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Isabelle S. Lee

Bowdoin College

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She is Magic is Her: Magic and the Becoming of the Lady of the Lake in *Le Morte D'Arthur*

Isabelle S. Lee
Bowdoin College

Abstract

The Lady of the Lake is a valuable and complex character in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, yet her value, power, and identity are rarely critically regarded by both Arthurian scholarship and within the text, contributing to the marginalization of her character. However, adopting the scholar Geraldine Heng's feminist approach to studying the Lady of the Lake in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, we may realize how, and by what or whom the Lady of the Lake is marginalized. Through this realization, we may gain a more robust understanding of the Lady's identity as an enchantress and how they are not only crucial to her character, but also to the narrative. Thus, the Lady's magic is a vital quality of not only her identity, but also of *Le Morte d'Arthur.* The Lady of the Lake's presence, including her gender and her enchantments, are deeply intertwined with the central narrative of *Le Morte d'Arthur.*

Keywords: Arthurian legend, feminism, Lady of the Lake, *Le Morte d'Arthur,* medieval literature, Sir Thomas Malory

Le Morte d'Arthur was written by Sir Thomas Malory in the late 15th century, and the text centralizes King Arthur of Camelot and his Knights of the Round Table, beginning with King Arthur's birth and ending with his death and downfall. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur,* the Lady of the Lake (also known as the Damosel of the Lake or distinguished as Nyneve) is an enchantress who dwells at the metaphorical and literal margins and shapes the text through her magic and femininity, these traits influencing the other. For example, she protects herself from the sorcerer Merlin's sexual predation by banishing him through her magic. Although there are multiple of these Ladies (as they respawn from deaths and occupy multiple places at once), they are rarely distinguished from one another and are rather addressed as a singular, collective figure. The Lady of the Lake glimmers in and out of focus to bestow magic upon the protagonists, such as by presenting enchanted gifts to King Arthur or acting as a decisive force in knightly battles through her intervening with her magical abilities.

In Geraldine Heng's "Feminine Knots and the Other: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (1991), Heng counters the dominant scholarly narrative that Morgan le Fay, an enchantress who is also Arthur's half-sister, is a marginal figure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and instead highlights Morgan's "overarching authority" and asserts through a feminist lens that Morgan le Fay is central to the story (Heng, 508). Inspired by Heng's approach to recognizing and the marginalized feminine figures' critical influence, we can analyze the role of the Lady of the Lake's magical identity in relation to the texts' dominant, central narrative. The Lady's magical skills allow her to overcome her marginalization and significantly affect the narrative. Simultaneously, the Lady's influence and control through magic reflects a portrait of her literary character that would have been overlooked otherwise, her magical decisions revealing the complexity of her "moral compass." For example, the Lady makes decisions that conflict against each other, therefore never necessarily easily defined as "always in Arthur's favor." She sometimes strikes "unfair" or "dishonest" bargains with Arthur that lack full disclosure for her own advantage, but she also sometimes saves his life. These impartial and partial decisions define the Lady as a complex character who operates on her own terms.

Despite both the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay being prominent, powerful enchantresses in Arthurian literature, scholarship on Morgan le Fay is much more robust and nuanced in comparison to that of the Lady of the Lake, the former becoming regarded as complex and significant and the latter depleted of critical attention, analysis, and thorough characterization.[1, 2] As an example of the Lady of the Lake being traditionally perceived as small or insignificant, the Lady of the Lake has her own entry in Robert H. Wilson's catalog of minor characters, "Addenda on Malory's Minor Characters," which is a study of minor characters who

[1] Heng, Geraldine. "Feminine Knots and the Other Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *PMLA*, vol. 106, no. 3, 1991, pp. 500–14. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/462782. Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.
[2] Mediavilla, Cindy. "From 'Unthinking Stereotype' to Fearless Antagonist: The Evolution of Morgan Le Fay on Television." *Arthuriana*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2015, pp. 44–56. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24643428. Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.
[3] Wilson, Robert H. "Addenda on Malory's Minor Characters." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1956, pp. 563–87. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27706826. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.
[4] Deutsch, Otto Erich, and A. H. F. S. "The Walter Scott Songs." *Music & Letters*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1928, pp. 330–35. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/725994. Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.

appear throughout Malory's texts.[3] The Lady's place in this catalog symbolizes dominant scholarship's broader assignment of the Lady of the Lake to a minor and marginal character. Despite receiving little scholarly attention, the Lady of the Lake is the subject of intense fascination beyond the realm of Arthuriana, inspiring major artistic works such as Sir Walter Scott's poem "The Lady of the Lake" and Franz Schubert's "Ellen's Gesang III"[4] (also known as "Ave Maria"). This phenomenon can be attributed to the narrowness of the Lady of the Lake's perception by scholars. This perception portrays her as marginal, thereby further diminishing her as a character. To achieve a more comprehensive picture of the Lady of the Lake's character in *Le Morte d'Arthur,* we must recognize and redefine the literary margins, the center, and their relation to one another within the context of magic.

