are Malory's pawns; they are certainly not pawns of the male characters. If anything, the text would suggest the exact opposite. In a patriarchal society, such as that of King Arthur's court, it is impossible for women to have any kind of political power; they are rendered incapable of action by the culture in which they live. However, being incapable of action is not the same as being incapable of decision. Malorian women excel at making decisions: they plot, they scheme, they analyze and, because they cannot be in power themselves, they do the next best thing. Women in the *Morte Darthur* have the ability to bestow or revoke power from the man of their choosing; this is demonstrated subtly, through the courtly love tradition and more literally, as in the case of both Balin and Arthur himself, through the bestowing of swords. In writing the *Morte*, Malory arranges it so that when this dynamic is respected, the kingdom thrives. Conversely, when men ignore the importance of women to the kingdom, things begin to fall apart.

In order to effectively discuss the roles of men and women in Arthurian society, one must first discuss their characters as defined by Malory. Catherine LaFarge suggests in her essay, "The hand of the huntress: repetition in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," that women in the *Morte* have to do with the inner or private sphere and men with the outer or public (264). It is the exteriors that matter to the male characters. Balin and his brother, Balan end up killing each other because of a preoccupation with exteriors; they see only the armor, and neither bothers to consider who could possibly be underneath it. Similarly, when Malory introduces a new male character, there is normally some description of his social placement, who his father was, or any noble or heroic deed for which he may be famous. Most importantly, almost every virtue connected with a male character is

associated with action. When the sword-damosel appears at the beginning of the tale of Balin, she offers a definition of what a good knight is: “a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis and withoute velony other trechory and withoute treson” (Malory, 40). No part of this definition is concerned with what may be in the knight’s mind or heart; it is wholly concerned with what he has done.

Women, conversely, have no family history or noble deeds to speak of. Whereas male characters have their reputation, there is no way to judge a woman by her appearance: beautiful and ugly women are equally suspect. A woman’s character in Malory is focused entirely within her private thoughts and her only actions are in respect to one or another of the knights. This is why, as Lynch notes, women are judged completely as maintainers or destroyers of otherwise good knights (286). However, considering that the characters of Malorian women are almost entirely private, it seems highly problematic to judge them based on a public scale. So little of their motivations are revealed and they are so shrouded in ambiguity and mystery, that it is difficult to find a truly good or evil woman in Malory. In fact, most of an Arthurian woman’s character can be determined by studying the man to whom she gives agency. This gift can manifest itself abstractly (simple feelings of love, for example), but often it will take on a more literal character: a damosel will literally give a knight a gift that furthers his agency.

Because of their relation to both power and masculinity, swords are very important symbolically to the *Morte*. He who has the sword has the power; this is demonstrated from the very beginning when a young Arthur pulls the sword from the stone to solidify his kingship. Women have no power, because they cannot use swords, which are thoroughly masculine devices. Therefore, it is interesting to watch a damosel

bestow a sword upon a knight; she is literally giving him some degree of power and thereby manipulating social structure. However, “even when apparently manipulating events...the woman cannot herself alone provide their resolution” (Lynch, 287). Women are forced to be thinkers because they cannot act for themselves. In order to thrive and survive, they must carefully consider with which knights they want to align themselves.

The opposite of the sword, of course, is the scabbard, which is as important symbolically as the sword. Coming from the same Latin roots as the word ‘vagina,’ the scabbard stands for femininity in the same way that the sword symbolizes masculinity. It is tempting at first to deem the sword much more important than the scabbard, but the *Morte* shows that this is far from the case. This is most notably demonstrated in the case of Arthur’s sword, Excalibur, which shall be discussed later, but it can also be seen in other various instances throughout Arthur’s kingship. In one of Arthur’s first battles, Merlin becomes quite angry with him, saying, “Thou hast never done! Hast thou nat done inow? Of three score thousande thys day hast thou leffte on lyve but fyftene thousand. Therefore hit ys tyme to sey ‘Who!’” (Malory, 26). Sheathing one’s sword is apparently just as important as drawing it (Shawver, 7).

