Function and Representation of Women in Fourteenth-Century English Arthuriana

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ABSTRACT

Arthuriana is a plastic literary world, one that is easily manipulated and altered by an author's social background and particular agenda, whether social, political, or religious. Thus, fourteenth-century English Arthurian texts reflect each author's social milieu through the use and adaptation of tropes for both male and female characters. This thesis investigates the function and representation of female characters through Arthurian tropes in three fourteenth-century English Arthurian texts: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and *Sir Launfal*.

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Chapter I

THE FUNCTION AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH ARTHURIANA

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, England experienced vast political, legal, and social reforms and changes that led to a new and often complicated fourteenth-century culture. The intermingling of cultures before and after the Conquest created a versatile social landscape centuries later, leading great thinkers and writers of the age to write intelligent and provocative social commentary. The cultural merger of the Anglo-Norman and "English"—since England before 1066 was a melting pot of different histories, ways of life, accomplishments, and victories of one people over another, the term "English" is used to refer to those who inhabited England at the time of the Conquest—fed kings' pursuit of power in England and led to the changing of cultural values. The Anglo-Norman kings' struggle for legitimization was reinforced by popular texts, especially Arthuriana. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his well-known *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (c. 1138), made King Arthur an ancestor of the Normans, so many features of his Arthur and Arthur's court are recognizably Anglo-Norman French. Arthuriana even after Geoffrey remains a political tool used by kings to validate their claim to the throne of England, particularly in the fourteenth century. In many respects, England's social history in this time period is mirrored in Arthurian texts, proving how vital the Arthurian tradition was within medieval culture. What is so compelling and what concerns this thesis is that medieval women's roles are as often reflected in these texts as well as men's roles. Fourteenth-century Englishwomen have been

portrayed in a variety of manners, and have been considered, for the most part, marginal in the context of medieval social history, but their part in the culture, especially how their roles might be reflected in popular Arthuriana, is certainly worth further examination.

Arthuriana: Origin of a Tradition

In order to ground fourteenth-century social history and several significant themes of fourteenth-century romances, it is important to examine some of the earliest roots of Arthuriana and the earliest functions and representations of female characters in early Arthuriana. The Arthurian tradition begins much earlier than Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century version, with Latin and Welsh references to Arthur and the legend surrounding him surviving from as early as the seventh century. While the Latin chronicles build a "historical" framework for Arthuriana, the Welsh legends are marked by their mythical elements. The female characters of the Latin chronicles hold historical and often familial roles, while many Welsh Arthurian female characters are fictional or fantastic. In 800, Welshman Nennius writes the first Latin chronicle, *Historia Brittonum,* to mention the name "Arthur," a warrior who "carried an image of St. Mary, the Perpetual Virgin on his shoulders" into battle (Wilhelm 5). In *De rebus gestis regum Anglorum* (1125), Englishman William of Malmesbury, too, represents Arthur as a Christian warrior who relies on Mary for protection: "Finally at the siege of Mt. Badon, relying on the image of the Lord's mother, which he had sewn on his armor, …[Arthur] dashed down nine hundred of the enemy in an incredible massacre" (7). William also clarifies Arthur's relationship to Gawain: "At that time [1066-87] in the province of Wales known as Ros was found the tomb of Walwen [Gawain], who was by no means degenerate nephew of Arthur through [Arthur's] sister" (7). According to the examples above, the roles of female characters in the Latin chronicles are modest and insignificant to the action of the works.

Female characters of the Welsh Arthurian tradition are more important as they are characterized in several ways and play a part in the action of the works in which "Arthur is depicted as the leader of a band of superheroes [of men]" (Lupack 17). The anonymous *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (the Welsh *Triads*) perhaps illustrate the greatest range of roles of Welsh Arthurian female characters. Triad 56 names the three Great Queens of Arthur, all significantly named Gwenhwyfar, while Triad 57 names Arthur's three mistresses. Triad 80 names the three Faithless Wives of the Isle of Britain, "and one was more faithless than [all] three: Gwenhwyfar, wife of Arthur, since she shamed a better man than any of them" (Bollard 23). Triad 84 recounts the three Futile Battles of the Isle of Britain, the worst being the Battle at Camlan, brought about by a quarrel between Gwenhwyfar and Gwenhwyfach. Triad 70 on the three Fair Womb-Burdens of the Isle of Britain names the daughter of Afallach and wife of Urien as Modron, likely one of the earliest Welsh representations of the later Morgan le Fay. But, as Roger S. Loomis assures us, Welsh legend characterizes Modron variously: "[I]n Welsh folklore we may recognize Modron not only as the lovely fay of the lake who brings her husband wealth and beautiful children but also as a fearful hag, haunting pools and foreboding death and doom" (197). Characterized as mistresses, unfaithful wives, lovely fays, and fearful "hags," Welsh female characters play far more roles than those in the Latin chronicles. The *Triads* and Roger Loomis' observations on Welsh folklore envision female characters as either positive or negative figures based on how they impact their male-dominated world.

A shift in the representation of female characters occurs in the twelfth century when Geoffrey writes his seminal *Historia* and his later work *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150), two works which blend the Latin histories with the mythohistorical Welsh materials, thus allowing Geoffrey to develop identifiable female characters like Queen Guinevere and "Morgen." By

forming an Arthur and Arthurian world in the mold of his Anglo-Norman overlords, Geoffrey's *Historia* provides a transition to the Anglo-Norman environment that adopted Arthur in order to legitimate its claim to England. Geoffrey's gesture invites interrogation by readers (such as Geoffrey's critic William of Newburgh) and leads to his second work of Arthurian acclaim, *Vita Merlini*. Examination of Geoffrey's works is central to discussion of Arthuriana as it initiates a central feature and pattern in all subsequent Arthuriana: the molding of the historical myth of the Arthurian world and its characters to reflect a contemporary agenda and set of values.

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Arthurian Mirror

Because Anglo-Norman kings strived to be legitimized as the rightful kings of England, and Geoffrey's material provided a plausible historical context for such confirmation, Arthuriana was a popular tradition during the Middle Ages. Arthuriana proved plastic, moldable to the political conditions and ideals of its audience. Thus, as Richard M. Loomis finds, "Geoffrey celebrates an imperial Britain, one that, like Norman England, is expansionist, centralized, and authoritarian, a model of manners and mastery for the world" (60).