Beyond *Le Morte d'Arthur,* the Lady of the Lake's character is often viewed as the morally purer counterpart to Morgan le Fay, who in *Le Morte d'Arthur,* is depicted as cunning and evil as she attempts to deceive and slay Arthur and his knights. In the article "Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake" (2000), Anne Berthelot compares the two Arthurian enchantresses Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake, asserting that Morgan is often depicted negatively, while the Lady is described positively (Berthelot, 55). The Lady is described to "not have such an important part to play either, but acts as substitute mother and protector to Lancelot, she must be above any suspicion. Accordingly, if she has learned magic, it has to be 'white magic,'" or *good* magic, rather than Morgan le Fay's black, or evil magic (Berthelot, 65). Although the Lady is categorized as minor or marginal by scholarship, she is highlighted for her goodness and purity. This is emphasized further in juxtaposition to Morgan. The enchantresses' characters are contrasted in a passage from *Prophesies de Merlin* translated by Carolyne Larrington:

> Morgan was born in the fire of lechery. And I believe that the lovely Lady of the Lake was born somewhere near Paradise. Morgan plans and carries out wicked deeds. And she of the Lake does good deeds. The former has good knights killed, while the other gives them comfort and help. She brings help to orphans and Morgan destroys them, to spite their fathers and mothers. (Larrington, 97)

Through this comparison of the Lady of the Lake and Morgan le Fay, the perception of the Lady's image as a generous, aid-giving character is heightened. In turn, she is reduced to only these qualities. Furthermore, the Lady of the Lake is also frequently analyzed with respect to the characters she "accompanies," emphasizing her marginal role as the helper figure throughout Arthuriana. For example, S. E. Holbrook states that the Lady of the Lake is often studied and remembered by scholars by her relationship to Morgan, rather than as she appears in "the whole of Malory's Arthuriad whether approached as a collection of assorted tales or as a unified narrative sequence" (Holbrook, 762).

The Lady of the Lake, when appreciated, remains imagined only in comparison to the masculine narrative of Arthuriana and *Le Morte D'Arthur*, specifically mentioned by Holbrook as an "isolated, and in this case even paltry, Merlin affair" (Holbrook, 762). In appreciation of Heng's work with Morgan le Fay and Holbrook's recognition of the Lady of the Lake as a "luminary," I hope to further expand scholarship's understanding of the Lady of the Lake's character by studying the Lady and her magic in their own contexts rather than in the narratives or characters she is frequently described to accompany.

Magic is a source of mobility and visibility for the Lady in *Le Morte d'Arthur.* Her femininity is integral to how she uses magic, while magic also gives the Lady agency and

autonomy as a woman. For example, she escapes Merlin's sexual predation by using her magic to entomb him. I argue that magic and femininity are two forces in interplay that define the Lady of the Lake, who influences and shapes the crux of *Le Morte D'Arthur* through these aspects of her identity. The narrative would not hold without its magical framework, which the Lady provides from her unique position. Thus, despite the marginalization of the Lady by the context of the text and its existing scholarship, the entanglement and inseparability of femininity and magic in *Le Morte D'Arthur* reveals the Lady of the Lake as crucial to the narrative.