If the perfect union consists of a sword and a scabbard, what does one make of Balin, the knight with two swords? Read allegorically, this could mean either an overdose of masculinity without any of the necessary feminine element or an overdose of power with no plan of how to properly use it. Both allegorical readings seem to work in this case. In the beginning of the story, Balin is not an overly masculine figure, mainly because he is concerned with more than exteriors and appearances. Before pulling out the sword, he says to the damosel:

[W]orthynes and good tacchis and also good dedis is nat only in araymente, but manhode and worship [ys hyd] within a mannes person, and many a worshipfull knight ys nat knowyn unto all people—and therefore worship and hardynesse ys nat in araymente (Malory, 42).

This level of insight is certainly not typical of a male character. However, from the moment he draws the sword, all traces of femininity vanish from Balin. This is perhaps to do with the damosel's request that he return the sword after drawing it. Balin sees only the sword—the power—and he does not recognize that this power is not his own. From that moment on, Balin is completely wrapped up in exteriors, and he is ready to swing his swords at anything that moves. Obviously, the masculine preoccupation with exteriors is erroneous, as it leads to the deaths of both Balin himself and his brother Balan. Furthermore, his power-hungry attitude causes, among other things, the Dolorous Stroke and the death of the Lady of the Lake.

Though “The Tale of Balin and Balan” is only a small portion of the *Morte* as a whole, Balin is very much reflected in the character of Arthur himself. Balin's receiving of the sword was specifically written by Malory to reflect Arthur's own encounters with swords—both the one that he drew from the stone and the one given to him by his own sword-damosel, the Lady of the Lake (Shawver, 7). This gift of Excalibur to Arthur is perhaps the most notable and obvious example of a female character bestowing power, and it is rendered even more notable by the fact that Excalibur's power is contained not in the blade but in the scabbard. Arthur, of course, is completely insensitive to this fact, and when questioned by Merlin, he replies decisively that he prefers the sword. Merlin then replies, “Ye ar the most unwise, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde upon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded” (Malory, 38). However, even with Merlin's teaching, Arthur never quite learns the full

value of the scabbard. After retrieving Excalibur from Accolon, Arthur sees that Accolon has custody of the scabbard also. So, Arthur “sterete to hym and pulled the scawberte frome hym, and threw hit frome hym as fer as he might throw hit” (Malory, 89). Arthur must realize the scabbard has some value because he knows to prevent Accolon from keeping it, but unfortunately he does not realize enough of its value to be sure to keep it for himself. However, though he underestimates the power of Excalibur’s scabbard, Arthur, unlike Balin, shows himself sensitive to the fact that it is a *borrowed* power that he holds (Heng, 284). Even as he is about to die, he makes sure that Excalibur is returned to its proper owner, the Lady of the Lake.

Aside from his ignorance of the scabbard’s power, Arthur’s dismissal of the importance of femininity can also be seen in his treatment of Guenevere. In lieu of a sword, Guenevere bestows upon Arthur a much larger and more prominent symbol of power—the Round Table. The table, which comes to be synonymous with Arthur’s fellowship, is given to Arthur by Guenevere’s father as her dowry. Whether or not the table is Arthur’s object in marrying Guenevere, it is clear that he sees the connection between the two. When he is first asked by Merlin who he would like to marry, Arthur declares, “I love Gwenyvere, the Kynges doughtir of Lodegrean, of the londe of Camelerde, the whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde” (Malory, 62). Malory repeatedly mentions Guenevere’s name in connection with the table in the period before the wedding. However, though Arthur is aware that the Round Table was acquired through Guenevere, once both are in his life he turns his attention solely to the Table and his fellowship of knights. Arthur’s lack of appreciation for his wife eventually leads to her affair and his own eventual demise.

