Molly Trammell

ENGL 437

31 October 2014

ENGL 437

Love, Loyalty, and Impotence: Arthur's Place in the Affair of Lancelot and Guinevere

Adultery is a grand and complicated theme in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. This is seen most obviously in the affair of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. Their adulterous love is often considered the sin that destroys King Arthur's fellowship of the Round Table; however, there is more evidence to the contrary. Arthur's repeated failures in the realm of love as king, knight, and husband, coupled with his utter disinterest in (if not approval of) his wife's affair, hint at an underlying impotence in his ability to be a true husband. It should be remembered that the marriage between Arthur and Guinevere was made primarily for political reasons, and Guinevere herself is never shown to give her consent to the marriage or to be particularly satisfied with it. Furthermore, a love affair between a knight and his queen did not technically violate Arthur's chivalric code – the primary law at court – although Arthur himself did by never stepping up to rescue his queen. Finally, at the end of the book, Malory shifts the reader's focus off Lancelot and Guinevere, making their affair almost irrelevant to the list of things that contributed to the fall of Arthur's court, with Arthur's inability to control his knights at the forefront. When viewed through these lenses of court politics, readers might reconsider their view of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair and Arthur's role in it.

Placing the blame for the downfall of King Arthur and his Round Table on Guinevere and Lancelot is an attractive, but perhaps overly simplistic, interpretation of this tale. After all, modern Western readers automatically condemn adultery as sinful according to the prevailing

Christian morality, which condemns adultery specifically. However, Malory's view of adultery, as gathered by reading this text, is quite different. To Malory, the "important thing is not one's own knowledge of what one has done […], but public recognition of one's own actions" (Lambert 850). This explains why the affair is not portrayed negatively until Agravain and Mordred publicly expose it. In the minds of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, the private relationship was not sinful because Arthur appeared to approve of it and Lancelot and Guinevere were not breaking any chivalric rules as stated by Arthur's Pentecostal Oath.

An argument can also be made for the idea that Arthur did not want a marriage in the first place. Arthur himself says, "My barons will let me have no rest, but needs I must take a wife" (Malory 50). In other words, Arthur had to marry to appease his people. Furthermore, Guinevere's father possessed the Round Table that once belonged to Arthur's father and promised it and 150 knights as a dowry (Malory 51). Upon Guinevere and Arthur's wedding, the Round Table is given equal (if not more) attention than the queen herself. Both the Table and Guinevere are spoken of as being "delivered" to Arthur, and upon their arrival only a few phrases of worship are said of Guinevere while Arthur devotes the rest of his marriage day to finding more knights to occupy the Round Table (Malory 51). This foreshadows Arthur's treatment of his queen throughout the book: his knights are his primary concern; his queen is but an afterthought.

Clearly, this marriage is not so much about Arthur and Guinevere as about Arthur and his fellowship of the Round Table. This is expanded upon as the book progresses by Guinevere's notable lack of children and Arthur's obvious use of his knights as his progeny. As Cherewatuk notes, "Despite her failure to produce an heir, Malory's Guinevere […] has already provided Arthur with a kind of male line through her marriage portion, the Round Table" and its accompanying knights (26). At the end of the book, Arthur shows where his true love lies in regards to his queen and his knights, claiming, "much more am I sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen" (Malory 481). Guinevere's true role in the marriage was finished once Arthur obtained the Round Table and the knights, bringing "stability and order to the court" (Cherewatuk 34). This left her free, in Arthur's eyes and her own, to pursue an affair with Lancelot.

While it is true that Arthur mentions his love for Guinevere before sending Merlin to fetch her, once again we see his juxtaposition of her and the Round Table; her and his fellowship of knights. Karen Cherewatuk mentions this in "The King and Queen's Marriage: Dowry, Infertility, and Adultery," writing "in the passage where he confesses his love for Guenevere [sic] to Merlin, Arthur describes the queen by the physical object that will serve as her dowry" (32). Arthur tells Merlin, "I love Guinevere the king's daughter of Lodegreance […] that which holdeth in his house the Table Round that ye told me he had it of my father Uther. And yet this damosel is the most valiant and fairest that I know living, or yet that ever I could find" (Malory 50). This leaves the reader to wonder what Arthur loved more: Guinevere or the thought of inheriting the Round Table and proving his virility in his collection of noble knights.