The Two Variants of Le Morte D'Arthur

The existing texts of *Le Morte d'Arthur* exist in two variants: the 1485 print published by William Caxton (circa 1422 – circa 1491), and the Winchester manuscript which was copied by two professional scribes between 1470 and 1483 (BL Add. MS 59678, *The Malory Project*). Both variants are derived from Sir Thomas Malory's now-lost original holograph, which was written entirely by Malory's hand. The Caxton manuscript, a printed edition of *Le Morte d'Arthur* by William Caxton in 1485, was the first variant to become accessible. The Winchester manuscript was discovered in the Winchester College Library in 1934, and scholars agree that it is closer to Malory's original holograph than the Caxton. The Winchester and Caxton differ from each other in both content and organization; the Winchester is composed of eight books while the Caxton is composed of twenty-one books with a total of five hundred and seven chapters. The Winchester is also significant in that it contains marginalia (markings in the margins of manuscripts such as comments, scribbles, or decorations) and colophons (statements at the end of a book that reveal information about its authorship), both of which the Caxton lacks or omits. However, the Caxton contains additional fragments of text that are not found in the Winchester, which modify the situations and contexts of events throughout the story. In this paper, I use the 1954 edition of *The Works of Thomas Malory* by Eugène Vinaver (which brackets words omitted by the Winchester) and the 2015 Canterbury Classics edition of *Le Morte d'Arthur.* In addition, I also use the digital Winchester and Caxton manuscripts through *The Malory Project* to provide extensive close readings and interpretations of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (*The Malory Project*).

The historical identity of Sir Thomas Malory remains unclear but has been traditionally attributed to Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, a knight who was jailed for a range of crimes including murder, rape, theft, and extortion (Vinaver, v). Another likely identity is Thomas Malory of Papworth, who has been attributed a rich collection of Arthurian literature through his connections with the Wydville library. However, he is unlikely to be a "knyght-presoner" (knight prisoner) as the author describes himself in the colophon at the end of *The Tale of King Arthur* in the Winchester manuscript discovered in 1934 (Lumiansky 882; fol. 70v). And yet while considering the identity of Sir Thomas Malory, it is important to note that the author references *Le Morte d'Arthur* as the "book of Arthur and his knyghtes," emphasizing the centrality of King Arthur and his knights in the narrative.

When studying the margins where the Lady of the Lake dwells, the margins are both literal and metaphorical. The literal margins of the text are where the marginalia dwell, serving as a "metatext" in *Le Morte d'Arthur.* In this context, the metatext presents itself as an

illustrative expression of the author's thoughts about the text. On the manuscript level, these marginal metatext also appear to be the text's thoughts about itself, framing the main narrative.

The Extrahuman Qualities of the Image of the Lady of the Lake

The protagonists Arthur and Merlin are approaching a lake when the Lady makes her first appearance in Book I of the Winchester manuscript (fol. 20v). Arthur's original sword (also referenced as Excalibur in *Le Morte d'Arthur)* was broken in battle, so Merlin guides Arthur to a lake and explains that the king may obtain a new sword. As they approach the lake, Arthur sees "an arme clothed in whyght samyte, that helde a fayre swerde in that honde" (Vinaver 41). From her arm, we can discern she is clothed in "whyght samyte" (white samite), a rich, silk fabric that is often interwoven with gold (OED, "Samite, *N.*, Sense 1."). Above the length of her arm, a "fayre swerde" (fair sword) protrudes from the grasp of her hand. The first appearance of the Lady of the Lake in the text is mysterious, yet alluring, and perhaps even glorious. Though only describing her arm, the descriptions of the Lady are rich and luxurious, producing an image of a gleaming sword and lustrous fabric emerging from the water.
In another *The Noble Tale of the Sangreal,* one of the books in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* that retells the quest for the Holy Grail, white samite is also mentioned in reference to another magical or divine – Holy Grail.

> Natforthan there was no knyght that myght speke one worde a grete whyle; and so they loked every man on other as they had bene doome. Than entire into the halle the Holy Grayle covered with whyght samyte, but there was none that myght se hit, nother whom that bare hit. (Shepherd, 503)

In both contexts, white samite accompanies a divine entity–the Holy Grail and the Lady of the Lake–and the white, silken fabric serves to conceal or clothe the entities. Nearly fully submerged in the water, the only visible parts of the Lady are her uncovered arm, the white samite of her clothing, and Excalibur. Piecing these elements together, this fraction of the Lady's image is radiant–provocative in its unnaturality and unsettling allure–a maiden underwater proudly displaying a weapon. Clothed in white, she even becomes extra-human through the insinuation of her supernatural ability to remain submerged underwater. In this moment, the Lady's proximity to humanness is questioned, thus prompting a reevaluation of the Lady with respect to the divine instead.

