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# When Family and Politics Mix: Female Agency, Mixed Spaces, and Coercive Kinship in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terme Wathelyne, and "The Deth of Arthur" from Le Morte Darthur

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Lainie Pomerleau entitled "When Family and Politics Mix: Female Agency, Mixed Spaces, and Coercive Kinship in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terme Wathelyne, and "The Deth of Arthur" from Le Morte Darthur." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Laura L. Howes, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Dzon, Anthony Welch

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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When Family and Politics Mix: Female Agency, Mixed Spaces, and Coercive Kinship in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terme Wathelyne*, and “The Deth of Arthur” from *Le Morte Darthur*

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### Abstract

In this paper I will be examining the relationship and rivalry between Morgan and Guinevere, sisters by law, and the intricate combination of love, family loyalty, and political obedience they both elicit from their shared nephew, Gawain through the systemized use of coercive kinship. I will be arguing that Morgan and Guinevere are connected by a desire to exert control and influence on the masculine, chivalric world of Camelot. In order to do so, Guinevere accesses and utilizes the masculinized, political forms of influence available to her, while Morgan is dependent on the more traditionally female modes of access through family lineage and blood ties. Either way, Morgan and Guinevere, in an effort to establish or maintain their influence and power in Arthur's court must rely on their nephew's courtly obedience and loyalty owed to them as their nephew and, in a larger sense, as their knight. Gawain, who owes both women fealty and submission according to the rules of chivalry (as his lord's queen and his aunt and his blood relative and aunt) behaves as their witness and knight. He acts as test subject and participant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, knightly escort, witness, and participant in *The Awyntrs off Arthur at the Terne Wathelyne*, and as loyal knight and nephew in Sir Thomas Malory's "The Deth of Arthur." In each of these texts, Gawain acts as an example of the chivalric code, but does so within a distinctly female-manipulated courtly space.

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## Introduction: The Structure of Coercive Kinship

English Arthurian women present an interesting set of contradictions within medieval literature. Powerful enough to incite quests and manipulate men through magic and beauty, they are often pushed to the side by texts and critics alike. They are confined to marginal feminine spaces, relegated to the position of female other in tales that focus on heroic deeds and violent battles fought by knights. However, this model limits female characters, notably Guinevere and Morgan le Fay, to the edges and boundaries of the text's action, thus minimizing the literary significance of major female characters in the legend of Arthur. While there are certainly plenty of women in the tales who are nothing more than a means to a questing end, some of the more powerful women operate beyond the limited space provided in readings that concentrate only on their secondary status. Instead, I think it might be more fruitful to argue that Morgan and Guinevere are neither marginal nor "othered" characters, but capably operate as fully in the political and social landscape of the text as their nephew Gawain. What allows all of these characters an equal agency (which they all access through different modes and means) is a system of political and familial kinship where everybody has a vested interest and capability to affect alliances which are self-determined and advantageous.

In this paper I will be examining the relationship and rivalry between Morgan and Guinevere, sisters by law, and the intricate combination of love, family loyalty, and political obedience they both elicit through a system of coercive kinship from their shared nephew, Gawain. Morgan and Guinevere are connected by a desire to exert control and influence on the masculine, chivalric world of Camelot; Guinevere accesses and utilizes the masculinized, political forms of influence available to her (allowing her to build her political family), while

Morgan is dependent on the more traditionally female modes of family lineage and blood ties, which she privileges over political relationships. Either way, Morgan and Guinevere, in an effort to establish or maintain their influence and power in Arthur's court must rely on the ties Gawain's chivalric and familial compliance provides them as their nephew. Gawain, who owes both women loyalty and obedience according to the political and social rules of Camelot (to Guinevere as his lord's queen and his aunt, and Morgan as his blood relative) behaves as their witness and knight. He is a test subject and participant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a knightly escort, witness, and participant in the *Awntyrs off Arthur at the Terne Wathelyne*, and a loyal knight and nephew in Sir Thomas Malory's "The Deth of Arthur." In each of these texts, Gawain acts as an example of the chivalric code, but does so within a distinctly female-manipulated courtly and familial space.

It is tempting, especially when reading medieval romances, to categorize that world as a place where men and women had clear roles, defined by their social class<sup>1</sup> and gender. However, to do so is to ignore the political realities within which these works were created. The English feudal system was a sophisticated matrix of affiliations and loyalty, which, if we even glance at history, was all too easily disrupted by family and political feuds and alliances. As such, I would like to suggest a similarly complex mechanism for examining the role of the medieval political and domestic feudal-family; I propose that the medieval family and its members be less defined by our modern sense of "family," but instead be characterized as an aggressively coercive political, social, and domestic function that helped create, protect, and disrupt power.

While paternal and maternal elements in medieval social structures have been examined at some length by literary scholars, the role of the family as both a domestic and political unit in

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<sup>1</sup> Social class did create social boundaries and characterizations which are reflected in medieval texts, but this paper is concerned with characterization of the aristocratic female characters in Arthur's legend. Therefore, I will be concentrating on gender roles within the feudal households of the nobility.



which individuals negotiate with one another for power and influence has been somewhat ignored. While there is no question that most of the figures of power in the medieval world were men, it does seem a gross over-simplification to assume that their way to power lacked barriers from men and women of their own and rival families and courts, and to do so is to ignore the political realities within which these works were created. The Anglo-Norman and later English feudal system was a sophisticated arrangement of allegiances and loyalty that was all too easily disrupted by family and political feuds and coups. Therefore, a similarly elaborate means for examining the role of the political and domestic family needs to be put into practice in order to allow for a more leveled representation of political and familial kinship. By the late 1980's, historians like Eleanor Searle began reevaluating medieval families and their political roles. She coined the term "predatory kinship" to explain a model of Norman history that paralleled Carolingian history<sup>2</sup>. In an effort to use her scholarship, but within the bounds of literary inquiry, I have used Searle's "predatory kinship" as a jumping off point for the theoretical framework I like to call coercive kinship.

Coercive kinship is concerned with the study of family members' "capability (not the right, but the ability) to produce a desired effect, to bring about an intended response" (Searle 2). I explore the process of political and familial power formation as products and innovations of individual family-member coercion in medieval Arthurian legends. If, as Searle argues, the Anglo-Norman "foundation of power lay not in disciplined retainers but in family" (159), then it also seems clear that the feudal power formation that is reflected in the English Arthurian legend is "based upon family manipulation, not upon public, ducal rights" (8 - 9). These political-familial bonds of kinship then had twice the ability to generate or lose power, either through

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Eleanor Searle's book *Predatory Kinship and the Creation of Norman Power, 840-1066* for further reading on the historical model of predatory kinship in Norman France.

lines of lineage or lines of alliance, often formed through marriage, thus creating an intricate web of single and double bonds of kinship: “It imposed heavy restrictions and responsibilities on the individual (as does membership in any human group), but it also left room for many choices – choices about the individual made by the family and regional warchiefs, and choices about his destiny made by the individual” (159 – 160). These individual choices, particularly those made by women, actively influenced the long term success or failure of ruling families, as women had the ability, through marriage and childbirth, to form double bonds of blood and political ties. If, as Searle points out, men and women both had expectations of inheritance (either for themselves or their children), and the inheritance consisted not just of lands and material goods but also the system of political and related allies built up by the previous generations, then “these real loyalties are why powerbuilding could proceed rapidly once the leader had sufficient resources to afford a high-status wife and her demanding children” (144). Just as there were two types of kinship, there were two types of fertility available to women, political and biological fertility, both of which could provide powerful yields. While a woman could bear children biologically, if she could not create and enforce lines of political alliance, her blood kinship is rendered meaningless and powerless.

While lineage alone could not guarantee political kinship with the powers that be, if political kinship could be established along already established family lines, the ruling family could ensure that those in their thrall were tied by twice as many bonds than those simply connected through alliances (or simply by blood, who could attempt to establish political kinship with another ambitious family). Therefore, instead of examining the aristocratic families of Camelot as an either/or of blood lines and chivalric compliance, it would instead be more useful to look at Arthur and his family “as a warrior kin-group: district leaders who over the generations

gradually came to be identified as kinsmen [...] self-interest, not self-discipline, is the characteristic most notable of this group” (Searle 10). Such a view of Camelot turns the court into a mixed space of family feuds and political ambition where different individuals and alliances jockeyed for primacy.

The deployment of power and ambition allowed by coercive kinship was not limited only to men, as women had an equal share and interest in their family’s political and domestic relations<sup>3</sup>:

We will see their politics more clearly by putting their women, as they did, into that [political] landscape. And we shall not assume, as is done so often, that the women were subservient prey and plunder. There is no reason to suppose that they did not share the predatory values of their society, and, as we shall see, there is evidence that they did (Searle 11).

The reason why this model is so significant is that it encourages scholars to study female characters like Guinevere and Morgan le Fay as individuals whose agency is equal to that of their male counterparts. This is not to say that, as characters, they could pursue their goals using the same methods as their male counterparts; rather, it is to argue that while their means may be a bit different, both women had the same level of agency available to them as family members like Sir Gawain had.

I would contend that under the auspices of coercive kinship, men attempted to manipulate their family members and kinship systems (which extended far beyond parents to include siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and godparents) through the martial avenues available to them,

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<sup>3</sup> “Even among the nobility, before the transformations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (which saw the beginnings of the exclusion of daughters and, partially, of the practice of favoring the eldest son), women generally participated in successions, including rights to landed property” (Derouet 33).

while women attempted this same manipulation using the methods available to them, which would include advantageous marriages, childbirth, and the loyalty of their own family, whose duty it was to offer them protection and support in the event they were widowed or otherwise neglected by their spouses' families<sup>4</sup>. Instead of simply viewing women as only tokens or objects who were traded by men in marriage and treaties, but instead as individuals who were active participants in the power formation medieval kinship allowed, they cease to be marginal, subservient characters whose fates are entirely in the hands of men. This is not to say that men were not the ultimate decision makers in a legal sense - this is to say that women were active participants in the formation of "adaptable and adaptive" (Searle 161) kinship structures, which, when attached to the alliances formed by marriages (either as a wife, sister, mother, or daughter), gave them access to power and control.

I have chosen to apply the theoretical framework of coercive kinship to three texts: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terme Wathelyne*, and "The Deth of Arthur" from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In "Othering the Other: Feminine Political and Familial Modes of Power in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," I argue that Guenore and Morgan le Fay's rivalry and its resulting power struggle are central to the narrative of *SGGK*; instead of characters marginal or incidental to the story, they are the tent poles around which the poem is built, which in turn supports a reading that regards both women as characters whose agency is no more limited than their male counterpart, Sir Gawain. The following chapter, "Overlapping Spaces: Gainour and Gawayn's Family and Political ties in *The Awntyrs off*

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<sup>4</sup> In northern France and Anglo-Norman England, "the 'dowry' simply comprised the goods that the woman brought into her new household upon marriage. This did not mean that this matrimonial prestation would constitute the entirety of what she would receive from her family of origin. Upon the death of her father and mother she would be able, by restoring what she had received at the time of her marriage (or its value), to participate in the succession equally with all her brothers and sisters" (Derouet 32).

*Arthure at Terne Wathelyne*,” deals specifically with the overlapping of politico-masculine and intimate-feminine spaces and the alliance building opportunities they afford Gaiour in relation to Gawain. The third and final chapter, “The (Weak) Ties That Bind: The Ultimate Failure of Single-Bond Kinship in Sir Thomas Malory’s ‘The Deth of Arthur’ ” argues that because Gwenyver focuses only on building political kinship, while Morgan concentrates particularly on reinforcing kinship by lineage, neither woman is able to build the dual bonds of political and family relations necessary to make coercive kinship work, thus explaining the ultimate failure of both women to secure their power through either their political or blood nephew Gawain.

Family and political ties are my central concern in this study of the two most important women in Arthur’s life, as well as his most “parfit” knight Gawain. Because of the rather glamorous nature of all three characters and the masculinity central to medieval chivalry, it is understandable that many scholars find it useful to characterize Guinevere and Morgan in accepted female romantic identities, like the good queen, the seducer, the magician, the inciter of quests. However, these are not the only readings available, and, I would suggest, are rather limiting. Instead, I propose that these characters and texts be placed in a more complex and difficult medieval landscape where family and politics not only mix, but depend on one another to attain, maintain, and create a legacy of power. In this space, all family members, political, blood, or both, are equal players in that they all have an equal interest in securing and expanding their power base, either through more traditionally masculine modes of battle, feminine modes of family lineage, or in hybrid arrangements that allow the masculine political and feminine domestic to mingle and double their efforts to reinforce the bonds of feudal and social alliance.

Chapter 1: Othering the Other: Feminine Political and Familial Modes of Power in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* created, along with *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Erkenwald*<sup>5</sup> a small but powerful corpus of alliterative, Middle English poetry. While little is known about him, the influence of his works, especially in regards to the English language Arthurian legend, is unquestionable<sup>6</sup>. His only secular poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, became a memorable, innovative, and much cited source for studies and creation of the Arthur legend, particularly in regards to the character Gawain, and his relationship with chivalry, courtliness, and women.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK) appears to have been written toward the end of the fourteenth century, and the poet's dialect points to a geographic area near Cheshire, about two hundred miles northwest of London (Borroff xiii). He is often referred to as an example of the alliterative resurgence in Middle English literature, a phenomenon his contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer was well aware of, as he notes in *The Parson's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*: "I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by letter" (l. 41). Other than this, everything known about him is derived from an analysis of his knowledge of religious doctrine, aristocratic lifestyle, and the sophistication of his writing. It seems clear the *Gawain*-poet not only had familiarity with the English Arthurian tradition laid out in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1135) and Wace's translation of it, *Le Roman de Brut*, but Chretien de Troye's Arthurian stories and other regional traditions such as the Welsh and Irish legends related to Arthur (Elisabeth

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Borroff, the translator of *Gawain Poet: the Complete Works*, attributes authorship of *Sir Erkenwald* to the *Gawain*-Poet: "there have always been scholars who thought it was the work of the *Gawain* poet. Needless to say, the author of the five translations published here concurs with their opinion" (xv – xvi).

<sup>6</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience*, *Pearl*, and *Cleanness* "appear side by side" in MS. Cotton Nero A (Borroff xv). *Sir Erkenwald* is located in MS. Haley 2250 (Borroff xv).

Brewer 244)<sup>7</sup>. However, by making Gawain (who enjoyed great popularity in Britain and its environs, but whose role and importance is greatly diminished in Continental versions of Arthur) the central figure of his poem, it can be asserted that in the alliterative *SGGK*, the *Gawain*-poet created an Arthurian addition to the legend that was distinctly British.