Arthur's obsession with acquiring knights to prove his worthiness as king sheds more light on the Guinevere/Lancelot relationship. Cherewatuk makes the interesting connection between Guinevere's adultery with Lancelot and Lancelot's continued fealty to Arthur: Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship and their love and loyalty to one another keeps Lancelot at Arthur's court, "thus [providing Arthur] with Lancelot's service and […] affinity" (26). One particular episode between Arthur and Guinevere illustrates this point perfectly: after Guinevere is suspected of murdering Sir Patrise with a poisoned apple and is to be tried by battle, Arthur asks her where Lancelot is, saying, “And he were here he would not grudge to do battle for you” (Malory 407). He then, after learning that Lancelot is absent from court, blames Guinevere for this, asking, “What aileth you […] that ye cannot keep Sir Lancelot upon your side?” (Malory 408). Instead of the usual task of a queen to produce heirs, Guinevere’s job as Arthur’s wife seems to be to make sure that his best knight stays at court to bring worship to Arthur and the Round Table. After all, Arthur’s court is weaker without Lancelot, as proven later when the fellowship breaks upon Lancelot’s departure. Lancelot himself remarks about this when Arthur forces him into battle, telling the king, “by me and mine all the whole Round Table hath been increased more in worship than ever it was by any of you all” (Malory 495). In other words, the strength of Arthur’s fellowship suffers without Lancelot and his kin.

There is evidence in the text that Arthur knew before marrying Guinevere that she would be unfaithful to him. Merlin, his most trusted advisor, warned him that “Guinevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Lancelot should love her, and she him again” (Malory 50). The fact that he married her anyway sets the reader up for Arthur’s acceptance of his queen’s infidelity. Thus forewarned, it cannot be said that Arthur knew nothing of the affair before its publication by Agravain and Mordred. It might be argued that Arthur was blind to or refused to see what was in front of him, but the fact that Merlin warned him explicitly makes this difficult to believe. In this light, Cherewatuk’s idea that Arthur knew about Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair and yet allowed it to continue to keep Lancelot at his court makes more sense (26).

Malory’s text presents a notable lack of evidence that Guinevere ever consented to her marriage to Arthur; Malory simply states, “And so King Lodegreance delivered his daughter Guinevere unto Merlin” (51). This is important because in the time that Malory would have been writing, it was Church law that "no marriage could be made without the consent of both principals" (McSheffrey 4-5). While it has been suggested that "for marriage to a king, the consent of the bride's father suffices" (Cherewatuk 28-29), it seems unlikely that Malory, were he aware of the marriage laws of his time, would have simply forgotten to mention Guinevere's consent. The absence of her consent could change the way we see her marriage, and thus her relationship with Lancelot. Is it adultery if, according to canonical law, Arthur and Guinevere's marriage is not valid?

Furthermore, Malory includes no actual marriage scene between Guinevere and Arthur. The story skips from Guinevere's delivery to Arthur to Arthur's commission of Sir Tor. This, again, hints at Arthur's inability to be a true husband to Guinevere, given his obsession with his fellowship of knights. His obvious inability to produce an heir is also echoed here in his clear disinterest in Guinevere as wife. As Cherewatuk notes, Arthur's sole interest in his queen is in what Guinevere contributes to his court by sustaining his fellowship of knights through her relationship with Lancelot (26). Clearly, that is the only progeny she will produce with Arthur. Therefore, since she is doing her part in the chivalric community to keep Arthur's best knight and his kin at court, she is doing her duty as queen but not as wife. So perhaps a canonically valid marriage truly didn't matter to Arthur or Malory, as long as Guinevere was effectively playing her part and keeping the fellowship united.

Also, importantly, there is no exchange of gifts between Arthur and Guinevere, when the act of giving gifts "was particularly important in courtship ritual" and could be a symbol of the marriage contract (McSheffrey 22). While Guinevere does bear the Round Table to King Arthur, it is not a gift from her but a dowry from her father (Malory 51). Aside from being a symbol of marriage, gifts could also symbolize children. Arthur and Guinevere give each other no gifts and no children. Their only heirs are Arthur's knights – the products of the only gift ever passing between the couple (though in reality, Guinevere has little to do with the gift at all). On the other hand, the exchange of rings between Lancelot and Guinevere once their adultery is exposed is an obvious allusion to a marriage ceremony: Lancelot "kissed her, and either of them gave other a ring" (Malory 474). As mentioned earlier, while Lancelot and Guinevere never produce a child, their relationship produces the only "children" that Arthur is interested in: his fellowship (Cherewatuk 26). Lancelot brings with him many knights that stay loyal to Arthur's court because of their loyalty or kinship to Lancelot. Therefore, Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship keeps unity at Arthur's court, which is apparent when Lancelot leaves court and Arthur's fellowship begins to crumble (Malory 474). Despite the lack of actual children, Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship is more fertile than Arthur and Guinevere's relationship, by their unity and maintenance of a vast part of Arthur's fellowship.