Monmouth's *Historia*, a "history" of Britain written in Latin, is one of the most significant versions of the tradition as it is one that makes the mythical King Arthur famous across Europe and one that establishes Arthur's queen, Guinevere, as an identifiable character. Drawing on just enough material from important Latin chroniclers, like Nennius, Bede, and Gildas, to make his "history" seem actually historical, Geoffrey bills his work as a historical Latin chronicle of Arthur. Using these historical records, he crafts a version of Arthur and the Arthurian world, but he also uses his imagination, "dramatiz[ing] folklore and legend" (Loomis, "Arthur in Geoffrey" 60). Thus, Geoffrey adapts and renders malleable

Arthurian tradition in order to appeal to his Anglo-Norman overlords, a pattern for Arthurian writers for centuries to come. Geoffrey argues that he has filled "historical gaps" using a certain ancient text given to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford. This book, written in the British language (Welsh or Breton), "reports" the "rest of" the history of all the kings of Britain, but its existence is doubted by most scholars, who view it as a pretext for Geoffrey's fictional additions.

In order to create an Arthur and a (fictional) world recognizable to the Anglo-Normans, Geoffrey reflects many Anglo-Norman political and social ideals in his *Historia.* The manners and dress of Arthur's court are recognizable to the Anglo-Normans because these are emulations of their own manners and styles. Geoffrey also emphasizes "noble love," or courtly love in Arthur's story, an addition which Richard Loomis argues is also an appeal to Geoffrey's Norman patrons, as these patrons are well known for introducing the concept of courtly love to the feudal courts (60). Arthur's knights compete for the love of women; in other words, they must deserve the love they are given. Geoffrey's work is the first to emphasize the competition amongst Arthur's knights in order to win a lady's love. Geoffrey's Arthur, as a Christian king, would have been a recognizable figure for Geoffrey's Anglo-Norman patrons; Geoffrey describes Arthur's noticeably twelfth-century armor and Christian piety: "Arthur…donned armor as befitted a king, along with a golden helmet with the carved likeness of a dragon upon the crest. And on his shoulders he bore the shield Pridwen, which had the image of the blessed Mary, mother of God, painted on it, keeping him always mindful of her" (Geoffrey 166). Arthur rids England of Saxon invaders, defeats the Scots and Picts, and drives off the Irish king and his fleet of warriors who attempt to assist the Scots and Picts in their raids. Later in his career, Arthur "desired to submit all Europe to his rule" and expands his domain (171), attacking Ireland and Iceland and gaining

loyalty from their kings and princes, and also voluntary submission from the kings of Gothland and the Orkneys. Twelve years of peace follow Arthur's expansion onto the continent. During this time, "[t]here did not remain one prince of any merit on this side of Spain who did not attend [Arthur's] court when summoned. And this is no wonder, for Arthur's generosity was renowned all over the world, and this made all men love him" (175). Arthur's domination of a greater part of the continent resonates for an Anglo-Norman audience who, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, had "conquered Scotland… parts of Wales and Ireland, Sicily, and Malta" (Hall 239). Not coincidentally, Geoffrey's *Historia* makes Arthur the liege lord of the Bretons (the Celts of Brittany) as well as the Britons (the Celts of England). As the descendants of Breton Normandy, the Normans would have understood this representation as legitimization to hereditary rule of both Normandy and England.

Geoffrey trades in the *Triads*' representation of women, which gives Arthur multiple queens and many mistresses, for Arthur's only queen, Guinevere, "who sprang from a noble Roman family…and surpassed all the other women of the island in beauty" (Geoffrey 170). Faithless as in the Welsh *Triads,* Geoffrey's Guinevere "br[eaks] her marriage vows" with Mordred, Arthur's nephew, after Arthur leaves these two in charge of his kingdom in order to campaign in Rome (196). As Mordred and Arthur do battle, Guinevere flees to Caerleon "where she joined the nuns at the Church of St. Julius the Martyr and was determined to live chastely" (198). The negative representation of Guinevere in the *Historia*, as an adulteress whose treachery leads to the downfall of Arthur, proves that women might have been considered a threat to male order. Guinevere, allied with Mordred, threatens and eventually ruins the stability of Arthur's powerful kingdom, but her behavior is "corrected," as she exchanges her once sinful life for a chaste one as a nun.

Geoffrey's later work, *Vita Merlini*, introduces the supernatural character Morgen of the Isle of Apples (Avalon) into his Arthurian world. One of nine sisters, Morgan "surpasses them all in beauty" (Geoffrey 263). Geoffrey's Morgen is a healer and a shapeshifter (263). In this work, it is Morgen who heals Arthur after his final battle with Mordred. Likely drawn from Irish and Welsh traditions, the supernatural Morgen is the earliest representation of the better known Morgan (later, Morgan le Fay). Significantly, it is Geoffrey's wholly supernatural female character who saves the renowned King Arthur from his war wounds, perhaps in order to strike a poignant contrast between Geoffrey's two female characters. Perhaps following Welsh tradition, Geoffrey's female characters are some of the first Arthurian women who are represented relationally to men; in Geoffrey's works, they are characterized as either good or evil depending on how they help or inhibit Arthur. Michael A. Faletra comments on the relationship between Geoffrey's works and how they allow for a smooth transition into later romances: "[T]he *Vita Merlini* continues the *Historia*'s exploration of the Arthurian past in terms that anticipate romance, and, in doing so, marks the narrative difference of such material from the stuff of history" (80).

Arthuriana's plasticity continued after Geoffrey's *Historia*, as the tradition was disseminated quickly across nations and cultures, with the myth transposed into numerous languages and versions to suit authors' various agendas. We can trace the Anglo-Norman acceptance and propagation of this version of their "history" through the court of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine to the twelfth-century Norman writer Wace, who, in 1155, translated Geoffrey's Latin history into Anglo-Norman French, naming it *La geste des Bretons* (known as *Roman de Brut*) and dedicating it to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the queen of Henry II. Chrétien de Troyes, a late twelfth-century French writer and poet at the court of Eleanor's daughter, Marie de Champagne, began a new strand of the Arthurian tradition by

expanding on existing material but fixing the attention of his works on the conflict created by the codes of courtly love and chivalry: the romance tradition. Marie de France, another late twelfth-century French writer who was likely a member of Henry and Eleanor's court, wrote narrative poems— or *lais*—about Arthurian material. Her work had a considerable influence on later French poets and Arthurian writers who were closely connected with the Anglo-Norman court in England.