Derek Brewer argues, quite rightly, that the poet “must have been educated,” as well as “of a certain social standing,” and was most likely “a courtly poet of some kind” (2). Not only was he a capable and talented writer, but apparently comfortable and familiar enough with church doctrine and pedagogical techniques, courtly romances and other aristocratic genres to bring them all together in *SGGK*. He was also well versed in the practice of alliterative poetry, which had survived in older forms still used in popular, oral entertainments, which makes him not just a courtly poet, but a distinctly English writer (Brewer 5). It is a credit to the *Gawain*-poet that he manages to use homely, popular techniques in a political, religious, courtly genre like Arthurian romance. For the aims of this paper, it is this poet’s familiarity with the rules, customs, traditions, and rituals of courtly life, specifically male-female and liege-lord relationships, that is of primary importance, a distinction that must be made when dealing with a text as complex, read and analyzed as *SGGK*<sup>8</sup>.

The significance of women in *SGGK* has long been debated, and the work of critics such as Geraldine Heng has helped expand the discussion beyond the dismissive treatment Morgan le Fay and Guenore’s characters had received in the past from critics such as Derek Brewer and J.R.R. Tolkien, who felt that the main thrust of the story was about the virtues of masculine

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<sup>7</sup> The beheading game and incident as described in *SGGK* seem to be taken from the two versions of the Middle Irish *Fled Bricrend (Bricriu’s Feast)* (Elisabeth Brewer 245).

<sup>8</sup> Much work has been done on the trove of religious (including Christian, pagan, and Judaic) symbolism and tropes in *SGGK*, as well as the importance and specificity of the hunting scenes and the famous pentangle allegorization (only seen in this text), which is understandable with such an important and influential piece. For the sake of this paper, I will be working almost exclusively with the worldly, secular, courtly themes, and the way elements such as gender and religion work within those spaces.

chivalry, and the difficulties of maintaining such high ideals. In her essay “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Heng addresses the tradition of reticence that Brewer and other critics had to giving the female characters in *SGGK* anything other than marginal characterizations, and who confidently and firmly identified this text as exclusively masculine: “[Brewer] finds this text ‘a fascinating poem for any middle-aged soldiers and politicians who may be able to read a slightly difficult Middle English dialect: not much likely to attract women and undergraduates’” (194). While Brewer’s work has become an understandable standard in medieval studies, his influential and gendered reading of *SGGK* is not only dated, but it dismisses the complexities and sophistication the poem as well.

Geraldine Heng instead asserts that “every woman in the poem may be said to refigure another – to function as a point of reference and construction, an other for the others,” and that “the construction of each woman entails a point of anchoring in another” (200 - 201). Guenore’s appearance as a beautiful, courtly lady is reflected in Lady Bertilak’s introduction, and in the feast scenes at both castles they parallel one another in their prominently high seating next to Gawain and other knights – one lady is replaced with another, and both have a desire for Gawain’s compliance. Correspondingly, Morgan reproduces the Virgin Mary’s supernatural and intercessory aspects, although they intercede in the affairs of Gawain for different reasons. Essentially, she argues for a reading of the poem that includes a complementary feminine narrative to the masculine structure. She describes this subtext as a feminine desire that is rooted in plurality – feminine desire (for power, for Camelot, for Gawain’s service) is repeated, and this repetition is mirrored and linked through the actions and desires expressed by Guenore, Morgan, the Lady and the Virgin Mary. However, I would like to push her argument a bit further, and examine Guenore and Morgan as characters that do not strictly operate within the bounds of a



feminine narrative or subtext, or as characters whose actions essentially feed their common desires. Rather than isolate Morgan and Guenore as figures connected by Heng's object- subject relationship in the feminine narrative chain of "plans initiated by one woman [that] are directed at another, performed by a third and modulated by the actions of a fourth"<sup>9</sup> (197), I believe it is more effective to move both characters out of the feminized, and, while not intentional, marginalized space of a secondary or hidden narrative, and inspect their roles within the story as full agents, whose motivations and desires are equal to any other character in the story. Both women interact in spheres of masculine influence easily, and it is their relationship and rivalry (mediated by their male relations and vassals) that sets up the narrative structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

This chapter maintains that the story of *SGGK*, while seemingly masculine and operating in male-dominated spaces is actually temporally operating in feminized spaces simultaneously. Both Guenore and Morgan have equal access to the easily manipulated rules of chivalry and both make the most of it, albeit in different ways; Guenore employs masculine political modes while Morgan uses the more feminized methods of magic and family. Although females were nominally marginalized in the chivalric tradition, neither character is marginal in its traditional definition – even though they both operate on the boundaries, they move in and out of the main geography of the poem, and are not relegated to the edges of the text. Like the bleeding of the masculine and feminized spaces, Guenore and Morgan blend marginality with the mainstream. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* details the ways women are not just central to the Arthurian legend, but the ways they deal with each other through the masculine entities and customs in their lives. Morgan and Guenore should not be regarded as merely sideline players in *SGGK*, but rather the characters who provide the primary action around which the text and story to unfold.

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<sup>9</sup> Morgan le Fay, Guenore, Lady Bertilak and the Virgin Mary, respectively.

The story opens at the Christmas festivities in Camelot. It is a young Camelot, before the infidelities, murders, and grail quest have torn it asunder: the “salad days” of Arthur. The Knights of the Round Table are all present, and are in close proximity to the ladies of the court. The focal point of the hall is an elevated platform where Arthur stands and Guenore is seated<sup>10</sup> next to Gawain and other well-known knights. This marks a point of intersection between the masculine and feminine space of Arthur’s court. Guenore’s ascendancy in the former is secured by her physical location high upon a dais, which also works to reinforce her political importance as the only woman at court so honored. It is apparent that it is her nephews, Gawain and Aggravaine, who are honored by their closeness to their aunt, and not the other way around:

Ʒe best burne ay abof, as hit best semed,  
 Whene Guenore, ful gay, grayped in þe myddes,  
 Dressed on þe dere des, dubbed al aboute  
 [...]  
 Ʒe comlokest to discrye  
 Ʒer glent with y3en gray,  
 A semloker þat euer he sy3e  
 Soth mo3t no mon say (Tolkien ll. 73-83)  
 [The best seated above, as best it beseemed,  
 Guenevere the goodly queen gay in the midst  
 On a dais well decked and duly arrayed

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<sup>10</sup> My reading of the poem lends me to believe that Arthur is standing at the table on the platform where Guenore and Gawain are sitting: “Thus þer stondes in stale þe kyng hisseluen,/ Talkkande bifore þe hy3e table of trifles fule hende” (Tolkien ll. 107-108).

[...]

Fair Queen without a flaw,

She glanced with eyes of gray.

A seemlier that once he saw,

In truth, no many could say] (Borroff, ll. 73-83).

This juxtaposition of Arthur and his knights, and Guenore with her knight, creates an interesting scenario of aristocratic courtliness and family relations. Stemming from his chivalric description in *Le Roman de Brut*, Gawain became popularly known as knight to all ladies as Arthurian stories were spread and reproduced, and, as such, became considered a knightly paragon of manhood<sup>11</sup>. Not only is sitting next to the queen is quite an honor for Gawain, his seat away from the other knights also indicates the mingling of the masculine and martial with feminized, separated space of Guenore's platform. This early instance of Guenore and Gawain's closeness in the actual court of Camelot also seems to indicate a personal connection between the powerful queen and her younger in-law, who is also her husband's knight and nephew.

Guenore's seat at the center of the hall and the significance of the men with whom she surrounds herself is suggestive of her ambitions to political prowess and importance, as she is the only woman in this scene with the power to be seated in this manner. The road to these goals is made more difficult, although not impossible, by her being a woman, and thus a legal and connubial vassal to Arthur. It is through her role as a wife that she can attempt to realize her ambition: "Women derived their power from families intent on deploying all their human resources on a broad horizontal plane for the immediate acquisition of wealth and status in an

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<sup>11</sup> Although the exact source material for *SGGK* is unknown, it is clear that the *Gawain*-poet was very familiar with the Arthurian legend, and his characterization of Gawain and his chivalric devotion to the Virgin Mary implies a knowledge of Gawain's reputation as a defender and protector of all women.

expanding world. They endowed daughters and widows with wealth in pursuit of strategies dependent on marriage alliances and military enterprise.” (McNamara 19). However, because of the rules of chivalry, as well as the traditions of family kinship, she must develop a system of personal and political support and security, and for this important role she has chosen to ally herself with Gawain, one of Arthur’s favored nephews:

There gode Gawan wat3 grayþed Gwenore bisyde,  
 And Agrauayn a la dure mayn on þat oþer syde sittes,  
 Boþe þe kynges sistersunes and ful siker kni3tes;  
 Bischoþ Bawdewyn abof bigine3 þe table,  
 And Ywan, Vryn son, ette with hymself.  
 Þis were di3t on þe des and derworþly serued,  
 And siþen mony siker segge at þe sidborde3 (Tolkien, ll. 108-115)  
 [There Gawain the good knight by Guenevere sits,  
 With Agravain a la dure main (of the hard hand) on his other side,  
 Both knights of renown, and nephews of the king.  
 Bishop Baldwin above begins the table,  
 And Yvain<sup>12</sup>, son of Urien, ate with him there.  
 These few with the fair queen were fittingly served;  
 At the side tables sat many stalwart knights] (Borroff, ll. 108 – 115).

Because Guenore has married into Camelot without bringing any male kin upon whom she can impose the loyalty of lineage<sup>13</sup>, she must use political and chivalric means to assure

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<sup>12</sup> Yvain, also known as Owain or Uwain in other legends, is Morgan le Fay’s son and Gawain’s cousin.

<sup>13</sup> *SGGK*, like many Arthurian stories, does not discuss Guenore’s family, male or otherwise. If any of Guenore’s relations are at the court as presented in the poem, none are important enough to be seated next

herself of a way into power and a dependable means of protection. Because of his reputation and importance to the court of Camelot, it does not seem surprising that Gawain is her pick, or that she has a preference to keep him by her, both literally and metaphorically, and away from some of the other knights of the order, many of whom are his brothers and cousins, all of which denotes their shared lineage with Arthur. What does seem surprising is Gawain's willingness to be so separated from the very activities and individuals that help solidify his public and private identity. I am not suggesting that Gawain prefers Guenore to his uncle, or that there is anything romantic or sexual between the characters; I am suggesting that Guenore and Gawain seem to have a special link between them, and that Gawain values her patronage on an almost equal level to her husband's, thus emphasizing her political significance in the feudal court.

A new visitor, the Green Knight, arrives unannounced to the feast and challenges King Arthur or any of his knights to attempt to behead him. Arthur is ready, and eager to take up the challenge: "Now hatȝ Arthure his axe, and þe halme grypeȝ" (Tolkien l. 330). However, Gawain, seated next to Guenore, takes up the challenge on behalf of his king and lord, asking in addition for the queen's blessing:

Gawan, þat sate bi þe queen,  
 To þe kyng he can enclyne,  
 'I beseche now with saȝeȝ semes  
 Þis melly mot be myne.'  
 'Wolde ȝe worþilych lorde,' quoth Wawan to þe kyng,  
 'Bid me boȝe fro þis benche, and stoned by yow þere,  
 þat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table,

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to their kinswoman or well-known enough to merit a place in the tale. All of the knights mentioned in the poem and connected to Guenore and Camelot in the text are relations of Arthur and Morgan through their mother Igrayne, a point that is dwelled upon later in the work.

And þat my legge lady liked not ille,

I wolde com to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche (Tolkien L. 339-347)

[Gawain by Guenevere

Toward the king doth now incline:

“I beseech, before all here,

That this melee may be mine.”

“Would you grant me the grace,” said Gawain to the king,

“To be gone from this bench and stand you there,

If I without discourtesy might quit this board,

And if my liege lady misliked it not,

I would come to your counsel before your court noble] (Borroff ll. 339 – 347).

There are many things happening quickly here; Arthur is showing his characteristic eagerness (and short sightedness) to take on a potentially fatal physical challenge, even though his death would mean the end of his kingdom and would leave Guenore with no protection in the inevitable fights to gain control of his throne. Gawain, perhaps out of a sense of shame, chivalric obligation, or both, steps in for the King, and does ask the queen’s permission. While he asks her permission largely out of adherence to the chivalric code, this act of tact also implies her political as well as social power in Camelot, which lends support to the claim that Guenore is comfortable utilizing masculine, political means as ways to secure her importance and legitimacy at court. By asking for her blessing in conjunction with the king’s, Gawain is putting his aunt by marriage on equal feudal footing with his uncle by blood: “Bot for as much as 3e are myn em I am only to prayse, / No bounté bot your blod I in my bodé know” [“That I have you for uncle is my only praise;/ My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth;] (Tolkien ll. 356-357, Borroff ll. 356-

357), thus negating the importance of blood ties as privileged over forged alliances. Hence, in this sense, Gawain's relationship with Guenore is just as meaningful and binding as his relationship with his other family members, male and female alike.

Guenore is a necessary, albeit understudied, part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In one light, she fits the usual model of Arthurian female-as-quest-inciter or female-as-chivalric-proving-ground. Her role in the Green Knight's illusion and visit is central; as is revealed late in the poem, she is the entire reason for the intricate test. The *Gawain*-poet seems to be working from the understanding that the audience knows the history and shared dislike between Morgan and Guenore, which stems in some earlier tales, like the *Lancelot-Grail* chronicle, from a love affair Morgan had with young kinsman of Guenore<sup>14</sup>.

Monion hym had douté,

Bi þat his resoun3 were redde.

For þe hede in his honed he halde3 vp euen,

Toward þe derrest on þe dece he dresse3 þe face (Tolkien ll. 442-445)

[There were many in the court that quailed

Before all his say was said.

For the head in his hand he holds right up;

Toward the first on the dais directs he the face] (Borroff ll. 442-445).

The Green Knight does not turn his severed head to Gawain, as would be expected, but to Guenore, whose reaction is not shown; the text alludes to the amazed and frightened reactions of Arthur and others in the hall, but leaves Guenore rather curiously silent, possibly implying her

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<sup>14</sup> One of the few times Guenore's male relations, other than her father, are mentioned in relation to her time at Camelot as a queen is in this story from the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Lancelot-Grail* cycle.

lack of fear or a refusal to give a reaction to what she may already suspect is a trick of Morgan le Fay's.

