

THE ARTHURIAN CYCLE AS A CROSS-CULTURAL MATTER

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	vi
1 Introduction	1
2 Arthur, Fellowship, and Fraternity	7
Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain	10
The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes	13
Erec and Enide.....	15
Perceval: The Story of the Holy Grail	20
The Knight of the Cart.....	27
Summation.....	31
The Mabinogion	32
Hartmann von Aue's <i>Erec</i>	34
Wolfram von Eschenbach's <i>Parzival</i>	37
The Lancelot-Grail Cycle	40
Conclusion	46
3 Arthur, Women, and Courtly Love.....	48
Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain	51
The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes	56
Erec and Enide.....	57
Perceval: The Story of the Grail	62
The Knight of the Cart.....	65
Summation.....	68
The Mabinogion	69
How Culhwch Won Olwen	69
Hartmann von Aue's <i>Erec</i>	72
Wolfram von Eschenbach's <i>Parzival</i>	75
Marie de France's <i>Lanval</i>	79
The Lancelot-Grail Cycle	83

	Morgan le Fay.....	87
	Conclusion.....	90
4	Arthur and Kingship.....	92
	Geoffrey of Monmouth's <i>The History of the Kings of Britain</i>	93
	The Romances of Chretien de Troyes	97
	The Mabinogion	100
	Rhoanbwy's Dream.....	101
	How Culwch Won Olwen	104
	Hartmann von Aue's <i>Erec</i>	106
	Wolfram von Eschenbach's <i>Parzival</i>	108
	The Lancelot-Grail Cycle	110
	Conclusion.....	114
5	Arthur, Malory, and Conclusion.....	117
	Malory's <i>Le Morte Darthur</i>	119
	Caxton's Preface.....	124
	Conclusion.....	125
	References	128
	Primary Sources.....	128
	Secondary Sources.....	129

Abstract

Arthurian literature is some of the most pervasive literature to come out of the Western world in the history of the written word. Called the “Matter of Britain,” Arthurian literature centers around a sixth-century Welsh warlord whose dubious existence has led to the development of a legend connected not only to Wales, but to Britain and the rest of Western Europe. Twelfth-century writers from various cultures—particularly French, Germanic, British, and Welsh—adopted Arthur and his court to be representatives of an ideal feudal world. This ideal world was increasingly portrayed in a pessimistic light, as Arthur is increasingly portrayed as a weak king and his court is unable to handle the many competing responsibilities of a world governed by ambiguous rules of chivalry and courtliness. This thesis analyzes a sample of twelfth and thirteenth-century works from various cultures, and examines how these cultures adapted the Arthurian legend to fit their culture. Arthurian literature gained popularity through the Middle Ages and Arthur himself was identified in the fifteenth-century as one of greatest Christian kings to have ever lived—over a millennium after he *might* have lived. The only thing which remains consistent is the tragedy of Arthur’s inevitable fall. Arthurian literature has been enjoyed by audiences through history. The “Matter of Britain” is actually the matter of a much wider scope, spanning both time and space.

Introduction

King Arthur, Guinevere, and the Knights of the Round Table are some of the most recognizable figures in western literature. Nearly a millennia since Chrétien de Troyes wrote his tales of Arthur, the Arthurian legend is still retold and adapted today. Stories featuring Arthur and his knights have a long history of being adapted. Though the literature concerning Arthur and his court became known as the “Matter of Britain,” the legend itself exists as a composite of works from French, Germanic, Welsh, and English writers. The medieval writers of Arthurian romance built upon each other, adopting characters and plots, but each presented Arthur and his court in unique ways. In this thesis, I intend to explore why the Arthurian legend was adopted by different cultures, and how these cultures left their mark on Arthurian literature.

In the twelfth-century, the concept of literary “matters” (from the Old French “matiere”) came into vogue (OED “Matter”). The literature surrounding Arthur and his court is commonly referred to as the “Matter of Britain,” despite being a product of several cultures—particularly French culture—independent of Britain. Two others “matters” were developed during this time: The Matter of Rome (which was a compilation of the works of Greek and Roman authors, some of which dealing with Alexander the Great) and the Matter of France (which dealt primarily with Charlemagne and his peers). It is relevant to note that all three of these kings became members of “The Nine Worthies.” The Nine Worthies were nine of most valiant

conquering heroes of the medieval imagination. Their stories—more fiction than fact—defined good kingship. Thus, Arthur became a part of a mythos associated with Britain and the literature surrounding him added to this definition. Depending upon the work, this mythos could be patriotic or an indictment of British—or feudal—governance.

It is important to note that, during the time period this thesis is concerned with—roughly the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—nations did not exist as they do now. Politically, a kingdom was those lands and peoples gathered within the geographic scope of a king’s power, but these boundaries encompassed many different cultural groups and were ever-changing as a particular king’s influence expanded and contracted. R.W. Southern, in his book *The Making of the Middle Ages*, encourages scholars to look not at political divisions but language groups when studying this time period (Southern 16). Essentially, these groups could be divided into Romance languages stemming from Latin, and Germanic languages. Even England, which had been conquered by the Normans in 1066, could be drawn into the Romance language category, and is considered by Southern to have “been effectively added to the French-speaking world” (Southern 17)¹. The commonalities in Romance languages were likely incredibly helpful in the transference of Arthurian legends, though the cultures were most certainly diverse. While the Germanic world in the eleventh and twelfth centuries enjoyed relative stability, the Capetian Dynasty of the Frankish kingdom—

¹ I am aware of the language variety that Celtic Ireland, Scotland, and Wales (as areas that remained unconquered for some time) represent and have not disregarded the important impact these cultures have had on Arthurian literature in this thesis. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I have chosen not to greatly explore the influence of language on these texts.

which, succeeding the Carolingians, reigned from the tenth to the fourteenth century—struggled to control the fractious lands and lords they ruled over. This was the time of the feudal society. Power was meant to follow a linear, vertical pattern, but all too often became localized allowing local lords the ability to pursue goals independent of the king and state. Howard Bloch, in his article, “The Death of King Arthur and the Waning of the Feudal Age,” describes feudal society as it developed after the end of the Carolingian Empire as relatively modest and pragmatic systems of social rapport: the exchange of counsel and military support for economic support and protection. Vassalage, a form of fictive paternity alongside true paternity... Its sole purpose—self-defense through limited emphasis upon abstract ideas of political sovereignty and increased emphasis upon strict loyalty to the immediate warrior group. Fealty meant, above all, unquestionable fidelity to one’s lord (Bloch 294).

Whenever the social contract described above was broken—and this was whether it was small localized incident, or a large military act—it undermined the entire concept of feudalism as an effective system.

During the twelfth-century, literature focusing on the heroic exploits of chivalric heroes—which would become known as the “romance” genre—became popular. According to Southern, the Arthurian Romances encapsulated all of the popular ideas of the medieval imagination: the spiritual journey, the allegories of love, and the questing knight. Through the process of transculturation, these stories were shared, translated, and adopted into medieval popular culture (Southern 222). These concepts were situated on a backdrop of deep-seated pessimism born of more than a century’s worth of governmental failings. Before this time, Arthur’s name was mentioned in passing in some historical works, but there was no great literature

ascribed to him. This changed with the works of Chrétien de Troyes. Chrétien wrote within the first century and a half of Capetian rule, during a time when the royal struggle to maintain centralized power and authority over aristocratic vassals was at its height. Bloch writes, “Rooted far deeper than human foible or folly, the crisis of Arthurian kingship resembles to a striking degree the crisis of feudal values and institutions...Arthurian sovereignty has all of the earmarks of early Capetian monarchy”(Bloch 292). While Bloch is most certainly correct that Arthurian literature represent an allegory to the floundering feudal structure, I disagree with him that the human foibles and follies presented in Arthurian literature are somehow less relevant than the governmental allegories. The spread of Arthurian literature through Western Europe cannot be solely accounted for as a common frustration with inefficient politics, especially considering the diverse political grounds these stories took root in. Rather, the fictional trials, successes, and ultimately the failures of King Arthur and his people are themes that are constantly recycled and adopted. Arthur, more than any other of the Nine Worthies, is a king whose humanity is always at the forefront of his story. The tragedy of inevitable failure, despite inherent goodness, is a human tragedy and one that has struck a chord in human consciousness across a nearly a millennia.

Each of the following chapters—with the exception of the concluding chapter, which will focus on Malory—will analyze French, Welsh, English, and Germanic works. I begin my discussion of each chapter with an analysis of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, which was written c. 1136 in Latin. I then move on to the French poet Chrétien de Troyes (who wrote later in the twelfth century), as Chrétien’s influence can be felt in most (if not all) of the works which came after. Relatedly, a note must be made about the *Mabinogion*; the earliest

manuscripts of this Welsh work date to the twelfth-century, but the stories themselves existed in Welsh tradition for much longer than this. In fact, we likely have Welsh bards and writers to thank for preserving the dubious history of King Arthur for the centuries between the time he might have lived and when he was adopted about whom to write in Latin and Old French. The *Mabinogion* is one of those works which was influenced by Chrétien, as some stories—which will not be discussed in this thesis—are influenced directly by the plots and characters Chrétien introduces. Some stories, however, like *How Culwch Won Olwen* and *Rhoanbwy's Dream* are from a much older Arthurian tradition and are distinct from the French works. The Germanic works written by Wolfram von Eschenbach and Hartmann von Aue are taken directly from Chrétien, but these writers introduce their own significant themes as well. The following chapters are organized into themes which I believe engaged the medieval psyche and helped to perpetuate the telling of Arthur's story through different cultural lenses.

When working with medieval texts, there are always some difficulties which one must be aware of. One of these difficulties is in the language; I have worked entirely with translated works throughout this thesis, which can result in a modern audience's misunderstanding of medieval authorial intent. Loomis, in *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes*, dedicates a chapter to the factors which affect the transference of stories, and which in turn make investigating the appearance and origin of certain plot points and themes difficult. These include: the oral tradition of the works, unrevealed plots known by medieval audiences but not modern ones, stories entirely independent of one another, survival of a more archaic story in a later text, conflation, modernization, misinterpretation, and the fusion/fission of characters

(Loomis 38-54). While most later works borrow heavily from Chrétien, each provides an opportunity for insight into the culture of the author. Some works—notably, *The Mabinogion* as compiled by Lady Guest—are compilations of stories written in different time periods, some of which precede Chrétien’s work by several hundred years, but for which we have manuscripts dating approximately in the 12th century. These works were not excluded from outside influence, which we can see in the appearance of Chrétien’s characters in works like *The Mabinogion*. In order to keep from monotony, I have chosen to discuss only those works which either denote strong cultural bias or which clearly demonstrate the driving force of Arthurian literature: the common humanity that is portrayed by Arthur and his knights.

I

Arthur, Fellowship, and Fraternity

One of the tenets of Arthurian society—the ideal society as outlined by Geoffrey of Monmouth—is the idea of the Round Table. This idea was founded on the concept of fellowship and egalitarianism among peers under their king, the most honorable and worthy among them, Arthur. The concept of fellowship, however, is somewhat difficult to describe. The knights discussed in this chapter certainly found this to be the case. Fellowship, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, can mean “membership of a society,” and “a community of interest” (OED “Fellowship”). While Arthur and his knights certainly were a part of society, the OED’s definition of fellowship falls short of the sentiment encapsulated in the idealization of the Round Table. The knights and their king made up a fraternal order, in which chivalric behavior would—ideally—be the guiding force. The Oxford English Dictionary turns to Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* in its definition of fraternity, “Therfor was the round table founden and the Chyualry hath ben at alle tymes soo by the fraternyte whiche was there that they might not be ouercomen” (OED “Fraternity”). Clearly, there is an element of chivalry and bounded togetherness to defend against the less worthy societies. Arthur’s knights, therefore, were not merely individual vassals to a king but soldiers with responsibilities to the best court imaginable.

The mounted soldier—the knight—is one of the most characteristic figures featured in the literature of the Middle Ages. Much of the literature surrounding King Arthur and his kingdom follows the adventures of Arthur and, to a greater extent, his knights. The portrayal of knights in medieval literature correlates with the rise of the knight as societal, as well as a military, figures. In the centuries preceding the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, whose interpretation of Arthurian literature would establish the canon, governmental politics of much of Western Europe became a game of individual players as more power was held by local land owners. The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw a greater disparity of class divisions as the rise of vassalage in Western Europe created an interdependent class system in which protection was sold for labor. This time period also saw the rise of the knight as a figure in society. Ideals beyond the realm of military engagement became attached to knight. Knighthood and nobility were not necessarily the same thing—though economic realities certainly tied the two together²—the knight represented a powerful figure bound by a higher cause than land ownership. Such a figure was attractive for conveying messages of morality, and so the concept of knighthood, according to Southern, “responded to every wind that blew: without ever becoming religious it enjoyed the sanction and colour of a religious setting; it obtained a place in the philosophy of political and social life; it inspired a great literature and was swept into a romantic movement wholly alien to its

² The price of arms and horses, along with the training to make the horseman an effective soldier, was expensive enough to generally limit knighthood to the upper-class.

origins” (Southern 111). Connected to the idea of knighthood was the concept of chivalry—a term that is attached to knighthood but which is complicated by the many ideas which it encompasses.

Chivalry, though originally referring to the military horseman, often encompassed a complex set of behaviors ideal knights were to exhibit. As explained by Ashe and Lacy, chivalry

referred also to the moral and military code of the knight, whom medieval manuals of chivalry exhorted to love and serve God, king, and companions in arms; to pursue justice, to protect the poor and the weak; to fell from pride; to remain clean in flesh and pure in spirit (Ashe and Lacy 70).

This definition, as provided by Ashe and Lacy, demonstrates the many layers of expectation placed upon knights. One who was chivalrous would have had to navigate their responsibility to God, king, companions, and lovers. This difficult task could not possibly have been managed—or even attempted—by all of knights through history, but the knight as a figure became idealized along with the societies they represented. Southern analyzes the Arthurian literature of the twelfth century against *The Song of Roland* (written between 1040 and 1115), writing, “in the knights of Arthur, as in those of Charlemagne, there is a great sense of a common objective, but it is a wholly ideal objective, at once quite universal and quite individual” (Southern 244). While knights in reality may not have held true to these standards, the knights situated within the fictive ideal world of Arthurian literature certainly would be expected to.

King Arthur rarely was the recipient of direct criticism from twelfth-century writers, but the failures of his knights became a condemnation of Arthur’s ruling

ability. While early works feature Arthur as a campaigning warlike king, his later passivity would increase the popularity and importance of the adventures of his knights. The drama surrounding these knights does not come from their conflict with forces from outside of Arthur's kingdom but from the knights' inner conflict with their personal desires and chivalric fellowship. In the Arthurian world, fellowship—loyalty and goodwill towards one's fellow knights and king—is particularly important, as the knights of the Round Table have the ability to work independently of their king while still representing him and his court. Fellowship within the Arthurian Cycle proves problematic because individual knights' goals and responsibilities almost constantly come into conflict with their chivalric duty, which causes the ideal king Arthur to be weakened, and the court to fall apart. In attempting to appeal to their audiences, each of the works and authors discussed below handle the disparity between responsibilities in a different manner as they try to reconcile the presentation of an ideal society with the views and needs of their audiences. Many of the works discussed draw upon the writings of Chrétien de Troyes; when analyzing these works, I will only discuss those areas which are relevant and distinct from Chrétien's work.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* is a unique work in the Arthurian literary canon because it is meant to be read as a historical document. Geoffrey's purpose is to depict a certain image of Britain, which makes his work inherently more political than a fictitious romance. Like the texts found in the

Mabinogion, Geoffrey's *History* primarily concerns itself with Arthur's doing, but the importance of the knights who serve Arthur is evident to readers. Because so much of the focus of *The History of the Kings of Britain* is on Arthur's campaigns, it is best to focus on where the fellowship fell apart. Mordred, Arthur's nephew in this work, is entrusted with the care of Britain while Arthur is campaigning on the continent, and Mordred seizes upon this opportunity to make a grab at power. Mordred's behavior is not only treasonous in and of itself, but he also involves others in it as he asks them to swear fealty to him.

Geoffrey writes Mordred's betrayal as a sudden, unexpected event. At the end of successful campaign in France, Arthur prepares to move to conquer Rome. He is cut short, however, when he receives word "that his nephew Mordred, in whose care he had left Britian, had placed the crown upon his own head...As soon as the bad news of this flagrant crime had reached his ears, Arthur immediately...set off for Britain, accompanied only by the island kings and their troops" (Geoffrey 257- 258). Mordred is described as a "treacherous tyrant," the "most infamous traitor," and later as "the Perjurer" (Geoffrey 257-258). According to Ashe and Lacy, Mordred's reputation as a traitor is owing to Geoffrey. Geoffrey characterizes Mordred as Arthur's nephew and the traitor who sets in motion the events that would end Arthur's reign (Ashe and Lacy 337). Mordred's betrayal of Arthur is not merely a personal betrayal, but it constitutes a large-scale betrayal which throws the entire island into chaos.

The way in which Mordred usurps Arthur's power not only breaks the ties of fellowship and fraternity between royal uncle and nephew, but also usurps the entire institution in Britain. Robert Hanning states that the character of Mordred is meant to serve a national, rather than a human, purpose within the context of story (Hanning 154). Mordred gathers together a host of enemies which are an insult to Arthur's rule. He sends a leader of the Saxons to Germany to call up an army of "pagans" in exchange for land in Britain that had formerly been owned by Saxons, and "Chelric pledged his obedience to the traitor Mordred as if to the King" (Geoffrey 258). Additionally, Mordred invites Scots, Picts, Irish, "and anyone else whom he knew to have hatred for his uncle. In all, the insurgents were about eighty thousand in number, some of them pagan and some Christians" (Geoffrey 258). Mordred's actions are meant not only to take power away from his king and lord, but he grants power to peoples who were traditionally enemies of the British state. Worse, this treachery comes at a time when Britain is enjoying the "high point" in its history: Arthur, the good king, has established peace and prosperity, has beaten back enemies from the borders (something that Britain has historically struggled with), and mounted an imperialistic campaign expected to benefit Britain greatly. It seems baffling that Mordred, who already enjoys special privilege such that he is able to rule Britain in his uncle's stead and who no doubt would profit from the continual campaigns, would throw Britain into chaos such as this. We must remember, however, that Geoffrey is writing *The History of the Kings of Britain* as a "historical" work and intended to show why Britain fell as an ideal of kingship. Even though the much of the work came

from Geoffrey's imagination, there must be a historical reason as to why the prosperity of Arthur and his knights did not continue indefinitely. Hanning writes,

the "meaning" of British history for Geoffrey...is simply that Britain, like other nations, rises, flourishes, and falls. The human-political desire for freedom motivates the nation at greater moments in her history...within the limits of Britain, recurrent dramas of human greatness and of the clash between personal and national interests plays themselves out before our eyes (Hanning 171).

Geoffrey's Arthurian Britain was prosperous, but also dependent on the loyalty between lord and subject. By breaking the ties fellowship between himself and his uncles, Mordred defies the social contract of feudalism in favor of personal goals, to the inevitable detriment of Britain.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*—while an unreliable historical source—provides us with a crucial perspective on how the breaking of ties between the ruler and the ruled can end an age of prosperity. Mordred's betrayal is twofold: he betrays his uncle, Arthur, and the fellowship that is supposed to exist between them, and he betrays Britain itself. All of this is, in Geoffrey's mind, the inevitable historical conclusion to even the best of states. Geoffrey's pessimism regarding Arthur would carry on to other works and would influence those works which feature the end of Arthur's rule in Britain.

The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes

Writing in twelfth-century France, Chrétien de Troyes was aware of the fractiousness of French feudalism. While Chrétien was writing his romances in Champagne and Flanders—two areas subservient to the Capetian crown but historically resistant to their rule—he must have been influenced by his patrons,

aristocratic vassals attempting to assert their autonomy under a king. Howard Bloch describes the world that Chrétien must have witnessed:

The difficulty of succession among the early Capetians, the necessity of renewing charters, contracts and laws with each change of office or reign, the conflicts due to overlapping obligations to enemy lords, the usurpations behind the back of absent seigneurs and monarchs all point to the precariousness of subjective ties of dependence as opposed to more enduring institutionalized relations between men (Bloch 296).

The Capetians' inability to demand and consolidate power among themselves and trusted individuals empowered disloyal subjects to pursue their own political ambitions without check. In writing about Arthur's ideal court, Chrétien presents knights and a king with very human flaws. Just as a typical *seigneur* would have to work within the public sphere while nursing his own personal goals and desires, Chrétien designs challenges for Arthur's knights. The outcome is often very pessimistic, for although these characters are a part of a noble court, they are often lacking in some significant way to be more of a liability than a help to Arthur's court. Arthur is often portrayed as weak and alone. Chrétien attributes the weakness and the strengths of this ideal king to the appropriate (or inappropriate) behaviors of those of his court.

Chrétien de Troyes essentially prescribed certain roles to the knights of his invention. In the twelfth century, the individual-centered hero—as opposed to heroes that followed rigid codes of conduct, like Roland—became hugely popular, and Chrétien, in telling his romances through the perspective of each individual knight, contributes to the rise of the individual (Cazelles 22). By placing the audience's sympathy with whichever knight is the focus of the story at that time, Chrétien creates the means through which all personal goals seem valid, despite the behavior of the

knight himself. Though each author that followed Chrétien chose to present the knights in their own way, something from Chrétien's ancestral texts usually remained. Erec has to learn how to balance private and public life, Perceval must become spiritually worthy of Arthur's court, and Lancelot, infamously, breaks his bond with his lord by falling in love with his queen. These plot points are incredibly important, as they shape how the knights engage with their fraternal and lord/vassal obligations.

Erec and Enide

Chrétien models the story of *Erec and Enide* after a knight, Erec, who is unable to manage his private relationship with his wife, and his public obligations to his fellows and Arthur's court. Erec's irresponsibility is problematic because a vassal who acts in his own self-interest is not useful to Arthur, but a vassal who is aware of his obligations and able to meet them is an invaluable ally to the king. Erec grows into his chivalric maturity to become an appropriate member of King Arthur's court and a king in his own right. Erec's youth and immaturity makes him an ineffective knight, so he must go on a journey in order to learn how to better manage the demands chivalry makes of him. Erec is a unique knight because his problem—while fairly common in the world of Arthurian literature—is one that is not always so easily solved, yet Erec is able to complete the challenges set before him with relative ease and is rewarded with his coronation at the end of his story. I will further explore the relationship between Erec and Enide in a later chapter. For this chapter, I would like to look at Erec's relationship with the rest of his community in relation to his chivalric

maturity. The evolution of this maturity is best observed in the first and last portions of Erec's story.