As the popularity of Arthuriana increased over the next few centuries of Norman rule, it continued to be used as a political tool by Henry's descendants well into the late Middle Ages. Rife with plague, religious reform, and social upheaval, the fourteenth century allowed its writers a complex and critical period in English history on which they could reflect. The life of Edward III, the most famous king of the fourteenth century, is indicative of the role of Arthuriana in continuing legitimization of rule. Unlike Edward III, his father, Edward II, was not interested in being a military leader, and was more interested in playing favorites with Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser. During Edward II's time as king (1307-1327), his wife, Isabella, unhappy with her husband's favoritism for Hugh Despenser the Younger, began an affair with Roger Mortimer, one of the king's barons. The affair eventually led to the deposition and death of Edward II, but Isabella and Roger Mortimer did not commit treason without a price; "[Edward III] had Mortimer hanged like a common thief, and sent Isabella into retirement" (Unstead 8). The treacherous queen provides a historical context for the adulteress Arthurian queen type to continue to be relevant.

Edward III learned many lessons from his father's unsuccessful reign and harnessed the Arthurian legend as he created his public face. Ruling from 1327 to 1377, he found particular favor with his English subjects: his "wartime triumphs made him a hero to the military ranks and he consciously fostered a chivalric image and military comradeship

through tournaments, Round Tables, and the creation of the Order of the Garter" (Waugh 23). Of the fourteenth century monarchs, in many ways Edward most overtly identifies with Arthur. Edward III enjoyed a glorious fifty-year reign; according to Unstead, "[i]n the eyes of his subjects, Edward III was the perfect monarch…who looked and behaved like a king, for he loved fighting, treated all men with courtesy and provided them with opportunities for plunder and glory" (8). However, Edward III aged and his heir, the Black Prince wasted away, marking an end to the Golden Age of Edward III's reign. Edward III was succeeded by an eruption of problems; England felt the impact of the Hundred Years' War, the Black Death, and subsequently, the fluctuation and evolution of a new social situation. The Hundred Years' War fueled the nation's economic instability while the multiple occurrences of the plague (approximately every five to ten years until the seventeenth century) dramatically diminished England's population. However, the aristocracy thrived, and "[t]rade and business, forever expanding, produced a class of wealthy merchants, as lordly in their ways as the nobility" (28). England's blatant distinctions between the rich and the poor led to social instability and even uprisings, like the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 during the reign of Edward III's much less militaristic grandson, Richard II. Richard II inherited a socially and economically complicated England. Meanwhile, having grown up under the rulership of the popular Edward III and experiencing the turmoil of the fourteenth century, the Ricardian poets, who wrote during the reign of Richard II and who include the *Gawain*-poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, and possibly Thomas Chestre, wrote Arthurian material in response to their social experience. Thus, even into the fourteenth century, medieval English social history seems to mirror Arthurian texts, or vice versa, arguing for both their continued influence and their ability to reflect contemporary social conditions of their authors remarkably well.

Considering much of fourteenth-century England's turbulent history and some of the roles of women in it, we can assume that fourteenth-century Englishwomen were characterized relationally to men, depending on how these women functioned for or against men. In turn, the female characters of fourteenth-century Arthuriana also can be characterized relationally according to how they help or hinder a work's protagonist, and can be divided into categorized as one (or even a few) distinct Arthurian types.[1] In its use of types for female characters, fourteenth-century English Arthuriana reflects the social conditions and roles available for women of the day. There are many types in Arthuriana. For males, the types may be the good knight, dastardly knight, First Knight, king, betrayer, and wizard. Similarly, types exist in Arthuriana for female characters based on their positive or negative relationship with the hero, allowing them to be characterized as good, bad, or ambivalent forces. A female character can be quite plastic—old, young, virginal, or wanton, based on which type an author needs for his rhetorical agenda and the purpose of the plot; these types are driven by fourteenth-century English social conditions and attitudes.

The Arthurian Mirror and Fourteenth-Century Women

According to social historians, by the fourteenth century, the roles Englishwomen played in medieval society depended entirely on their social standing and marital status, and they were classified simply as wife, daughter, or widow (Mate 2). Henrietta Leyser confirms women's sexual status: "[M]en might be thought of collectively as knights, merchants, crusaders; women were virgins, wives or widows. They were also, of course, mothers" (93). In most cases, following the reforms of the Gregorian papacy, by the fourteenth century, women could at least consent to their marriages, as opposed to being married against a woman's will (106). But by "common law," women in an English feudal society operated

[1] I use the definition for *type* given in William Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature*, 12th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012), p. 488.

under the instruction and protection of their husbands, and very rarely held land on their own, save in cases of some heiresses and widows. As Frances and Joseph Gies argue, "[p]re-feudal society was already male-based and military, but by linking landholding to military service [after the Norman Conquest], feudalism meant the further disenfranchisement of women" (27). With the feudal system in place and the relative success of its laws, medieval women were left with few legal and economic opportunities, with even upper class women reliant on their "knights in shining armor" for protection and voice.

Peasant women and townswomen in the fourteenth century were predominantly responsible for the household and caring for the children, though some few occasions allowed them to work the land alongside men. P.J.P. Goldberg's research indicates: "[A]n impressionistic overview of scattered sources suggests that it was not until the economic expansion of the later fourteenth century that women moved beyond the most traditional female tasks, such as spinning and laundering, and outside the market-place" (86-87). He finds that "women's role[s] w[ere] circumscribed by lack of access to wealth and training, by marital status, by the particular needs of the local economy, and by household and family responsibilities" (82). Mavis E. Mate argues that in towns, women might find more diverse work in victualing and brewing, service, miscellaneous crafts, and trade (38-47); for example, Geoffrey Chaucer's well-known Wife of Bath is a proficient cloth-maker: "Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt / She passed hym of Ypres and of Gaunt" ("General Prologue" 449-50). These spheres and opportunities limited peasant women and townswomen, and laws put them at the mercy of men of their own class and of the knightly class.