According to Arthurian legend<sup>15</sup> (which the *Gawain*-poet assumes his readers have some knowledge of), it is supposedly the concern for Morgan's personal and family honor that forces Guenore to evict Morgan from Camelot, an action that forever earns her the enmity of Morgan. That being said, I also believe it could be convincingly argued that Arthur, who traditionally has very close ties to his sister as both a counselor and friend, is the one woman who has enough power to supplant Guenore as the woman in whom Arthur places his faith, and as an extension, political power. Morgan, who does not trust Guenore, spends the majority of the Arthurian legend trying to work her way back into Camelot, an attempt which the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* tells. As *SGGK* unfolds, it becomes increasingly apparent that Morgan and Guenore have the abilities and means to not only manipulate but coercively affect the functioning of the nominally masculine world of Arthurian-chivalry.

True to his word, the following Christmas Gawain sets out to meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel to receive his blow to the neck. He invokes the protection of the Virgin Mary as he sets out, and, at the end of a harrowing journey, is greeted and welcomed by Lord Bertilak and his court, in whose land the Green Chapel is located. Gawain is invited to join them in their Christmas festivities. During his stay, the lord of the castle exhorts him to rest before his challenge, and enjoy the feasting and company his court offers. However, this seemingly idyllic stay is part of Morgan's master-plan, and contains another element of challenge to the chivalric customs of Camelot.

If Guenore's role in *SGGK* creates an oddly feminine force in a knightly tale, Morgan le Fay's characterization in the story is even more problematic. At different times in the history of

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<sup>15</sup> This story is recounted in the *Lancelot-Grail*, which dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.



criticism of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*<sup>16</sup> her storyline has been written off as the work of an incompetent poet, added after the *Gawain*-poet, or considered a simple *deus ex machina* mechanism to tie the story up neatly<sup>17</sup>. And, even for those critics who accept her story line (who are now in the majority), many have simply declared Morgan to be a “deadly enemy to Arthur, Guinevere and to her own nephew Gawain” (Derek Brewer 12), an evil character whose only motivation seems to be the destruction of Camelot’s happiness and prosperity. This is simply inaccurate, and seems to grow out of a desire to see *SGGK* as a story that highlights Christian repentance and forgiveness themes, as well as the virtuous, if flawed nature of Gawain. While these concepts are not incorrect, they do overlook the large, if troubling role Morgan plays in the entirety of the story.

It is she who arranges the bewitchment of Bertilak into the Green Knight, and who, it can be argued, counsels him and his lady as to the temptation tests of Gawain at their castle. While the rules of chivalry protect Gawain’s flirtation with the beautiful Lady Bertilak, they also put him at a disadvantage; if he must do as a lady bids, especially in the feminized space of a bedroom<sup>18</sup>, he must also risk boorish behavior to avoid committing another transgression of chivalry in disloyalty to the lord whose guest he is. Even though he avoids a sexual relationship with the Lady, her repeated visits to his bedroom help draw Gawain into a relationship with her

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<sup>16</sup> Some earlier scholars viewed “Morgan as a purely malevolent character,” whose ugliness indicates evil, or, for others “she becomes the accident, the flaw in an otherwise flawless plot, the evil interloper who desires to destroy the Round Table” (Tracy 41).

<sup>17</sup> “Today, the theory that Morgan le Fay is the inorganic and supererogatory addition of a bungling poet is less frequently voiced, and a number of important studies have emphasized her importance to the poem’s overall design. However, the older view of Morgan continues to live on in editors’ treatment of her character. This treatment becomes especially evident in the crucial passage where we learn about her role in the testing and her relationship to Sir Bertilak (2444-58). Almost all editors punctuate this passage so as to blunt its impact, turning a straightforward assertion of Morgan’s power into a rambling digression made memorable mainly by its convoluted syntax.” (Battles 332)

<sup>18</sup> In many medieval romances, the bedroom is often presented as a feminized space where men and women negotiate love and loyalty; masculine spaces, like jousts, tend to be identified with battle and martial heroism.

that places her as a figure of authority, which is dependent on his continued obedience to the rules of courtly love. While he cannot yield to her as a lover, out of respect to his host, he cannot bluntly refuse her company or her gifts. One gift in particular, her girdle, is an especially tempting present, as she assures him that it will protect the wearer from death, even at the point of an ax. Gawain, trusting her and her intentions, accepts her girdle as a means to save his life, thus becoming reliant on her for protection<sup>19</sup>. Once again, feminine influence and opportunism has seeped into the masculine world of weapons and challenges, and has done so because the Lady is capable of such coercion in a court that exists through the magical power of Morgan.

It does appear that Morgan, understanding the rules of Arthurian chivalry, is expecting at least the possibility of Gawain's acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge; if she did not, then a disguise would be unnecessary:

An oþr lady hir lad bi þe lyft honed,  
 Þat wat3 alder þen ho, an auncian hit semed,  
 And he3ly honowred with haþele3 aboute.  
 Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,  
 For if þe 3onge wat3 3ep, 3ol3e wat3 þat oþer (Tolkien ll. 947-951)  
 [Another lady led her by the left hand  
 That was older than she – an ancient, it seemed,  
 And held in high honor by all men about.  
 But unlike to look upon, those ladies were,  
 For if the one was fresh, the other was faded] (Borroff ll. 947-951).

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout the poem, Gawain is often physically next to, asking for help, or influenced by women, both mortal (Guenore, Morgan, and Lady Bertilak) and supernatural (the magic charm offered by the Lady, Morgan's enchantments, and the Virgin Mary).

Morgan, whose beauty, natural or not<sup>20</sup>, was legendary, and whose visage would be known to her sister's son, takes pains to disguise herself. Her role as advisor to Bertilak is also the likely source of the Lady's repeated temptations of Gawain, as she is aware of her nephew's pride, as well as shortcomings, in his role as chivalric paragon.

While I do believe that she arranged this supernatural test as a means to eradicate her enemy (a practice more commonly seen in male-male knightly contests than in female-female relations, who are rarely explored in Arthurian tales),<sup>21</sup> I do not feel that her intent was ever to destroy Arthur or Gawain. The text makes repeated references to the importance of lineage, and by repeatedly making references to the lineage of Gawain's family, the poet reinforces the importance of blood: "Ʒat is ho Ʒat is at home, Ʒe auncian lady; / Ho is euen Ʒyn aunt, ArƷureȝ half-suster, / Ʒe duches doȝter of Tyntagelle, Ʒat aƷel is nowƷe"<sup>22</sup> (Tolkien ll. 2464-2466) [She was with my wife at home, that old withered lady/ Your own aunt is she, Arthur's half sister,/ The duchess's daughter of Tintagel] (Borroff ll. 2463 – 2465).

Morgan always privileges the importance of blood ties over political alliances (a weakness of chivalry that she constantly exposes), and Camelot is the one place that, for all of her magical powers, she cannot access. She, like Guenore, must use men in order to gain the prowess that eludes her when she works alone. Interestingly, she shares two other similarities

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<sup>20</sup> Some legends maintain her beauty throughout her life, while others claim that, while she was beautiful, her looks were destroyed through her use of magic. In my reading of *SGGK*, I see nothing to indicate that Morgan's elderly looks are permanent, but is instead an enchantment.

<sup>21</sup> This is not to argue that women do not play a central role in the Arthurian legend, but rather that it is their role as trophies or quest-inciters that is considered paramount; the feuds and relations between women are either ignored, or written about in masculine terms, in which men avenge them. It seems that Guenore and Morgan's on-going feud and enmity is an exception.

<sup>22</sup> "Interestingly, Gawain's genealogy is traced via the female line and a web of connections in which Morgan is central. We are told *she* is *his* aunt, Arthur's half-sister and *daughter* of the *Duchess* of Tintagel. Feminine influence is asserted. Tracings work back and forth in transgressive reinscription to ally her *through* Gawain to Camelot and Arthur, and, thus, to Guinevere" (Ashton 55).

with her rival - the position they hold in their respective courts and their proximity and use of their nephew:

Derf men vpon dece drest of þe best.

þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho sytteȝ,

þe lorde lufly her by lent, as I trowe;

Gawan and þe gay burde togeder þay seten” (Tolkien ll. 1000-1003)

[By doughty lads on the dais, with delicate fare;

The old ancient lady, highest she sits;

The lord at her left hand leaned, as I hear;

Sir Gawain in the center, beside the gay lady] (Borroff ll. 1000-1003).

The key difference between the two women is that Morgan includes a blood relation in her plans to become her brother’s partner at Camelot. Without this perspective, I can see why so many critics (such as C.S. Lewis and Tolkien) felt that her addition was a weak point in *SGGK*. If her agency as a character is not considered in the same sense as Bertilak, who, as a male character, has managed to not be also seen as a simple mechanism to move the story along, then it does appear that she is only an addition to the story to reinforce its Arthurian roots. However, if, like Guenore, her role in the whole of the task and text is valued equally to Bertilak and Gawain, the story becomes a complex, sophisticated study of the mechanisms available to women to ensure and protect their power.

What I am proposing is that these two women provide the narrative framework for *SGGK*; without them, their feud, and their political and magical power, the story simply could not happen. As such, I cannot understand the reticence of some critics to firmly place Bertilak and his wife into the chessboard that is Morgan’s enchanted geography where, like Gawain, they

are pawns in the game of chivalry: “The idea that Morgan is peripheral because the revelation of her identity comes at the end, and she appears to take no direct or dynamic action in the poem until its conclusion, is problematic because it denies her agency in creating the illusion of the Green Knight and setting the test of Arthur’s young court, as yet untainted by the scandals of adultery and betrayal” (Tracy 41). While utter destruction could have occurred with this plan, it could only occur if there were not a person controlling the enchantment and test and if that person did not have a clear goal in mind:

‘Bercilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe.  
 Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,  
 And koyntyse of clergie, bi craftes wel lerned –  
 Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho hatȝ taken;  
 For ho hatȝ dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme  
 With þat conable klerk, þat knows alle your knyȝteȝ  
 at hame;  
 Morgne þe goddess  
 Þerfore hit is hir name:  
 Weldeȝ non so hyȝe hawtesse  
 Þat ho ne con make ful tame –  
 Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle  
 For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were  
 Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;  
 Ho wayned me þis wonder your wytteȝ to reue,  
 For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe.

With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
 With his hede in his honed bifore þe hyȝe table (Tolkien ll. 2445 – 2462)  
 [“Bertilak de Hautdesert, this barony I hold,  
 Through the might of Morgan le Fay, that lodges at my house,  
 By subtleties of science and sorcerers’ arts,  
 The mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man,  
 For sweet love in secret she shared sometime  
 With that wizard, that knows well each one of your knights  
 And you.  
 Morgan the Goddess, she,  
 So styled by title true;  
 None holds so high degree  
 That her arts cannot subdue.  
 She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall,  
 To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride  
 That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table.  
 She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits,  
 To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death  
 With awe of that elvish man that eerily spoke  
 With his head in his hand before the high table] (Boroff ll 2445 – 2462).

Because this is not an act of nature, but rather the political act of a human with supernatural capabilities<sup>23</sup>, Arthur, Camelot, and Gawain are free from danger. Even if her original task of murder falls short, Morgan enjoys her ability to frighten and test Gawain, especially when it works to degrade the Round Table chivalry of Arthur's court.

There has also been a body of literary criticism that seeks to separate the masculine space of Gawain, knighthood, and chivalry from the feminized space of enchanted forests, castles, bedrooms and magic. Geraldine Heng describes a "feminine text" separate from the "regions where the logic of the poem as the stage of the masculine actors founders and fails," "the limit of the masculine narrative" (195). While this is an interesting and accepted criticism of *SGGK*, it is not the only way to analyze the text. Instead of Heng's clear cut ideological spheres of influence, I would argue that the physical and metaphorical masculine and feminized spaces of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* overlap and bleed into one another. Areas that may be defined as distinctly male or female are non-existent in *SGGK*; just as Gawain and Aggravain can sit in the masculine space of the hall of Camelot while simultaneously occupying the feminized space of Guenore's dais, the areas of masculine and feminine engagement are mixed. Morgan and Guenore are not operating as "Others" who are pushed to the edges of the poem; instead, they are marginal characters (by behavior and gender) who operate as freely between the borders and central plot of the text as other characters. The reason they can do this, of course, is because they both have a legal, familial (marital or kin) obligation of devotion they can exact from their nephew.

Accordingly, the character of Gawain does have as much agency as his aunts; however, his characterization is such that he is more open to feminine access and influence. At court, he is

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<sup>23</sup> There is criticism that views Morgan as the embodiment or representations of the Celtic tripartite goddess mold. While interesting, I do not believe it is an applicable analysis, and I do not see the support in these arguments. While she is definitely a figure who can access magic and the supernatural, she is not a supernatural being, but rather a human with supernatural powers. If she were truly a goddess, then she would care less about blood lines, family, and the possible harm that Guenore could do to her brother.

an open and influential ally of Guenore, upon whom he depends for approval and judgment as much as he does King Arthur. While Gawain may be considered Camelot's epitome of chivalry, Morgan recognizes his and the court's weaknesses and strengths, and creates a test which will not only bring about (the hoped for) destruction of Guenore, but, even if and when it fails, also works to expose the weaknesses inherent in Arthur's kingship, including his tendency to put his glory before the good of the kingdom and the tradition of chivalry itself. Because Arthurian chivalry operates on a system of acts and repayments of honor and slights, it creates a never ending circle of battles and fights, which can never ensure peace or steady prosperity. Paul Battles contends that the limitation of female agency in *SGGK* also stems from a tradition of editors who, for whatever their reasons, "have often passed over Morgan le Fay in their search for his real antagonist" (Battles 331). He claims that past editorial interventions and changes "all reduce women's agency and subordinate them to men, even when the poem implies – or expressly states – that the opposite is true" (Battles 324), an critical awareness which lends support to the importance of Guenore and Morgan to the narrative of the tale.