Erec's first action in Chrétien's *Erec and Enide* is to ride with Queen Guinevere and her maiden, rather than to take part in Arthur's hunt for a white stag. This hunt was likely instigated by Arthur to encourage manly bonding between his knights via recreational hunting. Rather than engaging in this opportunity for bonding with his fellow-knights, Erec chooses to accompany women—the Queen and a maiden—in watching the hunt. This is a strange choice for a young knight, especially as he had not yet had the chance to prove himself to members of the court through a tournament. As the Queen, the maiden, and Erec travel separately from the hunt, they see a group—a knight, a dwarf, and a lady. Chrétien has Erec approaching an unknown knight and his retinue only after the queen's maiden approaches and is attacked. Erec himself is then struck, and is unable to defend his own honor, as he has left his arms elsewhere (*Erec and Enide* 4). It is rare for a knight in a romance to be found without his weapons and armor, and Erec seems to put himself at a disadvantage by traveling without them. In order to regain his honor, Erec must defeat the other knight in battle. He follows the knight to a town in which a competition for a sparrowhawk is being held. To engage the knight in battle, Erec needs to defend the reputation and beauty of a woman, and comes upon the beautiful Enide. Erec wins this competition, thereby proving his worth, and is able to bring Enide back to Arthur's court, where they are married.

After the wedding night, Erec is wholly enraptured with his wife. The drama of Erec's story stems from giving himself wholly over to his wife, rather than maintaining a balance between his familial duties and his responsibilities as a knight and lord. He allows his obligations to fellowship and fraternity to fall by the wayside. Chrétien gives a description of Erec as a problematic leader:

Erec was so deeply in love with [Enide] that he no longer took any interest in arms or attended tournaments: he no longer cared to joust, but spent his time playing the lover to his wife...He very seldom went far from her; but never on that account did he give his knights less in the way of arms, dress or money. There was nowhere any tournament to which he did not send them richly equipped and accoutered (*Erec and Enide* 32-33).

As seen in this passage, Erec does not entirely disregard his knights. He makes sure they are clothed and armed as befits their station, but the knights are unsatisfied with this. Erec's physical absence cannot be made up for by the equipment he provides. The crux of the problem is then presented: Erec is not well-equipped to deal with the competing demands of knighthood and being a husband. Erec's deficiency is seen even more clearly in his response to Enide informing him of this problem. Immediately, Erec makes preparations to leave his castle. Rather than calling together a group of companions to travel with—and prove himself in front of—Erec chooses to have Enide accompany him on his journey. This decision represents not only Erec's breaking from the unity of his peers, but also Erec's inability to manage his household reliably. In his succeeding adventures, as he treats Enide harshly, Erec continues to demonstrate that he cannot juggle the demands of both knighthood and being a husband. He snaps at his wife for disobeying his orders, although she only does so to his benefit and gives her difficult jobs better suited to a stable boy.

During their journey, the traveling couple comes across King Arthur's party in the forest. Despite the knights and the king himself conspiring to meet with Erec and invite him back into their circle, Erec takes great pains to avoid them, and leaves Arthur alone in the woods (*Erec and Enide* 53-57). Constantly, Erec makes the decision to travel alone, despite the clear welcome and respect of the other knights. This self-imposed exile is characteristic of an Arthurian knight, and indicative that Erec has some maturing left to do. Southern likens the questing knights to English and Irish missionaries of the seventh and eighth centuries who searched for spiritual enlightenment separated from society. Southern emphasizes the "removal from friends and homeland, rather than a search for a search for new experiences and adventures," as the most important thing about a traveling figure (Southern 222). Erec, by cutting Enide and himself off from society, either consciously or unconsciously sets up a goal for his quest: he must learn how to be a good knight—a lord and protector—while in the presence of his lady. This goal becomes important as Erec and Enide face increasingly dangerous adversaries, and must survive together.

The danger that Erec faces, and the multiple calls to heroism are important in his development as a knight. The incident between Count Oringles, however, is the moment Erec is able to reconcile his love of Enide with his knightly duties. Count Oringles, who is otherwise a virtuous man, loses his sense of propriety when he is overcome with lust for Enide. Rather than defending himself, or attacking for the sake of honor, Erec must free his wife from Count Oringles. After he slays Oringles, he forgives his wife her "trespasses" and takes on the husband role again (*Erec and Enide* 69). This incident better prepares Erec for when conflict between his love and duty come into conflict once more. In a later scene, Erec will be able to help and instruct

another knight, Mabograin, on the proper way to balance one's life. The fact that Erec is able to do this indicates that he is ready to rejoin Arthur's court as a worthy and appropriate vassal.

Although Erec is a young man, he clearly holds an important place within King Arthur's court. Arthur appreciates Erec's value, and encourages Erec to stay by his side. Chrétien's states, "Before all the good knights, Gawain should come first, Erec the son of Lac second, and Lancelot of the Lake third." (*Erec and Enide* 23).

Relatively early in his story—that is, when he is still developing in his chivalric code—Erec is placed among two of the great knights of Arthurian romance. Within both stories, King Arthur and Guinevere go to great lengths to assure Erec's happiness and presence in their court. The attempts of both the king and queen to gain Erec's favor, and to have him remain in the court with them, may stem from political necessity. Readers are aware of Erec's position as the son of king Lac. Enide, in winning Erec's heart, "won much honour, joy, and dignity" and her relations do not worry about her future (*Erec and Enide* 18). As heir to a kingdom, Erec can promote his new father-in-law to a high station within his kingdom (*Erec and Enide* 25). Although he may sometimes find himself without appropriate arms, Erec's political and monetary resources cannot be doubted. These resources make him an important member of Arthur's court.

Arthur is not entirely a strong figure in this story. Upon returning to the court, Erec finds that Arthur "had been bled privately" (*Erec and Enide* 85). Clearly, King Arthur is sick, and in addition to this, he has only five hundred of his knights with him at court. It is possible that Arthur's earlier extensions of good will and care came because the king had the foresight to know that he would need Erec later. According

to Adler, “In handling the situation with so much savoir faire, the king is not prompted by courteousness only. He needs men like Erec. Ironically, towards the end, the king is shown, lonely and neglected, with not more than five hundred knights around him.” (Adler 920). The figure of the mere five hundred knights becomes more significant in consideration of Erec’s wedding. In Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide*, Erec’s coronation brings thousands of people to the court of King Arthur, many of them kings, dukes, or counts (91). Even if these people did not intend to stay at the court of King Arthur (which is likely), Arthur no doubt benefitted from this. During the coronation ceremony, “King Arthur had dubbed four hundred knights and more, all sons of counts and kings. To each of them he gave three horses and two pairs of robes to enhance the appearance of his court” (*Erec and Enide* 88). These four hundred were then indebted to the king and invested in his success. Thus, Arthur benefitted from Erec’s coronation in his court, which came at his insistence (*Erec and Enide* 86). Arthur’s appreciation of Erec goes farther, as Chrétien writes, “The king had two thrones of gleaming ivory...both so alike in height, breadth, and decoration that, however you might scrutinize them to tell one from the other, you would never be able to find anything in one that was not in the other” (*Erec and Enide* 88-89). Arthur is willing to expend considerable resources to help Erec and to bolster his image as knight and lord. This makes Erec one of the few knight written about by Chrétien to have completed his quest and become a valuable member of Arthur’s court.

Perceval: The Story of the Holy Grail

Perceval is an important knight to study, not only for his connection with the Holy Grail, but for the unique way in which Perceval is made to juggle the ambiguities

of court society. Chrétien's character Perceval is complicated and problematic for several reasons, the least of which being that he is an unintentionally comic figure for a knight in medieval literature. Despite this, medieval audiences enjoyed the entertaining Perceval, and though Chrétien was unable to finish the story, the missing ending provided a unique opportunity for medieval writers to provide their own conclusions in several continuations. These continuations usually contained attempts to moderate the sometimes ridiculous Perceval in order to make him worthy of Arthur's court. Chrétien's unfinished Perceval, however, was unlikely to ever become the typical Arthurian knight, as his much of his characterization does not lend itself to either vassalage or fellowship.

In the first half of *Perceval*, Chrétien creates an unlikely hero in the figure of Perceval, a young man estranged from courtly society. Chrétien begins the story, "Sow little and you reap little. And whoever wishes to have something to harvest should scatter his seed in a place where God will increase it for him a hundredfold; for in worthless ground good seed dries up and fails" (*Perceval* 374). These lines are apt and ominous foreshadowing to Perceval's future, as in the unfinished work, Perceval begins and remains an inappropriate candidate for Arthur's court. Not only is Perceval ignorant of chivalric behaviors, but even his lineage suggests that he would not belong among Arthur's knights.

From the moment that Perceval appears, he acts almost comically inappropriately. In the words of Brigitte Cazelles, "the essential quality of the protagonist in chivalric romance appears to be his capacity to confront, understand,

and control the world that surrounds him” (Cazelles 22). Knights like Gawain often are able to avoid trouble simply by understanding a situation and controlling it by using temperate language. Perceval is originally unable to understand or control the world around him as with child-like naivety he reacts without thinking and is often unwilling to defer to the judgment of others. The earliest example of this occurs when Perceval encounters knights from Arthur’s court for the first time. He continuously questions them about their weapons rather than listening to the knights, who are on an urgent quest. Perceval’s nature is revealed in this scene; he is more impressed by the superficial aspects of knighthood (the weapons and armor of the knights) than the chivalric aspects (the quest to rescue abducted women). After this encounter, Perceval becomes fixated on becoming a knight, but the self-serving nature of this desire is illustrated by his silencing of his own mother, who wishes to inform Perceval of the dangers of knighthood. Ann McCullough demonstrates that by silencing his mother, Perceval chooses to ignore painful realities of knighthood, remaining willfully and selfishly ignorant (McCullough 56). Perceval leaves his home no better prepared than before.

Determined to be made a knight by Arthur, Perceval travels to his castle at Carlisle. Along the way, he meets a charcoal-burner, who imparts some very important information to Perceval about King Arthur by saying, “the King of the Isles was defeated, which made King Arthur happy; and he’s sad on account of his companions, who dispersed to go and stay in the castles they found most attractive” (*Perceval* 385). Through the charcoal-burner, Perceval and the audience becomes aware of the fact

that Arthur is in trouble—as he was in *Erec and Enide*—because his knights are not present in court with him. Had Perceval the temperament to listen to the charcoal-burner, he might have gained some valuable information, but instead Perceval, who “would not have given a penny for the charcoal-burner’s information,” simply moves on (*Perceval* 385). Chrétien, by writing this line, draws attention to the fact that this information was worth something—the implication is that the information was worth at least a penny—yet Perceval cares nothing for it, as it does not suit his immediate goals. When Perceval goes to Arthur’s court, Arthur reveals his anxiety about his wife’s “suicidal mood,” yet Perceval is unable to show even the basest level of compassion before demanding that Arthur make him a knight and stipulating further that Arthur “be quick about it, and then I’ll leave!” (*Perceval* 387). Perceval’s treatment of King Arthur is reminiscent of his treatment of the lowly charcoal-burner, again revealing Perceval’s ignorance about society and appropriate courtly behavior. Further, given the charcoal-burner’s earlier warning, Perceval’s statement is precisely what Arthur would not want or need from a knight. Despite Perceval’s outlandish conduct, Arthur becomes angry with his seneschal Kay for mocking Perceval. Arthur chastises Kay, “Although the youth is naïve...He can still turn out a worthy vassal” (*Perceval* 387). Arthur’s statement indicates that he is willing to accept Perceval as a vassal, should he be instructed properly. The education that Perceval pursues comes into direct conflict with Perceval’s ancestry and would contribute to his eventual failure.

Perceval is of Welsh ancestry. One of the knights from Arthur's court that the young Perceval first meets in the forest states, "the Welsh are by nature more stupid than grazing beasts; and this one is just like a beast" (*Perceval* 377). This statement indicates some Arthurian prejudice against Welsh society. Perceval leaves his home, "equipped in the Welsh manner and fashion...He wanted to take his javelins with him, but his mother had two of them taken away, because he would have looked too much like a Welshman" (*Perceval* 382). Perceval could know nothing about the divisions between Arthur's court and his Welsh ancestry, but it is likely that his mother does, as she takes these steps to remove part of his outfit to protect his reputation while at court. Perceval arrives in Arthur's court in noticeable clothing and he is immediately recognized as a Welshman. Perceval's behavior initially seems to confirm the idea that the Welsh are *gallois*: rude, rough, and peasant-like. Despite his apparent coarseness, Perceval is able to solve the problem that the Red Knight poses to Arthur's court (Pickens 114). According to Cazelles, the fact that none of Arthur's knights would answer the challenge set forth by the Red Knight—indeed, the fact that there was a challenge made at all—indicates that Arthur's reign as king is not as secure as his reputation would lead one to believe (Cazelles 57-58). This instability might explain why Arthur seems ready to admit an outsider to his court.

Later, in a comical scene, Perceval refuses to abandon the clothing he had taken from his mother's house, and puts the Red Knight's armor on over his clothes. The red armor is important in two respects. First, the red armor is a symbol of the Red Knight's chivalric status; Cei mocks Perceval's desire for the armor because Perceval

does not appear experienced enough to warrant the armor. By placing the red armor over his mother's clothes, Perceval is literally (but unknowingly) placing a symbol of Arthurian knighthood over the clothes of his homeland. Secondly, Perceval becomes known as the Red Knight until the time he gains knowledge of his own name.

Perceval's identity, therefore, becomes intimately entwined with Arthur's court before Perceval is aware of the repercussions of altering his identity. As Perceval's journey would progress, he would abandon his Welsh clothing to take on a more Arthurian identity, which would culminate in his name finally being revealed to the audience after leaving the Grail Castle. Chrétien withholds Perceval's name until he gains the armor to demonstrate that Perceval's search for an identity through Arthurian knighthood is complete. Ironically, Perceval's Arthurian education is what would lead to his failure.

Perceval is instructed by Gornemant of Gohort in the ways of chivalry. One of the most important things he is warned against is "speaking too freely" (*Perceval* 396). Much depends upon Perceval acting correctly in the situation at the Fisher King's court. For the second time in the story, a king must rely on the help of an extremely young knight. Perceval, however, is given an impossible task within the context of the story. He is instructed by a knight whom he trusts to not ask too many questions. Perceval follows the directions of his better, and because of these instructions, he fails in his spiritual duty to ask questions. McCullough writes, "Perceval commits a sin, the sin of silence, because he is afraid of committing a sin" (McCullough 54). Perceval was unencumbered by this fear before his instruction from

Gornemant, without which he might have been successful. Pickens identifies Chrétien's Grail castle as having its roots in "anti-Arthurian Wales," (Pickens 115). Harkening back to the opening scene the story, Perceval constantly asks questions about anything that catches his eye. While this was perceived as rude and exasperating for the knights, Perceval's natural curiosity never limited him from asking questions and, in this scene, getting answers. Perceval's failure, then, is read as an Arthurian failure.

Perceval's desire to become a knight is what causes him take Gornemant's instructions. Arthurian society would not have otherwise been able to accept a knight who acts as foolishly and disrespectfully as Perceval does when he first comes to Arthur's castle at Carlisle. When Perceval's chivalric education causes him to fail, then, it is not merely Perceval failing a task. Ashe and Lacy write,

it is precisely when [Perceval] follows the rules of Arthurian chivalry that he falls into error and sin. The implication is inescapable: this romance constitutes an indictment of Arthurian chivalry, not only as it had come to be practiced at court but perhaps in its theoretical conception as well (Ashe and Lacy 72)

Chrétien places Arthurian society and the Grail society in opposition to each other. Perceval has two different and opposing sets of expectations placed on him at the Grail Castle. These expectations set Perceval up to fail from the start, which constitutes the locus of Chrétien's drama. Cazelles states, "The significance of Chrétien's introduction of the Grail material within the context of traditional Arthurian material consists in exposing—without solving—the unstable elements constitutive of knightly society" (Cazelles 29). Like many of the task before Arthurian knights, the

task given is meant to force the knight to juggle a part of his life which is separate from the court, and chivalric expectations. Perceval's failure is not a personal one, then, but an exposure of the problematic expectations of Arthur's court.

Despite Perceval's failure, he does gain the knowledge of his own name when he leaves the Grail Castle. The sudden realization of his identity of "Perceval the Welshman" after having failed his duty to the Grail Castle suggests that Perceval, while spiritually unworthy, had come into his chivalric identity (though this, too, was still not perfected). Though Chrétien de Troyes never finished *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, several authors sought to finish the work in the next century, with most focusing on the redemption of Perceval. Yet, Perceval's uniquely uncouth boyishness made him popular with medieval audiences. There were several continuations and adaptations beyond those discussed above. Despite his popularity as a character, however, in the *Vulgate Cycle*, Perceval would be by Galahad as the Grail hero. According to Pauline Matarasso, Perceval was most likely set aside because his naivety and improper manners, "were not consistent with [the author's] conception of the Grail hero" (Matarasso 16). Perceval would be replaced in the story of the Grail in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* with the more successful Galahad as the main searcher for the Grail because Arthurian literature at that time required, "a higher conception of chivalry and thus to a superior order of knights" (Lacy and Ashe 103). Chrétien's Perceval, while entertaining, was irreconcilable in the medieval imagination with Arthur's superior knights.

The Knight of the Cart

Lancelot is one of the most popular characters of Arthurian literature, whose tragic story invented by Chrétien de Troyes would carry him from the late twelfth-century into modern literature. Lancelot likely had a “Welsh prototype”, but this early version likely had little bearing on Chrétien de Troyes’s creation (Loomis 188-190). In Chrétien’s *The Knight of the Cart*, the infamous love affair between Lancelot and Queen Guinevere is revealed, and sets into motion the events which would eventually lead to the ruination of Arthur’s court and kingdom. Yet the tragedy of the story is that there is no malice meant by Lancelot or Guinevere in the affair. Rather, the Arthurian code of chivalry was not equipped for complications between love and honor. This story became so popular; it was repeated over and over again, and included in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*.³

Before Chrétien had dedicated a story to Lancelot, it was clear that he meant for Lancelot to be an important knight in his personal canon of Arthurian literature. In Chrétien’s earlier work, *Erec and Enide*, Lancelot is named as the third most important knight, after Gawain and Erec himself (*Erec and Enide* 23). In *The Knight of the Cart*, the antagonist Melegant comes into Arthur’s court and says to him, “I hold in captivity knights, ladies, and maidens from your land and your household. However, I give you this news of them not because I intend to return them to you: on the contrary, I wish to tell and inform you that you lack the strength and resources to be able to get them back.” (*The Knight of the Cart* 185). This is a similar challenge issued by the Red Knight in Chrétien’s *Perceval*, in which he makes off with Arthur’s cup as a symbol

³ The only work which deviates from the pattern Chrétien developed was Ulrich von Zatzhoven’s *Lanzelet*, in which a bigamist Lanzelet goes through a series of adventures and marriages before happily retiring to Arthur’s court. I have chosen not to include an analysis of Lanzelet in this chapter, as I do not feel it contributed greatly to the development of Arthurian romance.

of his ability to take things from the king. There is nothing symbolic about Melegant's actions, however, as he is not only able to walk into Arthur's court and defame him, the villainous knight holds people of Arthur's lands in captivity, and the Queen herself would become a hostage. Sears places particular importance on the inaction of the court in the face of Melegant's taunt, "not one of the 'many barons' that the narrator has placed in the hall responds to Melegant's taunt, while Lancelot is absent, Gawain unmentioned, and Arthur apparently incapable of taking action" (Sears 45).

Melegant's claim that Arthur lacks the ability to reclaim his missing people is then effectively proven, as Arthur is disinclined to act until Guinevere herself is kidnapped.

Lancelot proves to be an energetic and competent knight during the search for Guinevere, which makes him appear to be a great fellow of Arthur's court. Not only does he ride two horses to death in his frenzy to find the Queen, but he also single-handedly defeats any enemies that he comes across along the way. Additionally, later in the story, Lancelot demonstrates an ability to calmly control situations through eloquence. When it seems that people would riot with each other for the honor of having Lancelot stay the night in their homes, he is able to come up with a speech so that he "subdues and calms them all" (*The Knight of the Cart* 218). Unlike Erec and Perceval, Lancelot appears to be able to manage situations with the best parts of chivalry. In fact, the only situation in which Lancelot acts less than worthy is in the interaction with the dwarf and the cart, which would shape important events later on in the story. Having worn out his second horse, Lancelot is forced to take up the humiliating position of riding on a cart driven by a dwarf. By hesitating for a moment, Lancelot nearly spoils his entire journey. The ride in the cart will haunt Lancelot for

much of the story, as he often meets with people who treat him as if he is not a worthy knight, but a criminal instead.

When Lancelot finally is able to battle Melegant, it is clear that he could best the other knight if he wanted to and was not distracted by Guinevere. Yet, on Queen Guinevere's order, Lancelot begins to lose the battle. The reasons why Guinevere might have ordered Lancelot to stop fighting will be discussed in another chapter, but the reason Lancelot obeys immediately is quite clear, "One who loves is very obedient; and gladly and with alacrity, if he is the perfect lover, he does whatever might please his beloved" (*The Knight of the Cart* 235). Lancelot's love, then, is clearly causing problems for his chivalric virtue even before the audience is given explicit evidence that the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is adulterous. Many of Arthur's people were held hostage by Melegant, yet rather than avenge Arthur, Lancelot surrenders the battle. Although Lancelot is able to prove himself as "the perfect lover," his behavior is problematic for a knight, as this very act is treasonous and causes him to act inappropriately for a knight.

The story makes clear that Lancelot is driven on the quest for Guinevere by love, which complicates his chivalric identity. Throughout the quest, Lancelot is able to act appropriately in every regard, except when Guinevere is signaled. Spying a procession with Guinevere in it from a window, he "wanted to let himself fall and drop to the ground below; and he was already half-way out when my lord Gawain saw him" (*The Knight of the Cart* 192). When he finds her comb, Lancelot faints from excitement and must be helped by the woman he is traveling with to stay up in his saddle (*The Knight of the Cart* 204). Only the signs of Guinevere can make Lancelot act so ironically irresponsible while on his journey; by putting himself in such danger,

he limits the likelihood that he will be able to rescue the Queen. Lancelot's poor decision-making is further exemplified in the careless way he conducts the affair with the queen. Not only does he go to her room in a foreign land, but neither he nor she is very careful in hiding the evidence. This carelessness puts not only Lancelot and Guinevere in danger, but the injured Kay as well. Lancelot loses his ability to carefully control a situation because of his love.

After further adventures, Lancelot finally is able to return to Arthur's court to fight with Melegant one last time. This fight ends in Melegant's death, "The king and everyone there display the great joy they feel" and Lancelot is borne away on their shoulders (*The Knight of the Cart* 280). This anti-climactic ending, which was finished for Chrétien by Godefroi de Leigni, results in no resolution to the problem that Lancelot represents.

Summation

The romances of Chrétien de Troyes are incredibly important because they set up the knights with the personalities and the flaws that will be carried with them into many of the future works. All of the knights have defects which make them less effective knights for Arthur's court than they should be, and if their flaws are not in their personalities (as is the case with Lancelot), then the flaws lie in their actions. Quests are meant to alter their situation, but this only rarely happens. Robert Hanning notes the clash between personal and national desires in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, attributing inevitable failure to human desire and willful misconduct. Chrétien, by focusing on a single knight in each story, is able to add to the human element of national failure.