Aristocratic women seem to have been appreciated for their roles as dowry-bringers and heir-producers, and some were respected consultants to their husbands, but even these

women were required to behave according to certain strict standards and were especially limited by the public's perspective. Their privileges as aristocratic women at least provided them with more power than their lower-class sisters. Leyser reports: "[T]he regular appointment of wives as executors of their husbands' wills testifies as much to their proven expertise as it does to marital affection. Some women were literally called upon to defend hearth and home when their menfolk were away" (165). At all times, noblewomen and particularly queens were expected to behave in a very specific manner, or face consequences. As Mate argues: "A queen who did not follow accepted standards for queenly behavior–who was not subservient to her husband and who did not restrict her activities to intercession and acts of charity–was liable to earn the disapprobation of contemporaries" (68).

Thus, the social conditions reveal that fourteenth-century women might expect to be: defined relationally, or through the lens of their perceived impact, positive or negative, on male perspective; reliant on male agency or choice for final decisions to be made; protected, more or less, by virtue of class and/or proximity to court; and expected to act within societal parameters with a consequence of negative judgment for departures from the norm. All of these features hold true in fourteenth-century English Arthuriana, explaining the varied assessment of female characters within the same types as good, evil, or ambivalent, and demonstrating how consistently Arthuriana reflects the social ideals and agenda of its authors. Thus, a closer look at the lives of late medieval women is a necessary context for examining female characters portrayed in three Middle English Arthurian texts: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and *Sir Launfal.* Chapter II, regarding the *Gawain*-poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, will look closely at the role of each female character therein, her relationship with the other women, and the influence of these women on the protagonist. The third chapter on Geoffrey Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's

Tale" considers the perspective of the narrator, the Wife of Bath, as she manipulates a traditional Arthurian romance in order to challenge the various roles of women of the Arthurian tradition. The fourth chapter will address Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, examining the representation of the text's female characters as they function within or outside of King Arthur's court.

Chapter II

WOMEN IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:* THE TRUTH ABOUT SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a popular anonymous poem of the Alliterative Revival of the late fourteenth century, follows the journey of one of King Arthur's best knights, Gawain, and documents the knight's dedication to chivalry, devotion to morality, and struggle to maintain these virtues when faced with his own mortality.[2] Works of the Alliterative Revival like *Sir Gawain* are marked by a seemingly renewed interest in the alliterative style of the Anglo-Saxon oral poetic tradition, thus tying these works more closely to an earlier English tradition than to the Anglo-Norman French style or tradition of verse, and creating a body of works often tailored to the interests of the yeoman class of the fourteenth century. However, the *Gawain*-poet of northern England, writing in a West Midlands dialect, uses the alliterative tradition in a most interesting manner, one directed less to the yeoman class and more to the courtly class, the sole class with which this work deals. Gawain, Arthur's brave knight, must confront his mortality only after a journey that exposes him (and makes him vulnerable) to the conflicting imperatives of the chivalric, courtly, and Christian codes, a dilemma Gawain has never been forced to face before. Significantly, the female figures in this work lead Gawain to realize the flaws in his mode of thinking and force him to reconsider the institutions that have long directed his life's path.

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[2] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Middle English Text with facing Translation, ed. and trans. by James Winny (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2011). All quotations from *Sir Gawain* have been taken from this edition.

The *Gawain*-poet's Arthurian romance marries the worlds of chivalric duty, courtly love, and Christian piety in the journey and moral dilemmas of Gawain. As the story progresses, though, it becomes clear that these codes may not be able to coexist easily for Gawain. *Sir Gawain* features a few of Arthuriana's most well-known characters, but the motivation for Gawain's quest, the encounters along his way, and the lesson learned by the young knight are unexpected. What Gawain does not expect along his journey is an inner battle, orchestrated by his aunt, Morgan le Fay, fueled by his host's wife, Lady Bertilak, and perpetuated by his courtly lady, the Virgin Mary. Through the female characters' varying positive, negative, and ambivalent functions and representations throughout the poem, Gawain learns about his conflicting imperatives. Geraldine Heng makes a pointed statement about the women's roles in this text: "Repeatedly crisscrossing the narrative plane established by such characters as Gawain, Arthur, and Bertilak and by the worlds of the two courts are…the reticulated angles and interstices of a feminine nexus, a spacing of women" (501). The roles of these women seem to be independent of one another, yet they all lead to Gawain's eventual understanding of the imperfection of his world of social constructions.

Heng's assertions, and others similar to hers, are particularly compelling. Since each female character in the poem stands for alternative modes and mixtures of thinking, it is reasonable that women in *Sir Gawain* move the narrative along in different ways and thus work as "movers" of the plot. Their relative personas, Morgan as jealous sorceress, Lady Bertilak as courtly lover, and Mary as the Christian ideal, work together and apart as powers in Gawain's life to prove the conflicting imperatives complicit in the codes of behavior by which the nobility were expected to live. Examining each woman's connection with Gawain's eventual determination that his moral system is flawed illuminates clearly the impact women have on the knight and the knight's choices. I will work backwards through

the order in which the women are introduced in the text in order to reflect the significance I attribute to each female character's intentions for and effect on Gawain. Since Morgan instigates the Beheading Games, I will address her first.

Morgan, called "the goddes" (2452), is critical to both initiating and ending Gawain's quest, or so it seems. She recruits Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert/the Green Knight to go to Arthur's court and propose the first Beheading Game, which essentially begins Gawain's quest (2456-62); to end it, Gawain must "play" the second Beheading Game at which he learns the truth about the games, learns that his moral foundations are decidedly destructible, and returns to Arthur's court where he must face a court that does not understand (or does not care to understand) his moral dilemma. Critical opinion of Morgan and her function in the text varies widely. J.J. Anderson finds that once it is made clear that Morgan is behind Gawain's tests, Bertilak's and Lady Bertilak's motives throughout the poem become tied to "arbitrariness and malice." He argues for Morgan's negative traits: "Morgan is the malevolent genius in the background who gives the lie to any appearance of order in the lives of those who are under her sway" (348). Alternatively, Denver Ewing Baughan views Morgan's role as beneficial for Gawain's lesson-learning. Baughan recalls earlier Arthurian tradition in which Morgan healed Arthur's wounds at Avalon, "so here that same Morgan would send Bertilak to purge and heal [Arthur's] court of its moral corruptness" (251). Sacvan Bercovitch finds Morgan to be ambivalent; she is an enchantress who has created a tangled web of games and codes for Gawain, but she has "only the friendliest feelings towards her nephew" (259).