The difference, then, is one of political innovation and older, more traditional modes of government and the loyalty each provides. Guenore, who, for reasons not made clear in this poem, cannot or does not depend on male kinship, uses Camelot-style chivalry and the conventions of marriage to create bonds of dependency and protection through the political nature of knighthood, thus attempting to tie Arthur's (and, by extension) Morgan's nephews to her. Morgan resents and mistrusts the queen as an interloper and usurper of her proper place by Arthur's side<sup>24</sup>. In an effort to destabilize the woman who has replaced her as Gawain's aunt,

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<sup>24</sup> As some of Arthur's knights, including Mordred, are, depending on the legend, fathered on his half-sisters (full sisters of Morgan), she would have a ready-made familial network of nephews and sisters; there is also the point that Guenore, who is childless, has done nothing to ensure the continuity of the lineage and throne of Camelot, and is thus less of a vested member of court than the sisters of Morgan,



Morgan uses Gawain in an effort to reach her brother to show him his error and to encourage him to instead create a Camelot that is run solely by those of the blood royal. Morgan is assuming that the “authority within the home” she feels entitled to as a sister and aunt should be “analogous to authority in the public sphere” (Riddy 214). In this context Morgan is much less of an “Other” or marginal female than Guenore, who temporarily successfully accesses and utilizes the political modes available to her to create a network of male kin<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, without a queen to plot against, the entire narrative of *SGGK* could not happen. Simply put, while the action of the text seemingly concentrates on the masculine spheres of battle, honor, hunting, and fighting, it really occurs in masculine and feminine spaces like the court and the bedroom which have been manipulated and ordered by the feminine-feud between Guenore and Morgan le Fay. One of the things that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* exposes is the power of women over and through the conventions of chivalry, and how relatively punishment-less they are in this system if they have sufficient political and/or familial power behind them. Guenore knows that she is protected by the intertwined network of knights and nephews she has built around her at Camelot, and Morgan, whose role as an enchantress (her magical abilities acts as a type of political currency, as it, like feudal power, helps ensure obedience) and the king’s sister enjoys a fair amount of protection for her manipulations.

While the action of the majority of the text works in “masculinized” spaces, and features traditional knightly challenges, tests, and religious devotion, the entirety of the story operates at a level of female manipulation of these political spheres: there is an implication that Guenore is attempting to cultivate a line of defense through her nephew-knights, and Morgan is attempting

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and Morgan herself, who have sent their sons away from their respective husbands’ courts to ally them with Arthur.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, this success is temporary, as she is eventually credited as a cause of the fall of the Round Table because of her adultery with Lancelot (and rumored other knights and kings who abduct her).

to re-capture her brother and blood-nephews in order to create a kingdom run on loyalty to blood, not political glory. And, by the end of the poem, it does seem apparent to the reader why they have both chosen Gawain as their instrument; he is a surprisingly easy knight for women to manipulate and turn toward their needs.

As the poem continues, it becomes increasingly apparent that, through personality and chivalric custom, Gawain is prone to be easily prevailed upon by women, especially aristocratic ones. He is not only influenced by women, but actively invokes and solicits their protection, therefore inviting women into his masculine space, both metaphorically (his shield is painted with an image of the Virgin Mary) and physically (his proximity to Guenore, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan in their respective courts). He courts the most noble of women, Mary, and carries her with him through his travels and battles, depending on her intercessory abilities to keep him safe and in her favor. While Gawain is certainly not the only male in medieval literature to be devoted to the Virgin Mary, whose cult was tremendously popular historically and in literary depictions, his veneration of her when compared to his connections with other women in *SGGK* exemplifies his female relationships in the poem. Of course, he does not venerate any of the human women as he does the holy Mary, but he is willing to perceive and describe women like Guenore and Lady Bertilak in similar terms, and has complete trust in both of them. Just as he asks and believes he will receive protection from the Virgin Mary as he sets out on his journey to the Green Chapel, he believes that Lady Bertilak's offer of magical protection is valid and sincere.

Once Gawain is informed by Bertilak that his entire challenge has been nothing more than Morgan's attempt to assassinate Guenore and embarrass Arthur's court, Gawain gives vent to his surprise and disgust at the means Morgan (and other aristocratic women) use in order to manipulate men and politics:

And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,  
 For so watȝ Adam in erde with one bygyled,  
 And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsoneȝ –  
 Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde – and Dauyth þerafter  
 Watȝ blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.  
 Now þese were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a

wynne huge

To luf hom wewel, and leue hem not, a leude þat coupe.

[...]

And alle þay were biwyld

With wymmen þat þay vsed.

Þaȝ I be now bigyled,

Me þink me burde be excused (Tolkien ll. 2415-2428)

[And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,

For so was Adam by one, when the world began,

And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty –

Delilah was his doom, and David thereafter

Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore much distress;

Now these were vexed by their devices – ‘twere a very joy

Could one but learn to love, and believe them not.

[...]

And one and all fell prey

To women that they had used;

If I be led astray,

Methinks I may be excused (Borroff ll. 2415 – 2428).

Gawain's frustration is not with all women, and is not directed at the Virgin – his anger is strictly for courtly noblewomen, and one has a feeling that the names "Morgan" and "Lady Bertilak" could be used in place of "Delilah" and "Bathsheba." These women, who have actively taken advantage of Gawain's willingness and chivalry have managed to defeat him, and to do so outside of the bedroom – Morgan and the Lady, who technically have no place in matters of arms and challenges, were essentially his victors in a battle of arms.

Even though Gawain is horrified and embarrassed at the trick his aunt has managed (with the Lady acting as her accomplice), at the end of the poem Gawain does not inform Arthur or Guenore of Morgan's intrigue. In fact, he is curiously silent in regards to this important information. Why does Gawain keep this information to himself? The attempted murder of Arthur's queen and Morgan's desired humiliation of one of his knights seems like the type of news Arthur might be interested in hearing, and the type of news a man of Gawain's stature as a loyal and brave knight should share with his lord; at minimum, he should at least share it with Guenore. While not as clear cut as other examples, I think the reason Gawain stays quiet is because he does not believe that Morgan represents a real threat to the fabric of the Round Table. He knows that she desires to see Guenore eradicated, or at least ousted from Camelot, but he possibly also realizes that Morgan is not seriously attempting to destroy her brother or his realm; rather, the test served to point out the weaknesses inherent in a political system based primarily on feudal alliances.

Guenore and Morgan are not the feminine Other in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the female who participate in othering. If the theoretical other is considered to be an individual or

group that cannot effectively and equally operate within the dominant system, than neither woman belongs in that category. Rather, both Morgan and Guenore appear to effectively make Gawain the submissive other as they manipulate masculine power structure to their advantage. It seems fitting to view these fictional medieval women in light of historian JoAnne McNamara's work on women of the Middle Ages: "It is hard to imagine that anyone with the slightest knowledge of medieval history would seriously contend that individual women were not significant actors on its stage throughout the period" (McNamara 21). Neither Guenore nor Morgan could be considered anything but "significant actors" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – their actions are self-determined and self-aware, and both very capably and coercively operate in the mixed political and familial landscape with the same agency as the men who and male-systems they handily used.

Chapter 2: Overlapping Spaces: Gainour and Gawayn's Family and Political ties in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terne Wathelyne*

*The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne* is a fourteenth-century Arthurian verse-romance from an anonymous poet, distinguished, in large part, for its distinctive, bipartite form. Unusual in form and content, it points less to being based solely upon any one source than to being a part of two larger literary traditions; the chronicle tradition provided by Geoffrey of Monmouth and later Wace's *Roman de Brut*, as well as the *memento mori* ("Remember that you will die") stories and lessons of Christian bodily transience and the punishments awaiting sinners in the afterlife. *The Awntyrs* exists in four surviving fifteenth-century manuscripts<sup>26</sup>, which, along with a probable oral history and tradition, "attest to the popularity of the *Awntyrs* in the fifteenth century at least<sup>27</sup>" (Shepherd 365). While the original version of the text remains unknown, it can be assumed that, rather than a poem based on a single Arthurian source, it was "a sophisticated composite of several favorite thematic and textual traditions – and the effectively bipartite structure of the poem is the most obvious sign of that composite provenance" (Shepherd 365).

*The Awntyrs* is a work controlled less by the authority of any single source text, but instead "as a whole is governed by traditions associated with the alliterative (verse) medium; the poem finds analogues in both form and content with a number of Middle English alliterative poems" (Shepherd 368). Because of its singular form and the seemingly two unrelated tales, there have been some scholars, notably Ralph Hanna III, that have asserted that the poem is actually a composite of two distinct poets; however this opinion has been "adequately refuted by

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<sup>26</sup> Bodleian Library MS Douce 324 in Oxford, the "Ireland-Blackburne" MS, the "Thornton Manuscript," and the Lincoln Cathedral Manuscript 91 (Shepherd 219 Footnote 1).

<sup>27</sup> From Stephen Shepherd: "The readings of each of the four versions are, nevertheless, substantially close most of the time, and the omission in all of the ninth line of the fourth stanza shows that they derive from a common original" (365).

A.C. Spearing's studies of the unity of the work [...] structured around two distinct adventures" (Moll 125-126). Essentially, A.C. Spearing argues that the work "must be viewed as a diptych, in that the actions in one episode comment on the other" (Moll 134), an assessment shared by the majority of literary critics working with *The Awntyrs*.

The Norman poet Wace's *Roman de Brut* was a thirteenth-century addition to the Anglo-Norman corpus of Arthuriana, whose source material was Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Tremendously popular and influential, Wace's text, along with the alliterative *Morte Arthure* "provided a main source for the most widely circulated of all narratives about Arthur current in fourteenth-century England" (Shepherd 69). Like Geoffrey, Wace's work is a chronicle of the political and martial conquests, successes, and failures of Arthur's court, and was received and read as a history rather than as a medieval romance. This is not to say that *Brut* does not contain fantastic elements<sup>28</sup>; rather, "Wace went so far as to allow that such wonders and adventures did occur – in the twelve years of peace which followed the young Arthur's first conquest<sup>29</sup>" (Burrow 72). The rhetorical purpose of balancing history and the fantastic was to emphasize a sense of the elevation of the subject matter, to mingle the historical with the mythical: "when medieval rhetoricians spoke of 'amplification,' they had in mind not only the lengthening but also the heightening of materials – elevating them, that is, above the common run of experience" (Burrow 70).

If read in this light, it is more understandable how the diptych works in a larger historical-literary sense. The two parts of the poem, Stephen Shepherd rightly argues, "constitute 'testing' stories [...] both tell of challenges thrown down to the Arthurian court which demand that the court serve the needy better [...] it could be said that either part, as a tale of pride

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<sup>28</sup> The alliterative *Morte Arthure* is also a bit less fantastic than some other Arthurian legends.

<sup>29</sup> The anonymous *Gawain-Poet* also alludes specifically to the temporal placement of his *Sir Gawain and the green Knight* as during the early years of Camelot, before the court is torn apart by treachery.

admonished and charity tested, is an analogue to the other” (Shepherd 369). Thus, while the *Awntyrs* is related, in part, to the Arthurian chronicle rather than the romance tradition, it is a smaller part of the larger traditions of Catholic and historical conduct guides, texts meant to be a type of pedagogic entertainment with lessons on morality, proper religious practice, and the warnings of history.

The structure of the poem is made up of two distinct parts; the first part, which is the portion of the story this chapter discusses, is a story involving Gawayn, Gaynour, and the putrefied spirit of her mother returning with dire prophecies and admonitions for both of them, as well as a directive to help those in need and to have masses sung for her so that she may eventually be able to leave Purgatory. The second part is more typically Arthurian, and deals with a duel between Gawain and another knight in a competition over the ownership of land and the honor attached to such a fight. While this chapter concentrates primarily on the first part of the poem, both parts work together in the larger scheme of influences and traditions.

Similar to their relationship in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte Darthur*, Gaynour and Sir Gawayn are described as spatially and emotionally close in *The Awntyrs*. Their connection is both familial and political; Gawayn is Arthur’s nephew and one of his most important knights. He is tied to Camelot through blood and loyalty, which, as the fictional paragon of chivalry, is a tie that Gawayn accepts unconditionally. However, while he may be his uncle’s nephew and knight, he is equally tied to Gaynour in the same position. As she is his king’s queen and his aunt by marriage, he owes her at least the same chivalric allegiance as Arthur. However, I am arguing that their relationship transcends the traditional knight-liege lady themes so common in Arthurian romance. Instead, I feel that their relationship points to Gaynour’s ability and drive to supersede the more traditional female space of inspiration, and



instead is more interested in gaining a political might equal to that of her husband (similar to the themes discussed in the previous chapter on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). In order to assure this power, she is again characterized again by her close alliance to Gawain<sup>30</sup>, who becomes a male symbol of her authority in Camelot, as well as works to reinforce her ties to Arthur's blood line. Thus, their physical closeness throughout the first part of the poem is an allusion to Gaynour's significance and ties to the eventual fate of Arthur's court. Gaynour is a politicized female, less bound by blood and family and more apt to build alliances that are politically beneficial to herself and Camelot (even if it is in the short-term), which shows a propensity to manipulate male legal codes through traditionally female modes, like dependency on family, and less orthodox means, like creating liege-lord relationships with Arthur's younger male kin.

*The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne* opens with the description of a royal hunting party, led by Arthur, making its way into a forest near Carlisle<sup>31</sup>. Sir Gawain enters leading the queen, and the descriptions of the rich dress of the entourage, especially Gaynour, coupled with hunting, marks this event as specifically aristocratic and courtly:

Fayre by the [fermesones<sup>32</sup>,] in frithes and felles.

Thus to wode arn thei went, the wlonkest

in wedes,

Both the Kyng and the Quene

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<sup>30</sup> In her article "Displacement of the feminine in 'Golagros and Gawayne' and the 'Awntyrs off Arthure,'" Jeanne T. Mathewson argues that a connection between *SGGK* and *The Awntyrs* is made explicit through the use of the bob and wheel form of both poems.

<sup>31</sup> Tarn Wadling is approximately ten miles south of modern day Carlisle (Cumberland County), in Inglewood Forest – these locations are also included in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* (Shepherd 219, Footnote 1).

<sup>32</sup> From Stephen Shepherd: "'beautiful in the close season (i.e., the time between September 14 and June 24, during which it was forbidden to hunt male deer; females, moreover, could only be hunted between November 11 and February 2, a period consistent with the winter landscape described'" (220, Footnote 4).

And al the doughty bydene;  
 Sir Gawayn, gayest on grene,  
 Dame Gaynour he ledes.  
 [To hunt the female deer in the enclosed forest,  
 Beautiful in the close season, in woods and fells.  
 Thus to the woods they went, in the most splendid dress,  
 Both the King and the Queen  
 And all the doughty knights together;  
 Sir Gawayn, the most handsome on the green,  
 Dame Gaynour does he lead] (ll. 7-13).