The Mabinogion

As stated before, *The Mabinogion* is a composite work that contains several Arthurian stories. This section will examine the story *How Culhwch Won Olwen*, as the relationships between lord and vassal are complicated by other social obligations. The short story *How Culhwch Won Olwen* is an interesting work because the story itself predates the works of Chrétien de Troyes, but the earliest manuscript that we have is from the fourteenth century. Ashe and Lacy write that *How Culhwch Won Olwen* might have been the “earliest fully developed Arthurian story in Welsh,” and might have been developed in its current form in the eleventh century. During this time, the Normans who had been so successful in the century prior in England had just begun to experience success in Wales, and the Welsh culture was not quick to be put down. The work retains much of the Celtic mythology in the form of giants, witches, and special talismans. Along with featuring a much more active Arthur, the story also demonstrates a very giving relationship between Arthur and his nephew and subject, Culhwch. This relationship is unique, as Culhwch is able to demand things of an unusually lively King Arthur, upon whom the success of the mission rests.

A great part of this story revolves around the obligations that the men have to each other. Culhwch is a character who must go on a quest to marry a giant’s daughter, Olwen. The danger of the quest necessitates that Culhwch go to Arthur’s court to ask for help. Rather than coming to Arthur’s court as merely a guest, Culhwch comes to the court as a relation of Arthur. At the same time, he is a subordinate of Arthur and must ask for help on this quest. When Culhwch, asks Arthur for his assistance, invokes the names of many of Arthur’s fellows—even the servants—at his

court. (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 184-189). Many of the people named are given titles or small explanations of special powers and abilities that they have. It is obvious to the audience that Arthur is not suffering any lack of fellows as he does in Chrétien's romances. Arthur agrees to help Culhwch. First, Arthur sends knights out into the world to find the giant and his daughter, but is unsuccessful. This is the point in which Arthur becomes more involved in a quest than most other works. Two desires motivate the story; Culhwch wishes to find Olwen, and once he has involved Arthur in the quest, Arthur, according to Piquemal, "becomes at once helper, in that he helps Culhwch to find Olwen, and protagonist (and beneficiary) since his duty—and satisfaction of desire—is to fulfill the boon" (Piquemal 16). When Arthur's men return empty-handed after a year of searching, Culhwch says to Arthur, "I am still without. I will leave and take your honor with me" (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 189). To protect his honor and prove himself a good lord, Arthur sends six of his best knights with Culhwch to search for Olwen before eventually becoming involved in the quest himself.

Culhwch and the company find Olwen and her father, Ysbaddaden Bencawr, who gives them a long list of nearly-impossible tasks. The tasks would only be achieved by the eventual intervention of Arthur, who takes the quest in hand and is physically involved in the questing. Arthur's involvement is not entirely his own idea; Piquemal illustrates that the structure of the tale has Arthur beginning as a passive ruler in the court. Through a series of events he is gradually obligated to join his warriors in the field, until their success is dependent on his physical presence (Piquemal 9). Bencawr tells the party that he is giving them these task because he thinks that they are impossible to achieve, but to each task, Culhwch replies, "It is

easy for me to get that, though you may think it's not easy" (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 195-200) Culhwch clearly states that he intends to have Arthur get these things for him. In one year, Culhwch and his companions manage to complete only a small portion of the tasks assigned to them. They return Arthur's court, and are dependent on his counsel, influence, and eventual physical involvement to complete the quest. Arthur is obligated to help not only because of the kinship he shares with Culhwch—which likely would have obligated him anyway—but because a failure would mean that he would have broken the promise he had given Culhwch earlier in the story. With Arthur leading them, the knights collect all of the necessary items that Bencawr asked for. Piquemal writes, "Arthur has helped Culhwch to win Olwen, but this was only possible because Culhwch put his fate and trust in the hands of Arthur, his king, and submitted to his rule" (Piquemal 22). Culhwch, essentially, exists as the primary hero, but much of the story is focused on Arthur's heroic deeds.

The fellowship that exists between Arthur and Culhwch is two-fold: they are related, and Culhwch is dependent on Arthur. Unlike Chrétien's romances, Arthur is not a king who is in desperate need of knights at his court, but he is a king whose assistance is required. *How Culhwch Won Olwen* is fascinating because it presents a unique look into the privileges of fellowship between a lord and subject.

Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*

Hartmann von Aue was one of the first—if not the first—Germanic writers of Arthurian literature. Hartmann's *Erec* is based on Chrétien's poem *Erec and Enide*, but according to Ashe and Lacy that he was working off of another work with Welsh origins (Ashe and Lacy 98). Hartmann does not necessarily change the plot of the

story in his poem, but rather offers some additional details which alter a few key scenes. Ashe and Lacy write that the Germanic authors like Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach were writing in response to Chrétien's romances (Ashe and Lacy 97). Hartmann's changes are relatively small, however, and he continues the theme of Erec growing into his chivalric maturity.

One of the most noticeable changes occurs in the beginning of the story, when Erec is riding with Guinevere and her maiden and they spot the strangers. Rather than waiting for the maiden to take action, Erec offers to approach the knight himself, and does not need to be requested to do so. Although Hartmann presented Erec in this scene as acting more appropriately and in accordance with the rules of chivalry, Hartmann emphasized Erec's youth and inexperience far more than Chrétien. For example, just before the tournament following Erec's marriage (this tournament would serve as a means by which Erec would establish himself as a worthy member of Arthur's court), Hartmann described Erec's anxiety surrounding the event:

Since Erec had never taken part in a tournament, he considered at length how he could attend in a manner befitting his rank. It often occurred to him that the reputation which a young man gets in his first years as a knight may easily remain with him for life, and he feared long-lasting disdain. He was therefore quite concerned about how to make a good impression (Hartmann 55-56).

Erec demonstrates clear anxiety about proving himself in front of his fellow knights. Starting in this tournament is important because it is the way in which Erec will be able to build a reputation for himself. This anxiety comes into direct contrast with Erec's attitude shortly after he celebrates his wedding night with his wife.

In both Chrétien's and Hartmann's stories, Erec become wholly enraptured with his wife. Hartmann, however, takes pains to present Erec's behavior as less

acceptable. Whereas Chrétien merely mentions Erec's absence annoying the knights he ruled over, Hartmann describes Erec's court and character falling, "[Erec] had become quite worthless: this was his repute. A change had taken place in Erec so that his former fame has become shame and everyone spoke scornfully of him. His court was joyless and fell into decay" (Hartmann 64). Erec, who had been so concerned about his reputation up until this point, abandons his goals to be a knight of great repute in favor of spending all day and night with Enite. Further, the effect of uncourtly behavior reflects strongly in Hartmann's work. As in Chrétien's work, Erec richly outfits those knights who are in his service, and their annoyance grows despite this. The situation deteriorates so quickly that knights "who before had led a merry life there now became very bored and left" (Hartmann 64). We know that knights abandoning their lords is incredibly problematic, and Erec's loss of his knights signals a weakening of those feudal ties that were so important. Realizing that his court is in trouble, and that his efficacy as a knight and lord was coming into question, Erec embarks on his quest to become more mature in his chivalry.

Erec is able to mature as his quest intends and becomes a better knight for his experiences. Just as is true in Chrétien's work, Hartmann uses the screen with Mabonagrain to mark Erec's growth as a knight. Erec is able to demonstrate his newfound wisdom to Mabonagrain in the following speech:

Although it is delightful here and although nothing makes the heart so light as when two lovers like you and your wife are together, still one really should withdraw from women at times...I am really surprised that such a handsome knight as you could remain here, for it is very nice to be with other people (Hartmann 138).

Erec is able to remind Mabonagrain that though the love he holds is good, it is important to attend to others who require this noble man's attention. Erec is likely

emphasizing the importance of fraternity with other knights by encouraging Mabonagrain to withdraw from women and by stating “it is very nice to be with other people.” Clearly, Erec has matured to a suitable point to rejoin the masculine world and manage his private and public duties effectively.

Erec, in the stories of both Chrétien and Hartmann, offers us a look at a young knight, new to Arthur’s court that must learn how to practically work with the chivalric code. While Erec is not a perfect knight, he is able to understand his faults, and journeys to correct them. This ability not only makes Erec worthy of his coronation, but also of his seat at the Round Table. In this way, Erec is a unique creation of Chrétien, as not all knights are able to attain happy endings.

Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival

Wolfram von Eschenbach was a Bavarian former soldier who wrote an adaption, *Parzival*, of Chrétien’s *Perceval* in the early thirteenth century. This adaption contains two books which tell the history of Parzival’s parents before he is born and Eschenbach, unlike Chrétien, was able to finish his work (Ashe and Lacy 98-99). While *Parzival* differs in many ways from Chrétien’s conception of the story, there are two aspects which concern this chapter: Parzival’s character development, and the interaction between the Grail and Arthurian societies.

Like Hartmann von Aue, Eschenbach sought to give Parzival background on otherwise unexplained parts of Chrétien’s story. Parzival’s familial history is explored in detail at the beginning of the story. Something that is immediately apparent is that Parzival is not Welsh, as he had been before, but from the French province of Anjou (Eschenbach 17). Though the knights Parzival encounters in his home call him

“Waleis,” Eschenbach takes a moment to remark, “The Waleis, I must tell you, share the same distinction as we Bavarians, but are even denser than Bavarian folk... Whoever is born in either land will blossom into a prodigy of tact and courtesy!” (Eschenbach 72). Parzival is referred to as Waleis throughout Eschenbach’s story, though his actual ancestry is more complicated than this. Eschenbach does not make Parzival into an overly-comical figure, preferring to present him as simply naive. One layer of the identity Chrétien built for Perceval is consequently removed. The knights he meets in the woods also remark upon the nobility of his appearance several time during their visit in Parzival’s forest (Eschenbach 73-74). When Parzival makes up his mind to go to Arthur’s court, his mother dresses him “regular fool’s clothes” so that he would be mocked at the court in an attempt to make him come home (Eschenbach 75). Yet the clothing does little, if anything to take away from Parzival’s appearance, as all within Arthur’s court marvel at his good looks (Eschenbach 84-85). Additionally, Parzival comes into Arthur’s court having gained his name from a cousin he had met during his travels, and introduces himself as the son of a queen (Eschenbach 81, 85). Thus, Parzival has a strong sense of identity before the offer to join Arthur’s court it ever made.

The Grail society of *Parzival* exists alongside that of the world of chivalry. According to Ashe and Lacy, “Wolfram conceives of the Grail realms as superior to that of worldly chivalry, but they are not separate and mutually exclusive realms” (Ashe and Lacy 99). The Grail Castle, then, is not a purely spiritual society, but Like Chrétien’s Perceval, Parzival is advised by his mentor not to ask many questions (Eschenbach 96). Again, Parzival does not ask the questions at the Grail Castle (Eschenbach 127). Parzival, though made aware of his mistake by his cousin Sigune,

returns to Arthur's court and is offered a seat at the Round Table. Cunneware de Lalant, however, arrives and speaks harshly to King Arthur,

Now that Perfidy has joined it, the Table Round has been destroyed!
King Arthur, you once stood high above your peers for glory, but your
ascendant fame now plunges down! Your prestige, which used to go by
leaps and bounds, *hobbles* at the rear! Your praises are declining from
their zenith! Your high name stand revealed at counterfeit!

The mighty reputation of the Table Round has been maimed by the
presence at it of Lord Parzival, who moreover wears the insignia of
kighthood (Eschenbach 164).

This is an important passage, as it differs greatly from the scene depicted in *Perceval*. Chrétien had a loathly lady accuse Perceval of his wrong-doing and failures before the court, whereas Wolfram von Eschebach uses Cunneware to criticize King Arthur's decision to have Perceval as a member of the Round Table. By targeting King Arthur, Eschenbach specifically calls Arthur's judgment and legitimacy into question. It falls to Parzival, then, to not only to restore his own honor, but also to atone for the wrong he had done to King Arthur. Will Hasty frames Parzival as "not an individual desperately seeking the proper personal relationship to God, but the representative figure of knighthood, a scale-model messiah fulfilling functions dictated by the secular interests of a developing court society" (Hasty 355). Parzival's participation in courtly life as a fully-functioning knight is important to the legitimacy of the court as a whole.

Thus, Parzival's journey becomes much more like that of Erec's, in which he must come into his chivalric maturity in order to do his duties for his lord more efficiently. Parzival's position is more precarious, however, as he is destined to inherit the Grail castle, and thus his duties are both secular and spiritual. In Wolfram's work, Parzival wanders for five years searching for the Grail, but is unable to find it. His inability is because of his spiritual imperfections, which he only able to overcome

while staying with a priest, Trevrizent, who instructs him the ways of the Grail castle. Parzival then knows he must ask the question—what ails the Grail King—and returns to become king of the Grail castle. Just as in Chrétien’s story, Parzival must be instructed by someone else. In Wolfram’s *Parzival*, however, Trevrizent instructs Parzival in the way the Grail society functions, rather than how the chivalric world functions. This is an important distinction, as Parzival would become king of the Grail castle, a spiritual society.

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle

The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*⁴ is a group of romances—five, though few manuscripts preserve all five—which tie together the most popular elements of Arthurian romances (the Round Table, the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, the Grail quest, and Mordred’s eventual betrayal). The work was so popular, it was translated in German, Dutch, Welsh, and Spanish, and would continue to influence writers—notably Thomas Malory—into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Ashe and Lacy 86-87). Ashe and Lacy remain unconvinced that the entire work was written by a single author—as am I—because of the complex web of interwoven quests (Ashe and Lacy 84). The presentation of the Grail Quest and the “Death of Arthur” section of the *Lancelot-Grail* are particularly problematic, as each section seems to have different goals. The Quest for the Grail section deals mostly with the inferiority of

⁴ This work is called the Prose Lancelot or Vulgate Cycle. The translation that I use is titled “The Lancelot-Grail Reader,” so I will refer to this work as “The Lancelot-Grail” throughout the thesis.

other knights, and superiority of Galahad. The *Lancelot-Grail* presents some of the most problematic aspects of the fellowship which exists between Arthur and his knights. Norris J Lacy, in the introduction to *The Lancelot-Grail Reader*, writes that

Arthur is far from enthusiastic about the quest; instead, he is angry and depressed about the prospect, for he immediately understand that, although the quest may unite his knight in a common purpose, that purpose does not—except negatively—involve Camelot or the Round Table society itself. Indeed, as Arthur realizes, the Grail both draws knights away from his court, and, owing to the dangers inherent in the quest, ensures that many of them will not return (*The Lancelot-Grail* ix).

The dangers of the quest increasingly become less about the chivalric world itself, but how these characters handle their chivalry. The Lacy uses the term “celestial chivalry” to describe “both a religious ideal and an extraordinarily rigorous moral standard” (*The Lancelot-Grail* ix). In their turn, each of the familiar knights are found morally unworthy of attaining the Grail until a new knight, Galahad, is able to attain the Grail. The final part of the *Lancelot-Grail*, “The Death of King Arthur” shows a Round Table in complete disorder, as both king and knights turn on each other.

Wolfram von Eschenbach styled his work, *Parzival*, off of Chrétien’s plot. As Arthurian literature progressed, however, Perceval became something of an awkward figure in Arthurian literature, which would cause him to be replaced in the history of the Grail cycle. Neither perfectly chivalrous nor spiritual enough for the writers of the *Lancelot-Grail*, he would be replaced with one of the most important figures of Arthurian literature, Galahad. Combes points out that the *Lancelot-Grail* seems unsure at the beginning whether the Grail Hero will be either Perceval or Galahad (Combes 7). This “internal contradiction,” according to Combes, might have been purposeful (Combes 8). The *Lancelot-Grail* essentially throws away the tradition of twelfth-

century romances—in which Perceval grows into becoming the Grail Hero after trials and learning—to introduce a new character, Galahad, whose inherent goodness makes him the *only* quester who *can* achieve the grail.

Galahad has the potential to be helpful to Arthur’s court in that he “was the one destined to put an end to the adventures of the Holy Grail” (*The Lancelot-Grail* 311). These adventures had caused discord in the kingdom of Logres for a long time. Galahad is spiritually important and the most pure out of all the knights (so much so that he is allowed to ascend to Heaven when his job is done). His contribution to the fellowship of the Round Table, however, is not great. He was meant to lead the knights upon completion of Grail Quest, but he never returns from the Grail Quest. Galahad is a difficult character to empathize with; while his goodness makes him an admirable character, he is almost inhuman in his worthiness. This is perhaps why following his death, the story immediately returns to Arthur’s imperfect kingdom.

Although the adventures associated with the Grail pose danger for the kingdom of Logres, it is clear that the Grail is not problematic in itself. Just before the quest, the Grail appears and feeds the court with a feast of all the foods anyone can imagine, and Arthur is identified as the happiest of all the celebrating knights, “because Our Lord had rewarded him more generously than any previous king” (*The Lancelot-Grail* 315). The real destruction of Arthur’s court comes from the behavior of Arthur’s knights, most notably Lancelot. Though the Lancelot-Grail Cycle—which is also called the Prose Lancelot—departs from some of the traditions associated with the Arthurian legend by replacing Perceval with Galahad and having him successfully complete the Grail Quest, the tradition of Lancelot and Guinevere’s adulterous relationship continues. In fact, the *Lancelot-Grail* expands on the details of Lancelot

and Guinevere's relationship. By doing this, the author(s) of the *Lancelot-Grail* make Lancelot's behavior even more of a betrayal of Arthur.

Much of the *Lancelot-Grail* focuses on the indiscretions of Lancelot and Guinevere, but the behavior Lancelot exhibits at the beginning and end of the story are the most important in determining his relationship to the fellowship. Lancelot's behavior early on represents a departure from fellowship. When it has just been determined that Lancelot is in fact a worthy knight, he waits to be knighted. Sir Yvain notices that Lancelot has not yet been girded with a sword, and tells him that he ought to remain behind so that the king can properly make him a knight. Lancelot asks Yvain to wait for him as he retrieves his sword for the occasion, but does not return, for "the young man had no wish to come back, for his aim was to be knighted not by the king but by a certain other person, who he believed would benefit him more" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 105). The other person is clearly Guinevere, but why he would choose the queen over the king unless he was already enamored with her is unclear. Longely states that Lancelot does this because he "deems [her] more worthy of the task" (Longely 52). Regardless, Lancelot in this passage is deceptive and evasive of his fellow-knights, rejecting their masculine company for that of the Queen.

This is not to say that Lancelot's actions do not benefit Arthur's chivalric court; Lancelot's actions are usually beneficial to Arthur, and he proves himself to be a good knight when it comes to physical engagements with enemies. For example, when Arthur and his knights are in an uncertain conflict with the knight Galehaut, Lancelot enters the fray and—through physical prowess and courtly tact—is able to convince Galehaut to submit to Arthur. As the other knight rejoices, however, Lancelot is brought before the Queen and he tells her that his action were not for Arthur, but for

the Queen. He tells her that he has loved her from the moment that she has called him “my friend” (*The Lancelot-Grail* 116). This scene quickly turns problematic, as Galehaut endeavors to become an advocate for Lancelot, saying, “I ask that you give him you love, and that you take him as your knight forevermore, and become his loyal lady for all the days of your life” (*The Lancelot-Grail* 118). Guinevere assents and boldly kisses Lancelot, and Galehaut becomes a witness to their new relationship. This is problematic because Lancelot just won Galehaut’s loyalty for Arthur; Galehaut’s submission was to Arthur as his liege-lord. With this action, we can see the a corrupted relationship begin to take root as a knight’s personal endeavors trump the loyalty he is supposed to show to his king.

Lancelot’s indiscretion with Guinevere is additionally problematic for the strife it incites between other members of the Round Table. In the “Death of King Arthur” section of the *Lancelot-Grail*, following his failure on the Grail Quest, Lancelot

had renounced Queen Guenevere, as the story has told earlier. Yet when he returned to court, not a month passed before he was so enamored and inflamed as he had ever been before, so that he again lapsed into sin with the queen just as he had done formerly. But whereas he had previously indulged his sinful passion so prudently and so discreetly that no one knew of it, now he behaved so foolishly that it became apparent to Sir Gawain’s brother Agravain (*The Lancelot-Grail* 367).

There are multiple breaks of fellowship here. Obviously, Lancelot no longer care to comport himself in a manner which would protect everyone from scrutiny. Second, we are told that Agravain never liked Lancelot and looked for reasons for him to behave incorrectly (*The Lancelot-Grail* 367). While it is a reality, the fellowship does not always translate into friendship between members of the Round Table, the common cause—Arthur and Logres—which bind the knights together should be enough to

overcome personal difficulties between the knights. This is not the case between Lancelot and Agravain, who seeks to harm a fellow-knight without thinking about the consequences for the whole community.

The most important show of fellowship between the knights of the Round Table is their willingness to remain silent on the matter of Lancelot and the Queen's affair to the king. Agravain seems to be the only knight of Arthur's court who is overly-excited about the prospect of revealing the truth to Arthur. One day while Agravain, Gawain, and their brothers are discussing the matter, Agravain purposely speaks louder to gain Arthur's attention. As Arthur comes to join their conversation, Gawain protests twice, saying "Agravain is unusually bothersome, and you have no need to know what it concerns, for it would be of no use to you or anyone else" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 371-372). Gawain, Arthur's most trusted and experienced knight, is attempting to protect his king and country against evil information, knowing that there is no good that can come of it. Of course, Arthur finds out the truth through Agravain, and the ensuing war between Lancelot's army and Arthur's in Gaul leaves many of Logres's best knights dead. This leaves Arthur when Mordred eventually betrays him.

Mordred's bid for power is simply that; it is not indicated that he holds any malice for Arthur, but that he wants the position that Arthur held. In planning his attack, he plans to avoid as much damage being done to the land as possible (*The Lancelot-Grail* 385). Protecting land, which is a source of wealth, is important for a usurper like Mordred. He, like Lancelot, involves others in his betrayal. His strategy was to win "over to his side all the noblemen who held land from King Arthur, and he kept them with him for a long time...everyone brought more [wealth] and gave it to him; they thought that a good investment, considering his generosity" (*The Lancelot-*

Grail 385). Without much coercion from Mordred, the nobility—presented here as greedy—willingly betrayed their king. Ashe and Lacy state that Mordred’s betrayal “is simply the final, inevitable step in a long sequence of events set in motion by the love of Lancelot and Guinevere” (Ashe and Lacy 86). Thus, the weakening of Arthur’s court, starting with personal issues between two knights and sexual indiscretion, became an unmanageable, consuming situation in which loyalty was for sale and the kingdom perished.

The knights of Arthur’s court fail in many ways to honor the bonds of fellowship in *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. Galahad, the most perfect of the knights, is ultimately unhelpful in keeping the kingdom from destruction, except for removing the threat of the Grail Quest. The qualities that made Lancelot an unfit knight for the Grail Quest were never fully resolved. Perhaps the greatest crime that any knight committed was in undermining Arthur’s authority by causing factions to form between those who followed him.

Conclusion

At the time Chrétien de Troyes and other writers were composing romances surrounding Arthur, the idea of a king as a strong authority figure was something of the past. The rather egalitarian Arthur’s court, in which his knights are free to pursue their own interests represents a world where the fellowship between a king and his knights goes wrong because the chivalric code they are operating under does not provide for the complications of human error. Arthur’s court is meant to represent an ideal chivalric community. Yet, Arthur’s legitimacy as a ruler depends on the effectiveness of his knights. Even the knights of the Round Table were largely

unable to manage the many competing demands of chivalry, as it, according to Ashe and Lacy, “promoted an ideal of moral and sexual purity so rigorous as to disqualify all knights except Galahad” (Ashe and Lacy 70). Arthur’s dependence on his knights and the fellowship they were meant to provide him and each other eventually weakened his court.