Women are givers of power but they can also take it away, which brings the discussion around to Morgan. Morgan is perhaps the only female character in Malory that can be called 'evil', and because of the lack of information from Morgan's point of view, one must be hesitant to use the word even in reference to her. Though Morgan differs from many other women in that she tries to revoke power instead of bestowing it, she still retains all the advantages and disadvantages of her femininity. She is able to see the significance to Arthur's magical scabbard but is unable to steal it herself. Instead she needs a man, Accolon, to do the deed for her. Even with all the 'evil' within her, Morgan, like the other women, must gain her power by proxy.

Balin's tale demonstrates the fate of those who completely miss the feminine influence in knightly affairs. Arthur is aware of a feminine presence but not enough to foresee the problems in his own actions. There are in fact very few male characters that are sensitive to this particular dynamic. Two such males are Merlin and Lancelot. Both of these characters are deeply connected with femininity; it is not a coincidence that both were raised without a significant father figure. Lancelot shows his awareness of femininity by referring to himself as Lancelot du Lake, which makes reference to the Lady of the Lake who raised him. He is also frequently seen in disguise, which connects him with the interior world of women as opposed to the exterior world of men. Finally, Lancelot recognizes the impact Guenevere's love has on him: in true courtly love tradition, his bravest and noblest deeds are for love of her. Guenevere does not bestow any gifts on Lancelot; in fact she does almost the opposite: she disarms him both literally and metaphorically (Scala, 383). However, this is equally important, because in stripping

him of his disguises, Guenevere has bestowed on Lancelot a sense of self that he previously had lacked.

Merlin, of course, has a profound connection to the feminine because of his association with the ‘other world’ or the ‘mystical realm.’ This realm is seen as “a feminine zone often ruled by women as opposed to the court, which is ruled by men” (Saunders, 3). Like the women, Merlin is also focused on interiors: he often utilizes disguise, he sees the power of Arthur’s scabbard, and he can tell that Balin’s sword-damosel is “the falsiest damesell that lyveth” (Malory, 44).

It is in the relationship between Merlin and Nivea that one finds the first exception to the *Morte*’s otherwise consistent gender-relations. Their tumultuous relationship poses a number of questions: the most prominent being, why did Merlin let himself be defeated, especially when he himself foresaw it? Joan Ferrante believes that Merlin needs to be willing in order for Nivea to succeed (Ferrante, 121), but her explanation is ultimately unsatisfying. Even if a “man’s willingness is the source of the woman’s power” (Ferrante, 121), there is still no reason as to why Merlin would be a willing victim in the first place. His demise breaks the rules: Nivea creates a masculine character for herself by carrying out her plan for Merlin’s downfall on her own, and Merlin becomes effeminate by not taking action to stop her. Ultimately, there is a bigger question at stake here: can Nivea and Merlin both simultaneously exist? Both characters represent a union of masculine and feminine traits: Merlin has no need for women, and Nivea, after learning Merlin’s magical secrets, has no need for men. Since the stability of Arthur’s court rests on men and women mutually depending on each other, perhaps Merlin’s demise acts to restore some balance and to prevent any future conflicts that

might arise from two independent beings existing at once. Since Merlin and Nenive are both very balanced creatures, they each wield a lot of power. If they were ever to have conflicting interests, a lot of damage could result; therefore, Nenive acts quickly and takes Merlin out of the picture.

The other possible exception to Malory's gender rule occurs in "The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal," which seems to turn everything on its toes. Women, who have heretofore been spiritual figures, bestowing agency on the knight of their choosing, seem to be forced from their established roles, as the men explore a more religious side of their characters. A narrative littered with Biblical allusions reinforces the idea of a new—perhaps a holy—knight. So, where now do the women fit? If there is to be an uprising of the courtly ideals, where the knights look to God instead of their earthly loves, then the role they have played thus far becomes redundant. "The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal," on the whole, exists in a liminal world between the two opposing ideals, and this transition is demonstrated best in those who would bear it most heavily. Arthur and the women of the court, Percival's unnamed sister, and Sir Lancelot—all people who stand to lose by this new way of life—feel the shift much more than the others and it is through them that the reader can feel it too.