Of special note here is Gawayn's attachment to Gaynour as compliant escort and protector. Since she is Arthur's queen, and Sir Gawayn is one of the most noble and chivalrous knights, their attachment is legal and political, but reinforced by Gawayn's position as nephew to Arthur by blood and Gaynour by marriage. It is also striking that Gaynour appears to be the only woman attending the hunt (there is no mention of any other ladies of the court attending). This points to Gaynour's importance to the court of Camelot, as well as her need for a companion, which, of course, cannot and should not be her husband, whose primary role is to lead his knights in a successful hunt. However, I do think it is interesting that Gaynour did not bring any of her ladies-in-attendance as companions, an element which seems to point to her as a more masculinized woman in the political sense; instead of being surrounded by the more usual courtly entourage of her aristocratic ladies-in-waiting, and being escorted, as a group, by a knight, Gaynour appears to have an expectation singularity and individuality. Her presence in the procession makes her a feminine physical representation of Arthur and Camelot's grandeur, but,

by connecting herself to Gawayn, she is also exerting her political importance to the court itself, and, as such, she seems to be distinguishing her position in Camelot as on equal footing to that of her husband's.

Another intriguing aspect of Gaynour and Gawayn's entrance into the forest is their physical proximity, which is never broken. Gawayn escorts her into the forest, and stays by her side as Arthur splits off to organize the hunt with his men:

Al in gleterand golde gayly ho glides

The gates with Sir Gawayn, bi the

Grene welle.

And that burne on his blonke with the

Quene bides.

That borne was in Borgoyne, by boke and by belle.<sup>33</sup>

He ladde that lady so long by the lawe sides;

Under a lorre they light,

Loghe by a felle

[All in glittering gold she glides

Along the paths with Sir Gawayn, by the

green pool,

And that man on his horse with the

Queen stays

Who was born in Burgundy, by book and by bell.

He led that lady long by the hill sides;

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<sup>33</sup> From Shepherd: "I tell you" with due solemnity" (220 Footnote 1). Shepherd further explains that the phrase "alludes to certain prescribed effects used either in the Mass or in the rite of excommunication" (149, footnote 6).

Under a laurel tree they dismounted,  
 Low by an enclosure] (ll. 27-33).

The *Awntyrs* poet, by never having either leave each other's side in the first part of the poem, seemingly wants to direct attention to the importance of each character by their partnership, as well as their especially close relationship. I do not believe that the poet is attempting to imply a romantic entanglement between the two – as can be inferred from the prophecy of Gaynour's mother, this tale takes place early in the years of Camelot, before the court is destroyed by intrigue (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and adultery, and, as such, Gaynour is still a woman above suspicion. However, the closeness and intimacy of queen and knight, and aunt and nephew as he leads her to a bower<sup>34</sup>, does imply a certain lord-liege or political-familial tie that seems particularly close. Gaynour, with her significance as Arthur's consort, seems desirous of such an important allegiance to her husband's male kin<sup>35</sup> in order to bolster her public political meaningfulness.

It is also significant that Gaynour and Gawain remain physically together in the particular setting of the forest. Forests and bowers are not just common tropes of medieval romance, but are also indicative of supernatural visitations and testing (Classen 49). This specific forest (Inglewood) is a nexus of spaces and worlds; as the wild, unmanaged forests were no longer in existence in England<sup>36</sup>, but were, in reality, “carefully surveyed, managed, and circumscribed woodlands” (Putter 16), the forest is simultaneously foreign and familiar (Classen

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<sup>34</sup> From Laura Howes: “a spot that is green despite the wintry woods, and may be an evergreen bower, a type of pleasure garden in the midst of this hunting forest” (3).

<sup>35</sup> While attendance upon a highborn woman by a knight is a common trope in medieval romance, it does seem unusual that as important a knight as Gawain would be removed from the masculine, courtly hunt for just any woman; thus, I feel that just as he is a politically important knight, Gaynour is a politically prominent woman.

<sup>36</sup> From Ad Putter's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance*: “In 1250 the last surviving wild forest, the Forest of Dean, disappeared” (Putter 16).

50). This juxtaposition of the real and fantastic works as a parallel to Gaynour's ability to balance between the spaces of traditional feminine queenship and masculinized political authority, just as she and Gawayn can also move between the physical, courtly, space of the forest as hunting grounds into the feminized, intimate space of a pleasure bower. Their location also works to alert the reader of an impending challenge, as the forest in medieval romances was often "the location where the protagonist experiences his or her transformation, challenge, and ultimate growth" (Classen 50). This malleability of space and roles becomes even more interesting when it is considered that Gaynour and Gawayn are sitting under a tree around midday, a romantic context<sup>37</sup> that Shepherd argues "is tantamount to inviting a supernatural visitation" (222, Footnote 1). *The Awntyrs'* forest, then, represents an interstice between the masculine and feminine, the political and intimate, as well as the world of the living and the world of the dead.

As Gawayn and Gaynour settle down in the evergreen bower, an eclipse (a natural phenomenon also indicative of the supernatural) occurs:

Fast byfore under this ferly con fall<sup>38</sup>;  
 And this mekel mervaille, that I shal  
 Of mene –  
 Now wol I of this mervaile mene if I mote:  
 The day wex als dirk  
 As hit were mydnight myrke  
 [Just before midday this marvel did fall;  
 And of this great marvel that I shall

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<sup>37</sup> See *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal*.

<sup>38</sup> From Shepherd: "Just before midday did this marvel occur. (Sitting under trees on or before noon is in a number of romances tantamount to inviting a supernatural visitation)" (222, Footnote 1).

Tell –

Now of this marvel I will tell if I may:

The day grew all dark

As if it were murky midnight] (ll.72-76).

Not only does the sky go dark, but it begins to snow, which causes the hunters, led by Arthur, to hurry on so that they may continue to hunt, leaving Gaynour and Gawayn alone as witnesses to the events as they unfold. They are alone and together, both abandoned by the court they serve (albeit for hunting, although it seems to foreshadow troubled days at Camelot), and in a space where the masculine, martial arts of chivalry are rendered almost useless in the feminized context of a pleasant bower operating as a scene of magic, which also contains a feminine subtext. For all of his masculine skill and chivalry, Gawayn's fate is connected to and controlled by his queen, and the prophecy of her mother.

In the midst of the eclipse, a horrible sight greets the pair; a spirit, howling and sighing, rises out of the lake and approaches them. Gaynour is frightened, and even after Gawayn tries to calm her, citing a clerk who told him that it was an eclipse, angrily decries “Sir Cadour, Sir Clegis, Sir [Constantyne,] Sir Cay<sup>39</sup>:/ The knyghtes arn uncurtaysm by Crosse and by crede, / that thus oonly have me laft on my deth-day” [Sir Cadour, Sir Clegis, Sir Constantine, Sir Kay: / Those discourteous knights, (I swear) by the Cross and the Creed, / That have left me alone on my death day] (Shepherd ll. 96-98). Seeing the spirit during an eclipse in the forest, Gaynour assumes that her own death approaches. It is at this moment that the poem moves away from the traditional tropes of Arthurian romance (although it does work as a foreshadowing to the end of Camelot, the story of which as laid out in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* the poet seems to be

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<sup>39</sup> This line is confusing, as no mention of these knights has been previously made in the poem; perhaps it is a reference to the knights who opted to remain with the king instead of the queen, which could also be an allusion to the eventual rifts that occur with the destruction of Camelot.

assuming knowledge of by the audience), and begins to work more closely within the *memento mori*<sup>40</sup> tradition. The decaying spirit, who is in the most abject condition and barely recognizable as human (she is described as covered with toads, worms, black in color with sunken eyes) is Gaynour's mother, who has come specifically from Purgatory to warn her daughter of the afterlife, as well as to deliver a prophecy about Gaynour and Gawayn's worldly futures.

The spirit begins by describing her life in this world, a description which parallels nicely with the description of the richly dressed and much honored Queen Gaynour entering the forest:

Quene was I somwile – brighter of browes

[...]

Gretter then Dame Gaynour – of garson and golde,

Of palaies, of parkes, of pondes, of

Plowes,

Of townes, of toures, of tresour utnolde,

Of castelles, of contreyes, of cragges, of clowes;

Now I am caught oute of kide to cares so colde –

Into care am I caught and couched in clay.

Lo, sir curtays knight

How delfulle deth has

Me dight!

[Queen was I some while – brighter of brow

[...]

More commanding than Dame Gaynour - of treasure and gold,

Of palaces, of parks, of ponds, of

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<sup>40</sup> *The Gast of Guy* is a well-known provincial *memento mori* tale.

Plows,  
 Of towns, of towers, of treasures untold,  
 Of castles, of countries, of crags and ravines;  
 Now I am taken from home in bitter sorrows –  
 Into care I am caught and laid in clay.  
 Look, sir courteous knight  
 How death has at once  
 Dressed me!] (ll. 144-154).

Apparently, Gaynour's mother was just as beautiful, as wealthy, and as honored as her daughter in life, but is now suffering in the afterlife for her transgression, particularly an illicit love affair, although pride and ambition are also alluded to. This entire exchange between mother and daughter powerfully foreshadows Gaynour's own future as queen – the ghost's very description of who she was in life seems to warn against the current and future path of her daughter. In another reference to future events in the Arthurian legend, Gawain is powerless to come to Gaynour's aid; his sword is useless against the spirit, just as it will be useless against the Arthur's anger and the fall of Camelot.

The spirit's advice for Gaynour is orthodox in statement (to be merciful to the poor and humble in spirit), but I think the real work of the prophecy for Gaynour is the very physical disintegration of her mother, which works as a tactile warning against pride, lust, and its cousin ambition. Gaynour, a politically important woman in the man's world of chivalric Camelot, has chosen these attributes with which to win and keep favor in her husband's court – I would contend that her mother's warning is less about abiding by Christian ideals than a reminder to the



dangers of traversing gendered space as a woman walking into and dealing with the masculine world of leadership and commanding obedience.

Her warning for Gawain is also dire, as she tells him that it is Arthur's covetousness (a sin linked to jealousy) which will lead to a loss of renown for the Round Table, and contribute to its final destruction at the hands of Mordred and Gawain's eventual death:

In Dorsetshire shal dy the doughtest of alle –

Gete the, Sir Gawayn!

The boldest of Bretayne,

In a slake thou shalt be slayne;

Sich ferlyes shull falle

[In Dorsetshire shall the boldest of all –

Shall get you, Sir Gawain!

The boldest of Britain,

In a hollow you shall be slain;

Such wonders shall happen] (ll.295-299).

However, the ghost does not give specific warnings to Gawain about his behavior; rather, it seems that he shall suffer for Arthur's blind desire for new land and Gawain's lust and affairs. Because Gawain is considered the epitome of Arthurian, English chivalry, the ghost is using him as a stand in for the fate of all Knights of the Round Table.

It is also unclear why she decides to deliver Arthur's personal prophecy to his wife and their nephew, and why the poet goes to such lengths to remove Arthur from this section of the poem. Instead, the spirit addresses her most politically dire prophecy to Gawain (and Gawain by proximity):

Uppone Cornewayle coost with a knight kene:

Sir Arthur the honest, avenaunt and able,

He shal be wounded iwys – wothely, I wene –

An al the rial rowte of the Rounde Table.

Thei shullen dye on a day, the doughty bydene,

Suppriset with a surget: he beris [of] sable

With a sauter engreled of silver full shene<sup>41</sup>.

[...]

That outray shall you alle,

Delfully that day

[Beside the Cornwall coast with a knight keen:

Sir Arthur honest, gracious and able,

And all the royal company of the Round Table.

They shall die on this day, the doughty all together,

Surprised by an insurgent: he bears a (cost of arms) of black

With cross of silver and shining silver edges

[...]

Who shall destroy you all,

Sorrowfully on that day (ll. 301-312).

This prophecy has ramifications that reach beyond mortal life and heavenly salvation; it is a description of an entire government and realm being destroyed by Mordred, himself another nephew and knight of Camelot. Perhaps the ghost chooses these two specifically because of their

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<sup>41</sup> This is a description of Mordred's coat of arms as described in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*; a black background with the cross of St. Andrew edged in silver (Shepherd 230 Footnote 9).

connection to Mordred; he is Gawayn's half-brother<sup>42</sup> and eventual enemy, and, according to the source material of the *Awntyrs*, Gaynour becomes Mordred's willing abductee and consort in his attempts to take Arthur's crown<sup>43</sup>.

If this is true, then Gaynour's mother is using both the access of bloodlines (she is Gaynour's mother) and socio-political means (Gaynour's relationship to Gawayn and, eventually, his brother Mordred) to warn them of their part in the destruction of Camelot. Regardless, the ghost does not appear interested in delivering this message to Arthur, or even in ensuring that Gawayn and Gaynour share what she has told them. Her last words to them are to think on all she has shared<sup>44</sup>, and to have masses said for her soul, resulting in an ambiguous departure. Such a reading seems to support the argument that Gaynour's influence on Gawayn and Arthur (and in turn the entirety at court) is a result of personal ambition, and that its result will ultimately be failure as a punishment for the queen attempting to manipulate and work in a masculine court.

*The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terne Wathelyne* is a sophisticated, complex, and, at times, admittedly strange poem. However, much like the ghost's prophecy to Gaynour and Gawayn, I would argue that the poem works as an earthly political reminder of the responsibilities of kingship and good rule, and the danger and inherent threat that politically ambitious women can pose to order. While it does this through the accepted and traditional means of the *memento mori*, the spirit's frightening prophecy on the transience of earthly power, as well as the treachery of

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<sup>42</sup> Margause, Arthur's half-sister by their mother Igrayne is Gawayn's mother in almost all of the English legends; however, Mordred's parentage seems to be first described in the *Lancelot-Grail*, which makes him the illegitimate son of Arthur and his half-sister, a tradition carried on through Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. Post *Lancelot-Grail*, he is consistently referred to as Gawayn's brother or half-brother.

<sup>43</sup> The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* describes them as married and Gaynour as complicit; however, other legends have her escaping from Mordred.

<sup>44</sup> At the end of *SGGK*, Gawain also thinks on the events of the poem, but never shares his experiences with the king or queen.

kinship, operate as a powerful parallel to Gaynour's own attempts to solidify and grow her political prowess through Arthur and his male relations.

Chapter 3: The (Weak) Ties That Bind: The Ultimate Failure of Single-Bond Kinship in Sir  
Thomas Malory's "The Deth of Arthur"

One of the most significant additions to the English language Arthur corpus, *Le Mort Darthur* has influenced political, cultural, and English literature for hundreds of years, including among its audience individuals as diverse as King Henry VII and the Tudor family, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Mark Twain, and popular television and film. While Malory certainly engages with older source material, such as the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*) as well as the *Vulgate Cycle*, he also imbued a certain political sense reflective of the tumult caused by the War of the Roses into the work<sup>45</sup>. Written in vernacular English and one of the first works to enjoy mechanical printing and publication, *Le Mort Darthur* told the tale of an Arthurian Golden Age and the fall of even the best of kings, which exposed the political and national anxieties of Lancastrian-Yorkist England<sup>46</sup>. Presumably written during his third imprisonment between 1468 and 1470, this time likely at Newgate Prison in London, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* was printed by William Caxton on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1485 (Shepherd xxvi-xxvii). The printing and author of *Le Morte Darthur* has been the subject of many years of scholarly debate, much of which will not, for the sake of this work, be touched up on any depth<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> For a more complete study of Malory's sources, please see Ralph Norris' *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur*.