Arthur, Women, and Courtly Love

In addition to fellowship and fraternity, one of the most important aspects of Arthurian literature is the consistent presence of women. Maureen Fries notes the general “worsening” of women’s conditions from the late twelfth century that continued into the fifteenth century, which increasingly put women—both real and fictional—into rigid, puritanical roles (“Gender and the Grail” 68). Fries, however, does not take into consideration the treatment of women in literature from earlier in the twelfth century. Southern compares the presentation of women as literature shifted from the epic genre to the romance and finds that women in an earlier work, *The Song of Roland*, are not treated with much dignity or respect at all. Southern points out that in this work, women are only spoken of, “in the crude way of camp” and are generally given less thought than the lands that the heroes own (Southern 242). Romantic literature (and particularly Arthurian literature), however, never allows for this type of behavior from its heroic characters. The ideals of courtly love do not allow for male knights to behave in any way but courteously—even under difficult conditions.

The term “courtly love” was coined in the nineteenth century to describe the type of behaviors associated with the romances of twelfth-century authors. Interpreting what this type of love entails, however, can be difficult for modern scholars. Georges Duby chose to present the concept of courtly love and knightly culture as “based on the exaltation of profane love, masculine desire, and the pleasure afforded by women” (qtd. in “Gender and the Grail” 68). Duby clearly is referring to that destructive love

which caused the characters unending heartache and political turmoil. Ashe and Lacy, however, present courtly love as, “an ideal and a code of love...A complex phenomenon, courtly love includes the adoration of the lady, the desire to serve her devotedly, and the notion that such service ennoble the lover” (Ashe and Lacy 71). The concept of ennobling oneself through love is clearly what the ideal is, as knights who find themselves in such a situation are usually successful and happy, whereas the knights who do not are obligated to resolve this issue. Preferably, a knight would seek out a lover whose worthiness matches his own, and their love would be a reciprocal one. C.S. Lewis provides an apt description, “only the courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous” (qtd. in Classen 7). In this way, courtly love and courtly society were brought together, as—it was hoped—love would encourage courteous behavior, and courteous behavior would instill love and devotion in people of both sexes.

The devotedness of the knight to his female lover, however, can be problematic for the Arthurian world. The love that tears the knight away from his duties, and which causes a knight to break the fraternal bonds of fellowship between himself, other knights, and his king is dangerous. The rules of courtly love are ideal, and—much like Arthurian masculine society—do not account for real-life situations. When characters fall into the type of love that causes problems for Arthurian society, courtly love provides no rules to handle the situation. Albrecht Classen, in the introduction to the *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, notes how, “medieval women often held their own, and the allegedly weak sex proved to be surprisingly strong, not only because of their economic, political, religious, and sometimes even military might, but particularly

because they knew how to control language and utilize communicative tools to their best advantage” (Classen 20). Women pose a unique threat to the Arthurian world: they are a part of the ideal society, and through their interactions with men can hold incredibly important and influential positions within the society, but this influence can be as harmful as it is helpful.

The portrayal of women in medieval Arthurian texts is greatly varied. Within this chapter, I will turn to Guinevere time and again, as she is one of the most varied characters of Arthurian legends, and appears in more of the texts than any other female character. The various ways in which Guinevere and other women are portrayed in these texts demonstrates not only cultural bias, but also a progression of the courtly love theme in Arthurian literature. Chrétien de Troyes’s works sometimes presented courtly love in a playful or mocking way, but many of the women he portrays—with a few exceptions—are portrayed with dignity and respect. This is not necessarily the case with all of the Arthurian writings, particularly the Germanic works. Included in this chapter is a discussion of both a work and a character that does not appear in other chapters of this thesis. The first is Marie de France’s *Lanval*, which—in addition to being the only work discussed actually written by a woman—is a story moved forward by the actions of women. This work is important to this chapter, as it depicts Arthurian women in positions of power that they do not usually occupy. Maureen Fries identifies the roles in which Arthurian women can exist in a narrow context: the male-supportive and passive heroine, or the powerful, unmarried (and often sexual) counter-hero (“The Decline of Morgan le Fay” 3). While this binary is not necessarily always represented—the women of Chrétien de Troyes in particular exist outside of this binary—the heroine and the villainess were two prominent tropes in medieval

literature. It should be noted that each Arthurian writer had their own motivations in writing Arthurian literature, and the portrayal of women was sometimes incidental, rather than integral.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* is a unique work in the Arthurian literary canon because it is meant to be read as a historical document. Geoffrey's purpose is to depict a certain image of Britain, which makes his work inherently more political than a fictitious romance. Much of the text is concerned with battles and the inheritance of the throne. In the chapters preceding Arthur's rule, Geoffrey writes about four ruling queens: Guendoloena, Cordelia, Marcia, and Helena. Tatlock writes, "each of the four is distinguished in the diversified line of monarch by goodness or capacity or both" (Tatlock 702). The appropriateness of these ruling queens, according to Tatlock, was likely an attempt by Geoffrey to create a precedent for the rule of Empress Matilda (Tatlock 702). While describing the rule of Arthur, however, Geoffrey allows women to take a secondary role in favor of more political material. In discussing Arthur's rule—which Geoffrey idealizes as a time of plenty, though not necessarily of peace—Geoffrey connects the treatment of these women with Arthur's ideal court. The women are important, therefore, because they are able to influence the knights around them and not because of their individual character traits. Both Arthur and Uther have relationships with their wives which are ultimately allegorical with their stability of their power.

Before Arthur becomes the great king that Geoffrey portrays him to be, Uther Pendragon's less-illustrious reign is discussed. Uther becomes enamored with the

married Ygerna (this character is named Ingraine or Ignere elsewhere) and proceeds along a series of bad behaviors which would ultimately result in the birth of Arthur. Ygerna's watchful husband, Gorlois, notices the flirtation between Ygerna and Uther, and seeks to put distance between himself and the king. Ygerna is described as "the most beautiful woman in Britain," and this beauty—which is the only characteristic of value ascribed to her—causes political discord. Uther risks (and succeeds in) annoying an ally by flirting with his wife in public. Gorlois chances war with Uther rather than risking losing his wife, and sends Ygerna to the castle Tintagel, as "he was more worried about his wife than himself" (Geoffrey 205). The behavior of both of these men denotes a passionate fervor, but also civic irresponsibility.

Both Uther and Gorlois value Ygerna. Uther, with help from Merlin, is able to slip away to Tintagel and engage in a sexual relationship with her disguised as Gorlois. There are obvious moral problems with Uther's conduct, which Geoffrey acknowledges,

He had deceived her by the disguise which he had taken. He had deceived her, too, by the lying things that he said to her, thing which he planned with great skill. He said that he had come out secretly from his besieged encampment so that he might make sure that all was well with her, whom he loved so dearly, and with his castle, too. She naturally believe all that he said and refused him nothing that he asked (Geoffrey 207).

Scholars would have good reason to regard Uther as unworthy, lying, and deceitful. The extent of Uther's crime to medieval audiences can be exaggerated, however. At the very least, a modern audience would accuse Uther of being a rapist, as Uther and Ygerna's sexual relationship is based on false premises. Tolhurst informs us that medieval audiences might not have been so quick to blame Uther in this way. Rosemary Morris, in her article "Uther and Ignere: A Study in Uncourtly Love"

reminds us that the concept of “courtly love” had not yet been popularized in either Northern France or England (Morris 71). Additionally, Morris emphasizes the fact that Uther, as a king whose rule had been marked by treachery and warfare, had no opportunity to develop “the peacetime refinements which are to be gloriously fostered by his son” (Morris 72-73). Morris’s defense of Uther makes it easier to understand Uther’s love as out-of-control passion—the same type which the doctrine of courtly love does not advocate—and understand his love of Ygerna as genuine. While Uther and his behavior are not ideal, the society that Uther inherited and grew up in is not the same society which Geoffrey sets up to create through Arthur.

One of the ways that Geoffrey describes the improvements Arthur’s rule made to Britain is through the courtliness of the kingdom. This courtliness extends even to the women, as their involvement in court society becomes a marker of sophistication in *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey writes, “Indeed, by this time, Britain had reached such a standard of sophistication that it excelled all other kingdoms in its general affluence, the richness of its decorations, and the courteous behavior of its inhabitants” (Geoffrey 229). While this statement does not refer to women directly, it does not preclude them from the sophisticated society, either, by merely referring to knights or other forms of masculine society. Additionally, Geoffrey’s description of the sophistication of Arthur’s court is immediately followed by a description of the interactions between men and women at the court, “[The women] scorned to give their love to any man who had not proved himself three times in battle. In this way the womenfolk became chaste and more virtuous and for their love the knights were ever more daring” (Geoffrey 229). With this statement, the audience gets a sense of how

women might involve themselves a court. These women become judges in their own right, creating a standard that influences the behavior of the men.

Only when Arthur is firmly established as ruler of Britain does he marry, but Arthur's marriage to Guinevere—which appears to be a sensible and good choice—becomes problematic, and Guinevere's actions as queen would eventually lead to the downfall of both Arthur and Britain. Guinevere is not mentioned until precisely the time when Arthur is ready to marry, and when she does appear, it is almost out of thin air. Geoffrey writes,

Finally, when [Arthur] had restored the whole country to its earlier dignity, he himself married a woman called Guinevere. She was descended from a noble Roman family and had been brought up in the household of Duke Cadur. She was the most beautiful woman in the entire island" (Geoffrey 221)

This is the first time that the audience encounters Guinevere, and by writing her in this way, Geoffrey makes Arthur's choice in wife more political than anything else. While Guinevere's beauty—like Ygerna's—is important, her descent from a Roman family is stated first. Tolhurst writes, "the Romans provide the standard by which Geoffrey measures British civilization and power...and Arturus'⁵ marriage to his queen reunites the two bloodlines (British and Roman)" (Tolhurst 29-30). When Guinevere becomes involved in Mordred's betrayal, then, it is political too.

The extent of Guinevere's willing involvement in Mordred's betrayal is unclear, but Geoffrey makes it clear that her connection to it at all is objectionable. Geoffrey writes of Mordred's betrayal, "What is more, this treacherous tyrant was living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinevere, who had broken the

⁵ Arthur

vows of her earlier marriage” (Geoffrey 257). The language in this passage seems to indicate that Guinevere was complacent or even encouraging of this immoral behavior, and Geoffrey stiffly writes in comment, “About this particular matter, most noble Duke, Geoffrey of Monmouth prefers to say nothing” (Geoffrey 257). Clearly, Geoffrey is presenting the behavior of Guinevere and Mordred as distasteful. Yet, it is worth noting that Guinevere’s blame is implied rather than stated. During the conflict between Arthur and Mordred, Guinevere flees to a convent to become a nun. Some have taken her fleeing as a sign of her guilt; escaping the conflict for a religious life might ensure her safety. The way in which Geoffrey writes Guinevere’s fleeing, however, is, “the Perjuerer [Mordred] re-formed his army and so marched into Winchester on the following night. When this was announced to Queen Guinevere, she gave way to despair” (Geoffrey 259). This scene reads as though Guinevere was holding out hope that Mordred might not be successful. Tolhurst reads this scene as “consistent with her possible victimization” (Tolhurst 36). Geoffrey never states whether Guinevere was supportive of Mordred’s efforts, and her involvement might be overstated. Geoffrey does not typically endow his female subjects with special influential powers—beyond beauty and bloodlines—so it seems likely that Guinevere is merely a victim of circumstance. The circumstance is that she, in effect, belongs to Arthur. Her abduction and possible rape is meant to serve as an allegory on the state of Britain under Mordred’s rule, or a foreshadowing to what his rule would be like. Future works—Maureen Fries specifically mentions the Anglo-Norman *Brut* and *Alliterative Morte Arthur*, which would influence Malory—would call Guinevere treacherous, but place blame with Mordred (“Gender and the Grail” 69-70). This can be explained by a historical trend—in which women were increasingly subordinated to

male will—being reflected in literature, causing women to be seen, in the words of Fries, “as instruments rather than agents” (“Gender and the Grail” 70). Geoffrey rarely offers the audience insight into the inner workings of Guinevere’s mind, so it would seem that the thoughts and actions of Guinevere matter less than what Guinevere represents, placing her in the position of instrument rather than agent.

When presenting Arthurian women in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey of Monmouth presents them as valuable to the men that they are involved with. Where this value comes from—their beauty or real affection on the parts of Uther and Arthur—is not hugely important. Each woman is involved as an instrument of strife. In the case of Arthur, Guinevere’s status appears almost allegorical to the state of Britain; just as Mordred took control of Guinevere’s being, he took control of Britain. Neither woman is given a lot of attention as people, but this might be explained by Geoffrey’s intention with the work. *The History of the Kings of Britain* is meant to be read as a historical document, and contains none of the emotional elements that later romantic Arthurian literature would.

The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes

The influence of Chrétien de Troyes’s romances on nearly all Arthurian literature that came after them is undeniable. Chrétien’s characters were adopted and adapted for centuries. Chrétien’s women, though seldom as bad as some of those of his successors, challenged the heroine and counter-hero binary presented by Fries in their own ways. Chrétien’s female characters had agency, and their own (largely unspoken) code of conduct. Chrétien, writing in the mid-twelfth century, created

female characters whose direct involvement was a necessary component to the theme of courtly love.

The court of Chrétien's patroness, Marie de Champagne, to whom he refers in the opening of *The Knight of the Cart*, likely had some influence on his writing style. Although we have no evidence of Marie's direct and personal influence on Chrétien himself beyond his own statement, "my lady of Champagne wishes me to undertake the writing of a romance," the theme of courtly romance was obviously a popular one at the court of Champagne (*The Knight of the Cart* 185). Another writer, Andreas Capellanus, claimed Marie as his patroness as well. Andreas wrote a treatise on love, which itself has some Arthurian elements. According to translator P.G. Walsh, this treatise was to

daringly and humorously [discuss] in stylized play ideas of love and marriage which have no status in the real world of twelfth-century society, but which challenge and criticize the prevailing mores of sex and marriage imposed by feudal law and Christian precept (Andreas 6).

Walsh's description of Andreas's work is also an apt description of Chrétien's portrayal of courtly society. Andreas writes about passionate love, "love cannot keep control over its reins, but at once advances to action...the thoughts must be out of control" (Andreas 35). The crux of the conflict in all of Chrétien's romances is that the participants of love are unable to curb their behavior to fit with their worldly and religious responsibilities. This inability inevitably causes strife and ruin, which suggests that courtly society, does not provide reasonable guidelines for life, something that both Andreas and Chrétien seem to be well-aware of.

Erec and Enide

In the story *Erec and Enide*, Chrétien demonstrates a successful marriage-union between the titular characters. Erec and Enide—despite inauspicious beginnings—meet and marry in an appropriate way for a knight and his heroine-wife, in that Enide’s presence is helpful to Erec on his quest. As discussed previously, their marriage is problematic. Whereas some authors might have written Enide as a seductress and a distraction, Chrétien noticeably never refers to Enide in a disparaging way. It is clear that Enide is not to blame for Erec’s inadequacies and their marriage helps to further ennoble him. One cannot help but to compare Enide to the other two female characters of this story, Mabonagrain’s lover and Guinevere herself. Enide is truly faultless, and is essential to her husband’s ascent to chivalric maturity.

From their first meeting, Enide’s presence by Erec’s side is not only helpful to the young prince, but gives him legitimacy. When Erec is ready to confront the knight that had stuck him at the beginning of the story, he—according to the rules of the town he is in—requires a woman to defend as the most beautiful in town. Erec uses Enide for this purpose and, having fallen in love with her, decides to take her back to Arthur’s court in order to marry her. Enide’s presence at Arthur’s court is likewise helpful, as Arthur is in a problematic situation; having won the hunt for the white stag, it is now up to him to decide which lady is the most beautiful and bestow upon her a kiss. The entire court is poised for an uproar, as each man believes that his lady should be recognized as the most beautiful, and Arthur stands to lose good knights to either violence or insult. Erec, arriving with Enide dressed in rags, presents her to the court and she is unanimously found to be the most beautiful. Arthur bestows his kiss and crisis is averted. Erec promptly marries Enide, who had remained unnamed in the story up until this point, and is granted with the knowledge of her name (*Erec and*

Enide 27). The unnamed hero is a trope in Arthurian literature in which the name of the hero is not revealed until that character finds their way to Arthur's court or have otherwise served some greater purpose that their quest demands. By obscuring Enide's name until she has married Erec, Chrétien indicates that Enide's character has reached a position in her life in which her identity is no longer in question. Erec and Enide then return to Erec's court as prince and princess:

Never was a king seen with greater pleasure in his kingdom or more joyfully received, everybody striving to do him some service. Yet they showed even greater delight with Enide than with because of the great beauty they saw in her and still more for her open, noble character...she had her share of all the virtues any lady can possess, of generosity and of wisdom. Everybody loved her for her innate nobility; and whoever could do her some service derived pride and personal satisfaction from doing so" (*Erec and Enide* 32).

This quotation captures the intricate way in which husband and wife help each other. Everyone "striving to do [Erec] some service" is likely doing so because it is expected; he is a feudal lord (or will be, when his father dies) and has the responsibility of offering protection in exchange for the service of those within his kingdom. Enide, on the other hand, is a foreigner and new to the kingdom, yet the people derive pleasure from serving this woman who would one day be their queen.

Erec's behavior is not always courtly, and it is important that the text does not go to great lengths to defend him while keeping Enide a sympathetic character. Chrétien seems to be aware of the fact that this character behaves in ways that are not altogether worthy. For example, at one point during their journeys together, Erec sends Enide along the path ahead of him, which makes it seem as though she was journeying alone and put her in immediate danger so that he would be able to rescue her and prove his worthiness as a knight. Seeing a sneak attack, the audience is given a glance

at the inner workings of her mind, “what can I say? Now my lord will be killed or captured. God, shall I then be such a coward as not to dare tell him? I’ll never be so cowardly! I’ll tell him straight away!” (*Erec and Enide* 38). In this scene, Enide is shown to be both brave and loyal, despite her disobeying Erec’s commands, which is a forgivable offense. Rather than being grateful for her help, Erec is angry. He swears her to silence again, but once again they are on the verge of being attacked (this time Erec seeing the robbers before Enide). Enide holds back for a moment, thinking, “how shall I tell him? He’ll kill me! Then let him kill me! I’ll not hold back from telling him”⁶ (*Erec and Enide* 40). Again, Erec is angry with Enide for her intervention, saying, “This is a misdirected service, for I am not at all grateful to you—on the contrary you may be sure I hate you all the more for it” (*Erec and Enide* 40). Erec’s misdirection and angry outbursts are what cause Ashe and Lacy to identify him as a “deludedly cruel” character (*Ashe and Lacy* 304). A subtle but better indictment of Erec’s behavior comes in the form of a piece of equipment. In a scene in which an ally of Erec’s, Guivret the Small, gifts Enide with a palfrey, whose saddle-bows were decorated with the story of Aeneas and Dido. The language surrounding Aeneas serves as an indictment, “how in Carthage Dido joyfully received him into her bed, how Aeneas deceived her and she killed herself for him” (*Erec and Enide* 70). The language in the scene is signaling the audience to understand that men can be faulted, and can be unfair even to very good women. Erec must learn to be a better husband during his quest, along with coming into his chivalric maturity.

⁶ For future reference, Erec never threatens to kill Enide; he says that if she speaks out again, he will never forgive her.

The scene called “The Joy of the Court” features the last leg of Erec and Enide’s journey, when their union is stronger than ever and Erec’s chivalric maturity is no longer threatened by his wife’s presence. While before there was a danger of Erec falling so deeply in love with his wife that he would not be able to be effective in any other part of his life, he has learned at this point how to manage his private life as he is involved in chivalric duties. This lesson is important, because he is able to use his knowledge to help another knight, Mabonagrain, whose relationship with his lover is just the opposite. Mabonagrain is presented as a prisoner of his lady and the victim of making a rash promise (that is, promising to do something before knowing what the request is). Andreas Capellanus describes the same type of hasty promise, and references his patroness, “The Countess of Champagne...said that such a lady was too harsh in her command, for she was not ashamed to grind down by an unjust decision the man who had subjected himself utterly to her will” (Andreas 251). The Countess of Champagne, as patron, would be presented as the paragon of womanhood, so when Andreas presents her as a woman of both power and mercy, we can assume that a woman who would take advantage of her powerful position over a knight (as Mabonagrain’s lover does) was considered a negative figure by medieval audiences. Mabonagrain explains to Erec, “Who would deny his sweetheart anything? There is no lover who doesn’t completely carry out his mistress’s every desire without any omission or deception, so far as he’s at all able” (*Erec and Enide* 80). Not only does this statement reflect on of Andreas Capellanus’s rules on love, but shows how seriously Mabonagrain took the rules of courtly behavior. Unfortunately, these rules did not account for the reality of a woman taking advantage of a knight’s submission to her.

When Erec helps Mabonagrain get out of the agreement, everyone at court celebrates, with the exception of Mabongrain's lover, who grieves until Enide comes to her. It is revealed that the two women are cousins, and Enide is able to bring her out of her gloom. The entire court experiences a second wave of joy, this time brought by Enide. In these scenes, the audience is reminded of how well-matched Erec and Enide are; just as he is a mature knight able to engage in courtly conflict, she is able to wield her own, womanly influence for good.

Perceval: The Story of the Grail

Chrétien's *Perceval: The Story of the Grail* is a fascinating work because the women occupy roles outside of the role of lovers and wives. Perceval himself seems little interested in women, but much of his story is not focused on his courtly behavior towards women, but towards attaining the Grail to recover from his failure to ask the important question at the Grail Castle. It is perhaps significant to note that in this romance, Marie of Champagne is not Chrétien's patron, but the count of Flanders is. The lack of courtly love in this story might be attributed to a patron more interested in the growth of Perceval into a perfect knight. The importance of secondary characters is mostly as educators and quest-givers. Two female characters reflect Perceval's progression on his quest: his mother (and an educator) and the old woman who sends him out on his quest again. Both of these characters are able to affect the Perceval's quest.