The first signs of change are felt even before the quest is underway. To begin with, Arthur is ready to eschew his feast-time custom of waiting for an adventure before eating. It may be that Arthur has become an old man who wants his dinner on time, but there are signs to show that perhaps he merely knows the end is coming. Even before the knights have decided to undertake the quest, he remarks sadly to Sir Gawain,

[F]or thorow you ye have berauffe me the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the worlde. For whan they departe

frome hense, I am sure they all shall never mete more togydir in thys worlde (Malory, 503).

However, it is not until the knights are about to depart that the full extent of the changes begins to become clear; the knights receive word that “none in thys Queste lede lady nother jantillwoman with hym, for hit ys nat to do in so hyghe a servyse as they laboure in” (Malory, 504). On the surface this may seem like a simple and random rule, but it underscores the notion of a new type of system where the feminine element is no longer necessary. Galahad, the Holy Knight poster boy, highlights this principle in his refusal to even touch his mother, Arthurian Everywoman Elayne, when she wishes to kiss him goodbye, for fear that she might taint him with sin. In previous episodes, a kiss from a lady upon leaving would certainly have been good luck and perhaps even necessary for a successful quest but in the Grail Quest this is certainly not the case.

A second demonstration of this new way can be seen in the story of Percival’s sister. Ben Ramm, in his article “‘Por Coi La Pucele Pleure’: The Feminine Enigma of the Grail Quest,” discusses how women up until the Grail quest had taken on roles as redeemers. The arrival of Galahad on the scene, Ramm notes, “underscores an absolutely androcentric notion of redemption” (Ramm 518). However, when first introduced to Percival’s sister, the reader is tempted to believe that she will function as so many unnamed women before her. In an episode more than vaguely reminiscent of an inverted Samson and Delilah story, she weaves her hair into a scabbard for Galahad, Percival and Bors. This incident prompts even Galahad to say, “ye have done so much that I shall be your knyght all the dayes of my lyff” (Malory, 567). All the feminine elements of a traditional courtly story are there: the unnamed damosel bestowing a scabbard on a worthy knight. For further emphasis, the scabbard is crafted out of her own hair, which

she “loved well, whyle that [she] was woman of the worlde” (Malory, 567). The sacrifice of the hair can be seen as representative of the separation between the damosel and the physical world.

However, this courtly ideal is torn down within a few pages as Percival’s sister dies giving her blood to a leprous lady. Though it is possible to read her sacrifice as redemptive, it effectively removes the feminine presence from the quest. Also, if one chooses to read the donation of blood as a type of reincarnation, it can be said that Percival’s sister has gone from a position inside the quest to one wholly unconnected with it (Ramm, 523). Either way, female company and aid must be removed in order for the quest to be completed (Ramm, 524).

Removal of the feminine presence is precisely the problem for Sir Lancelot. Though Guenevere’s image has been a constant inspiration to him, her persistent presence in his mind limits him as well as it motivates him (Ferrante, 81). Known to readers as “the beste knyght of the worlde” (Malory, 498), Lancelot would be most readers’ first choice as the appropriate Grail knight. Also, as was discussed before, his reputation for disguising himself gives him a profound connection with interiors and realms more associated with the feminine; this gives him a well-rounded character. However, like David and his Bathsheba, Lancelot cannot give up Guenevere, and it therefore falls to his son to achieve his spiritual dream. For it is Guenevere who finally takes away Lancelot’s preoccupation with disguise and gives him a firm identity. Malory sums up this turning point in a few lines: “Than Sir Launcelot lete make hym a shyld all of sable, and a quene crowned in the myddis, of sylver, and a knyght clene armed knelynge afore her” (Malory, 486). Where there formerly was nothing, Lancelot places a

blatant image of his love for the queen on his shield, the very thing that knights use to identify themselves. Thus, it is the preoccupation with Guenevere, his “earthly goddess” (Davies, 363), which prevents Lancelot from achieving the Grail.