The Ambiguity of the Lady of the Lake's Name, Title, and Identity

It is also important to consider that "the Lady of the Lake" is a title for a multitude of Ladies who act as one, rather than a name for a singular individual. Perhaps, it is an appropriate descriptor for individual members of a larger group who can be attributed to the title. For example, there may be many ladies who are all individually referred to as "the Lady of the Lake," as the instances of the Ladies' deaths and reappearances suggest. Despite "the Lady of the Lake" functioning closer to a title than to a name (as there are multiple of these Ladies), the text conflates the two with its rare usage of distinction by names (such as in the case of Nyneve, the chief Lady of the Lake), and thus these two attributions combine. As a result, the *name* "the

Lady of the Lake" becomes synonymous with the *title* "the Lady of the Lake," and thus the text insinuates an overlap between the external perception of the Lady and the role of the Lady. There is an inherent plurality to the "Lady of the Lake," whom the text regards as both a name and title. Within this plurality of the Lady of the Lake, there is a curious combination of permanence and disposability that doubly exist for the Lady—while she dies twice through *Le Morte d'Arthur,* she also reappears and is consistently present throughout the text until the end. In another example, when the Lady first appears in the *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the text floods the scene with multiple Ladies of the Lake: there is the Lady going upon the Lake, the Lady in the lake with a sword in her hand, and the Lady who is speaking to Arthur. This multiplicity of the Lady of the Lake, which contains both her disposability by the text and her immortality, parallelize with the text that desires to marginalize the Lady and the Lady who overcomes this marginalization.

In the Winchester manuscript, the names of important figures, such as King Arthur, Merlin, or King Arthur's knights, are written in red ink in contrast to the rest of the text, which is written in black ink. When the Lady of the Lake makes her first appearance in the Winchester manuscript as the "damosell goynge uppon the laake" (fol. 20v), the word "damosell" is marked in black rather than red ink, undifferentiated from the rest of the text, unlike the names or titles of other characters. In the passage where she is introduced, the "Lady of the Lake" or other variants of her name are not mentioned, as the Winchester manuscript omits Arthur's question and Merlin's introduction of the Lady, which served as the singular instance of the Lady's naming in that chapter. In these instances of the omission and lack of distinction of the Lady's name like the other characters, the text fails to make the significance of the Lady explicit, underscoring her place in *Le Morte d'Arthur* as marginal.

Margin to Margin, the Marginalia Acknowledge the Lady of the Lake

Marginalia are embellishments, notes, or illustrations in the margins of a text. In *Le Morte d'Arthur,* a prominent form of marginalia are inverted triangles, or shield shapes, with text written inside. They are especially prevalent in the Winchester manuscript when the Lady of the Lake is present or about to appear. In the article *Inks and Hands and Fingers in the Manuscript of Malory's "Morte Darthur",* Whetter counts that there are "eighty red-ink marginal notes" across the Winchester manuscript, "some of which are enclosed in various shield-like shapes, some of which are not" (Whetter 433). For example, a shield is drawn to the left of the passage when King Arthur asks the Lady for her sword (fol. 21r). This particular shield is drawn in red ink and is inscribed with the text "here ys a mencion of the Lady of the Laake whan she asked Balyne le Saveage his hede," foreshadowing how the Lady of the Lake will ask King Arthur for the head of the knight Balin.

Whetter points out how these marginalia are unique from the usual marginalia occurring in medieval manuscripts, as they are "not, moreover, the usual sort of gloss identifying or explicating sources that appear in so many different kinds of medieval manuscripts, but very specific summaries of particular narrative events" (Whetter, 433).

The marginalia serve as a metatext in *Le Morte d'Arthur,* as it adorns the body of the text with summaries and prophecies, such as predicting characters' deaths. Erik Wade supports the theory of the prophetic function of the marginalia in the article *Malory's Marginalia*

Reconsidered, where he states that "...the majority of the marginalia in W appear to perform an indexical function; that is, they either immediately precede or are parallel to the events they describe" (Wade, 78).

In contrast to the body of the text, which only references the Lady of the Lake as a "damosell" in black ink rather than with a name in red (fol. 20v), the margins appear to consider the Lady of the Lake as an important figure, unlike the body of the text which often "forgets" to consider her through either complete omission of her name or failing to distinguish her name in red like other characters. In the margins, they spell her name in that space with red ink and even provide insight into her future actions, such as preceding the storyline by predicting the moment that she unexpectedly asks Arthur for Balin's head. While the body of the text is a space for the story of *Le Morte d'Arthur,* the margins of the text are a space for metatextual reflections, commentary, and the Lady of the Lake to be acknowledged. There is a prophetic aspect to this marginal, omniscient text that is reminiscent of Merlin and the Lady's prophetic abilities that are linked to their magic, and thus the text's "prophecy" in the margins can also be imagined as magical and deeply intertwined with the Lady. Although the Lady remains hidden in the body of the text, her presence is made more explicit and visible through the margins that speak of her, and perhaps even for her.