<sup>46</sup> The War of the Roses was a fight over the throne of England and the rights of lineage versus power between the Yorkists and Lancastrians. Malory appears to have fought for the Yorkist side, and while initially pardoned by King Edward IV, was later denied pardon and remained in jail, where he wrote *Le Morte Darthur*.

<sup>47</sup> It appears that the original manuscript Malory wrote himself was possibly copied in what is known now as the Winchester manuscript, which seems to correspond more closely to Caxton's published version. William Caxton was also instrumental in editing Malory's work, which his apprentice (and later publisher) Wynkyn De Worde also carried on, adding in minor corrections and, in Book XX, "adds a moralizing interpolation" (Malory, xi-xxvii). There has also been some debate on Malory's actual history and authorship, although most scholars accept his authorship.

Sir Thomas Malory was, by all accounts, what could euphemistically be called “a character.” Born to family belonging to Warwickshire gentry between 1415 and 1417 to Philippa Chetwynd and John Malory, Sir Thomas is first recorded as a knight in 1441, and in 1443 was on the receiving end of his first legal action (for causing physical injury, imprisoning, and stealing from a Thomas Smythe of Spratton, Northamptonshire – the case was never tried) (Shepherd xxiv-xxv). He appears to have fought for the Yorkist side, whose forces released him from prison for attempted murder, two rapes, theft, harboring a criminal, and attempted escape after they marched on London in 1460 (xxv-xxvi)<sup>48</sup>. He continued to fight for the Yorkist cause, and was imprisoned once again in London, although there are no records of his charges; he was “explicitly excluded from a general pardon of Edward IV” at this time, as he would be later in 1470 (Shepherd xxvii). Malory died, most likely in prison, in 1471.

Whatever his personal peccadillos and faults, Malory developed a thorough vernacular prose rendering of the Arthurian story. However, it is highly unlikely that the text would have been as popular or well received without the mediation and editorial efforts of its editor, William Caxton. It was Caxton who created the chapter divisions, attempted to unify spelling, and abridged certain sections, such as the Roman war scene, that gave readers the physical appearance and readability it still retains today. He also included symbols to indicate paragraph breaks, and Lombardic letters that represented the beginning of sentences. Caxton’s editorial changes linked Malory’s text more closely to its source materials; the textual differences of the “Winchester Manuscript,” discovered in 1934 at Winchester College, written for an anonymous patron, was located at Caxton’s printing shop, but does not seem to have been used as his “primary copy-text for his own edition of Malory” (Shepherd xxvii). In 1498, Wynkyn de Worde reprinted Caxton’s edition of Malory with some further editorial intervention, including a

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<sup>48</sup> It is unclear how many of these crimes Malory actually committed.

passage about the moral importance of reading the edition in order to engender one's self "to dread God, and to love rightwiseness, faithfully and courageously to serve your sovereign prince" (Shepherd xxxviii). While the significance of the works of these two printers and editors cannot be undervalued, there would have been little to edit without Malory's material. If Caxton and de Worde mediated and presented the material to its audience, it was Malory's version of the Arthurian legend that would become a standard of English literature.

In this chapter, I will be concentrating on the last chapter of *Le Mort Darthur*, "The Deth of Arthur," and the ways Gwenyver and Morgan attempt to access and disrupt chivalric honor and political power in the distinctly masculine space of Camelot, exhibiting a type of individual agency that goes beyond the accepted role of feminine guide-characters in Malory's text<sup>49</sup>. In order to supersede their roles as mere guides (a characterization that only defines Morgan and Gwenyver in the terms of one aspect of their relationships with men), they fully utilize their relationships with their male family kin (by marriage and blood alike) in order to penetrate and manipulate the chivalric political and social systems of Camelot. If, as Molly Martin maintains, "defining and valorizing the male community of knights and its specific version of romance masculinity is a, if not the primary concern in the *Morte*" (1), then it applies that the movement and decisions made by Gwenyver and Morgan throughout the story turn these same valorizations and definitions to their benefit by maneuvering through them via their male relations. Simply

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<sup>49</sup> There has been quite a bit of work done on the guiding role of female characters in Malory in the last decade. While I agree that there many types of these guiding characters in *Le Morte Darthur*, my argument attempts to move away from this perception, as I feel it limits the individual agency and choices these women show and make, as well as it does not apply to their female-female legal relationship. Geraldine Heng's essay "Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory" does an excellent job exploring the gendered roles in the story; again, I am not disagreeing with this argument, merely looking at it from the angle that the female characters I am discussing are not only limited to agency through guidance; rather, through chivalry they find a means to break out of that role, albeit with mixed results.

put, Gwenyver and Morgan appropriate and use the masculine means at hand in order to further their own goals and ambitions.

Arthur's codes of chivalry, which knights like Gawayne and Launcelot personify and knights like Mordred subvert, does not leave a tremendous amount of room for females of the court to operate. The Chivalric code as outlined in Malory's *Pentecostal Oath* is specific in its directive to knights:

the Kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys – and charged them never to do outeraige nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upon payne of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of Kynge Arthure for evermore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and widowes [socour], strength hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe (3.26 – 33, P. 77).

However, the rules of chivalry, with their emphasis on duty to women (especially noble ones) and unquestioning loyalty to their king and court, conversely also provided a means for politically ambitious women to access modes of power through their male relations, as those relationships demanded male obligation and obedience. Thus Gwenyver and Morgan Le Fay are able to move away from simply being objects of male gaze, romantic interests, and “inciters of quests” (Martin 148) toward a more active role in court, family matters, and government. It is this odd contradiction of masculine modes of authority and the expectation of male obedience that allows Gwenyver to become a figure of political, martial, and courtly power by depending



on and operating through her nephew Gawayne<sup>50</sup>, as Morgan attempts to infiltrate Camelot's court through her brother Arthur.

Gwenyver and Gawayne have a special aunt and nephew relationship throughout *Le Morte Darthur*. Earlier in the text, soon after Gawayne has been made a knight, in "The Weddyng of Kyng Arthur," it is Gwenyver, not Arthur, who levies punishment on the young knight after he has callously killed a maiden:

Than the Kyng and the Quene were gretely displeasid with Sir Gawayne for the sleynge of the lady; and there by ordynaunce of the Queene there was sette a queste of ladyes upon Sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes and to fight for hir quarrels, and ever that he sholde be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy, Thus was Sir Gawayne sworne upon the foure Evaungelystis that he sholde never be ayenste lady ne jantillwoman, but if he fight for a lady and hys adversary fyghtith for anuther (3.1-9, P. 70).

While it is certainly noteworthy that Gwenyver, not Arthur, is the authority figure that punishes Gawayne, ("Women assess and judge in matters of social and courtly behavior, chivalry, love and morality in Malory's work" (Jesmok 34)), her sentence is even more significant. With one fell stroke, Gwenyver has established herself as not just her lord's lady, but as a figure of authority over knights and thus over men generally, masculinizing herself within the world of chivalry through Gawayne's distinctly un-chivalric behavior: "Masculinity primarily depends not on the projection of male vision, but rather on the projection of male images. Masculinity thus capitalizes on the production of visible displays of acts that are coded male by the society that

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<sup>50</sup> Throughout English history, queens were a rare occurrence, and overtly politically ambitious women were often viewed with suspicion, "their regimes interrupting 'normal' monarchy" (Levin and Buckholz xiv).

defines it<sup>51</sup>” (Martin 2). While Arthur, in order to please his bride, allowed her to access that power, it was she who turned the situation to her best advantage; by levying such a punishment on Gawayne, she not only made Gawayne one of her personal knights (as she is the assumed queen of ladies and gentlewomen), but established her ascendancy over all the young males of Camelot. Her ability to punish and bind knights is equal to that of her husband’s; as they owe her loyalty as Arthur’s wife, she can realistically expect their obedience. It is also meaningful that she binds Gawayne so completely to herself; unlike Gawayne, or many of the other players in Arthurian drama, she is not a blood relation to either Arthur or any member of his court. She cannot depend on the loyalty expected of blood and familial ties<sup>52</sup> – she does not have a retinue of armed knights that only owe her allegiance. Therefore, she must create, and, if necessary, impose loyalty on those knights who could best serve her purposes at court.

Gwenyver’s choice of knight is also important; in the Anglo-Arthur tradition, Gawayne is often perceived as one of the best representations of Arthurian chivalry. He is also, even more importantly, a blood relation to many of the key players in the Arthurian saga: he is Arthur’s nephew (his brother, Mordred, is also Arthur’s son by his sister Margause), his brothers Aggravayne, Gaheris, and Gareth are also well known Knights of the Round Table, and his aunt is the enchantress Morgan le Fay. His blood line is direct to Arthur, which enforces his allegiance to his uncle, a bond that grows stronger when his father, King Lot of Orkney, is killed<sup>53</sup>. Unlike Arthur, or even Morgan, Gwenyver cannot rely on family loyalties at a court surrounded by the king’s family; rather, she must discover a way to establish and keep her

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<sup>51</sup> For further reading on the importance on gaze in medieval romances, especially in *Le Morte Darthur*, please see Martin’s book *Vision and Gender in Malory’s Morte Darthur*.

<sup>52</sup> While Gwenyver does bring one hundred knights with her from her father’s court, they are part of her dowry and gifts for Arthur’s court. Their allegiance as knights is to their new lord, King Arthur.

<sup>53</sup> It was a fairly standard practice for young, aristocratic men to be brought up in a different household from their parents; it would not be considered unusual for a young squire to be raised by an uncle or godfather.

political influence at Camelot, as it is this power that allows her some sense of prestige and agency; if “masculinity is primarily constructed through prowess, and especially *displays* of prowess” (Martin 14), then Gwenyver has established herself as a powerful courtly force. She, it seems, is more interested in her role as a queen who is a forceful political entity, as opposed to a queen who is only her lord’s lady, and she quickly divines the best way to do it – by doling out punishments to knights who slight women, and incorporating into that punishment an assurance of loyalty.

This is not to say that Gawayne did not, or would not have felt or acted upon a sense of loyalty to his aunt by marriage. She is his uncle and lord’s wife, and, as such, is owed chivalric obedience. However, it is obviously important to Gwenyver’s fortunes that there is no doubt who her self-appointed protectors are. Her male protectors, Gawayne and, later in the work, Launcelot, are chosen and manipulated by her (through the former’s assented kinship and her sexual relationship with the latter) – it is an almost anti-chivalric action, driven by ambition and defense rather than nobility and romantic desire. Rather than the usual feminine distress/masculine response model so often portrayed in medieval romances, Gwenyver aligns her masculine “responses” in anticipation of any coming distress, effectively complicating the masculine chivalric codes which, because of its bilateral context (male/female, fighting/faith, penance/revenge, etc.), “could not effectively cope with a female character whose actions do not fit neatly into one of the given definitions” (Martin 2).

Medieval feminine sexuality, especially as characterized by Gwenyver, was often perceived as threatening, especially in a social-political context. While Malory’s narrator often repeatedly protests to his readers that male-female love, usually as it deals with Gwenyver, should be understood as something different than popularly understood as appropriate: “for love

that tyme was nat as love ys nowadays” (20.4 – 5, P. 649). Still, the narrator’s protestations are only such because of the assumption that there was something physically illicit that needs to be hidden or explained. Culturally, the approved mode of female sexuality could include a chaste gentlewoman who may entertain what has become understood as a “courtly” lover, but was still expected to be unquestionably chaste before marriage, and unquestionably monogamous during marriage. This, of course, is directly related to anxieties about heirs and property inheritance<sup>54</sup>. It is especially important in the Arthur legend because of the importance of blood ties among Arthur and his knights. However, it seems problematic attempting to place Gwenyver anywhere on the spectrum of medieval feminine sexuality because of her self-chosen “masculine” role in governmental affairs. When she becomes Arthur’s queen she brings him the Round Table, which offers surrogate sons to Arthur in those knights who swear fealty to it (as well as the political organization for his realm); however, she does not bear any children. She is beautiful, married to a king, admired by many knights, loved by one, and abducted by two, but she is never entirely blameless or treated as an unwilling victim. Her position as an admired lady or abductee is ambiguous, unlike her queenliness, which is authoritative. Arthur’s dependence on her as a co-regent, as he “treats her as his equal, inviting her to accompany him to war” (Jesmok 38), invites her literally into “masculine fighting space” (Jesmok 38) and speaks to her unquestionable power – her status as a non-mother seems to point to her ambiguous and tenuous position as traditional queen consort.

Indeed, while Gwenyver is a politically powerful queen, she is lacking one specific attribute that was generally assumed of good queens (and good women): she is not a mother. The

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<sup>54</sup> “Marriage in the Middle Ages involved two crucial but sometimes conflicting dimensions: it was a private companionate relationship and a public social institution, the means whereby heirs were produced and land, wealth, power, and political rule were transferred” (Cherewatuk, preface).

fact that Arthur and Gwenyver are childless in the majority of medieval texts is foreboding<sup>55</sup>. It seems to point to the eventually futility and downfall of the Round Table, as well as the general unsuitability of Arthur's marriage to Gwenyver<sup>56</sup>. While Malory's narrator often extolls her virtues as a queen, lady, and friend, there is a sub-context that if she were "better," more apt to be true to her husband and the fictional mores of feminine courtly behavior, she would have better protection<sup>57</sup> (in the form of children, specifically sons) instead of having to manipulate Arthur's nephews and knights. At best, this type of protection is fleeting, as the ties of fealty and chivalry, as seen in the "Deth of Arthur," are lasting only in theory, but in practice can and are pulled apart.

Gwenyver's sexual identity as a queen, abductee, lover and surrogate-maternal figure, are all indicative of her marginal, suspect position – during the poisoned apple scene, and after, she is described as a destructive, not constructive force within *Le Morte Darthur*. Her dependence on nephews like Gawayne is paralleled with her relationship with his cousin (and Arthur's son), Mordred<sup>58</sup>, the "anti-Gawayne". Like his Aunt Gwenyver, Mordred is a marginal, suspect character whose actions seem harbingers of destruction. While there is an obvious element to this characterization (he mortally wounds Arthur), the way his character works towards this goal is

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<sup>55</sup> Cherewatuk argues that the gift of the Round Table represents "children" or the ability to gain more sons in Malory's story – however, I feel this is problematic in a text where blood lines and lineage are matters of such importance. Granted, the Round Table does enable to Arthur to build a literal army of surrogate sons in addition to his out of wedlock sons, but neither ensure (and, in the case of Mordred, actually guarantee the failure of) Camelot.