In response to the death of her husband, Perceval's mother withdraws into her lands, leaving society completely and becoming wholly responsible for Perceval's upbringing. Her withdrawal from courtly is important because it constitutes her own rejection of courtly society and imposes isolation on Perceval. Perceval's mother

essentially fails in educating her son in the correct behavior of a man at court. Ann McCullough writes, “Perceval’s complete lack of social skills is a result of a strange education his mother gave him” (McCullough 48). Perceval’s ignorance cannot be blamed completely on his mother, however, as she attempts to educate him in the ways of chivalric society to keep him from being humiliated when he goes to Arthur’s court. She instructs him to act honorably towards ladies, to know the name of a companion on road, to keep company with worthy men, and to go church (*Perceval* 381). Although these instructions fall on deaf ears, what Perceval’s mother has to say is essentially good; Perceval is later instructed by a man, Gornemant, in the ways of chivalry, and he instructs him to do the same things. When Gornemant learns that there is an overlap in what he is teaching Perceval, and what Perceval learned from his mother, he instructs him, “never say that your mother has taught you something: just say I have But don’t think we blame you for having said it up to now; however in the future, if you please, I beg you to drop the habit; for if you went on saying that, people would think it foolish” (*Perceval* 396-397). Gornemant’s instructions are essentially taking away credit from Perceval’s mother for her instruction, ostensibly because her advice would be valued less than that of a man’s. Perceval’s mother fades away from the story, with the exception of a scene in which Perceval learns that his callous demeanor has essentially killed his mother. This leaves us with the image of his mother being a fragile creature, but it should not be forgotten that much of Perceval’s behavior was shaped by her instruction (though it must be acknowledged that he misinterprets much of what she says). In this way, Perceval’s mother is a lasting influence on his life.

Another woman is able to affect to projection of Perceval's life. Perceval returns to Arthur's court after his experience at the Grail Castle, but in the midst of celebrating, an ugly woman (called the Hideous Damsel by Cazelles, and here) appears in the court and upbraids Perceval. She tells him that he is wrong for having not asked the question at the Grail Castle, and tells him that he will be the undoing of the land (*Perceval* 436). The Hideous Damsel's indictment of Perceval is against "this reprehensible passivity at the Grail castle, indicating that his dereliction of chivalric duty consists of a failure to assume his knightly responsibilities" (Cazelles 34). The Hideous Damsel also addresses the court, telling them where to find other adventures. There is a flurry of activity as Gawain decides to go on a quest to save a damsel, and Perceval says "that as long as he lived he would spend two nights in a single lodging, or hear news of any adventurous passage without going by the way of it...until he discovered who was served from the grail" (*Perceval* 437). The Hideous Damsel is able to come into the court and bring Perceval to task for failing in a quest, a position which is usually filled by the king himself, as well as assign quests to other members of the court. In this way, the Hideous Damsel becomes a judge of worthiness of a knight, an incredibly important role for a society which depends on the reliability of its knights. While in future works, an ugly hag as a character might arouse suspicion on the part of the audience, this woman takes on the responsibility of setting the chivalric society—Perceval in particular—on the path to greatness.

Perceval's life, despite the best efforts of the chivalric world, is greatly shaped by the women in his life. His mother attempts to instruct him in the ways of chivalry, and though her method is flawed, and his interpretation is off, the teachings that Perceval absorbs from her shape his behavior until he is better inured in masculine

society. Additionally, it is a woman—in the form of the Hideous Damsel—who sends him out on his second quest which, presumably, would have culminated in Perceval achieving the Grail. These women do not occupy the usual roles of women in courtly literature, and this allows them to either accept or reject Arthur’s chivalric society, and encourage Perceval to do the same.

The Knight of the Cart

In *The Knight of the Cart*, Guinevere and Lancelot’s infamous affair is played out. Guinevere’s abduction by Melegant and Lancelot’s attempts to return her to safety drive the story. The actual adulterous night that Guinevere and Lancelot share is written about with less fanfare than one might expect from one of the most infamous affairs in literary history. Much of the story is portrayed as a typical knight rescuing a damsel. What is far more interesting is the power dynamic which exists between Guinevere and the men that lay claim to her. Guinevere is at once the victim of an attack on Arthur, and a queen exercising the—admittedly limited—powers she has available to her in a foreign place. The relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot occurs almost rationally, and the potential problems it might cause for Arthur’s court are not given as much attention as they are in future works.

For as inherently problematic as the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is, Lancelot’s love for Guinevere is presented in shockingly appropriate ways. When presented with a beautiful woman who would like to seduce him, Lancelot shows her no affection. Chrétien explains, “The knight has only one heart; and that no longer belongs to him, but is entrusted to someone else, so that he cannot lend it out elsewhere. . . . Love valued the heart of this man so highly that he held it more

than all others in his sway, affording him such great pride that I would not blame him at all if he rejects what Love forbids him and concentrates on his desires” (*Then Knight of the Cart* 201). This is nearly word-for-word an embodiment of Andreas Capellanus’s seventh rule of love, “Be obedient to mistress’ commands in all things, and always be eager to join the service of Love” (Andreas 117). In this way, Lancelot and Guinevere are enacting acceptable parts of a relationship.

Additionally, the relationship that Lancelot and Guinevere share appears to be mutually ennobling according to the ideals of courtly love. Guinevere’s gaze alone inspires Lancelot to become something of a berserker—he is able to single-handedly kill many knights in the story just to get to her. Additionally, Lancelot’s presence as Guinevere’s vassal gives more legitimacy to Guinevere’s precarious position. Sears describes Guinevere’s position, “She finds herself in a kingdom in which, but not of which she is queen...Elevated to a position of honor and power, Guinevere remain nonetheless a queen without anyone to rule. Once Lancelot arrives, however, everything changes: Lancelot is Guinevere’s kingdom” (Sears 50). Guinevere is ruler in a land in which many of her people are being held hostage, but none except Lancelot are able to actively perform feats at her command. Guinevere is a spectator as Lancelot jousts with Melegant. Yet this position does not confine Guinevere in to a space in which she merely observes; she actively directs the fight. What is more, Guinevere judges whether or not the fight was fought well. It is not enough that Lancelot apparently won his joust; he must perform in the correct way. Ashe and Lacy read the scene like this, “[Lancelot] has briefly placed in his concern for his honor and reputation before blind obedience to the dictates of love, and he nearly loses Guinevere as a result. Instead of establishing an eventual balance between love and

chivalric concerns (pride, honor, reputation), Lancelot must later show himself willing to suffer public humiliation to prove that he unequivocally values love and the Queen over himself” (Ashe and Lacy 70). Lancelot is able to prove himself as a great lover by allowing himself to suffer the humiliation that Erec never would have been able to; he chooses to follow the rules for love to the letter, despite the potential humiliation and loss of reputation it might cost him.

There is, however, a difference between the service that Lancelot renders the queen and the service that other knights in her employ gives her. For example, Erec serves as Guinevere’s knight in Erec and Enide. He sends his hostages to her, not to Arthur, suggesting that is both acceptable and normal for a knight to operate under the Queen’s jurisdiction. It is assumed that the Queen is subordinate to her king, but the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is not one of Lancelot being Guinevere’s knight with deference to Arthur; Lancelot is wholly under Guinevere’s command. According to Fries, both Guinevere and Lancelot temporarily put aside their identities in favor of their mutual attraction (“Gender and the Grail” 71). It is impossible for either of these characters to simply “put away,” their identities, and the consequences of their actions. Their devotion to each other makes them great lovers, but their love run inherently against the rules of chivalry.

The relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is problematic in terms of courtly because it constitutes a betrayal of the chivalric community. Loomis notes that Chrétien’s romance between Lancelot and Guinevere is the first we have on the topic, and though it might not be necessarily the first account ever, there is a certain lack of surprise that goes along with the relationship (Loomis 194). The affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is one of the most famous in history, and becomes widely

known as the greatest betrayal of King Arthur. Yet, Chrétien offers no lament for the situation at Logres and barely mentions King Arthur and the disservice this affair does him at all. In fact, the interest is more on the disservice their relationship does Guinevere, as when she is at the castle of Bademagu, the king discovers evidence of some licentiousness and her reputation comes into question putting her in great danger. By writing the characters in this way, Chrétien focuses on the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, and how they navigate that love through the many obligations they have. In doing this, Chrétien appears to be positioning the two as great, tragic lovers, rather than the bringers of tragedy.

The affair in *The Knight of the Cart* has many layers to it. Guinevere and Lancelot act as two people enjoying love. They ennoble each other through their actions, and strive to protect each other from the dangers around them. The reality of their situation, however, marks their love as inappropriate and destined to get them into trouble. Not only is Guinevere married to Lancelot's lord King Arthur, she is a royal hostage in a foreign land. Lancelot performs those duties which would lead to her freedom, but any honor he might gain from that is besmirched by him abandoning the rules of chivalry to engage in the affair with Guinevere.

Summation

In Chrétien's works, women appear to hold significant positions in relation to the men that they deal with. Though these women can be the recipients of harm, they can also demand harm to be done. Women, when interacting with their lovers and relations, can act as judges and indicators of worth. Their criticism holds serious weight and spurs the knight into action, because one of the tenets of chivalry involves

interaction with women in a courtly setting. Women almost always are the characters spurring the knights into action; they are often both the motivation and moral compass for the knights. Chrétien's portrayal of women in these dynamic roles suggests a deep respect for women in positions of power. The romances tie women in with the power of Arthur's court, wherein they have the ability to act as their own agents, and as judges of masculine power.

The Mabinogion

Women do not feature as prominently in *The Mabinogion* as in Chrétien's works. This is likely because the theme of courtly love is overshadowed by the themes of the campaign and the quest. Jo Goyne puts *The Mabinogion* as being written "in the midst of a period of interest in and revival of folk tales, approximately in the year 1100" (Goyne 5). This was a period of intensified fighting between the Welsh and the encroaching Normans from England, which might explain the emphasis on the warlike aspects of Welsh life. The women that do appear in the Mabinogion, however, had the potential to be dangerous and powerful.

How Culhwch Won Olwen

In many ways, *How Culhwch Won Olwen* is a story that is drawn around women. Although a great deal of the story focuses on the prowess of Culwch, Arthur, and the other knights, the women in the story are ultimately the most powerful. Through marriage, the women can become valuable sources of lands and wealth, but both Culwch's stepmother and eventual wife, Culwch, hold special powers which can be threatening in the wrong hands.

Marriage, in this story, is originally presented as political. The story starts with the line, “Cilydd son of Celyddon Wledgi wanted a wife as well born as himself” (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 179). Cilydd’s desire is not unusual; to find a wife of similar social status was often expected. This line does create a political basis for all future relationships within the story. Despite the nobility of her birth, the woman, Goleuddyd, proves to be an unreliable person; she goes mad in pregnancy and gives birth to Culhwch in a pig-run. The Queen returns to her senses, but immediately becomes sick and binds Cilydd to a (hasty) promise that would prevent him from gaining a new wife. She does this to protect the birthright of her son, Culhwch. Eventually, Cilydd is able to take a new wife, and he promptly kills the husband of the most likely candidate. Thus, Cilydd is able to take possession of not only a new wife, but the lands of her late former husband.

The new queen seeks to match Culhwch with her daughter, but when she meets the slightest resistance she curses him, “I swear a destiny on you, that your side shall never strike against a woman until you get Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden Bencawr” (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 180). This curse, according to Goyne, gives Culhwch “a destiny articulated and framed by these two women” (Goyne 5). Culhwch’s eventual relationship with Olwen is unique in that it originates as an unwanted curse, but the audience is meant to understand that Olwen herself is not objectionable in any way, but that her father—a giant—is. Bencawr represents a danger to Culhwch, not only because of his abnormal physical bearing, but because he is unlikely to be a good political ally to Culhwch, the heir to his father’s throne. Rather than being concerned about the fact that his wife cast a spell on his son, Cilydd comments on the ease of the task, and send Culhwch to his cousin Arthur for help.

The story ends with this short passage, “And that night Culhwch slept with Olwen. And she was his only wife as long as he lived. And Arthur’s men dispersed, each one to his country. And that is how Culhwch won Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden Bencawr” (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 213). Goyne poses some thoughtful questions about whether or not this fidelity was incidental, as Olwen outlived her husband, or purposeful, as Culhwch managed to remain faithfully in love with his wife even beyond death (Goyne 9). Culwch was likely a worthy wife, as her beauty and goodness is lauded in the story.

As a wife, Guinevere—called Gwneyfar in Welsh works—had the potential to be seen in a very negative light. In *How Culwch Won Olwen*, Culwch’s uncle mentions, “There is nothing that can ruin me except my wife” (*How Culwch Won Olwen* 190). Wives, it would seem, are problematic to many men. According to Ashe and Lacy, “A Celtic queen was her consort’s equal and could take lovers without being condemned. If stories of such relationships reached medieval writers, the altered social setting would have prevented a proper understand. The free and equal women could have only been imagined as a headstrong, unfaithful woman, and that is what Guinevere becomes” (Ashe and Lacy 319). Ashe and Lacy write, “Guinevere is unkindly added to the triad of the ‘Three Faithless Wives’ as a fourth more faithless than the three, because she deceived a better man” (Ashe and Lacy 24). Gwentyfar’s blame is more clearly defined in the Welsh works than in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regnum Britanniae*, as the action of deceit is placed squarely on her shoulders. Gwentyfar’s reputation is not entirely soiled within the *Mabinogion*, however. In *How Culhwch Won Olwen*, Arthur tells Culhwch that he can have any gift that he wishes, “except my ship and my mantle, and Caledfwlch my sword, and

Rhongomyriad my spear, and Wyenbgwrthucher my shield, and Carnwennan my dagger, and Gwenhwyfar my wife” (*How Culhwch Won Olwen* 183). This is an attempt by Arthur to avoid making a hasty promise while remaining a good host and kin-member to Culhwch. Though naming one’s wife last in a series of weapons might not be overly-endearing, Arthur at the very least values Gwenhwyfar among his most prized possession. This line would also be interpreted as Arthur valuing Gwenhwyfar among those tools which help him keep his land.

The women in *How Culhwch Won Olwen* have the potential to be great assets to their husbands, and well as great dangers. The connection that *How Culhwch Won Olwen* has to Celtic mythology makes the use of magic more flexible than in future works.

Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec*

Hartmann von Aue’s presentation of the female character in his work *Erec*, Enite, differs greatly from the Chrétien’s presentation of Enide. It is perhaps telling that Hartmann’s work is titled *Erec*, rather than “*Erec and Enite*.” Chrétien includes Enide in his work as an equal and valuable member of the story. In Hartmann’s work, she appears almost incidentally to help further the narrative. Enite’s special qualities outside of the physical realm are almost entirely overlooked, unless Hartmann was describing a particular weakness. Even Enite does not recognize her own value, and internalizes the marginalized position that masculine society places her in.

Enite’s position in life is similar to Enide’s. In Hartmann von Aue’s version of the story, the fact that Enite is of unfavorable conditions is given more attention, “she lacked only wealth to be an excellent match” (Hartmann 35). In fact, her father was

once a count, and had lost his wealth through no fault of his own. Hartmann assures us, “The young lady’s uncle was the ruler of the land, the Duke Imain who was holding the festival: she was not of lowly birth” (Hartmann 36). Though Chrétien also acknowledges that Enide’s father had lost his place in the world through the treachery of others, and that she was related to a lord of the land that they were in, Hartmann’s repeated statement of her status places more emphasis on it. Despite this, the focus does not seem to be in granting her the nobility of the lower class, but to emphasize the efforts Erec made to overcome their class differences.

Both works recognize Enide/Enite as the most lovely that had every come to Arthur’s court, and without question worthy of Arthur’s kiss, but Hartmann focuses singularly on Enite’s beauty. Chrétien speaks to her other qualities; she was also “wise, courtly, and noble-hearted” (*Erec and Enide* 20). Hartmann focuses instead on the physical beauty that Enite possess, and the gazes that Erec and Enite bestow on each other. These gazes are lustful and as they are socializing at Arthur’s court, “Lady Enite, who looked like an angel as she sat there, filled Erec’s heart with ardent desire. To wait for her love any longer than until the coming night seemed to him much too long. Since Enite’ secret wish was the same as his, they probably would have begun a most loving game if no one had been watching” (Hartmann 51). Already, Hartmann sets up the love between Erec and Enite as problematic, as even surrounded by others they are liable to forget courtliness for lust.

Enite is also blamed for Erec’s behavior. When Erec beings to neglect his duties as a lord, the blame clearly lays with Enite. Hartmann writes, “Erec turned to a life of ease because of his wife” (Hartmann 64). Shortly before the marriage and immediately following, Erec is shown as the paragon o fa responsible knight, and he

worries about his reputation. According to the text, however, this falls away when he is married. Additionally, the knights who were judging Erec shortly after his marriage were thinking, “Cursed be the hour when we first saw our lady, for our lord is going to ruin because of her” (Hartmann 65). Erec is completely removed from responsibility from his actions, whereas Enite is held wholly responsible for the court falling into disrepair. When Enite hears about the discontent brewing at the court, she is pained on account of her husband. Hartmann writes, “

She was deeply troubled on hearing the reproaches, because she was fine and noble, and she tried to think of some way to appease the enmity which everyone felt toward her. Aware that it was her fault, she bore the sorrow in a womanly manner and did not dare say anything to Erec for fear of losing him” (Hartmann 65).

Even among all the worthy characteristics that Enite possesses, she is still “womanly” and inferior, and holds some of the blame for Erec’s shortcomings.

Additionally, Enite displays a lack of self-worth and preservation. As they are journeying, Erec threatens her with the pain of death should she speak to him. When she sees robbers preparing to ambush him, she is conflicted between warning him and remaining true to his orders of silence and laments, “A woman’s heart is too weak for so desperate a choice” (Hartmann 66). Eventually, she “made up her mind. ‘It would be better that I die,’ she thought, ‘whom no one needs lament, than such an excellent man whose death would be a great loss for many. He is noble and powerful, and we are not of like value. I shall die rather than see him perish.’” (Hartmann 66). Doubtless, this scene is to be read as Enite acting honorably towards her husband, who may or may not deserve this. Enite’s disposition might not be unique to her. Hartmann has a lot to say on the nature of women. When Erec and Enite first begin their courtship, Hartmann writes

She acted very shy, as maidens do, and said little to him. That is the way they are; at first they are as bashful and timid as children, but later they learn to know what suits them and to like what at first seemed difficult. They find that they would rather have a fond kiss, when they can get it, than a blow and good night than a bad day (Hartmann 46).

Criticisms of Enite and women abound in *Erec*. Yet, In the Joy of the Court scene, both Mabonagrin and Erec gain unbelievable strength from the thought of their ladies (Hartmann 135). Susan Samples offers an explanation for this, “Germanic courtliness reinforced the prescribed gender roles: laudable womanhood was a passive one” (Samples 9). This simple difference in viewing woman regulated Enite to an altered position within Erec’s story, where she is not valued as much for her character, but for her position and looks.

Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec* treats women in a noticeably different light as compared to the works for Chrétien de Troyes. While Enide suffered cruelties at the hands of her husband, Erec’s eventual maturity left Chrétien’s Erec able to be kind towards his wife. Hartmann’s Erec, however, is a product of a culture which valued passive female characters. Enite’s worthiness comes from her beauty, and she takes a share in Erec’s faults.

Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*

Like Chrétien’s *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*, Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* allows us a unique opportunity to examine female characters that are not lovers or wives. Wolfram’s interpretation of Parzival’s mother is particularly illuminating, though the character of the Hag is replaced by Cundrie, a lady who is talented but troubling. These slight changes are important to Wolfram’s adaptation, as women are given more attention than in Chrétien’s *Perceval*. This is especially

surprising because Wolfram, like Hartmann, has views on women which are not the most flattering, as evidenced by the chapter “Wolfram’s Apology”. Samples writes, “Germanic courtliness had a strong ethical component, which was based on faith” (Samples 9). Women, in Wolfram’s world, are incredibly emotional beings, which sometimes comes into conflict with a hero’s rational quest.

One of Wolfram’s greatest innovations to the Perceval story is in adding a scene dealing solely with Parzival’s parents. The relationship between Parzival’s parents is unusual, because Gahmuret was an well-traveled knight well-liked by ladies, who found himself obligated to be with Parzival’s mother, Herzeloide. Before Parzival is born, his father, Gahmuret says to Herzeloide, “Madam, if I am to find life tolerable with you do not chaperone me” (Wolfram 59). Herzeloide does not attempt to stop Gahmuret from going to tournaments or traveling overseas, but his adventures end in tragedy. Gahmuret dies far from home, and Herzeloide nearly passes away from grief, only staying alive to take care of their newborn son. Herzeloide’s sheltering of Parizival extends farther than in Chrétien’s Perceval, as Herzeloide actively attempts to keep Parizval from joining the Order of Chivalry by providing him with “regular fool’s clothes” and a lame horse (Wolfram 75). This is done so that Parizval would be humiliated at court, and be obligated to return to her. Despite her actions here, Wolfram emphasizes Herzeloide’s goodness, “This lady who shunned the failings of her sex reared her child at the breast...humility stood by her” and likened her to Mary, who also breastfed Jesus (Wolfram 66). Wolfram would continue to emphasize the goodness of Parzival’s mother, constantly reminding the audience that she is superior to other women.

Wolfram's disparagement of women extends into its own chapter, called "Wolfram's Apology." Wolfram tells us, "Like a tongs I clench on my anger for woman who has so mishandled me that I cannot choose but to be her enemy" (Wolfram 68). Wolfram makes it clear that he lost a lady because he wrote a poem disparaging her, which he refers to in other places in *Parzival* (Wolfram 68)⁷. Wolfram uses this chapter to explain his prejudice, and to defend himself, "I have not lost my ability to judge shrewdly of their ways and behavior. Yet I will champion any woman of modest character touching her good name" (Wolfram 68). Wolfram certainly recognizes Herzeloide's good character when she dies, "Her steadfast death preserved the lady from Hell's torments. O happy woman for having been a mother! Thus did a root of virtue, stem of humility, go the way that brings reward" (Wolfram 76). This statement suggests that Herzeloide would have suffered Hell's torments had she lived a little longer, and that motherhood and death were the paths to salvation. It is possible that Wolfram presents Herzeloide's death in a positive light because in death she is presented from taking further action. According to Samples, "laudable womanhood was a passive one," in Germanic society (Samples 9). Wolfram, still smarting from the rejection of his lady, chooses to place his most laudable, Mary-like female character into the most passive position she could adopt: a happy death. Other female characters, however, would not be so lucky.

Cundrie is the character that replaces the Hag in Wolfram's retelling of *Perceval*. She is described as a character that Wolfram identifies as bringing suffering to Arthur's company, as she is the character that delivers the message that Parzival has

⁷ The translator notes that the other places Wolfram mentions to poem are on pages 175 and 438 of *Parzival*.

failed in the quest. Although Cundrie is not a hag, as she is in Perceval's work, Wolfram endows her with talents, but these talents are also curses. "She was so talented that she spoke all languages...Her mouth suffered from no impediment, for what is said was quite enough, With it she flattened much joy upstanding" (Wolfram 163). Cundrie's talents, then, are not characteristics to be appreciated because they remove her from the passive woman position, which was likely uncomfortable for medieval Germanic readers. The danger than an active Cundrie represents, however, is mitigated by an apparent lack of ill-will towards Arthur himself. Unlike the Hag, who shames Arthur for allowing Perceval to be a part of the Round Table, Cundrie greets Arthur cordially and demands that Parzival is sent out to correct his wrong. Cundrie is essential to move the narrative along because she inspires Parzival to return to his quest for the Holy Grail. Cundrie exists outside of Maureen Fries's framework of passive heroine and active counter-hero. She is both an agent, in that she takes Parzival to task for his failings, and an instrument in that she is necessary to move the plot along.