Good, evil, or both, Morgan, representative of Gawain's conflict with the chivalric code, understands how to manipulate Arthur and his court. She knows that Arthur "yerned yelpyng to here" (492), so she sends a challenge via the Green Knight, "an aglich mayster"

(136). The Green Knight calls forth any man from Arthur's court to deal him a blow to the neck that will be returned in a year, but none of Arthur's knights have the courage to accept the challenge. Arthur, embarrassed and frustrated, says he will take the giant's challenge until Gawain gains enough courage to take his king's place, setting the rest of the events of Morgan's plot in motion. By means of the challenge scene, Morgan manipulates Sir Gawain's duty to the chivalric code by instigating the Green Knight against Arthur and his court. Thus Morgan singles out the most noble and honorable of Arthur's knights, the one who responds to the challenge, and entangles him in a web of conflicting imperatives, including his chivalric loyalty to his lord and later to his host lord when Morgan's challenges draw him there.

Crane comments on the motif of women's magic: "Women's magic has an element of ambivalence that expresses femininity's compounded attraction and danger in romance" (150); Morgan's plans, made evident by the Green Knight after the second Beheading Episode, seem to reflect closely Crane's idea. The only intention Morgan ever makes clear is that she wants "to assay the surquidré, yif hit soth were / That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table" (2457-58), and "to have greved Gaynour and gart hir to dyghe" (2460), but it can be assumed that she does not mean for Gawain to walk away from his quest unscathed; the tale would be an ineffective romance if the hero learned nothing from his journey. While Morgan certainly bookends the quest with her magic games, her other role in the poem, as the old woman who frequently accompanies Lady Bertilak in the castle, is essential for establishing Gawain's relationship with her before the second Beheading Game. As the old woman in Lord Bertilak's court, Morgan is cast in a gorget and veils (957, 958), with only her face exposed: "That noght watz bare of that burde bot the blake browes, / The tweyne yghen and the nase, the naked lyppez, / And those were soure to se and sellyly

blered" (961-63). She is highly honored at Bertilak's court, as she sits in the place of honor at dinner (1001). To all appearances, this woman lends a courtly respectability to the scene. She not only accompanies the Lady of the castle, but escorts her, leading her by the hand in one instance (947). Gawain spends a great deal of time with these women, and seems to enjoy their company. Elisa Marie Narin notes that the poet is consistent in distinguishing the old woman as "that oþer" where the Lady is "that one," thereby marginalizing Morgan to otherness (63). The problem becomes that Gawain suspects nothing of the otherness and magic associated with the old woman, nor does he expect that she is the reason that he must face the uncomfortable and very real game of death by beheading to honor the chivalric code in the promise he made to the Green Knight. Gawain's tricky aunt (2467), through her disguise as an esteemed old woman and through her tests to teach Gawain, is but one instigator of the conflicting imperatives of Gawain's socially constructed ideals.

Often in the company of Morgan-as-old-woman is Lady Bertilak. The lady is described as a superior physical being, even called "wener then Wenore" (945). Her description is intermingled with the description of the old woman, thus accentuating her beauty and youth (950-56). Physically, Bertilak's wife is starkly contrasted to Gawain's aunt, and the former takes on the two opposing types of faithful wife and temptress. Gawain is taken by the woman's beauty immediately, thus creating some uncomfortable tension between his passionate desires and his dedication to virtue. Gawain is a true and pure knight as made evident by the symbolism of the pentangle on his shield (619-669), so his virtue remains at the forefront of his concerns: "Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured" (633).[3] But the Lady's calculated advances in the three bedroom scenes are markedly valiant attempts to make Gawain fail and put his virtue aside. Jane Gilbert argues that Lady

[3] The pentangle symbolism is described in lines 623-65 of *SGGK*.

Bertilak represents sexuality and the inspiration of the only "explicitly erotic feelings [Gawain] is given in the poem" (64). As Anderson notes, Lady Bertilak "shamelessly plays on [Gawain's] reputation for courtesy" (347). Sharon M. Rowley, however, assumes that no conclusion can be made about Lady Bertilak's motivations for "flirting" with Gawain. Instead, she argues that Lady Bertilak is an active woman (unlike Guinevere who does not move from her spot at the feast) who acts against traditional gender roles.

I would argue that the bedroom scenes between Lady Bertilak and Gawain serve as the breeding ground for courtly love language and interrogate Gawain's knightly credentials. Here, the Lady puts Gawain's virtue under attack, questions his credibility as a chivalrous knight, and makes a rather intriguing statement about courtly love as the most important imperative of the knight's code, all on three separate occasions. The first morning, Lady Bertilak tempts Gawain by offering herself to him: "Me schal worthe at your wille, and that me wel lykez, / For I yelde me yederly, and yeghe after grace, / And that is the best, be my dome, for me byhovez nede" (1214-16). She further proclaims that he is of such renown that any woman would be lucky to be in her position (1226-29, 1249-58, 1268-75). When Gawain, "feted ful fayre" (1282), lets her down, she asks for a kiss, and he kindly obliges (1303). The second morning, she is a bit more forward, this time inquiring as to why Gawain "connez not of compaynye the costez undertake" (1483). The Lady continues her conversation with Gawain by insisting that he does not seem to be as notorious as stories of him make him out to be. She argues that "the lel layk of luf" is "the lettrure of armes" (1513), yet she has not heard Gawain speak a word of love. Here, Lady Bertilak does two things: she sets one set of ideals, courtly love, above any other cultural imperative, and she also identifies herself as the courtly lover. She wants to hear (or so Gawain thinks) Gawain

speak of love, and when he does not, she considers him as faltering in a key area of knightly honor.

It is important to remember that no point on Gawain's pentangle represents courtly love, nor do any of the knightly virtues designate courtly love as one of their number (652-54). Gawain's chivalric and Christian virtues have, up to this point, never presented him with this sort of problem since they have seemingly remained in balance. The Lady's emphasis on courtly love discontents Gawain; he respects the woman as a courtly noble and admires her for her beauty, so he expects her ideas about knighthood to be relatively accurate. What Gawain does not know, however, is that Lady Bertilak is knowingly working to trick Gawain into failure: "Thus hym frayned that fre, and fondet hym ofte, / For to haf wonnen hym to woghe, what-so scho thoght ellez" (1549-50). Still, innocent kisses are all Gawain will give; he maintains his virtue for another day.