Now that the existence of these new ideals has been established, it is only natural to ascertain Malory’s opinion of them, and the character of Lancelot is pivotal in answering this question. After Galahad is widely proclaimed the new best knight of the world, an unnamed damosel reminds Lancelot that the title is his no longer. When he replies that he never was the best, her response is quite definitive: “that were ye, and ar yet, of ony synfull man of the worlde” (Malory, 501). In his essay, “Malory’s Treatment of the Sankgreall,” Charles Moorman writes that Galahad is not to be read as a ordinary knight but as a heavenly knight, which is demonstrated through Malory’s regular elevation and dehumanization of his character (Moorman, 504). The implication is that, even with Galahad’s presence, Lancelot is and will remain the best knight of the earthly world.

Even as he is being shamed for his sins, there are vindications of Lancelot scattered all through the text. Elizabeth Scala points out that, although Galahad is now considered to be the best knight, the reader never sees Lancelot defeated (Scala, 391). Also, Galahad was conceived because of Lancelot’s love for Guenevere, so although this love prevents Lancelot from achieving the Grail, without it the Grail would not have been achieved at all (Scala, 393). Finally, as R. T. Davies notes, the first appearance of the Grail in Malory is to Lancelot; this privilege should normally be restricted to one without Lancelot’s sinful nature (Davies, 359). Lancelot, the perfect courtly knight, manages to

maintain his position as the hero without conforming to the purer standards of knighthood now advocated.

Just as Lancelot remains a champion even under rampant condemnation, images of the feminine remain persistent in the narrative after the women have been excluded. The Grail-bearers are themselves female, and even the Grail itself is a feminine symbol.

There is no small significance to the fact that, while Galahad dies in achieving the Grail, Lancelot lives on. Even as the ideals of the court shift towards favoring a purer, more spiritual knight, the human element will still be present in the form of the earlier courtly ideals. Lancelot, though no longer an ideal knight, remains the best product possible in an inherently sinful system. Malory's message seems to be that though we can hold these heavenly ideals, as long as we are of this world, we can never completely rid ourselves of what is human within us. That is why, even after the quest is complete, the court remains in a liminal phase between the two ways of life; the knights will never be able to renounce their earthly loves, even if it means achieving something greater. While Malory realizes that this is a flawed system, as Arthur's court inevitably falls, he does see a possibility of redemption: Lancelot sees the Grail. Through his refusal to condemn Lancelot and his dehumanizing of Galahad, Malory demonstrates his belief that the secular courtly life is not only more possible but more preferable than the holy way.

Camelot falls, and Malory knows that; there is no evidence that he ever denied it or even wanted to change it. However, Malory does see a hope for the courtly way of life, and that hope is demonstrated in "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney." There are no known sources for the Gareth tale; it is largely believed to be Malory's own creation. This gives him something that all the other tales lack: full artistic license. Gareth has it

all: he's young, good looking and it is hinted that he may possibly be a better knight than Lancelot; he even shares the penchant for disguise which seems to characterize Malory's intelligent male characters. He is a natural critique to the Arthurian court, because who can help but notice their own flaws in the presence of someone who has so few of them? Lancelot can be seen as the ideal product of a *flawed* system but Gareth's way of life corrects those flaws. The difference is this: he says to Lyonesse on their wedding day, "and I have nat you and welde you as my wyff, there shall never lady nother jantyllwoman rejoyse me" (Malory, 224). How often in Arthurian literature does a male make a vow of faithfulness *and* keeps it? If you said never, you are probably right. Lancelot and Guenevere's adulterous passion will never be as great as the love of Lyonesse and Gareth. It is fitting that Lyonesse's gift is not a sword but a ring.

Although it would be a stretch to call Malory a feminist, he recognizes indeed the differences between male and female characters and the roles they play in Arthur's world. Malory is one of the few in his time who recognize the importance of women's roles and the degree of influence they have over power distribution. Though it seems common sense, Malory's message is an important one: men and women need each other. Damosels with swords cannot use them, and knights need women to give them the weapons with which they fight. This may be the sword itself, or simply the motivation necessary for success. Those that recognize this dynamic prosper, but woe to those like Balin who ignore it. Malory shows his readers that only when these two elements are working in harmony can the kingdom prosper: a perfect sword in its sheath.

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