Wolfram's *Parzival*, then, is an interesting work because it seems to support the passive womanhood that Sample and Fries describe, but complicates that presentation with characters like Cundrie. Herzeloide, an invention of Wolfram's, is clearly meant to be a Mary-like figure whose goodness is defined by motherhood and death. Cundrie, who replaces the demanding Hag figure, is made more passive by her deference to Arthur, yet has the talent to be threatening just by way of speech. Speech is an important part of active womanhood in medieval texts, as the ability to manipulate one's language effectively creates characters who can work outside of the typical mold, as can be seen in Marie de France's *Lanval*.

Marie de France's *Lanval*

The works of Marie de France often have a unique perspective on gender. Born in France, Marie lived in England and wrote in Anglo-Norman. Marie's works were called Breton lais, which were shorter than the other works discussed in this thesis, but no less interesting. Marie's *Lanval* for instance, is a heavily dramatized work centering around the whims of women. Lanval, a knight of Arthur's court, finds himself in love with a fairy woman, who requests that he keep her a secret. In a scene reminiscent of the scene between Joseph and Potiphar's wife from The Book of Genesis, Guinevere sexually propositions Lanval, and when she is turned down, flies into a rage. Guinevere's accusation of rape leads to a trial, and it is only through the actions of Lanval's fairy woman that he is saved. Women are much more dynamic in Marie's work; they exert a very definitive force among men. Guinevere is shown in a dynamic, yet negative light, which casts a shadow on Arthur and his ability to react to situations wisely.

Unlike many of the other knights examined in this thesis, Lanval appears to be a knight who needs no improvement. At the beginning of the story, Lanval is described as "worthy, generous, handsome, and valiant...the son of a king and thus of noble lineage" (Marie 35). He comes to serve at Arthur's court, but is overlooked when Arthur distributes wealth. Lanval meets a fairy lady (who will be referred to as the Lady for this section), and immediately falls in love with her, saying, "if it pleased you to love me—if I were so fortunate—I would obey your every command, whether it be foolish or wise. I will do your will, and for you I will abandon the company of others. I never want to leave you: this is what I most desire" (Marie 36). It is possible to read this scene in a negative light. Remembering the themes of fellowship and

fraternity discussed in the previous chapter, it seems odd that Lanval would be so willing to leave Arthur's court and his knightly duties. The knight Erec, in both Chrétien's de Troyes's *Erec and Enide* and Hartmann von Aue's *Erec* was required to go on a quest to purge himself of this behavior, yet Lanval benefits from this situation. This might be because Marie is disregarding the themes of fellowship and fraternity altogether. Marie describes some of Lanval's fellows to be jealous of him, and the audience is told, "Some feigned affection for him, but they would not have been saddened if some misfortune had befallen him" (Marie 35). This enmity towards an otherwise perfectly good knight indicates that there is something wrong with chivalric world, and not Lanval.

The Lady and Lanval, then, are a good match for each other. After they spend a night together, the lady promises Lanval that "he would have in abundance whatever he most wanted. He could give fits and spend liberally, and she would provide whatever he needed" (Marie 36). This promise hinges entirely on the condition that Lanval never tell anyone about his lady. This promise is important, because Lanval is bound by word. Albrecht Classen identifies the use of language as something that is distinctly Marie's: in many of her works, Marie's characters are able to hold power as long as they use language appropriately (Classen 21). When Lanval returns home, he finds that his servants are well-dressed and he had the means to be a good host. Through the means that the Lady provides, Lanval is able to engage in knightly behavior that was previously unavailable to him,

Laval gave rich gifts; Lanval pardoned prisoners; Lanval outfitted jongleurs; Lanval performed noble acts. There was neither stranger nor friend to whom Lanval would not give money. Lanval had great joy and pleasure, for by day or by night he could see his lady frequently, and she was completely at his command (Marie 37).

Lanval is rewarded with love and abundance by following the commands of his lady. The generosity which Lanval is able to display brings him closer with other knights, who invite him to Arthur's court with them.

Lanval, which at court, comes into contact with Guinevere. Marie de France chooses to portray Guinevere more negatively than in other works. Guinevere, conspiring to get Lanval alone, takes thirty women to distract the knights of his company. When she has him cornered, she claims that she loves him and that he should love her in return. Lanval—perhaps unwisely—responds, “leave me alone! I have no desire to love you. I have long served the king, and I do not wish to betray my faith. Never will I wrong my lord for you or love” (Marie 38). Lanval proves himself to be a loyal subject to his king in this statement, but evidentially forgets the ability to control and understand a situation is a part of knighthood. Enraged, Guinevere accuses Lanval “I love and am loved by a lady who deserves to be prized over all others...even her poorest servant girl is more worthy than you, my dear queen—in body, face, wisdom, and goodness!” (Marie 38). Again, Marie demonstrates the use of language as powerful. Lanval's outburst immediately gets him into trouble, as Guinevere runs to the king to complain about the insult that Lanval had said (omitting, of course, wrongdoing on her part), and Lanval understands that he has lost his lady by breaking his promise to her.

In the culminating judgement scene, Lanval is asked to prove that his lady is more beautiful than any other. He is able to do this only when his lady, deciding to save him, appears and proves that he was telling the truth. The last lines in the story are, “he went with her to Avalon, to a beautiful isle. The young man was taken there, and no one ever heard of him again. Nor is there anything more to tell” (Marie 42).

The Lady is clearly taking the action here, happily abducting Lanval from his unhappy existence to Avalon. While Lanval gets a happy ending in this case, it is problematic that Lanval is so willing to abandon Arthur's court for his lady. In a way, Lanval's actions are more deplorable than Erec's, because Lanval chooses to abandon Arthurian society altogether so that he can live in relative peace and prosperity with his lady. Again, Marie seems to ignore the bonds of loyalty which are supposed to exist between knights and their king in favor for the more romantic ending. This ending, however, does not resolve the problem that Guinevere poses for Marie's version of Arthurian court.

The portrayal of Guinevere in *Lanval* is an interesting stepping stone in the development of Guinevere's personality. Marie de France characterizes Guinevere as a liar in addition to being an adulteress. It is important to note that Guinevere's character is not usually under attack in romances in this way. Though Guinevere is famous for her relationship with Lancelot, which eventually leads to the weakening of Arthur's court, she is not usually described as wanton and unkind as she is in Marie's work. She presses herself onto Lanval, wrathfully accuses Lanval of many unfavorable things, and presents a case to King Arthur so that Lanval—who is a very good knight in all regards—would be banished. Further, Guinevere's accusations, which the court suspects—and the audience knows—to be untrue, should undermine Arthur position. When Lanval's lady comes to save him, she reveal Guinevere to be a liar. Marie never addresses what happens to Guinevere in this story, or if anything happens to her at all, for her deceit. The final line, "Nor is there anything more to tell," indicates that there is nothing more to the story; Guinevere likely suffered no ill-effects for her deceit, despite the chaos it throws the court into. We can only assume that Marie's intention is

to leave the audience with the image of the king's wife as a wrathful, shameless would-be adulteress.

Marie de France's work offers a different perspective on how women can engage with the Arthurian community. Marie seems to ignore the fellowship which is supposed to exist between the knights so that her lai emphasizes the love which exists between Lanval and the Lady. Conversely, Guinevere's actions are the epitome of disloyalty between a man and wife, yet there are no great consequences presented for her. Marie's presentation is unique, as the fellowship aspects of Arthurian romance are temporarily left behind to focus on the women, who either can be a great help to the characters, or a direct detriment to the Arthurian court.

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle

In the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* we can see a more detailed account of how Guinevere's betrayal affects Arthur. We also see a greatly sympathetic view of Guinevere in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. The already-complicated chivalric code is further complicated by courtly love. Moorman writes, "l'amour Courtois existed not only as a paradox, a literary ambivalence, but as a fundamental dilemma of life, necessitating as it did a choice between Venus and Christ" (Moorman 165). Though for much of the story, Lancelot and Guinevere choose "Venus," the story ends with both of these characters separately entering religious orders. *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, already a more religious work than Chrétien's romances—when courtly love first began to appear in Arthurian literature—struggles with reconciling the courtly love which the thirteenth-century Church had begun to condemn as "immoral and adulterous" and chivalry (Moorman 165). Yet, though the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* makes

it clear that the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere plays a very big part in the eventual weakening of the kingdom, neither of these characters is presented in a particularly malevolent light. Guinevere is a very sympathetic character, and the relationship between the two characters is almost realistic in the drama that they encounter outside of the political arena. The long-lasting nature of the affair story cannot be attributed to the religious nature of the *Lancelot-Grail*, but in the appeal of the story itself to audiences.

While the writers of the *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle does much to emphasize the crime that Guinevere commits with Lancelot, they also present Guinevere as a highly sympathetic character. We are given insight into her mind, which allow us to understand the destructive love that forms between her and Lancelot. For example, when Lancelot and Guinevere first meet, Lancelot is immediately smitten and tongue-tied. The queen “realized right away that he was flustered and troubled, but she dared not think that it was because of her; and yet she did somewhat suspect so, which made her stop her questioning. Not wanting to worsen the boy’s confusion, she rose from her seat” (*The Lancelot-Grail* 103). Here, we see Guinevere not as the adulteress who wants to take Lancelot to bed, but a highly empathetic queen who does not want to cause anyone embarrassment. When Guinevere and Lancelot are found out, she says, “both of us are condemned to die here. And may God help me, that pains me more for your sake than for mine, for your death would be a much greater tragedy than mine” (*The Lancelot-Grail* 376). This line is reminiscent of those of the lovely Enide’s from both Chrétien and Hartmann’s Erec stories. Guinevere confers the same type of affection on Lancelot as did Enide, who loved her husband perfectly. The devotion that Guinevere shows Lancelot is that of the devoted lover, not of a malicious

adulteress. The knowledge of Guinevere's emotional state provides more information about Guinevere's identity beyond that of an adulteress.

The emotional state of Guinevere and Lancelot is important to the *Lancelot-Grail*, as their identities are formed around their relationship with each other, with the courtly society providing the setting⁸. Longley draws a distinction between the *Lancelot-Grail* and *Knight of the Cart* in that the central focus is no longer Lancelot and his identity “but rather his development as a hero as defined by his relationship to Guinevere” (Longley 55). When Guinevere knights Lancelot—albeit in an unusual way, as she is not present when he makes his transition from youth to knight—she takes on the role of lord of Lancelot. According to Longley, “the author clearly wants to present him as owing fealty to the queen and not to King Arthur. Guinevere is filling a customarily male role that was predominantly shut to women. Her completing his knighting ceremony by dubbing him introduces Lancelot as a different kind of knight—one in the service of love and not the king” (Longley 53). When Lancelot engages in battle with Galehaut's men and wins the day, he confesses his feelings to Guinevere, revealing that all he had done was for her, and not for Arthur. Guinevere, however, reacts in a strange way in comparison to her earlier introspective self; she insists that Lancelot does not love her completely, because of his reactions to the other women around them (*The Lancelot-Grail* 116). Guinevere often acts jealously and accuses Lancelot of engaging in relationships with other women. This seems to be intended to increase the drama of their situation—evidentially, the danger of their

⁸ The courtly society provides the setting for Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, rather than courtly society being the focus of the story, as we will see in *Malory's Le Morte Darthur*.

affair is not danger enough—and force Lancelot to constantly prove himself to be loyal subordinate to Guinevere’s love. The audience, then, become embroiled in the romance between Guinevere and Lancelot, in which Guinevere holds a great deal of the power.

Guinevere, even in the most desperate of situations, is not afraid to exercise her power. It is she who sends the messenger to inform Arthur of Mordred’s betrayal after she flees to the Tower of London and locks herself inside. Ashe and Lacy write, “it is doubtless a half-sympathy that leads continental romancers to break sharply with Geoffrey, portraying the Queen as scornfully rejecting the lustful Mordred and erring instead with the magnificent Lancelot” (Ashe and Lacy 319). If the sympathy does exist, it is likely that continental romancers found Lancelot a far more interesting—and appropriate—subject than a simple usurper. The love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is inherently inappropriate, yet it is certainly more appealing to match the beautiful Guinevere with the magnificent Lancelot, rather than the treasonous Mordred. *The Lancelot-Grail* writers take the idea of Guinevere fleeing to a convent from Geoffrey. Guinevere’s position is one that is easy to empathize with, as her world crashes at the same time as Arthur’s does, and she must live in the imperfect world that she helped to create.

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle has many facets. Though the religious nature of the Grail story is important, the very human relationship at work between Guinevere and Lancelot is endlessly fascinating. Though their actions are inherently wrong, neither is an unlikable character. Their relationship, and Guinevere’s character in particular, is solidified in the Lancelot-Grail, and establishes a more detailed canon around their

relationship than in Chrétien's work. It is this version of their story that would be retold in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and be remembered for centuries.

Morgan le Fay

Excluding Guinevere, there is no woman in Arthurian literature whose roots trace back to the beginning of the mythos to even the most contemporary of work as the character of Morgan le Fay. Loomis writes, "if anything is consistent about the legends of Morgan la Fée it is their inconsistency" (Loomis 102). I have chosen to give Morgan her own section because—although she is an important character—she appears so briefly in some works, and not at all in others that it is more helpful to analyze her character in relation to how medieval writers choose to portray their great witch.

There are many other women in Arthurian literature who have magical powers. The stepmother who curses Culwch in "How Culwch Won Olwen," as well as Olwen herself, show that they have abilities to enchant so that they can manipulate the world around them. Olwen's abilities are rather benign in comparison to the stepmother's, as the stepmother causes distress to Culwch. Still, there is no retribution for the stepmother's actions, and we can assume that there will not be. The magical women in this Welsh tale, then, are for the most part benign. Cundrie, from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* is referred to as "the Sorceress," but evidence of her magic is not given (Wolfram 164). The most important woman who works with magic, then, is the Lady of the Lake. Of the works discussed in this thesis, the Lady of the Lake (also called Viviane in the translation that I use) appears in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. She is the fairy-woman who raises Lancelot, and she, like Perceval's mother, instructs him in

the ways of chivalry before he comes to Arthur's court (*The Lancelot-Grail* 97). More importantly, Merlin becomes enamored with the Lady of the Lake, teaching her magic (as he did with Morgan), which she uses to trap him. This action reveals her to be a counter-hero, but Fries suggests that this behavior is more forgivable than Morgan's, as Viviane is unwilling to prostitute herself for knowledge ("The Decline of Morgan le Fay" 10). Fries identifies her as a "benign" and ultimately "Arthur-friendly" figure ("The Decline of Morgan le Fay" 8-9). This may be because the Lady of the Lake never seeks to usurp anyone's power, and when she traps Merlin, he finds himself in a most pleasant place. Eventually, the figure of the Lady of the Lake would become an incredibly helpful figure to Arthur specifically, as she provides him with his legendary sword. Morgan, who originally is portrayed as a helpful figure, develops in the opposite direction.

Morgan was originally portrayed as a positive figure. Geoffrey of Monmouth entrusts her with Arthur's health in Avalon after he was wounded at the battle of Camalan. Morgan's abilities as a healer herald back to Welsh mythology (Ashe and Lacy 338). Geoffrey of Monmouth not only presents Morgan as a healer, but as a great leader among women. Her home is called "The Fortunate Isle," and people live to old age with the help of Morgan's healing. She also has control over magic and mathematics, which she teaches to other women. Fries identifies the roles that Morgan le Fay occupies in this story as "androgynous," because she occupies roles traditionally associated with both women (healing and fertility) and men (teaching and ruling) ("The Decline of Morgan le Fay" 2). This image, though, would be the zenith of status for Morgan, as her odd mix of abilities would lend itself to a more ominous

figure, which Fries attributes to medieval writers being unable “To cope with the image of a woman of power in positive terms” (“The Decline of Morgan le Fay” 2).

Fries proposes the possibility of an early Morgan scene warping the views of medieval audiences and writers. In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History*, Arthur is brought to Morgan’s island of Avalon for healing (Geoffrey does not mention whether or not Arthur dies there). She retains her status as healer in the few twelfth-century works she appears in, but by time the *Lancelot-Grail* was written, she takes on a much more sinister and active form. Ashe and Lacy write, “Christian belief reduces and eventually blackens her” (Ashe and Lacy 338). Like many other Welsh pagan symbols, Morgan was not merely blotted out of the Arthurian legend, but was adapted to fit medieval Christian standards. Embodying Fries’s presentation of the female antihero, Morgan actively works against Arthur, providing her lover Accolon with Arthur’s sword and later encouraging him to turn against Lancelot. Further, Morgan is one of the most sexualized women in Arthurian literature. Loomis, when describing her character in the *Lancelot-Grail*, calls her a “baffled temptress” in which she constantly offers herself to the hero, but is never accepted (Loomis 193). Most works following the *Lancelot-Grail* would portray Morgan in a negative context, and particularly a sexual one. Fries uses the term “Devil in drag,” to refer to the evil hags who use the form of a beautiful woman to ensnare knights (“The Decline of Morgan le Fay” 6). Morgan power is often tied to her sexuality, and yet she is always overcome by Arthur’s masculine society.

Female witches have the potential to be very problematic to Arthurian society. Morgan’s supernatural powers are not unique, as many other women in Arthurian stories have the potential to use magic, and they also have the potential to be harmful

characters. Morgan, however, is a character who appears in many stories—though sometimes fleetingly—and whose character changes the most. Once a Welsh priestess with connections to a Celtic goddess, Morgan became a fairy, a mortal woman with healing powers, and finally a wrathful witch. Her character, which become increasingly powerful and sexual, represents a threat to the Arthurian chivalric world because she exists outside of it. Her threat makes Morgan the prime example of the female counter-hero that Maureen Fries presents.

Conclusion

Arthurian women appear in a multitude of capacities in the literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While Maureen Fries's model of passive heroine and aggressive, sexualized counter-hero is instructive, it is also too simplistic when describing Arthurian women. These women are an integral part of Arthurian literature, because not only do they appear in each and every story regarding Arthur and his knights, but they also drive many of these stories.

The concept of courtly love—which in romances is understood to be at least entwined with chivalry, if not an integral part of it—dictates that a knight be devoted to his lover. Some scholars believe that this devotion, which encourages a sort of blind loyalty to a woman, is the key problem with courtly love. Indeed, it would seem so if one were to study knights like Mabonagrain from the Erec story. Certainly, the unquestioning obedience prescribed by Andreas Capellanus causes problems for several knights. The hope, however, seems to be that the women would not take advantage of the devotion that they are shown. Those women who do take advantage of their situation are not regarded as highly women who act appropriately at all times,

like Erec's Enide. Even Geoffrey of Monmouth uses women to measure the courtliness of Arthur's court, and women consistently remain indicators of worthiness in the romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The ideal, then, that courtly love would be a mutually ennobling endeavor is certainly present throughout all Arthurian literature, but certain characters trouble this ideal.

Certain authors have different ways of presenting women in relation to the court. Geoffrey's main use of women is as a means of indicating the sophistication of Arthur's court, whereas Chrétien features women as dynamic characters whose involvement in the romance is essential. The Germanic authors, taking their cue from both their own culture and from Chrétien, present passive women who operate more as instruments in furthering the narrative. Characters like Morgan and Guinevere, who appear over and over change from story to story, and be helpful, sympathetic, problematic, and sometimes even malicious. Often, Guinevere occupies a dual role of both instrument and agent in Arthur's court, and her position is relative to Arthur's. Her behavior lends itself to one of the most famous love stories and tragedies in literary history, and it is impossible disregard her effect on Arthurian literature as a whole.

Arthur and Kingship

Kingship in Western Europe was a tenuous, unsure thing. Feudalism, as a government style, required a strong leader to demand order and keep corruption within the ranks of their aristocratic vassals at bay. This was the great problem for much of Western Europe. According to R. W. Southern,

Politically, the great question...was how far the disintegration of authority would go. The immediate cause of the disintegration was lack of loyalty, and with lack of loyalty to persons went a decay and confusion of the ideas for which the persons stood. It was a time when claims of allegiance and duty, however well founded in law or in history, counted for nothing when they went beyond the bounds of effective personal power (Southern 80).

Although Southern is describing the tenth century in this passage, it is important to note that the tenth and eleventh centuries saw the rise of many political and social trends which would define Western Europe for centuries. The Frankish Kingdom—which included parts of Germany—was just dividing into separate territories under the rule of Carolingians, who would establish a system of governance dependent on the loyalty of vassals to a king. With few exceptions, however, weak kings would have to contend with the growing power of their vassals. This extended into Capetian rule in the “French” lands. Early Capetian kings had wealthy enemies with large amounts of land, and attempts to achieve stability were often thwarted by an ever-shifting social landscape (Cazelles 6). Vassalage was further complicated by questions of boundaries and subservience to a king. For example, the Duke of Normandy was technically a

vassal of the French king. After 1066, however, he was also the King of England. The political strife of this time required strong kings to centralize power, but this often was not the case.

Medieval writers and their audiences were not blind to the failings of their day, and the response for many was to turn to a sense of idealized nostalgia for their entertainment. The *chansons de geste* of the eleventh century present Charlemagne—who had been dead for over two centuries—to remember him as a pious, righteous king. Likewise, the works featuring Arthur largely idealize Arthur. It is important to note that both Charlemagne and Arthur, who had works written about them centuries after their deaths, would be named among the Nine Worthies. When reading works of medieval literature, one must remember that writers could be aiming for idealized nostalgia, subversive political statements, or both in their writing. As far as the literature goes, a king's kingship is only as important as the statement that it makes. What is particularly interesting to note is that, unlike Charlemagne, Arthur is a failed king in most of the works about him. Arthur's entire kingdom literally falls with him, and sometimes Arthur is in part to blame. Arthur's status as the great became a part of his tradition, despite his many failings as a king. His humanity is what is important to many of the later authors, as his tradition and tragedy are, in the words of Robert Hanning a part of "the pageant of history" (Hanning 168).

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*

The motivations of Geoffrey of Monmouth are important to consider when analyzing his version of Arthur. The work *The History of the Kings of Britain* is one of the few texts I have chosen to discuss which does entirely focus on either Arthur or his

court. Arthur is one in a long line of kings, but he is meant to be understood as the zenith of British kinship up to Saxon domination of Britain. According to Tatlock, Geoffrey's motive was "to provide the British people with an honorable early history, which they had lacked up to that time," (Tatlock 695). This history was meant to be comparable to some of the great histories that were being written by Geoffrey's continental contemporaries, but it also was meant to give an air of cultivation to the "isolated British race" (Tatlock 701). Geoffrey's Arthur certainly has some amount of mysticism surrounding him, but for the most part is portrayed as a well-loved warrior king.

Geoffrey tells us in no uncertain terms that Arthur is a very active and competent warrior. Arthur leads his soldiers to victory, and his participation in battle is key. In one battle, Arthur's behavior is described in the following way:

Arthur went berserk, for he realized that things were still going well for the enemy and that victory for his own side was not yet in sight. He drew his sword Caliburn, called upon the name of the Blessed Virgin, and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy. Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow. He did not slacken his onslaught until he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men with his sword" (Geoffrey 217).