The third day is Gawain's greatest trial of resisting the Lady's temptation. But Gawain must firmly reject her attempts to seduce him: "'God schylde…that schal not befalle!'" (1776). The scorned Lady pretends to be offended, insisting that Gawain must have a lady elsewhere, but he denies this also: "The knyght sayde, 'Be sayn Jon,' / And smethely con he smyle, / 'In fayth I welde right non, / Ne non wil welde the quile'" (1788-91). Then, at long last, Lady Bertilak finds the cut, the weakness, in Gawain's supposedly impenetrable moral fabric, and she seizes it. Although, she first offers him a gold ring (1817-19), Gawain immediately refuses, but her next love-token is almost entrancing. The Lady offers a girdle, a "sexualized signifier" (Heng 501), as suggwsted by her unlacing of it: "Ho lacht a lace lyghtly that leke umbe hir sydez" (1830). She tells Gawain that the girdle has power woven into it that will protect the wearer from being killed (1848-54). Gawain, facing—as he thinks—his own impending doom, does not reject the Lady this time.

Instead, the lady "bere on hym the belt" (1860), signifying Gawain's acceptance of the girdle and the flaw in Gawain's once flawless adherence to his knightly ideals.

Anderson wonders: "Should [Gawain], a Christian knight, put his faith in something which supposedly has magic properties?" (351). His is a fair question, but Gawain takes no time to ponder it. His fear of death consumes him, so he cannot ignore any opportunity to escape (1858). Then, the Lady tells Gawain that the condition for keeping the girdle is that he must keep it a secret between the two of them and never tell his host. The line immediately following, and the two that follow, bind Gawain to the oath: "[T]he leude hym acordez / That never wyghe schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot thay twayne / for noghte" (1863-65). Now, Gawain is faced with an even greater dilemma: he is bound to his courtly promise to the lady to keep the girdle a secret as well as by his chivalric promise to his host to exchange all winnings each evening. Gawain, obviously ashamed, meets with a priest, confesses all of his life's sins, and is absolved (1877-84). That evening, he chooses to keep his promise to the Lady and only gives Sir Bertilak three kisses, instead of three kisses and the girdle, in the exchange of winnings (1936).

In the second Beheading Game, the Green Knight/Bertilak reveals to Gawain that the ploys of his wife were in fact designed by him (2361), and the Beheading Games were constructed by Morgan (2456-62). The Green Knight/Bertilak certainly could not have played temptress, for, it may be important to clarify, Gawain was plainly attracted to the Lady, never Bertilak, from the time he first arrived at the castle, and it is precisely Lady Bertilak's feminine charm (and Gawain's fear of death) that provoke Gawain, after three days, to accept the girdle/love-token. While Bertilak may have coordinated the virtue test in the bedroom, the Lady's role as actor is not unimportant. The Lady's marked use of her sexuality, repeated praise of Gawain's prowess, exaggerated emphasis on courtly love, and

calculated gift-giving make her a powerful, decidedly crafty force with which to be reckoned. She is very clearly characterized as a temptress, but she is also, if what Bertilak has said is true, a remarkably obedient wife, whose many advances on Gawain and tests of his virtue accrue into a moral quandary for Gawain. She complicates Gawain's perception of the systems on which he once fully relied, for she delivers false words and false hope to the knight; he has no idea what of her discourse is true and what is not.

At this point, it is important to direct attention to Gawain's "tirade against women," in which he verbally attacks the female characters who act against him (2407-28). Following Bertilak's revelation of the tricks, Gawain begins his rant, and it seems he will shake off the malice: "And comaundez me to that cortays, your comlych fere, / Bothe that on and that other, myn honoured ladyez" (2411-12). But for sixteen lines thereafter, he goes on and his book of courtly compliments is closed. He continues from the last line of the sixteen: "That thus hor knyght wyth hor kest han koyntly bigyled" (2413). He points to the women's offenses against him, insisting that they, along with countless other women in history, have tricked and deceived men with their games. He makes several biblical references, from Adam who was "beguiled" by Eve, to David who was "deluded" by Bathsheba (2416, 2418-19). Gawain concludes that loving women would be much simpler if men did not have to trust them (2421). Heng argues: "[I]n self-destructive fury Gawain attributes all responsibility and power to women…a tirade witnessing the belief that women dominate and shape the destinies of men" (501). She assumes that Gawain's misogynistic rant actually proves that women are in control and have the power to manipulate men's lives. Gawain's outburst recalls my earlier conclusions that Morgan and Lady Bertilak seem to represent those conflicting imperatives on which the foundation of Gawain's trust resides. The physical interchange between two personas, one as honored old woman turned sorceress and

the other as beautiful woman turned temptress, is unsettling for Gawain. But what frustrates Gawain the most, what forces him to question what is true and what is not, is the irregularity with which they portray themselves, Morgan as both respected elder and jealous and manipulative court-assessor, the Lady as both courtly lover and sly and scrutinizing instigator. Sharon M. Rowley argues that identity is itself a social construct (158), an idea that could complicate Gawain's soul-searching further. These women provide Gawain two very good reasons to reconsider the authenticity of his most fundamental foundations.

On the other hand, Gawain does ally himself with one woman, the Virgin Mary, on whom he may rely with no remorse and whom he has no cause to question. Her mode as a symbol of the Christian ideal is unchanging and should, therefore, be considered in a different light than those of the other women. Anderson's assumption that "[r]eligion is not presented as alternative to chivalry, but rather is fused with it" (337), can certainly be explored with the relationship (or lack thereof) of each woman with these codes in mind. The Virgin Mary can be understood as something like Gawain's liege lady, one who will inspire him to do great deeds and one to whom he will dedicate his accomplishments and aspirations (648-50). Mary, the Christian ideal, serves as the perfect match for Gawain since he too is good and pure (633-35), and she "replaces the flesh and blood lady who is the typical romance knight's inspiration" (Gilbert 64). Gawain carries with him a symbolic representation of his liege lady, interlaced into the pentangle (as Mary's five joys in Jesus) on the outside of his shield (676-77), and the image of Mary, emblazoned on the inside of his shield, to remind him to be courageous on his journey (648-50), while the pentangle itself is an emblem of faithfulness (630-35). The image of Mary and her incorporation into the pentangle remind Gawain that she is an ever-constant presence, consistently encouraging her knight to press on. When Gawain's way seems ominously hopeless, he calls on his liege lady

for help and Sir Bertilak's castle appears as if from thin air (754-58, 763-69). This instance reminds Gawain that Mary is looking after him, even in the thick of the woods and gloomiest weather.