The Manuscript's Usage of Red Versus Black Ink Reveals Its Priorities

In the Winchester manuscript, the text directs the reader's attention to Balin's beheading of the Lady through a manicule in black ink that points directly at the line in which Balin beheads the Lady: "And with his swerde lyghtly he smote of hyr hede before kynge Arthure" (fol. 24r). About three lines above this manicule, another inverted triangle in red ink is featured with the words "The dethe of the lady of the lake" (fol. 24r). Again, the marginalized text precedes the bodily text in knowledge of the sequence of events in *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In this instance, the margins make an explicit declaration that the body fails to address. The body of the text simply summarizes the interruption by Balin and his beheading of the Lady of the Lake, providing no further detail about the Lady after Balin's sudden assault. In the event of her death, the Lady of the Lake is mentioned in only one line, where she is reduced to the phrase "hyr hede," which Balin severs (Vinaver 49). Without much deliberation, the text swiftly progresses after the Lady's beheading and burial, this instance being one of the two cruel and casual deaths of the Lady. In the second death, the Lady warns Arthur not to wear an enchanted mantle sent from Morgan, and upon Arthur forcing the Lady to wear the mantle, she "fell down deede and never spoke worde after, and brent to colys" (Vinaver 113).

Although the Lady of the Lake is addressed by her name several times in this passage, her name is written in black ink while the name of her sword (now Arthur's), Excalibur is written in red ink (fol. 24r). The text fails to recognize the Lady of the Lake as being significant enough to distinguish her name in the same way that it does other figures, and yet the narrative recognizes the significance of the sword Excalibur, which was originally the Lady's possession. Where does the sword gain its significance from? Perhaps it is from how that the sword is no longer the Lady's, but its ownership passed to Arthur. In this interpretation, the text refuses to acknowledge the sword's magical origins (as a gift from the Lady), but focuses on the detail that the sword is possessed by the textually significant Arthur. The body of text omits the detail that

the sword was thrusted to the center by the Lady's decision to bestow the sword to Arthur. Instead, the text decides that the sword is significant because of its current position under the ownership of Arthur. In tandem with this idea that the text decides the sword is only significant when owned by Arthur, there is space to imagine the hunger, greed, or desire of the text that fueled the violence against the Lady—she is marginalized by the text itself in this context. Part of this greed is also visible in Arthur. While he receives the Excalibur from the Lady, he does so without fulfilling his end of the deal of beheading Sir Balin. The Lady is left with nothing, and Arthur keeps Excalibur.

The Lady and Her Magical Governance

When Arthur and Merlin approach the lake where meet the Lady, Merlin portrays the Lady as a figure that initiates–in this scene, an offer–yet does so while relying on the partaker's prior knowledge of rules that will govern the interaction. Merlin explains to Arthur that the Lady will "com to [him] anone," that the Lady will approach Arthur "immediately," or "at once" (OED, "Anon, *Adv.*, Sense 3.a."). He also tells Arthur that he may obtain the Lady's sword if he "speke fayre to hir," "fayre" potentially referring to speaking with justice and honor, or referring to speaking with "ethereal or magical qualities associated with fairies" (OED, "Fair, *Adv.*, Sense 2.a."; OED, "Fairy, *Adj.*, Sense 1"). However, not only must Arthur simply acknowledge the existence of the Lady and her magic, but he must also be respectful of the Lady and her magical gifts. Hinging on the second interpretation of "fayre" is the invitation of the Lady's magic to Arthur and the central narrative: he must approach her with the acknowledgment of her magic for the Lady to bestow magic (the sword), upon Arthur. Merlin knew that Arthur had to "speke fayre," or speak politely, to the magical Lady if he were seeking her gifts. Through her magic– or status as an enchantress– the Lady gains control of the narrative through achieving dominance over the protagonist Arthur in these bargains.

The Lady's magic also allows her to defend herself from Merlin, who was specifically infatuated with Nyneve. As Melin "felle in dotage on… one of the damesels of the Lady of the Laake, that hyght ⌜ Nyneve ⌝," he "wolde nat lette her have no reste, but allwayes he wolde be with her" (Vinaver, 91). After Nyneve first tricks Merlin into teaching her all the magic he knew, she then uses that magic against him to trap him under a "grete stone" forever (Vinaver, 93). Again, the Lady of the Lake exerts power and agency through her magic, outwitting and defeating the powerful Merlin.