It is also important to examine this love triangle through the chivalric code versus the Christian code at Arthur's court. Before their affair is unmasked, it is the private business of Lancelot and Guinevere. This is because, despite the fact that they violate the Christian code by committing adultery, they do not violate the all-powerful chivalric code of Arthur's court. The chivalric code – stated in Arthur's Pentecostal Oath – explains how to treat ladies, but it does not mention what a knight is allowed to do in the realm of love and there is no clause pertaining to adultery (Malory 57). Therefore, as far as the chivalric code is concerned, Lancelot and Guinevere's affair is not sin. Perhaps Malory omits adultery from the code on purpose, given Arthur's obvious knowledge of Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship.

While the Christian code condemns adultery, the religious rules are not as strong in Arthur's realm as his code of chivalry. The most important difference between the two is their area of focus: the chivalric code focuses on public life and the Christian code focuses on private life. As Mickey Sweeney states in "Divine Love or Loving Divinely?: The Ending of Malory's *Morte Darthur*," "a knight cannot be the perfect chivalric hero as represented by the [chivalric] code and at the same time be the perfect Christian" (75). And, as Sarah Hill states, "honor and Christian principles are often at odds, and when Christian principles of truth [and] sexual fidelity to one's spouse […] come into conflict with the Arthurian principles of truth determined by force [and] sexual reward for physical brutality, it is the Christian code which is rejected" (268). We see this clearly with Lancelot and Guinevere. After all, his "physical brutality" saves her on many occasions where Arthur is unable to rescue or her or where he is the one who is condemning her (Malory 446, 413, 480). Lancelot's triumph on these occasions is important because to these Arthurian people "guilt or innocence is determined by a trial by battle between the accuser (or a knight fighting on his behalf) and the accused (or a knight fighting on his behalf). […] [T]he judge is taken to be God" (Ackerman 4). Therefore, Lancelot's victories suggest, within the context of trial by combat, that God is on the side of Lancelot and the queen, as opposed to the people who wish to condemn them.

Of course, when Guinevere is wrongly accused of poisoning Sir Patrise, Lancelot's victory in battle for her is simply justified. However, his next victory in Guinevere's name falls in a bit of a gray area. Meliagaunt accuses Guinevere of fornicating with one of her attendant knights at his castle, which she did not do (Malory 454). Therefore, when Lancelot defends her honor, he is technically in the right, but the reader realizes that, though she didn't sleep with any of the knights named, Guinevere has been sleeping with *a* knight. Meliagaunt seems to make this connection and comments to Lancelot before their battle for Guinevere's honor, "God will have a stroke in every battle" (Malory 454). Lancelot replies with, "I say nay plainly, that this night there lay none of these ten knights wounded with my lady Queen Guinevere," a specific response that assures his honesty and the justice of his cause despite his own adulterous actions with the queen (Malory 454). However, despite the unclear innocence or guilt on Guinevere's part, Lancelot wins and she is proven innocent (Malory 459). Lancelot's final success in proving Guinevere's innocence happens when everyone is aware that Guinevere has had an affair. Lancelot, despite the belief that God would have a hand in proving the innocent and the guilty, successfully saves Guinevere from burning (Malory 480). This could indicate that either God is never on the side of those seeking to bring public shame to private affairs or, holding with my previous point, that Arthur and Guinevere's marriage is not canonically legitimate and so she did not actually commit adultery in the eyes of God. Whichever this proves, it further supports the evidence that Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship is not wrong, so long as it is kept private. Therefore, as long as Lancelot and Guinevere remain good and honorable in the public eye, to Arthur and his knights that is exactly what they are. The exposure of their affair is the true violation of the governing principles of Arthurian society by causing a rift in the fellowship (Malory 474).

Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere in these situations sharply contrasts with Arthur's inability to do so. In fact, on two of the occasions it is Arthur who intends to have the queen killed (Malory 413, 480). Although he expresses his reluctance, he is incapable of stepping up to save his queen, because his people expect him to be the hand of impartial judgment. Here we see Arthur's chivalric code in its full power. Even though Guinevere is "still in the prescribed code of conduct" (Hill 273), her public image has been sullied and so Arthur is trapped in his chivalric code, unable to step up and save her like Lancelot can and does. This, second only to his inability to produce heirs, shows Arthur's true impotence as king and husband.

The preeminence of the chivalric code could also be a reason why Guinevere is charged with treason rather than adultery (Malory 478). Guinevere's real crime is that she causes a rift between Arthur's knights (Malory 474). Despite her adherence to Arthur's code by exercising discretion in her affair, she is discovered in her infidelity. Again, we see the fallibility of Arthur's code in that it entraps Guinevere, when – as Cherewatuk notes – perhaps she was simply helping her husband maintain his fellowship of knights (26). However, despite the particulars, Arthur is still more loyal to his code and his fellowship than he is to his wife, as he makes obvious in his intent to burn her for treason (Malory 478).