<sup>56</sup> Merlin warns Arthur against marrying her: "but Marlyon warned the King convertly that Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff" (3.25-26).

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras's book *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* offers a complete discussion on medical and popular beliefs in regards to infertility. According to medieval thought, both men and women contributed to fertility, and the birth of sons or daughters was dependent on the strength of the man's seed and the "obedience" of the female womb; thus, sons were born to men of stronger seed. However, the blame for infertility was still often placed on women, even though both sexes shared in procreation (84-86).

<sup>58</sup> Mordred's lineage in Malory details his conception by Arthur on his own (then unknown) half-sister Morgause, Morgan's sister.

more subtle and clever than Gawayne's verbal abilities allow him, as a man of arms and action. Thus, it seems that Mordred and Gwenyver should be connected in the text, and that that connection remains, at least on some levels, ambiguous<sup>59</sup>.

The acrimony between Mordred and Gwenyver, and the foreshadowing of the eventual destruction of the Round Table and Arthur and Gawayne (among hundreds of other knights) can be located in the poisoning tale in "Sir Launcelot and Quene Gwenyvere." The story gives a voice to the dissatisfaction with and suspicion of Gwenyver that many knights, including Mordred and his brothers, feel which in turn seems to be hinting at disruption and unhappiness with Camelot and the rule of Arthur itself. What is interesting is that this is the first time in the text that members of the court, including Gwenyver's nephews (by marriage) express what appears to be a commonly known complaint about their queen and her influence on their Round Table; until this point, readers have only been exposed to the narrator's approval and rationalization on behalf of Gwenyver. It is quite startling to learn that, not only has a fellow knight tried to poison Gawayne, but that many knights "love hir nat, because she ys a destroyer of good knyghtes" (18.13-14, P. 594), an opinion they give Sir Bors as they expression their disappointment in his decision to do battle to defend Gwenyver's honor. What is even more perplexing is how readily the knights, including Gawayne, believe that Gwenyver is capable and interested in poisoning him, as Gawayne tells the queen, after seeing another knight poisoned by the apple meant for him, "wyte you that thys dyner was made for me and my felowis, for all folkes that knowith my condicion undirstonde that I love well fruyte – and now I se well I had nere been slayne!" (18.11-14, P. 591). This appears to indicate an underlying discomfort, on Gawayne's part, about his relationship and allegiance to his aunt. Perhaps it is because their familial ties are more political ties, and that his allegiance was mandated through her role as

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<sup>59</sup> In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* she is Mordred's willing consort, and has two children with him.

punishing authority; either way, Gawayne is surprisingly silent during this episode, neither directly accusing, or defending, the queen.

While Gwenyver is eventually cleared of wrong-doing, she is further legally connected to Gawayne in the epitaph of the true poisoner's tombstone:

HERE LYETH SIR PATRYSE OF IRELONDE.  
 SLAYNE BY SIR PYNELL LE SAVEAIGE THAT ENPOYSYNDE APPELIS  
 TO HAVE SLAYNE SIR GAWAYNE;  
 AND BY MYSSEFORTUNE SIR PATRYSE ETE  
 ONE OF THE APPLIS, AND THAN SUDDEYNLY HE BRASTE

Also ther was wrytn uppon the tombe that Quene Gwenyvere was appeled of it treason of the deth of Sir Patryse by Sir Madore de la Porte [...]” (18.14-20, P. 598).

Her inclusion in this epitaph seems unnecessary and smacks of too much protestation; if her innocence were truly believed, it would not be necessary to continue tying her name to the crime, the would-be victim, and her accuser. These political and judicial links seem to be the ones that bind her fate to both of her nephews, and in whose deaths she has a most definite and decided role – Gawayne’s fear that the realm would be “holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled” (20.20 – 22, P. 647) by the poisoning incident will be made true in “The Deth of Arthur,” where Gwenyver’s actions will test and ultimately destroy Camelot.

While it is her nephew, Mordred, who orchestrates the destruction of Arthur’s reign and the Round Table itself, it is the queen who provides him the means<sup>60</sup>. Interestingly, Mordred can

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<sup>60</sup> Mordred suspects her affair with Launcelot, and works not only to expose it but turn as many of the knights, as well as the king, against her.

read the situation and anticipate Arthur's reaction much more clearly than other knights can, and his plans are contingent on Arthur's reaction to his news of finding Launcelot in Gwenyver's room:

“And alas,” seyde the Kynge, “me sore repentith that ever Sir Launcelot sholde be ayenste me, for now I am sure the noble felyship of the Rounde Table ys brokyn for ever, for wyth hym woll many a noble knyght holde. And now hit ys fallen so,” seyde the Kynge, “That I may nat with my worshyp but my quene muste suffir dethe” – and was sore amoved (20.39-44, P. 654).

Gwenyver depended on her nephews and other courtly knights to bolster and support her power, as well as to protect her position. Her husband, who generally acquiesces to her political and legal pressures (for example, allowing her to dole out Gawayne's punishment and insisting that Sir Bors, in Sir Launcelot's absence defend her against accusations of poisoning), is rarely characterized as her protector; those roles are filled by her knightly nephews (and, of course, Launcelot). In relation to Gwenyver, Arthur is more often her punisher. Arthur is often easily influenced by the words of those around him, but as the last chapter of *Le Morte Darthur* starts, he is open only to the words of his nephew and half-son, Mordred, who seems to share this ability to influence with another aunt, Morgan Le Fay. Unable to recognize Mordred's true intentions, Arthur moves swiftly to punish Gwenyver, a similar role to that he had during the poisoning episode. Like her connection to Gawayne, Gwenyver's relationship with Arthur seems to operate almost exclusively in legal and political spaces; there is no feel of domesticity or familial love (in the medieval Catholic sense)<sup>61</sup> between husband and wife, which again directs

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<sup>61</sup> While medieval marriage was a sacrament, it was rarely a love match. As such, the duties husband and wife owed to one another were less romantic in nature than our modern concept of marriage. However, husbands and wives were expected to be loyal to one another, and to protect one another (this was especially true for husbands). Thus, while Arthur and Gwenyver's marriage cannot be examined through



attention to the political nature of their marriage<sup>62</sup>. Instead of her defender and friend, Arthur is her judge, just as Gwenyver was Gawayne's judge early on in the tale.

Already made suspicious by Sir Aggravayne, who told Arthur that Launcelot would not go hunt with the king so he could tryst with the queen, and heavily influenced by Mordred's words, he is barely moved by Gawayne's defense of Gwenyver (he is equally unsuccessful convincing his relatives not to pursue the course laid out by Mordred). Driven by loyalty and chivalry, and perhaps a lingering sense of guilt over his silence during the poisoning incident, Gawayne does attempt to defend Gwenyver, or at least ameliorate her death sentence through postponement:

“My lorde Arthure, I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty, but that ye wolde put hit in respite, thys jougemente of my lady the Quene hath oftyntymes ben gretely beholdyn unto Sir Launcelot, more than to ony othir knyght; for oftyntymes he hath saved her lyff and done batayle for her whan all the courte refused the Quene. And peradventure she sente for hym for goodnes and for none evyll.” (20.10 – 19, P. 655).

Gawayne is surprisingly insistent in his defense of his aunt, as well as in his disgust at his uncle's actions: “Jesu defende me,” seyde Sir Gawayne, “that I never se hit nor know hit.” (20.34-35, P. 655). In truth, he becomes insubordinate to his liege lord and king, refusing to lead Gwenyver to her execution:

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a contemporary lens, I would argue it is still an unusual marriage in that the tenets of loyalty, friendship, and protection are weaker than other relationships in Malory, like Gwenyver and Lancelot's relationship. For further reading on medieval marriage and love, please see Ruth Mazo Karras's *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*.

<sup>62</sup> While almost all aristocratic marriages are political or economic in nature, Arthur chose Gwenyver (whom he had fallen almost instantly in love with) for his wife and approached her father first; he was not approached with offers of marriage and dowry from her father. While their marriage would reflect the practices of the time, it does seem a romantic start to a union whose primary focus is political and martial.

Nay, my moste noble Kyng,” seyde Sir Gawayne, “that woll I never do. For wyte you well I woll never be in that place where so noble a quene as ys my lady Dame Gwenyver shall take such a shamefull ende –“...”my harte woll nat serve me for to se her dye; and hit shall never be seyde that ever I was of youre counceyle for her deth” (20.11-18, P. 656).

What, then, is it about Gwenyver that causes Gawayne to turn against his male kin at the moment of absolute crisis for the politics of Camelot and the legend of the Round Table? He appears to be turning against blood and the loyalty he has sworn to his uncle and lord. Gawayne feels his ultimate political loyalty, as defined in the code of chivalry, is to the noble who essentially created his character; it is Gwenyver who originally levied punishment on him, it is she who offered him a chance at redemption and forgiveness, and, as such, managed to supersede the political importance of his male kin. She is his true lord, and Gawayne remains loyal to her not simply because she is a woman, and he has sworn as an act of redemption to always champion ladies in need, but because she has annexed political supremacy through her acts as Gawayne’s spiritual and political benefactor, confessor, and forgiver in the tale “The Weddyng of Kyng Arthur.” Gawayne turns against many of his brothers and Arthur himself not out of love for Lancelot, but out of respect for the power of Gwenyver. As one of the given paragons of chivalric virtue, Gawayne must remain loyal to the one in whose power he has committed himself, which in name is Camelot and King Arthur, but in practice is Gwenyver. He severs all ties and eventually dies because of the chain of events unleashed not through his doing but by Gwenyver’s actions<sup>63</sup>. While the end of the Round Table does not elevate Gwenyver into power,

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<sup>63</sup> Because Launcelot has killed some of his brothers, Gawayne challenges him and eventually dies at his hands; however, even as Gawayne challenges Launcelot, he still maintains his loyalty to the queen, claiming “As for my lady the Quene, wyte thou well I woll never say her shame” (20.20-21).

it does appear that she has at least successfully maneuvered herself into a position of power through her use of political codes, designed to exclude women from matters of war and the body politic in general through the most convenient means available – a young male nephew whose loyalty became ensured through her lordly acts of judgment, punishment, and the offer of redemption.

If Gwenyver accessed power through existing, traditional avenues of political and feudal loyalty (albeit in a somewhat untraditional way), Morgan Le Fay<sup>64</sup> manages to be both radical and surprisingly orthodox in her approach and desire for political power in Camelot. Forever connected to her brother through family lineage<sup>65</sup>, she continually tests and exposes the weaknesses and faults of the Arthurian chivalric code, with its insistence on constant retaliation and payback, unquestioning fealty to Arthur and their “brother knights,” and the unchallenged status of helping women, no matter the situation or cause. In this sense she is very much a marginal figure, the much cited and, now somewhat clichéd “liminal woman” who operates in boundary worlds of magic, but never able to fully enter the patriarchally normed society of Camelot. However, I would argue that, like Gwenyver, Morgan, while untraditional in her approach, was no more liminal than her sister in law. Case in point, Morgan, quite conventionally, wants to establish her brother’s<sup>66</sup> loyalty to her as her blood; she is not, as some

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<sup>64</sup> Morgan Le Fay first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*, where she is characterized as a beautiful intelligent healer modeled on classical, rather than Celtic or Anglo-Saxon lines; Malory seems to have drawn upon this tradition in his characterization of Morgan, as opposed to more hideous or insidious depictions in other Arthurian tales (Larrington 8).

<sup>65</sup> Jesmok argues that two women, Igrayne and Gwenyver, are central to Arthur and the story of Malory’s Camelot (36). While I agree with this statement, I would add Morgan Le Fay into that list; she and her machinations influence Arthur’s story and the tales of his knights, Launcelot and Gwenyver’s affair, her sister relationship reinforces Arthur’s noble lineage, and she is present from the beginning to the end of the book.

<sup>66</sup> Morgan Le Fay is first described as Arthur’s sister in Etienne de Rouen’s text *Draco Normannicus* (approx. 1168); it is an adaptation that is picked up first by French writers, then by the English (Larrington 29).

people assume, looking to destroy Camelot in the service of bringing down male hierarchy or because she is simply jealous of Gwenyver and dislikes her sister in law. The situation is much more complex; rather than overturn the accepted modes of behavior, I am arguing that Morgan, like Gwenyver, is attempting to utilize her position as a female relative as a means to control and power at her brother's court.

As a blood relative, Morgan feels that it should be her role to influence court, as opposed to Gwenyver, an outsider with no blood interest<sup>67</sup>. As Gwenyver chose Gawayne, a younger male relative as her tool, Morgan first tries her brother (also younger) then their shared nephews<sup>68</sup> in an effort to turn Arthur's loyalties back towards his bloodline<sup>69</sup> – it is she who continually attempts to draw his attention to Gwenyver's emotional and physical infidelity, and the destruction she will (and does) cause<sup>70</sup>. Thus, it can be argued that Morgan is only somewhat subversive; for all that she can comfortably fit into the role of the supernatural, dangerous sorceress, Malory also imagines her in the very feminized, traditional, and maternal role of a healing, constructive force at the end of the poem, as she appears to tend to her brother, personally escorting him to Avalon (this stands in opposition to Gwenyver's masculinization as the a non-fertile, non-maternal, destructive force).

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<sup>67</sup> Many of the knights of the Round Table are nephews of Morgan and Arthur though their sisters Morgause and Elayne. The family tree changed considerably throughout the legend, but many of the most important knights are related by blood to the King's family.

<sup>68</sup> There is a history of sibling incest in the Arthurian legend, especially in regards to his "unknowing" beddings with his sister (or sisters, depending on the legend). While incest was a taboo in medieval society, sibling incest appears to have been the least egregious of the potential familial couplings, especially if the participants did not realize their kinship, a common trope in many medieval romances (Archibald, 193).

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Shepherd, the editor of the Norton edition of *Le Morte Darthur* claims at one point that Morgan is Igrayne's sister, which is inconsistent with the text itself and the legend – I believe this is a mistake (5, Note 7).

<sup>70</sup> Throughout *Le Morte Darthur* Morgan continually tests and challenges Arthur and his court; P. 84, some examples include, but are not limited to stealing Excalibur and its sheath so her lover Accolon may defeat Arthur, sending Arthur an enchanted mantle which will burn the wearer immediately, and imprisoning Launcelot in one of her castles in attempt to keep him away from Gwenyver.