Excalibur as an Extension of the Lady, Therefore an Extension of Her Magic

The Lady extends a part of her magic and power to Arthur through the sword Excalibur, which becomes an essential aspect of Arthur's conquests, and thus the text. The sword Excalibur occupies a significant and central position in *Le Morte d'Arthur,* as this weapon is always with the protagonist Arthur. The sword is highly valuable in and to the story, as it helps Arthur win the war against King Lot and the battle against Lucius. The name "Excalibur" comes from the Old French *Escalibor,* and is also a corrupt form of *Caliburnus* (often shortened to *Caliburn*) which comes from the Latin word *chalybs* (or steel) (Helmut 152). The etymological roots of the sword come together to emphasize its strength. The sword's strength and value are

also recognized by others, such as by Morgan le Fay, who steals Excalibur from Arthur and replaces it with a counterfeit (Vinaver 103). Similarly, Merlin tells Arthur that the scabbard of Excalibur would prevent him from shedding any blood (Vinaver 43). When Merlin receives Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake, Merlin asks Arthur if he liked the sword or the scabbard better, to which Arthur replied the sword. To Arthur's response, Merlin tells him "'Ye are the more unwyse, for the scawberde ys worth ten of the swerde; for whyles ye have the scawberde upon you, ye shall lose no blood, be ye never so sore wounded. Therefore kepe well the scawberde allweyes with you'" (Vinaver 43). In a Freudian reading of the sword and the scabbard, the masculine sword would represent Arthur, while the protective scabbard would represent the Lady. Interestingly, Merlin compares the sword and the scabbard by saying the scabbard is worth ten of the swords, which may be an allusion to both the Lady's multiplicity and disposability. The idea of the Lady's disposability exists in parallel with the idea that there are multiples of the Lady–she becomes regarded as less important because there are many of her. This idea becomes visible through the Lady's multiple deaths throughout the text. Imagining the Lady's magic as manifested into a physical form, we can recognize the sword Excalibur as part of the Lady. Thus, a part of her that is always carried by the text's hero; as such, she is able to enter and inhabit the central narrative. Interpreting the sword Excalibur as a part of the Lady, there is an inherent aspect of multiplicity and extension to the Lady of the Lake's character.

The Lady of the Lake Exercises Meaningful Influence

Examining the Lady of the Lake's authority and influence through comparison with another figure who also exerts authority and power– King Arthur– only the Lady's authority and power meaningfully spill into Arthur's world. She mysteriously appears and disappears on her own terms, aiding Arthur when she desires and taking advantage of him at other times. In her article "The Law of the Lake: Malory's Sovereign Lady," Amy S. Kaufman compares the Lady of the Lake to Arthur, revealing the hierarchical dynamics that exist between the knights of the Round Table and the Ladies of the Lake, specifically the chief Lady of the Lake, Nyneve: "Just as Arthur earns his place at the head of the Round Table, so Nyneve earns control of the 'Lake,' which, in Malory's text, appears to function as an organization of women with power and political influence. Each becomes a sovereign over his or her territory" (51). Expanding upon the "political influence" Nyneve exerts, Kaufman elaborates upon the Lady's governance over the Lake: "Nynyve is able to effect change within Arthur's court, while the king has no visible effect on hers. Nynyve is thus not only a sovereign, but she is also personally sovereign" (Kaufman 51). In Kaufman's interpretation of the Lady of the Lake's sovereignty over not only her Lake but also Arthur's court, which is unreciprocated by Arthur, the Lady of the Lake's governance transcends spatial boundaries. She is not only able to reach the central mortal realm from the marginal magical realm, but she is able to grasp and take control of it, owing to her magic as an enchantress.

For the Lady of the Lake, magic is both a deep-rooted part of her identity as an enchantress and a force that allows her to occupy the center of the text. Magic also characterizes the Lady's femininity, granting her the gift of achieving agency throughout the text. The Lady's femininity characterizes her magical decisions, as her identity as a woman is

ingrained in the narrative choices she makes, such as in her defense against Merlin. Despite moments of marginalization of the Lady throughout the text, the Lady asserts herself as a complex, multidimensional character by acting on her own terms. By doing so, she resists and defies both the text's and the reader's expectations of her as simply an aid-giving maiden, conveniently placed for Arthur's sake. Through the Lady's status as an enchantress, defined by her magic and femininity, these features bleed into *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Thus, the text is inseparable from magic and femininity, and magic and femininity inseparable from the Lady of the Lake.

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