But when Gawain arrives at Hautdesert and removes his armor, he seems almost to forget his liege lady. His passions rage as Lady Bertilak tries to cheat him of his virtue. But Gawain resists. In fact, he mentions Mary and the narrator calls on her in order to help Gawain during the bedroom scenes (1263, 1766-69). During the last bedroom scene, however, Gawain denies having a love outside of Hautdesert (1788-91). This denial can be understood in two ways, one perhaps rejecting Mary as his lady and the other considering Mary his lady but omitting the fact that she is at Hautdesert, symbolically on his shield and spiritually always with him. In the first sense, Gawain makes an attempt to reject Lady Bertilak kindly by refusing to mention his lady love Mary. In this way, he is failing as a courtly lover (just as Lady Bertilak had accused him a day earlier), and failing to be wholly faithful to the Christian ideals. In the second sense, Gawain could again be rejecting the Lady of Hautdesert as courteously as he may by omitting the knowledge that Mary is in fact with him at the castle and with him in spirit. This way, too, fails to give credit to Mary as his guiding light or to the Christian ideal as his unshakeable foundation. Whichever way Gawain means for the denial to be received, he indirectly proves that, again, the social constructions by which he lives are not necessarily fixed. This time, it is the winning of Gawain's worldly passions and natural desire for life over death that cause his religious ideal to crumble.

As Gawain arms himself to meet the Green Knight, the description of the girdle replaces any mention of the pentangle or shield emblazoned with Mary's image (2030-41). To be sure, the shield has not been replaced or disposed of, the pentangle or image has not been covered over; instead mention of the girdle and Gawain's careful attention to

incorporating it into his attire shows what is far more significant to him than Mary at this point. In fact, the absence of descriptions of the shield may suggest that the girdle has replaced the shield and the shield's symbols in Gawain's mind, just as interacting with the Lady in the bedroom and then accepting the girdle, have replaced his former trust in the chivalric and Christian ideals. Helen Cooper reminds us that "there is nothing heroic about being incapable of injury, no courage where there is no reason for fear" (90); Gawain is scared (but not to death!). Now, with the danger of imminent death, his faith lies in a questionably magic love-token. At the Green Chapel and after the second Beheading Game, the Green Knight tells Gawain that he "lakked a lyttel…and lewté…wonted" (2366). Here, "lewté…wonted" translates as "lacked…fidelity," a loaded phrase, suggesting both Gawain's decision to keep the girdle a secret and Gawain's displaced faith. Though Bertilak "absolves" Gawain of his transgression (2493), Gawain refuses to forgive himself, for his shame at falling prey to Morgan's and Lady Bertilak's tricks leaves him feeling "fawty" and "falce" (2382). He finds himself reevaluating the actuality and worth of his foundational values and assures the Green Knight, "[E]fte I schal be ware" (2388).

When Gawain returns to Camelot, he is further disheartened when Arthur and his court cannot seem to grasp the complexity of Gawain's dilemma: "[A]lle the court als / Laghen loude therat" (2513-14). They revel and rejoice at his return, and all don copies of Gawain's girdle as baldrics that will, for them, always represent honor (2520). Anderson calls the shamed Gawain a "broken pentangle" (352); the emblem that once sparkled on his shield and on his coat is now as vulnerable as the man because Gawain metaphorically cut the endless knot (another name for the pentangle) with his inability to balance all five virtues. Now, the blaring green baldrics and his own green girdle will forever remind Gawain of the transience of socially constructed systems (2511-12), much like the code that

would lead a chivalric knight to prefer to celebrate a badge of shame to one of honor, and not to listen long enough to hear the unease in his brother's voice.

In their distinct ways, the three women of the poem create a dynamic web of trust and mistrust for Gawain to navigate. They litter their individual webs with particular images, concepts, words, and ideals that attract and distract Gawain on his journey towards truth. The women of Hautdesert attract Gawain as distinguished noble women. Morgan as the old woman demands respect as an elderly aristocrat, while the young Lady gains respect by means of her supreme beauty. Narin argues that Morgan "simultaneously invites and defers resolution" (61); my reading suggests that Lady Bertilak does the same. The Lady's sexual advances in the bedroom topped by her flirtatious discourse on courtly love attract Gawain to her still more. She becomes nearly irresistible to him. But in these same ways, these women distract Gawain. Their appearances are deceptions, while the Lady's bedroom behavior is all a ruse. The juxtaposition of Gawain's attraction to these women on the one hand and his distraction by them on the other is what causes Gawain to question his beliefs. He is deceived and led to fail by figures whose identities he cannot trust.

In a different way, the Virgin Mary also attracts Gawain. She stands for an ideal which has never failed him and she proves, throughout the work, she never will. It is Gawain's distraction by other women that causes him to stray from Mary, perhaps proving that the Christian ideal might not be so fragile and vulnerable were it not for the imposition of fundamentally weak social constructions onto it. These morally frail systems burden the Christian ideal with insignificant dealings, or have tempered the Christian ideal to suit the more flexible worldly structures. By the end of the poem, Gawain is tormented over the very nature of truth, but it seems his predicament could have been significantly less complicated had he maintained his trust in Mary a bit longer and admitted to Lady Bertilak

that he did indeed have a lady love. Perhaps this admission would have stopped the Lady from insisting that Gawain take the girdle, thus giving him no reason to break his covenant with Sir Bertilak. Lady Bertilak insists that she will pull back if Gawain has plighted troth to another, but Gawain, taken in by the Lady's wiles, does no such thing. Instead, Gawain must glare at green for the rest of his days, discontented with the truth of anything around him.