Like Gwenyver, Morgan Le Fay is a queen through marriage to her husband King Urien. Unlike Gwenyver, whose space is restricted to that of Camelot-influence (even on trips she is surrounded by her husband's knights, especially Gawayne and Launcelot), Morgan seems free to roam about as she pleases<sup>71</sup>. Gwenyver's only non-authorized trips outside of the boundaries of Camelot<sup>72</sup> come at the hands of others through kidnap<sup>73</sup>. In this sense Morgan is atypical, and appears to have none of the household or courtly responsibilities usually associated with a queen or woman of noble stature. Morgan's power releases her from "normal codes circumscribing mortal relations" her powers "confer an extraordinary autonomy" upon her, she has "untrammelled freedom to act that is denied others" – and she "unleash[es] actions which may playfully mimic the gestures of the courtly-chivalric ethos, but without self-conscription" (Heng 104). While this is a definite indicator of her unusual status, the physical freedom does not ensure her an equal amount of political or familial agency, even though she can shape-shift, thus enabling her elude a multitude of boundaries.

While she is free to move where she wants around the physical and metaphorical boundaries of Camelot, she cannot move into that space; in this way, she is even more restricted in her access to political (not magical) power than Gwenyver, an aspect that seems to play up her convention as opposed to feminine "otherness." As "Morgan's bond with Arthur is never undone," allowing her "an unparallel position of intimacy with her brother" (Larrington 29), Morgan seems fixed, at least emotionally, squarely within the domestic space, and her choices seem emotionally driven by sibling loyalty and jealousy.

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<sup>71</sup> This particularly applies to magical or enchanted spaces "off the map," especially locations like Avalon, Arthur's place of healing from which he never returns – this space is distinctly "Morganesque" as it is enclosed, inaccessible to those without magical knowledge, an enclosure from which people can only leave at her discretion, and a place where men are held by her power.

<sup>72</sup> The courtly romance literature space occupied by knights also, like Gwenyver and Morgan, is bounded space which also encloses knights and limits their movement (Martin 5)

<sup>73</sup> In Malory, Gwenyver is abducted by Meleagant and Mordred.

While there is some speculation about the origin of Morgan and Gwenyver's shared dislike for one another<sup>74</sup>, it does seem apparent that a great deal of their enmity stems from a shared desire to elicit control and influence on the court, specifically through Arthur. Like his marital relationship, Arthur's relationship with his sisters is ambiguous; their husbands all fought against him as part of the eleven kings (Book I), but all of their sons are knights of Arthur's<sup>75</sup>. In *Le Morte Darthur* Morgan's characterization receives more attention. She is introduced as Igrayne's daughter who "was put to scole in a nonnery, and ther she lerned so moche that she was a grete clerke of nygromancye" (1.44-46, P. 5), an indication of her exceptional cleverness. Unlike other representations of Morgan Le Fay (previous and contemporary to Malory's story), she is presented as fair, more of an enchantress instead of witch<sup>76</sup> whose education, conducted in a nunnery, seems at least based in Catholicism, with references to a classical education, as well. As such, she holds a special place of trust and counselor to her brother, although her actions run contradictory to such a position. On one hand, Arthur acknowledges he has "honoured hir and worshipped hir more than all my kyn, and more have I trusted hir than my wyff and all my kin aftir," (4.34-36, P. 90) but on the other she attempts to shame Arthur into acknowledging his cuckoldry and the limitations of chivalric honor or imprison and/or murder his knights.

Interestingly, in Malory's re-telling, Morgan does not attempt to gain entry into Camelot through her nephew Gawayne, although this could possibly be because of his apparent loyalty to

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<sup>74</sup> One story details that their mutual dislike stems from a love affair the married Morgan carried on with a young male cousin of Gwenyver named Guiomar (from Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*), an act which Gwenyver disapproved of (for reasons of age and adultery) – Gwenyver removed both from Camelot (Larrington 25).

<sup>75</sup> "Some of the most prominent knights in romance tradition – Galescelain, Cador, Yvain and Percival – all acquire different Arthurian sisters as mothers in the *Estoire Merlin*. The sister's son relationship, traditionally a close and privileged one in Celtic and Germanic heroic society, emphasizes the nephew's intimacy with the king" (Larrington 32).

<sup>76</sup> An enchantress is usually defined as a woman who is highly educated, and that it is this education which allows her to access magic, whereas a witch or sorceress seems to have been born with or aided in gaining their powers.

her sister-in-law. And, while she wants to bring down some elements of Camelot and disrupt its court<sup>77</sup>, she does not align herself with her nephew Mordred, indicating that she is less interested in destroying Camelot than in making it a court that operates on a chivalric code run by familial loyalty instead of politically sworn loyalty. Such a make-up would have changed Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table tremendously – while many of the knights would have remained, there would have been more imperial power allowed, as Morgan and her sisters’ husbands would have had a more active role, which, in turn, would have possibly usurped Arthur’s role as king. Thus, it appears that Morgan’s efforts are pretty strictly of the constructive sort (again an implication of maternal femininity, reinforced by her son Sir Uwain); instead of destroying Camelot for the sheer joy of it, I would contend that Morgan wants to construct a court that privileges the role of family fealty over that of political fealty<sup>78</sup>.

However, there is the problematic binary of Morgan as healer/destroyer. Through most of *Le Morte Darthur*, Morgan seems to be plotting against her brother and even attempting to bring him mortal harm in the Accolon episode described in “Aftir Thes Questis.” Morgan actually changes Arthur’s scabbard in an effort to help her lover, which almost proves fatal for her brother. In return, Arthur sends his sister a gift of her lover’s corpse, attempts to give chase and cut her down with a sword, efforts Morgan returns when she sends an incendiary mantle to Arthur. While much of this can be blamed on Morgan’s jealousy at not being allowed access and

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<sup>77</sup> Heng argues that this seeming act of destruction is not as it seems, and that her continual testing “serves to increase their abilities and reputations with successful endurance” (107). This paper agrees with her in part (that all of Morgan’s acts are not as destructive as they appear); however, our opinions diverge on her motives, as I think Morgan constructs these tests not to bolster Arthur’s court but to point out the dangers in moving away from loyalty through lineage. I also think Heng’s discussion of Morgan’s rescuing Arthur in the end neglects to discuss the important element of sibling intimacy in their exchange as “fellow player[s] in a drama” (Heng 107).

<sup>78</sup> Like Merlin, it seems that Morgan feels Gwenyver is not good for Arthur or his realm; perhaps both characters realize that she will wield too much power and influence over her husband and his knights, and that power will result in the ultimate destruction of Arthur’s kingdom.

influence in Arthur's court, it seems too simple to simply label her as "malign" as Geraldine Heng does (104); it also does not account for her continual emotional attachment to her brother, or when she bears away his body as he is mortally wounded. Instead, I would argue that Morgan, as befits a traditional female characterization, is driven by emotion.

Most importantly, and most obviously different than Gwenyver, who is constructed and characterized as a largely destructive force, Morgan Le Fay is also characterized as a healer, which again is a regenerative, fertility-laden model of woman-ness, a gendered position reinforced through her association with enchantment and magic (other than Merlin, most of the male characters in Malory are enchanted as opposed to enchanters) (Heng, 99). After Arthur is mortally wounded in his last great battle with Mordred, it is Morgan who is sent for as his only hope: "And than the quene seyde, 'A, my dere brothir, why have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coude.' And anone they rowed fromward the londe" (21.6-9, P. 688). Arthur's last hope is in family – his code of chivalry has broken down, but, in taking him away to heal him, Morgan can finally create her kin-driven court, reinforcing her position as a threatening (the brave Launcelot claims "but sore I am of thes quenys crauftis aferde, for they have destroyed many a good knyght" (6.36-37, P. 155)) but ultimately beneficial female fulfilling her traditional role as woman as creator and bearer of men:

nothir more of the verry sertaynte of hys deth harde I never rede, but thus was he lad away in a shyp wherein were three quenys: that one was Kyng Arthur syster, Quene Morgan le Fay, the tother was the Quene of North Galis, and the thirde was the Quene of the Waste Londis (21.2-6, P. 689).

Ultimately, neither the political, destructive power of Gwenyver nor the familial, creative influence of Morgan Le Fay were successful, as neither woman achieved their desired ends,



likely because they had to depend on human males through which to enact their plans. Morgan is a powerful enchantress whose powers, while great, cannot accomplish and assure the one thing she wants, namely a court at Camelot where she influences King Arthur and his knights by dint of her family relations. And, for all of her machinations, she never once manages to remove, embarrass, or expose Gwenyver to Arthur, nor can she manage to operate within the physical bounds of Camelot. She only gains full access to the king (the representative of power) at his end, when his court is destroyed and his power much diminished.

Similarly, for all of the political authority and lordly fidelity Gwenyver commands, especially in regard to Gawayne, she is powerless in the face of Arthur's authority, and her ace in the hole (the protection of a favorite knight) is worth nothing. Gawayne cannot sway her husband, and his loyalty causes his and many other deaths and, most importantly, the destruction of what should have been a long golden age of Arthurian chivalry. And all of her power cannot prevent her sister in law's repeated attempts to humiliate and excise her from court, nor can it keep Morgan at Camelot long enough to exact punishment. Through her actions Gwenyver destroyed what Morgan sought to control, and through her efforts Morgan interrupted Gwenyver's bids for political agency.

In the end, these legal sisters do share an exit from "this world" or "this life," although there is a marked difference in how they go about this. Morgan comes in as a healing queen, the one chance England will have for Arthur's return, while Gwenyver, in the face of so much destruction, "stale away with fyve ladyes with her, and so she went to Amysbyry. And there she lete make herselff a nunne, and wered whyght clothys and blak, and grete penaunce she toke upon her as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe" (21.29-34). What is most telling here is that Gwenyver seems to admit some culpability for the destruction of Camelot, while Morgan does

not seem to have to partake in such an act of penance, which, in turn, argues that, it is Gwenyver who is the liminal, “othered,” subversive woman who must be punished for her ambition, while Morgan Le Fay is rewarded for her admittedly unconventional yet orthodox role of the woman loyal to her family, a creative, healing, maternal woman as opposed to a masculinized, politically ambitious, un-sexed and infertile woman<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, both Gwenyver and Morgan in Malory are characterized as beautiful, a characterization that could be read as either subversive (many times in Medieval literature evil and ugliness are equivalent, thus beautiful yet malevolent or unfeminine characters could be read as dangerous) or as an indicator of both of their basic natures as good in this text.

### Conclusion: The Landscape of Coercive Kinship

If we can accept that the Arthurian “foundation of power lay not in disciplined retainers but in family” (Searle 159), which, with Camelot’s tangled knots of kinship seems more true than not, then we find ourselves in a scenario where politics and family do not simply mix, but replicate their power structures repeatedly in each other. In such a space, the boundaries between masculine and feminine, as well as the political and domestic become blurred or even erased, and it is in such a landscape that the events of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at Terme Wathelyne*, and *Le Morte Darthur* unfold in the spectacular rise and fall of Camelot and the Round Table, whose fortunes are not decided by military prowess or the rules of chivalry, but by women connected to Arthur’s court through marriage and family.

Morgan le Fay and Guinevere are larger than life characters, an especially impressive feat in stories as fantastic and illustrative as those contained in the English Arthurian legend. However, their glamour is what often leads critics and scholars to treat them inadequately as characters or literary devices worthy of serious consideration. What I have attempted to do is provide a means through which their agency and capabilities can be more thoroughly examined and understood as a departure from their stereotypical bad or dangerous woman characterizations. Instead, I would like to encourage a more thoughtful and sophisticated view not just of these characters, but the way aristocratic women could and did operate successfully within male spaces and structures, and how they could use their femininity, political, and familial status to accomplish their goals.

As such, I have placed Guinevere and Morgan, along with Gawain, Arthur, and the court of Camelot itself into a framework that concentrates on the development and role of medieval feudal kinship. Instead of relegating the concept of family to the feminine sphere so commonly

associated with female domesticity, I have attempted to argue that the medieval noble family was an intricate network of single and double bonds of blood and/or politics. Within such a system, where women had an equal interest in the growth and continuation of their family's power, coupled with an ability to create biological bonds through childbirth and political alliances through marriage, they could use the modes of chivalry to enforce social compliance or encourage rebellion because they were situated in space that is neither particularly masculine or feminine. Rather than looking at the physical and ideological spaces contained in medieval romances as strictly delineated areas marked "male" and "female," I would like to start looking at them as a series of overlapping circles similar to a mingled series of Venn diagrams. In this situation, it becomes more obvious that medieval women were not simply restricted to a particular feminine space. While there were some areas where women were not a physical presence, like the battlefield, they were certainly present in their role as instigators, mothers, wives, and political players in the battles themselves.

It is this mobility that allows Guinevere and Morgan to be self-determined individuals with as much literary agency as other male characters in medieval literature. Their participation as coercive kin through advantageous marriages, childbirth, and courtly stature elevates their status beyond that of "other." Coercive kinship allows and encourages readers to push beyond the assumption that all romantic noblewomen were restricted to an existence of passivity as they were alternately won or lost at the hand of knights, but as characters who operated mostly the central plot lines as opposed to the boundaries of the text.

Looking at the textual relationships between Guenore, Morgan and Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gaynour and Gawayn in *The Awntyrs off Arthure and Terne Wathelyne*, and finally Gwennyver, Gawain and Morgan le Fay in "The Deth of Arthure" through

the lens of coercive kinship explores the political dynamics at play between the different levels of allegiance, as well as the dangers inherent in a system that consisted largely on demanding and relying on loyalty, in the hopes a family member, no matter how close or remote, would not decide that they may be able to do a better job than their ruling kin.

While the texts examined stretch over one hundred years, their particularly strong representations of not just women, but the way powerful queens could access and utilize male chivalric politics through their own kinship strata exposes the medieval political dependency upon family. Medieval feudal families stretched far beyond our small, nuclear families of today, and represented many varied interests and potential alliances; coercive kinship helps expose the uneasy relationship between the capabilities and decisions of the individual and the well-being and growth of the political and familial group as a whole, and it is this relationship that is exemplified in all three of the works discussed. The power struggle between two individual women and their plans for the continuation of their power, whether through family or politics or both in Camelot is central to the narratives and plots of these tales. It is in this mingled space that all family members, political, blood, or both, are equal players in that they all have the same interest in securing and expanding their power base, either through more traditionally masculine modes of battle, feminine modes of family lineage, or in hybrid arrangements that allow the masculine political and feminine domestic to mingle and double their efforts to reinforce the bonds of feudal and social alliance.

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