This type of battle prowess is never ascribed to Arthur again, but it is important to Geoffrey that Arthur is presented in this way. Throughout the whole of Arthur's reign, he never loses badly in battle. This is very much unlike his father, Uther, during whose reign the entire island was almost to a Germanic invasion by Octa and Eosa (sons of Hengist) as he lay ill (Geoffrey 209). Arthur is never removed from the battle, even going so far as to leave another person, Mordred, as regent as he campaigns on the continent. Arthur's campaign represents the Britain coming into the continent—Rome in particular—to sweep in a new glorious age. Hanning compares the "virile maturity"

of Britain to Rome's "decrepitude," noting that Arthur's imperialistic ambitions would be seen as a natural progression of the British state, and admirable in that Britain was the bastion of morality under Arthur (Hanning 168-169). Arthur, as head of the British kingdom is not only presented as a great military leader, but is considered the ideal moral leader as well.

As discussed in earlier chapters, Geoffrey presents Arthur's court as the height of sophistication. Unlike in his father's time, Arthur establishes rules of courtliness which define proper conduct of his knight. Geoffrey leaves us no doubt as to what type of person Arthur was, displaying "outstanding courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all the people...he observed the normal custom of giving gifts freely to everyone" (Geoffrey 212). Arthur has no issue in attracting knights to his court. In fact, Arthur's rule gained such a reputation for courtliness that "even the man of noblest birth, once he was roused to rivalry, thought nothing at all of himself unless he wore his arms and dressed in the same way as Arthur's knights" (Geoffrey 222). Arthur's rule as described by Geoffrey is in all ways the high point of British history, which makes the eventual and inevitable downfall all the more painful.

One of the motifs that Geoffrey introduces to the Arthurian legend is the treachery of Mordred, and the fall of the British kingdom because of it. It is important to note that Arthur always hands power over to his relation Mordred. Geoffrey writes, "[Arthur] handed over the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and to his Queen Guinevere" (Geoffrey 237). With this statement, Arthur's failure is assured. Mordred offers land to the leader of the Saxons to gain loyalty, displaying the same sort of generosity which made Arthur famous, but to a people who were historically

enemies of the Britons (Geoffrey 258). Already weakened and missing some of his best soldiers from his continental campaign, Arthur's forces struggle to overcome Mordred's. Mordred and Arthur meet in battle, and Mordred is killed while Arthur is fatally wounded. This distinction is important, because the final lines regarding Arthur that Geoffrey writes are, "Arthur himself, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to" (Geoffrey 261). Geoffrey does not actually inform the reader as to the King's fate. According to Ashe and Lacy, "Geoffrey leaves the door open for folk belief in his immortality without actually affirming it" (Ashe and Lacy 39). In this way, Geoffrey created a king to whom Britain could not only ascribe their past, but also hang their hopes on the future.

Arthur's rule, which began with such promise, descends into failure wrought by his own decisions. Seeking to expand Britain's rule, and having the moral high-ground in doing so, Arthur begins his campaign towards Rome. Unfortunately, his nephew strikes at the precise time any king would be weak; with his forces far from home and suffering heavy losses, Mordred makes alliances with Arthur's enemies. The culminating battle would be unresolved, and the heirs of both Arthur and Mordred would be left to continue the fighting. Geoffrey's Arthur represents all that is ideal in a king, and yet he still fails. Robert Hanning describes the tragedy of Arthur's situation well; his disappearance from Britain "painful in its irrevocability, and exemplary of the tensions always implicit in the pageant of history" (Hanning 168). Geoffrey's presentation of this texts as historical creates a trend in which Arthur will always fall to Mordred's treachery, but the events of his kingship and leading up to his death often differ in later tales.

The Romances of Chretien de Troyes

As Arthur's interaction with the members of his court and the threats to his rule have been discussed at some length in previous chapters, this section dealing with the works of Chrétien de Troyes need not be separated in the different romances. Chrétien's presentation of Arthur as a passive king remains fairly standard throughout his romances, and it would serve this chapter better to consider in detail some of the nuances of Chrétien's presentation. Cazelles writes that Chrétien's career "is rooted in those sites of resistance to the French monarchy" (Cazelles 5). Chrétien's patrons were people whose respect for the crown was not absolute, and Chrétien's pessimism regarding the monarchy shines through clearly in his romances. Arthur's state of mind is demonstrative of a rapidly-declining feudal king. Arthur not only needs to have reliable, worthy knights, but knights in attendance. The fact that he often lacks this basic tenet of feudal kingship is indicative of larger problems at work in Arthur's way of ruling. Howard Bloch writes that Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, which was written in England in the fifteenth century, presents an Arthur whose failings represent the failings of feudalism in France "two centuries after the beginning of the end of feudalism in France" (Bloch 291). I would contend that feudalism in France was being examined critically and pessimistically as early as the twelfth-century, and Chrétien's works are one of those which disparage the place of feudal king.

One of the most consistent problems of Arthur's rule is his lack of knights. We are told constantly that Arthur feels sad or sick because many of his knights are not with him. I have already indicated that Arthur's perusal of Erec and Perceval might be attributed to desperation on his part to obtain powerful allies. These allies must be for purely defensive purposes, though, because Arthur is not portrayed as a campaigning

or conquering king at all in Chrétien's romances. Instead, his society is made the center of the knights' world, where they go to become knights and gain identities and where they return when their quests have been completed. Ashe and Lacy write that in these stories, Arthur "has acceded (or receded) to the position of patriarch. The King only rarely initiates action and even more rarely participates directly in it" (Ashe and Lacy 69). Arthur's passivity is troublesome, as action tends to arrive at Arthur's court, and he never rises to the occasion to meet it.

There are constant challenges to Arthur's authority. The Red Knight and Melegant walk right into Arthur's court and deliver their challenge directly to him! What is more, neither of these men is immediately brought to task for his impudence, despite ample opportunity. The Red Knight waits outside of Arthur's castle and tells Perceval, "you can tell this good-for-nothing king that, if he's not willing to hold his land from me, then he must give it up to me" (*Perceval* 386). Perceval, a stranger to Arthur's court, is the one who stands up to defend him indicating that none of Arthur's knights have the ability to do this. Additionally, Melagant says to Arthur that he has hostages which Arthur cannot hope to recover, "the king replies that he must put up with this, if he can do nothing about it, though he is deeply grieved on that account" (*The Knight of the Cart* 185). These are the words of a king who is unable to defend his court by rising to the occasion as either a warrior or a commander. Additionally, when Guinevere is in another country and under the control of another king, her position does not seem to be one of imminent threat. Badgemagu is described as watchful, and Sears writes that his kingdom has an "impermeability to the kind of random danger that enters Arthur's court freely" (Sears 50). Arthur's court, in contrast, is consistently open to the entrance of strangers and threats. Arthur himself

seems to be trapped within his court and dependent on his knights to defend the court and pursue threats.

As we move away from Arthur's court geographically, there are still indicators that things are not as they should be in the country of Logres. The first scene encountered in *Perceval* is a scene in the Waste Forest, in which Arthur's knights are pursuing men who have apparently abducted women (*Perceval* 378). While this type of quest might be expected for men whose job it is to protect the land, *Perceval* is a work meant to pit the chivalric world with the spiritual one, and any failing on the part of the chivalric world to protect its citizens must be taken seriously. Additionally, Perceval's mother informs him, "After the death of Uther Pendragon, who was king and father of good king Arthur, noble men were impoverished, disinherited and wrongfully brought to destitution. The lands were devastated and the poor people degraded, so that anyone who could flee did so" (*Perceval* 380). Chrétien might be accounting for an undiscussed amount of time between Uther's death and Arthur's ascension to the throne or the state of things when Arthur ascended to the throne. Still, Perceval's mother makes it clear that the world of chivalry under these kings is an uncertain thing, in which people can quickly lose their wealth through no fault of their own, but the implication is through the fault of their king. This is a far cry from the prosperity which allowed Arthur to hand out gifts in Geoffrey's *History*.

Finally, Arthur seems to be working off of an outdated system of tradition which at times seems more likely to get him into trouble rather than help his kingdom. For example, at the beginning of *Erec and Enide*, Arthur proposes that the knights participate in a traditional hunt for the white stag. This immediately alarms Gawain, one of the best of Arthur's knights, as the tradition that goes along with the hunt for

the white stag—that the winner will be obligated to kiss the most beautiful woman at the court—has the potential to cause considerable strife between Arthur’s knights. When Gawain points out the danger to Arthur, he merely replies, “I shall not give up my intention of that account, for when a king has spoken, his word should not be retracted” (*Erec and Enide* 1). Arthur’s strict adherence to seemingly unimportant traditions—both the custom of the white stag, and the custom that a king’s word is final even in the face of potential dispute—is problematic. Arthur, according to Cazelles, is bound to the “Custom of the White Stag,” the purpose of which is to provide and reaffirm solidarity among his knights, yet achieves the opposite (Cazelles 63). Arthur’s inability to move away from established mores will become more dangerous with the development of the Arthurian tradition, as will be discussed below. As with the chivalric community and the rules of courtly love, the strict adherence to rules which do not conform to the reality of life, set Arthur up for failure.

The type of feudal kingship that Arthur represents is ineffectual and slightly pathetic. Although Arthur holds fast to certain traditions that he feels makes his court great, these traditions are in reality not helpful or have the potential to be harmful. Meanwhile, Logres faces threats beyond mere robbers on the fringes of society; enemies have the ability to walk into Arthur’s court and insult him, which both Arthur and the knights who surround him accept passively. Chrétien’s presentation of Arthur is that of an ineffectual ruler so separated from reality that he cannot respond appropriately to challenges, and therefore allows his kingdom to face threat without support.

The Mabinogion

When considering Arthur's kingship in the relation to the works presented in *The Mabinogion*, one must remember Arthur's history. Before Arthur was ever a British king, he was a Welsh warrior. Ashe and Lacy write that Arthur's frequent appearance in the *Mabinogion* is indicative of his great popularity in Welsh literature (Ashe and Lacy 64). In this section, I have included an older work, *Rhoanbwy's Dream*, which certainly has its roots in an older Welsh culture. In this work, we see Arthur presented as hilariously hypocritical, which brings the audience's attention to how we remember Arthur as a king. *How Culwch Won Olwen* presents a very different Arthur, in which his character is defined by both his righteousness and the activity he engages in. Both of these works portray Arthur in very active, commanding roles, departing from the influence of Chrétien.

Rhoanbwy's Dream

Rhoanbwy's Dream is a Welsh work which might have been one of the latest works to be added to the *Mabinogion*. There are elements of Welsh traditions in a few of the scene, but the work itself seems very much aware of its own modernity.

Rhoanbwy time-travels in his dream to the time of King Arthur, who criticizes him and his friends. Arthur is displayed as an imperfect king and warrior, however. This work is complicated to interpret, as it seems to criticize both Rhoanbwy's time and Arthur's without offering a resolution to the story. The story itself might be a commentary on how kings and stories are remembered, told with a humorous twist.

The Arthur of *Rhoanbwy's Dream* is shockingly different from the character portrayed in other works, in which he is a benevolent and patriarchal figure. In

Rhoanbwy's Dream, however, Arthur is presented as a campaigning king, his campsite roughness almost farcical in its extremity. Upon meeting Rhoanbwy's company, Arthur is disdainful of them, and derisively says, "I feel so sad that scum such as these are protecting this Island after such fine me that protected it in the past" (*Rhoanbwy's Dream* 217). The suggestion is that Rhoanbwy's company is ill-fit to protect Britain, and their presence is offensive to Arthur. Additionally, there is something of an awed fear surrounding the king. Arthur allows no disrespect—he strikes a horse on the nose hard enough to break the bone when its rider splashes him with water, and the company is told by one of the knights, "The emperor Arthur has never retreated, and if you were heard uttering those words, you would be a dead man" (*Rhoanbwy's Dream* 219). Arthur's reaction to perceived slights is hyperbolic, even if one would take into account the more active nature of Arthur's kingship in the works of the *Mabinogion*. Most would say that this scene is supposed to be humorous; Arthur, the great king his highly sensitive. Arthur's disdain of Rhoanbwy and the other soldiers of the future might also be considered humorous, as Arthur's eventual failure in the next scene indicates that he is no more worthy to protect the island than the knights he derides.

In the next scene, Owain and Arthur play a game called *gwyddbwyll* (a game that is similar to chess). As they play, they are interrupted multiple times and told that Arthur's men and Owain's "ravens" have begun fighting. Owain asks Arthur many times to call off his men, but Arthur merely tells him to get back to the game. The king seems to keep a cool head in the face of danger, but the narrator tells us, "It was as terrifying for Arthur as it was for Owain to hear that commotion above the *gwyddbwyll*" (*Rhoanbwy's Dream* 222). Shortly after this, Arthur, hearing that his young men and squires were being killed, asked Owain to call off his men. Owain

gives Arthur the same response he had been given. Arthur's men lose the battle, and Arthur crushes the game pieces. Arthur's original appearance as the level-headed chess-playing warrior is foiled by this fit of anger.

If *Rhoanbwy's Dream* merely meant to portray Arthur in a comical light, the ending scenes would be bizarre. Without resolving the issue of the men lost in the battle, a poet begins to sing the praises of King Arthur, and Rhoanbwy suddenly awakens no better for his time-traveling dream. It is very plausible that the writer of *Rhoanbwy's Dream* was commenting on how audiences choose to remember a historical or literary figure. The final lines of the story read, "This is why no one knows the dream—neither poet nor storyteller—without a book, because of the number of colours on the horses, and the many unusual colours both on the armour and their trappings, and on the precious mantles and the magic stones" (*Rhoanbwy's Dream* 226). The writer is aware of the dependence on the written word that the story requires in order to be told aloud, as well as the intricate details that appear to matter very much to this Arthurian story. This story reveals the Arthurian world for the overinflated, idealized world that is committed to paper and the imagination by depicting a more realistic, impatient Arthur not usually captured by storytellers.

This work, while complicated to interpret, offers the image of Arthur humorously judgmental and fallible. It is possible that the humorous nature of the story is meant to communicate something similar to what Geoffrey intended to communicate in his *History*; even the greatest king will one day fall. Again, this work seems to be aware of its own modernity, as it acknowledges that to remember the story, a poet would need a book. It makes much more sense to think of this story as the

author reminding us of the man behind the legend, and that legends rarely capture an entire individual.

How Culwch Won Olwen

How Culwch Won Olwen portrays Arthur in a rare position as he is obligated to take part in a quest. Arthur's knights, through bad luck and incompetence, require his help and put Arthur in such a position that he could not refuse the quest even if he wanted to. As Arthur leaves his castle and goes into a foreign land to complete the tasks set by Bencawr, Arthur's involvement in this quest is heavily politicized as Arthur's chivalric British society quests to overcome Welsh elements.

In *How Culwch Won Olwen*, Arthur is depicted physically participating in a quest, something that is strangely rare in Arthurian literature. Arthur himself rarely leaves his court, and when he does, he is surrounded—as a king would be—with a retinue of soldiers willing to come to his defense at any and all perceived slights. In this story, however, Arthur's soldiers seem to manipulate the situation so that Arthur is obligated to take on the most difficult aspects of the quest. When Culwch and the handful of knights Arthur provides him with quest for a year, they do not finish even half of the quest items. Arthur's intervention then becomes necessary. Piquemal writes, "On coming back to court, Ceir takes offense at Arthur ridiculing him... From then on Ceir disappears from the narration, forcing Arthur to take a continuous and integral part in the fulfillment tales" (Piquemal 14). One thing we can understand from this is that Ceir had essentially placed Arthur in a position in which he is obligated to be physically active. It should be noted that Arthur would have had to be involved in the quest all along. When Bencawr give Culwch the list of items that he must get, he

makes a bizarre statement, “*there is something you will not get*. Arthur and his huntsmen to hunt Twrch Trwyth. He is a powerful man and he will not accompany you, nor can you force him. This is the reason why—he is under my control” (*How Culwch Won Olwen* 199). The statement that Arthur is under Bencawr’s control is never revisited in the story, and causes no disruption in the plot. Furthermore, Piquemal points out that Arthur does not appear to have ever heard of Bencawr in earlier sections of the story (Piquemal 15). The only explanation I can provide for this inconsistency is that two different interpretations of the story were brought together in Lady Guest’s translation of the story, and never resolved. Arthur’s involvement in the boar hunt leads to Culwch’s success, and neither are penalized for Arthur’s involvement.

There is a political context for Arthur’s participation in the quest as well. Significantly, Arthur leaves his lands in order to complete the quest for his cousin, and begins either defeating or gathering mystical creatures and talismans. According to Piquemal, Arthur’s participation and success in the quest represents a success over the old culture of the country, “The predominance in the task list of figures that belong to a former cultural order is highly meaningful...Indeed, Arthur and the collective group he represents have to gain control over a cultural system that both obeys a different set of rules and that belongs to the past” (Piquemal 21). Piquemal also emphasizes Arthur’s involvement in the boar hunt, as it removes Arthur from the passive ruler to a civilizing pacifier and “a hunter-warrior who...hunts and kills the disruptive elements which threaten the well-being of his society” (Piquemal 15). So, not only is Arthur a force that goes out into the world to triumph over an outdated cultural system, he acts as a civilizing force. It is important to note that *How Culwch*

Won Olwen regards “civilizing” in relative terms; Bencawr’s head is chopped off at the wedding ceremony to much celebration on all sides. This final stroke reminds us that though Arthur represents British society, the work was still produced by the same old Welsh culture that he is depicted as defeating, and the story takes many of its figures and themes from the Welsh tradition.

How Culwch Won Olwen depicts a truly active king Arthur whose temperament does not seem influenced by Chrétien’s work at all. Arthur is thrown into the quest by his social obligations, but the quest is better for his involvement. Additionally, the quest takes on political meaning as the king leaves his kingdom to engage with a culture the British historically would attempt to conquer.

Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec*

Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec* takes the lead from Chrétien in that it focuses very little on Arthur at all, being more invested in the development of Erec as a knight. Hartmann chooses to focus on Erec because it is Erec who is crowned at the end of his story and needs to be prepared for his eventual reign as king over his own lands. Erec leaves Arthur’s court in order to become a better knight, and we often see the Erec avoiding the company of Arthur’s court even when he has learned those lessons that will allow him to be a very good knight. J.W. Thomas, the translator of *Erec*, presents a viable argument in his introduction: the jollity and celebration of Arthur’s court does not mesh well with the more sober ideals of Germanic chivalry (Thomas 18). I believe that this is the only reason that Erec, who is portrayed as restless at celebrations and eager to move on upon completion of each task, would avoid the Arthurian court—and therefore Arthur—in the way that he does.

Hartmann's Erec never seems comfortable at Arthur's court, despite the fact that he is a more than welcome member of the Round Table, counted among the three greatest knights of the fellowship. Hartmann, who positions Erec as the hero of his story, probably purposely turns Erec away from the Arthurian court in order to bring him in line with Germanic ideals of a king. Thomas writes "The basically secular nature of the Arthurian ethic made it somewhat incompatible with medieval Christianity...his realm stood outside the area of actual experience. The ideal society was not Arthur's, but that headed at the end by the humble and God-fearing Erec" (Thomas 18). The jovial nature of Arthur's court, which is always asking Erec to relax on his quest and attempts to distract him with courtly comforts is not one that fit well with Germanic culture. Erec does not break his fellowship with Arthur, as he makes it clear that he will always come to help Arthur should the need arise, and he often returns to Arthur's court bearing hostages or people who are applicants to the court. Erec simply chooses to remove himself from an atmosphere that is distracting from his quest to perfect his chivalric and spiritual self.

Erec is not only bothered by Arthur's court, either. He consistently attempts to escape feasting and celebrating. For example, when Erec decides to take Enite back to Arthur's court with him, he endures the celebration of the townsfolk, but a sunrise the next day, "Erec did not want to wait longer. He spoke of his lack of time and said that he had to take Enite and ride back" (Hartmann 47). Additionally, after the Joy of the Court scene, Erec remains at the foreign court only so long as he has to, "Since they would not let them go sooner, the three companion remained for the celebration, but Erec was not happy; indeed his heart was sorely troubled" (Hartmann 142). Erec is thinking about another duty he has: to help those women who had lost their husbands

to Mabonagrain. This is the case in nearly every scene in which Erec should be resting; he is thinking about his duties, and ways to improve his situation. This preoccupation with doing the right thing appears to be Hartmann's definition of good kingship. When Erec rules his kingdom, Hartmann writes that he "ruled the land so that it was at peace and did as the wise do who thank God for whatever honor they win and regard it as a gift from him. Many are misled by a belief which indeed deceives them when they become proud....King Erec did not behave thus, but praised God at all times for exalting him" (Hartmann 145). Clearly is meant to exemplify good, pious kingship as defined by Germanic culture, which was less secular than the French culture that produced Chrétien de Troyes's characters.

Erec's quest is of the utmost importance to Erec and, more importantly, Hartmann. Because Erec's progression to become a great knight and great ruler is of the greatest importance, Hartmann does not have Erec stop for the distractions that everyone from Arthur to his father-in-law would inflict on him. Hartmann writes Erec as impatient to move on to the next course of action that would improve him as a knight or spiritually. In Hartmann's view, this is the quality of a great leader, and Erec becomes a king that brings peace and prosperity to his land.

Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*

Like Hartmann, Wolfram von Eschenbach chooses to focus more on the development of his hero into a great king rather than write about Arthur's court. The spiritual nature of the Grail society creates a society that is distinct from Arthur's secular court. Wolfram's *Parzival* presents two kings that we can compare, Anfortas and Parzival. Arthur's kingdom is only important insofar as it is a starting place for

Parzival, who eventually would turn away from the purely chivalric society. Anfortas, as ruler of the Grail society, suffers from such a debilitating injury that he can hardly rule. This is acceptable, though, because Anfortas would be replaced by Parzival as head of the Grail society. The defining feature of the appropriateness of both Anfortas and Parzival as rulers is their masculine chastity.

To all appearances, the Grail society under Anfortas seems to be prosperous. When Parzival visits the Grail Castle, a great feast on splendid tableware is spread out before him by the power of the Grail, which seems to summon great quantities of good food as needed (Wolfram 127). Yet Anfortas is an unreliable leader. His wound is inflicted by God for sinning in pursuit of Love. Parzival's uncle, Trevizernt, when instructing him on spiritual matters, indicates that Anfortas's great sin was sexual indiscretion (Wolfram 244). Wilson identifies the concept of virginity being connected not only to sexual purity, but to being untouched by sin in general. The poison which courses through Anfortas's wound and causes him such pain is allegorical to the poison that is sin (Wilson 555). Because Anfortas is essentially bedridden by the pain of his sin, he cannot reasonably lead the Grail society. The punishment inflicted on Anfortas is important because it indicates that he is not spiritually worthy to lead the Grail society, but that he is to be replaced as king.

In what Wolfram must have thought would be a logical end to Chrétien's Perceval story, Parzival ascends to kingship of the Grail castle. Though Parzival comes to rule the Grail society, he is representative both the spiritual and the chivalric cultures. Parzival begins his quest with nothing more in mind than becoming a knight. After receiving an education from Guremaz (spelling), Parizval marries a queen, and though the marriage is not consummated, he inherits her lands and castles before

leaving her to complete his quest (Wolfram 110). Parzival must search for some sort of spiritual and chivalric fulfillment, but he wanders the world without a hint of what he must do. According to Wilson, Anfortas's pitiful figure was meant to be a test of Parzival's compassion, which Parzival failed by sticking to the flawed rules of chivalry that he was presented with (Wilson 553). The lesson of compassion is important in both the spiritual and secular societies presented by Wolfram, and it is only once Parzival understands the extent to which he has shirked his duties towards his fellow human beings can he return to the Grail Castle to make his mistake right. Parzival asks Anfortas what ails him, freeing Anfortas and identifying himself as the rightful king. After five years of journeying, Parzival is finally able to retrieve his wife, and there is rejoicing in the Grail society as they become king and queen.