Finally, upon the transfer of guilt at the end of the story from Lancelot to Agravain and Mordred, we see the how little Arthur's downfall has to do with Lancelot and Guinevere and how much it has to do with Arthur's inability to control his knights. Arthur himself clearly blames Agravain and Mordred, the knights who attempted to bring public shame to the lovers, crying, "Ah, Agravain, Agravain […] Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thy evil will that thou hadst and Sir Mordred thy brother, unto Sir Lancelot, hath caused all this sorrow" (Malory 482). As Mark Lambert states, "If we see the tragedy primarily in terms of a shame-ethos, Aggravain [sic] does really cause it: we view Lancelot and Guinevere as victims rather than culprits, their love as the occasion and not the root of the anger and unhap" (854).

Furthermore, Agravain and Mordred do not only bring shame to Guinevere and Lancelot in their public slander, they also bring shame to Arthur. After all, if a woman was proven adulterous, the real shame fell on her husband "for not controlling his wandering wife" (Cherewatuk 50). In other words, Agravain and Mordred are exposing Arthur's marital impotence and inability to do his duty as husband in lying with Guinevere. It would make sense if Agravain and Mordred's intent was to shame Arthur along with Lancelot and Guinevere, given Mordred's subsequent attempt to steal the throne (and the queen) from Arthur (Malory 505-506).

Even Sir Gawain refuses to put the blame on Lancelot and Guinevere, and chides Arthur for his inability to stop the shame being heaped upon his queen. When Arthur entreats him to bring Guinevere to the fire for her execution, Gawain responds, "Nay, my most noble king, […] that will I never do! For wit you well I will never be in that place where so noble a queen as is lady Dame Guinevere shall take such a shameful end" (Malory 479). He also refuses to condemn Lancelot, even after Lancelot murdered his brother Agravain, telling Arthur that he warned Agravain and Mordred not to meddle in Lancelot's private affairs (Malory 479). It is important that Gawain acted thus about the relationship with Lancelot and Guinevere, when Gawain is the knight who pushes Arthur into war against Lancelot for killing his innocent kin, Sirs Gareth and Gaheris. With this, once again, we see Arthur's inability to stand up to his own chivalric code. As Sir Lucan, one of Arthur's knights, relates, "'my Lord Arthur would accord with Sir Lancelot, but Sir Gawain will not suffer him'" (Malory 499). Despite Arthur's obvious reluctance to go to war with Lancelot, he is honor-bound if his vassal Gawain demands it.

Finally, upon Gawain's demise while fighting against Mordred's usurpation, Gawain tells Arthur to reconcile with Lancelot, saying, "And through me and my pride ye have all this shame and disease, for had that noble knight Sir Lancelot been with you, as he was and would have been, this unhappy war had never been begun" (Malory 508). Indeed, Lancelot attempted to reconcile with Arthur on multiple occasions and was rebuked by Gawain. As Malory mentions, "King Arthur would have taken his queen again and to have been accorded with Lancelot; but Sir Gawain would not suffer him by no manner of mean" (486). In no way does Arthur put his foot down and control his vassal Gawain. Gawain exercises total control over Arthur, his king, even when Arthur does not agree with Gawain's counsel.

The affair of Lancelot and Guinevere is a multi-faceted and eternally interesting relationship in medieval literature. However, it is not the story of an evil temptress and an unfaithful knight who bring down a great king's empire. It is the complex story of an impotent king, two lovers, and how the social constructs of that time played into a private relationship. The actual demise of Arthur does not happen as a result of Guinevere and Lancelot's affair, it happens as the result of Arthur's inability to hush the slander of Agravain and Mordred and to stand up to his knight Gawain. Lancelot and Guinevere's adulterous relationship was not the demise of Arthur's kingdom as it was in no way a sin against his chivalric code of conduct. Arthur himself committed that sin in being a weak and impotent king.

Works Cited

Ackerman, Felicia. ""Always to Do Ladies, Damosels, and Gentlewomen Succour": Women and the Chivalric Code in Malory's *Morte Darthur*." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26.1 (2002): 1-12. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.

Cherewatuk, Karen. "The King and Queen's Marriage: Dowry, Infertility, and Adultery." *Arthurian Studies LXVII: Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory's* Morte Darthur. Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 2006. 24-55. Print.

Hill, Sarah J. "Recovering Malory's Guenevere." *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*. Ed. Lori J. Walters. New York, NY: Routledge, 1996. 267-79. Print.

Lambert, Mark. "Shame and Guilt." *Le Morte Darthur*. By Sir Thomas Malory. Ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd. New York, NY: W. W. Norton &, 2004. 849-56. Print.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*. Ed. Helen Cooper. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

McSheffrey, Shannon. Introduction. *Love & Marriage in Late Medieval London*. Trans. by McSheffrey. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995. Print.

Sweeney, Mickey. "Divine Love or Loving Divinely?: The Ending of Malory's *Morte Darthur*." *Arthuriana* 16.2 (2006): 73-77. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.