Wolfram von Eschenbach enforces the strictest rules of kingship on the behalf of the Grail. Though Trevizent uses the word "virginity" quite often, he refers both to sexual purity and freedom from sin. Anfortas becomes an inappropriate king for the Grail society because he cannot maintain the standard of spiritual purity necessary. Parzival, on the other hand, grows into his spiritual and chivalric maturity at the same time, and becomes a more appropriate leader for the Grail society.

The Lancelot-Grail Cycle

The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is important when considering kingship for the same reasons it is important elsewhere. Not only does the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* cement the order of events which would define Arthur's reign—prosperity, the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, war, and Mordred's betrayal—but presents all of the characters in very human ways. Most of the characters' feelings and motivations are

described to some extent in order to explain why the members of Arthur's court are behaving in ways that do not fit in with ideals that they are supposed to represent. Arthur especially struggles with figuring out how to best approach situations which his society has no rules for. This work does not seek to display Britain as the best kingdom that ever existed, or Arthur as the best king living. Instead, the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* presents what was by the thirteenth-century the well-known story about the end of Arthur's court, adding to it by examining in depth all of the failings of the king himself.

The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is not as committed to presenting Arthur as the best of all kings as other works are. In addition to Arthur's many failings, the work presents other rulers who are just as good of rulers, and whose failures are not put on display like Arthur's. For example, when he receives a challenge from Galehaut, one of his well-traveled knights says,

[Galehaut] is a good half-foot taller than any other knight know, is better loved by his people than any other lord in the world, and has conquered more than anyone else of his age. He is young and unmarried, and those that have met him report that he is the noblest knight, the most gracious in the world and the most generous... I am not claiming to believe that he, or anyone else, could overpower you (*Lancelot-Grail* 111).

Usually, Arthur's enemies—particularly the giants—are depicted as despicable brutes. In this work, however, Galehaut seems just as able as Arthur to be a great king, and furthermore has some of those qualities which Geoffrey originally attributed to Arthur to define him as the best king living. In the *Lancelot-Grail*, however, Arthur only appears to be a superior king in comparison to Galehaut because Lancelot, Arthur's best knight, is able to defeat him in armed combat. Additionally, Arthur is not a conqueror as was in other stories. The focus of his campaign shifts from conquering

Rome to increase British power to a campaign of revenge on the continent in an attempt to punish Lancelot. Meanwhile, Arthur does not even seem as though he wants to be engaged with the battle. We are constantly reminded that Arthur is weighed down by many sorrows about the death of his knights and the betrayal of his wife. The audience is painfully aware throughout these scenes that Arthur's despair is partially his fault.

Arthur, like Guinevere, is presented very sympathetically in this work. We understand the inner-workings of his mind, and the agony that he goes through in understanding that his court is basically doomed from the moment he catches wind of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. It is clear that Arthur understands that the undeniable revelation of the affair will destroy his court, and yet he pursues it anyway. Arthur understands Lancelot and Guinevere's affair as a great dishonor and embarrassment to him. When he finds the pictures depicting evidence of the affair which Lancelot painted during his imprisonment at Morgan's tower Arthur at first says, "Lancelot could not shame me worse than by dishonoring me with my wife" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 368-369). Arthur then says, "I'll pursue this until they are caught together in the act. And then, if I fail to impose a punishment that will be remembered forever, I agree never to wear a crown again" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 370). Thus Arthur ties his kingship to his ability to regain the honor which he perceives to have lost. When Arthur returns to his castle, he begins a course of conduct which he knows will end in heartbreak.

Rather than attempting to catch Guinevere and Lancelot in the act of coitus himself, Arthur seeks to get his knights to confess to their knowledge of the affair and help him in finding the lovers out. Arthur's determination to involve the knights in the

matter is incredibly damaging to the fellowship between the knights. Gawain and his brothers are divided in how to deal with their knowledge of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. Gawain, the eldest of the knights and the one most commonly seen by Arthur's side is staunchly against speaking about the affair, as he knows that the resulting confrontation will permanently damage Arthur and his court. Arthur demands answers that he knows he will not like to hear, causing Gawain and Gaheriet to leave. Still, leave the conversation, despite Arthur's order to return and tell him at once. The brothers speak, "saying to each other how unfortunate it was that the word had been spoken. For if the king learned the truth and took action against Lancelot, the court would be destroyed and dishonored, since Lancelot would have on his side all the power of Gaul and of many another country" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 372). Their concerns are the same as Arthur's, yet Arthur continues to press on the remaining brother. After threatening Agravain with death in a scene which involves more violent gestures than French works typically portray Arthur with, Agravain reveals the content of their conversation, to which Arthur says, "I never suspect [Lancelot] of seeking my dishonor, and I've always honored and cherished him so much that he should never shame me in any way" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 373). This statement runs counter to the reality, as Arthur saw Lancelot's damning paintings and drew his own conclusions. Arthur's obstinate stance proves harmful to the court—even his vassals could predict the future ruin of the court, so logically Arthur would too. Still, he chooses to embroil the entire court in the mess.

Just as Arthur and Gawain predicted, the fellowship between the knights is irreparably damaged. Some of the knights flee with Lancelot to France, while the rest follow with Arthur. Throughout the siege waged on Lancelot and his followers, Arthur

regrets the circumstances which brought them to this point, and his grief is at times so crushing that his people are disheartened by the losses they have suffered. When Arthur returns to Britain to take back his land from Mordred's treacherous grasp, he suffers even more losses. One of his knights suggests that these losses were some sort of recompense for his great honors earlier in his life. Arthur's fortune is presented in this last chapter similarly to Boethius's *Wheel of Fortune*, with Arthur and Britain itself on a downturn (*The Lancelot-Grail* 390). Arthur, along with everyone who follows him, is aware that a series of mistakes made by Arthur led them to this most unfortunate time in their history. One knight weeps, "Oh, King Arthur, what great sorrow is ours on account of you!" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 394). Not a single one of Arthur's knights survive the ending tragedy. Of the two who survive the battle, Arthur crushes on in his near-death delirium, and the other, Girflet, chooses to pass away, "since his lord had left this world, [and] he would no longer remain in it" (*The Lancelot-Grail* 397).

The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is an emotional retelling of the downfall of Arthur's court. By displaying Arthur's feelings, the *Lancelot-Grail* makes it clear to the audience that Arthur is not blameless in the events that led up to the end of the kingdom. While Arthur's death is lamentable, it comes almost as a relief, for Arthur contributed to all of the tragedy in the last few chapters of his life, up to and including accidentally killing one of the few knights he has left. Arthur's inability to solve the problem presented by the confusing ties of fellowship and courtly love ultimately present him as a poor leader. Despite this, Arthur's reputation as a great king lives on precisely because his failures are humanistic.

Conclusion

Howard Bloch, in his article, “The Death of King Arthur and the Waning of the Feudal Age,” presents Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur* as the work that represents the medieval pessimism, recognizing the failings of feudalism, as “feudalism turned upon itself in slavish obedience to its own most cherished ideals” (Bloch 294). Clearly, however, even as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, medieval writers were well aware of the failings of the medieval system, and laughed and mourned at them in turn.

The various representations of Arthur as king show the mixed feelings medieval writers and their audiences had about kingship as it stood in this time period. Some writers like Geoffrey of Monmouth and the writers of the *Mabinogion* choose to remember Arthur as a great king in order to emphasize the superior nature of the court from a time before, indulging in idealized nostalgia. Chrétien presents a problematic Arthur, as his passivity is clearly unacceptable and causes his court to be perceived as weak, but there are not real consequences for his court. It is only once the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is written that Arthur’s public and personal failings spell tragic disaster. The gripping aspect of Lancelot-Grail Cycle is that there is no malicious intent between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Though they certainly feel anger and fear in their turn, there is real mourning felt by each of these characters. No one understands the tragedy of their situation better than King Arthur, who understands from his first discovery of the affair to his last battle that the rules of chivalry and courtly love never prepared him or anyone else for a situation in which the two ideals are irreconcilable with each other. Arthur’s gut-wrenching laments, which dot the last scenes of his life,

display not just a king facing the end of his reign, but a man whose world turned irrevocably and uncontrollably against him.

Arthur, Malory, and Conclusion

The thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries saw a flurry of Arthurian material being produced, including the Prose Tristan, Perceforest, the Alliterative and Stanzaic Mortes, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Ashe and Lacy “Chronology”). This list is by no means exhaustive, as the works listed are only those which were produced in France and England. Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur*⁹ is a work which became one of the most important of all Arthurian literature. *Le Morte Darthur* would go on to inspire centuries of Arthurian writings across the world. Malory’s work is not without its own influences, however. For this chapter, the focus on France and England is appropriate, as Malory’s work shows an inner conflict on the part of the author as he attempts to claim Arthur for England while giving credit to his French sources.

As the previous chapters show, Arthurian literature—the literature which makes up the Matter of Britain—is largely a product of French writers. Roger Sherman Loomis offers an explanation as to how interest in Arthur might have taken root in England after the Norman invasion, “after 1066 a number of important fiefs in England were held by Bretons, and they would naturally welcome entertainers from

⁹ I am using the Winchester manuscript version, as translated and edited by Helen Cooper.

their homeland. Everything goes to show that these entertainers, speaking French, found favor also with the Anglo-Normans” (Loomis 16). Anglo-Normans like William of Malmesbury looked on the finding of Gawain’s tomb, and Arthur’s prophesized return with interest (Loomis 15). The mutual interest of the English and French in Arthur—which had been present in both cultures since at least the twelfth century—began to draw the two cultures together in new ways.

The Hundred Years’ War was waged between France and England from 1337 to 1453. At this time, the idea of the nation was more well-formed than it had been in preceding generations; the governmental instability that plagued much of Western Europe—and which inspired many of the Arthurian writers—gave way to the beginnings of nationalism. In the early fifteenth century, one of the areas that France and England came into conflict over whether England was large enough to be considered a nation and exercise imperialist tendencies on its own n. The war between the English and the French helped to shape certain aspects of Arthurian literature. Nations, and the regions that composed them, were not well-defined, and Lancelot’s awkward political position is highlighted in Malory’s work because of this. Additionally, people could no longer be easily sorted into language-groups, as multilingualism confused these boundaries and, as Hodges writes, “the increasing use of English during the Hundred Years’ War... helped shape a linguistic community distinct from French” (“Why Malory’s Launcelot” 141). Though Malory borrows heavily from his French sources, there are many political and social factors at work in his interpretation of the Arthurian story.

Thomas Malory’s life and the circumstances under which *Le Morte Darthur* was published are factors that are unique to the work. Malory had a long criminal

career, and was repeatedly imprisoned for crimes such as theft, extortion, and rape. Ashe and Lacy note that these charges might have been “trumped up for political reasons” (Ashe and Lacy 128). A copy of Malory’s work found its way into William Caxton’s hands around 1485. Caxton published the manuscript with a few alterations, including adding a preface, which would become famous. Malory used both French and English sources when writing, and this leads to some issues with consistency between books; for example, a character might die in one storyline, only to reappear later. Ashe and Lacy note that Malory’s most successful attempts at merging narratives together occurs in the final two books, which deal with the fall of the Arthurian court (Ashe and Lacy 130). Malory’s work is the result of several hundred years of influence on the Arthurian legend, but told in such a way that serves Malory’s purposes. Malory is not so bold as to claim Arthur all for England, as he often gives credit to his French sources. Meanwhile, Caxton’s preface is more nationalistic. For the purposes of this chapter, I will identify some of the influences that are evident in *Le Morte Darthur*, and then will move on to how Malory’s representation of the three essential themes identified in this these (fellowship, courtly love, and kingship) are manifested.

Malory’s Le Morte Darthur

Malory undertook a huge project in melding together various French writings in order to create a fifteenth-century adaptation of the Arthurian legend. Malory, by making specific choices with his plot, changes the course of the story to a more “English” story. As he does this, the themes of fellowship, courtly love, and kingship

are so tightly woven together that it is difficult to separate the different aspects of these themes.

The basis of fellowship in *Le Morte* is not unique to Malory. Noguchi notes that self-control is not a characteristic ascribed to many of the Arthurian knights, but adds, “the aggressive aspects of freedom are checked by other knightly virtues, such as pity, humility and fellowship” (Noguchi 21). Malory borrows many of the ideals of the behavior which should be exemplified by the knights from earlier works, but also portrays some of his own cultural biases. Malory retains some of the fractiousness of France from an outsider’s view. According to Hodges, “lands and lords of France offer both threat and promise... French knights are dangerous precisely because their loyalties cannot be determined” (“Why Malory’s Launcelot” 139). Malory is clearly displaying an English bias against the French, yet Arthur’s court—at least at the beginning of the story—is not closed to allies from different areas. According to Hodges, “Arthur’s best knights come from regions outside England... Malory brings out the political implication of knights’ origins through the fifteenth-century lens of regional affinities (“Why Malory’s Lanuncelot” 137). This is certainly the case with Lancelot, whose fighting prowess is emphasized by Malory.

Lancelot’s abilities as a competent knight are emphasized by Malory. Although Lancelot still loves Guinevere, and this is problematic, he is able to engage in activities that are not meant for only Guinevere’s enjoyment. Lancelot’s first action when he enters the story is to seek adventure, telling Sir Lionel to get ready, “for we must go seek adventures” (Malory 95). The habit of engaging in adventures for the sport of it—without a lady to impress, a king to defend, or a lesson to be learned—has become something of a novelty in Arthurian literature at this point. Malory, then, is

positioning Lancelot as a man of action, rather than a man whose entire identity is formed by love.

Malory does not present courtly love in the same way that his predecessors do. Rather than presenting the thoughts and feelings of the characters, Malory uses actions to demonstrate the situations that they find themselves in. The relationship which develops between Lancelot and Guinevere is described in more detail than in other works, but it loses some of the nobility that the earlier works ascribe to the couple. Guinevere is presented as jealous and accusatory, and the couple argues. Moorman presents the argument that Malory, aware of the failings of his sources and the bias that his audience brings to the story, chooses to downplay those areas in which his sources over-glorify courtly love. Malory decides “to exploit the paradoxical nature of courtly love in order to define and emphasize the chief failure of Arthur’s court” and put adulterous courtly love on display as a “confusion of earlier times” (Moorman 165). The ambiguous nature of courtly love and chivalry, as discussed in previous chapters, is dealt with by Malory in that he emphasizes the part they play in the destruction of what Moorman calls “the Round Table civilization” (Moorman 165). Malory does not ignore the part that the fellowship has to play in the fall of Arthurs court. When describing Lancelot and Guinevere’s love, Malory writes,

For like as winter rasure doth always erase and deface green summer,
so fareth it by unstable love in man and woman. For in many persons
there is no stability...anon we shall deface and lay apart true love for
little or nought, that cost much thing. This is no wisdom nor no
stability, but it is feebleness of nature and great disworship, whoever
useth this (Malory 444).

This passage does not only blame two lovers for their “unstable love” but “many persons” who would “deface and lay apart true love.” Both Gawain and Arthur will later blame Agravaine for the strife between himself and Lancelot. Arthur says, “Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thy evil...hath caused all this sorrow” (Malory 482). Arthur ascribing the breakage of the fellowship to another is fairly in character for Malory’s interpretation of him, as his kingship

Malory begins *Le Morte Darthur* by showing Arthur as a fairly active king, but John Michael Walsh points out that Arthur is once again a passive figure in the middle section of the story, and his knights—first Agravain and then Gawain—are the instigators of his actions through most of the end of the story (Walsh 518). Walsh contends, however, that Arthur’s passivity in this case “exerts a considerable degree of control over the action, and his motivations and responses make for a great deal of dramatic interest” (Walsh 518). Malory’s Arthur, then, is defined by a passiveness with purpose, rather than the listless, weary feudal king presented in the French works.

The scene in which Arthur interrogates Agravain demonstrates how Arthur can be both passive and active. Malory writes that “the King had a deeming” of the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot (meaning that he suspected it), but did not want to believe it, out of love for Lancelot (Malory 470). Instead of investigating the matter himself, Arthur merely leaves it in the hands of Agravaine and Mordred, the two knights who hate Lancelot the most, to resolve the problem. This passive behavior on the part of Arthur might be indicative that Arthur does not want to know whether or not his best knight and queen are engaging in uncourtly behavior which shames him. Agravaine, sure of his plan, encourages Arthur to go on a hunting trip, saying “that night we shall take him with the Queen, and we shall bring him unto you quick or

dead” (Malory 470). Malory practically lifts this scene and all of its problems from the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*. Without considering the consequences of pursuing this situation without tact or discretion, Arthur lands himself in the same problematic situation in which his knights are pitted against each other. Bloch describes the problem of Arthurian kingship as,

A system without distinction between private and public domains, Arthurian kingship relies judicially upon the archaic legal procedures of trial by battle and entrapment in flagrante delicto for resolution of the conflicts occurring naturally within every society. Both serve to complicate and extend the very dilemmas that judicial institutions are meant to contain (Bloch 292).

The pursuit of Lancelot, both armies’ great losses, and the death of many good knights mirrors the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*’s events. Malory does not introduce new material to the legend, but brings the events together into a more cohesive narrative. Additionally, Malory pushes Arthur’s realization of his folly slightly farther. Arthur says “And much more am I sorrier for my good knights’ loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company...there was never Christian king that ever held such a fellowship together” (Malory 481-482). Arthur is aware that his greatest loss is not his queen or his position as king, but the fellowship which existed between his knight and himself. With the help of a few wrathful knights, Arthur destroys the trust and loyalty which exists between what could have been the greatest fellowship to ever exist.

Malory’s presentation of fellowship, courtly love, and Arthur’s kingship is multi-layered and complicated. Malory accepts some motifs from earlier works, but rejects others to substitute his own interpretation of a character or a scene. While Malory’s presentation results in slightly different readings—and much scholarly

debate—he continues the Arthurian tradition of viewing Arthur’s court in a pessimistic light, but forgiving the characters for their faults anyway. Malory’s intention seems to be to stay as true to the Arthurian tradition as makes sense to him in the fifteenth century.

Caxton’s Preface

William Caxton’s preface to Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* is an important part of the book, as Caxton’s intention is to inspire nationalism in readers of Malory’s work. Although the work is called a “preface,” many publishers now place it in the back of Malory’s work; this is because the work itself is separate from Malory’s work, and Caxton’s intentions seem very different from Malory’s.

The preface begins describing Arthur as “the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian and worthy, King Arthur,” (Caxton 528). This is a reference to Arthur’s status as one of the Nine Worthies, of which he is one of three Christians. Caxton places special emphasis on Arthur’s Englishness and writes that Arthur “ought most to be remembered among us English men before all other Christian kings” (Caxton 528). In this line, Caxton is encouraging English audiences to remember that they owe a certain amount of attention to Arthur. About the content of the book, Caxton writes, “And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in; but for to give faith and belief that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty. But all is written for our doctrine” (Caxton 530). Caxton rejects the idea that this book is merely a pleasant recreational read; by referring to the work as “our doctrine,” Caxton is encouraging English readers to take the nobility, bravery, and daring exemplified by the knights to heart. Emulation of the characters is

not necessarily what Malory seems to be aiming for, as he presents his characters as realistic and reactive in the situations that they find themselves in. Caxton's preface, short as it is, is important to understand as both separate from Malory's work, but also an important interpretation of the story from a fifteenth-century audience member.

There are many forces at work in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. The political and cultural scene is totally different from when the twelfth-century works were produced. Malory, as a writer, chooses to portray his characters in ways that are different from the earlier works, but stay true to traditional story. While Malory seems inclined to give credit to his French sources, Caxton seems to want to reclaim Arthur from the French.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis is not exhaustive in its examination of the development of the Arthurian legend through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but it does examine some of the most popular and influential examples of Arthurian literature. Arthurian literature is not merely the Matter of Britain, but a vast collection of work that appealed to many different peoples across time and space. The most important parts to understanding why Arthurian literature progressed the way that it did can be divided into those areas which have been discussed in this thesis: fellowship and fraternity, women and courtly love, and Arthurian kingship. These areas each important because they each identify an aspect of Arthurian literature which shifts as the legend is adapted by writers of different cultures.

The most consistently displayed aspect of Arthurian literature is the fellowship between the knights. Arthurian society is built out ties of loyalty between the knights

and their king. Though the knights pursue their own interests, they are often attempting to grow into the chivalric maturity. King Arthur's legitimacy as a ruler is dependent upon his knights' ability to behave appropriately and offer support to him when he needs it. Unfortunately, the writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries often depict the knights as being unable to do this, indicating a pessimistic view of the feudal ties which are supposed to keep the fellowship together. The competing demands of chivalry and the difficulties in balancing public and personal responsibilities causes cracks to appear in the veneer of knighthood.

One of the most important, but oftentimes the most problematic, matters that the knights struggle with is balancing and understanding courtly love. Courtly love is meant to be mutually ennobling, and often the women of Arthurian literature are helpful agents towards their lovers and husbands. The problem comes in when a knight mismanages his responsibilities towards his kingdom and his wife, or when a lover takes advantage of the powerful position courtly love puts her in. Guinevere is a character whose characterization is constantly shifting as authors choose to portray her. Her status as adulteress usually sticks to her, regardless of the work she appears in, and her behavior usually affects Arthur or the legitimacy of his rule.

King Arthur is at once a king to whom many people owe their loyalty and a passive figure incredibly sensitive to the winds of change. Arthur's ability to rule well is affected by many factors outside of himself, and he has the potential to be negatively affected quite often. Though Arthur is occasionally presented as an active king, the focus that many medieval authors have on knights and questing renders Arthur less useful. In the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Arthur is ultimately the one

responsible for the end of his empire, as his actions lead to the disbanding of the fellowship, something that is acknowledged in all relevant texts to be a great tragedy.

With certain aspects of the Arthurian legend established as tradition by the end of the thirteenth century, Thomas Malory interprets scenes and dialogue to create a new adaptation of Arthurian material. Malory, drawing heavily from French sources, acknowledges his interpretation as being just that. William Caxton, who writes the preface to Malory's work, seems more concerned with reclaiming Arthur as English, and encouraging readers to buy into the noble qualities that portrayed in the book. Malory's interpretation of the story would inspire waves of Arthurian material over the course of the next few centuries.

Arthurian tradition has been preserved for centuries because people find the story—and the tragedy—interesting. One cannot escape the pains that medieval authors went through to portray both Arthur's goodness and his fallibility. The characters that have become embroiled in the Arthurian tradition are both lovable and heartbreaking. Though an Arthurian story will usually end in tragedy, the humanity of the characters—especially the king—and their flawed devotion to one another inspired the medieval imagination and continues to draw a modern audience.

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