Sir Gawain features portraits of Arthurian aristocratic women who function in order to guide Gawain to his ultimate purpose, a greater sense of himself and of the complexity of the conflicting codes of knighthood. These women, Lady Bertilak, Morgan le Fay, and the Virgin Mary, help develop the overall themes of the work by forcing the young protagonist to question the ideals upon which his character is based, thereby effectively positioning each of the three women as profoundly essential to Gawain's journey. The women are characterized relationally. Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak, the magical old woman and the beauty, are characterized ambivalently as the male hero's opponents. They manipulate but remain subject to his ultimate choice, and are protected by their social status in Bertilak's court. Both, but particularly Lady Bertilak, are judged in Gawain's angry speech for stepping outside what he expected and for challenging his conflicting ideals. Gawain's lady love, Mary, on the other hand, is the constant guide and source of solace to which he may always turn. She is also defined relationally as supportive of Gawain; she is a holy, virginal character who awaits and blesses Gawain in ways subject to his choice. Mary remains what she should be, representing thematically the Christian ideal from which Gawain has strayed, only to take up more obviously pleasing worldly ideals in the games of Morgan and the comforts of Lady Bertilak. Together, these noble women, powerful in their social stature or heavenly grace,

lead Gawain through a tangled web of conflicting imperatives, causing him to question his foundational beliefs and to reconsider his where his allegiance lies.

Only the noble class, its men and women, is represented in *Sir Gawain*, which naturally gives a certain agenda to the messages of this courtly Arthurian romance. This slant, and the representations of female characters that attend it, differs markedly from an otherwise typical Arthurian tale, Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale." It is to this second and different tale that I now turn.

Chapter III

"THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE": WOMEN'S WORLD OF ARTHURIANA

Geoffrey Chaucer's highly acclaimed *Canterbury Tales* recounts the pilgrimage of twenty-nine socially varied travelers and their self-reflections, tales, and interactions with one another.[4] The son of a wine merchant Chaucer was a man who eventually married above his estate, fought for the king, and became a "knight." In *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer adeptly embodies the voices of the various social classes represented therein and skillfully weaves an assortment of genres together to best represent the voice of each class and each individual pilgrim. Chaucer was no stranger to the romance, as made clear throughout the *Tales.* One of his contributions to Arthuriana, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," gives the tradition a new voice, that of a woman. The Wife of Bath, an upper middle-class tradeswoman, manipulates a traditional Arthurian romance in order to challenge the various female types of the Arthurian tradition. The Wife's romance features not only a noble cast of men and women, but also two women who exist outside of the court and challenge the traditional types: one maiden who is raped by one of Arthur's knights at the tale's beginning, and one "wyf," an old and magic woman who, though she "belongs" outside the court, imposes herself upon Arthur's court and its company in order to correct Arthur's unchivalrous knight and also to gain something for herself. In an unusual twist of a typical Arthurian motif, Arthur's court becomes ruled by his wife and her court of women in the Wife's telling, and the women beyond the court serve, in different ways, to expose the knight's injustices against women

[4] *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All quotations from "The General Prologue," The Wife of Bath's Prologue," and "The Wife of Bath's Tale" have been taken from this edition. Chaucer's *The Canterbury's Tales* was written circa 1370.

and his disregard for Arthur's court. The female characters undercut his scandalous manipulation and neglect of the chivalric code, forcing him to come to terms with the power of women.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale," told from the perspective of an upper middle-class tradeswoman, provides some new insights on the fourteenth-century women discussed in the first chapter. Mary Carruthers argues that, as a skilled cloth-maker, the Wife represents a successful member of the "bourgeoisie engaged in trade" (209), as well as a successful medieval widow: "It was common for husbands to leave property to their wives without entail or other encumbrance and for the widow to be made executor" (210). The Wife, a widow for the fifth time at the time of the Canterbury pilgrimage, has learned to be an incredibly independent woman, and she discusses the value of the power of her gender in her Prologue, as many scholars have noted. The Wife's idea that males should submit to female power is further explored in her tale. A number of scholars characterize the Wife's agenda for her tale differently. Walter C. Long sees the Wife as a "constructive moral agent" (275), while G.L. Kittredge argues that the pilgrims' responses to her Arthurian tale "debunk her moral" (187, 189-90). Susan Carter states that "[t]he Wife's subjective voice is… authenticated by her sharply critical view of the *reality* of knights and maidens" (334, emphasis mine). I agree with Carter, in that, while the Wife's prologue is filled with overly-personal and exceptionally detailed accounts of her sex life and marriages not reflected in the tale, her tale nonetheless illustrates a number of remarkably realistic representations of fourteenth-century life from a straightforward and colorful woman's perspective.

The Wife's offbeat Arthurian romance begins with a twist: a knight of King Arthur's court has raped a maiden "[b]y verray force" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 888). The violent knight is not like the type of a traditional Arthurian First Knight who exemplifies virtue and

chivalry like Chrétien de Troyes' Lancelot. Chrétien's twelfth-century Lancelot is the prototypical knight: undyingly committed to Queen Guinevere, devoted to loving and honoring her through his fearless feats and acts of love. The Wife of Bath's knight, on the other hand, disregards courtesy and respect towards women. This disregard is clear because he rapes a maiden against her will (887-88). While a maiden, particularly a virginal one, is an expected type for an Arthurian tale, she is usually rescued, not raped by "her" knight. Rape is nonconsensual, and the speaker (our Wife of Bath) takes special care to note that the maiden is forced to have sex with the knight. Thus, the violent knight forgets his pledge of chivalry until it becomes convenient for him to recall it. Ramón Llull explains some of the ethical duties of a knight: "The office of a knight is to maintain and defend women, widows, and orphans, men diseased; and those who are not powerful nor strong. For as custom and reason is that the greatest and most mighty helps the feeble and the lesser, and that they should have recourse to the great" (35). The knight in the Wife's tale, in contrast, only cooperates throughout the tale if the outcome of his cooperation benefits him. Susanne Sara Thomas argues: "The knight is limited by the fact that his desires have been defined *for* him [by social and ethical codes]. He desires what everyone is supposed to desire. But he cannot thoughtfully examine those desires. The knight will not or cannot think about changing his definitions of power and value" (94). The knight is a product of his noble environment, tempered by ideals of pageantry and chivalry, but, when he rapes the maiden, he proves that he cannot even adhere to noble custom. He adjusts his value system as it becomes convenient for him to do so. This alternative version of King Arthur's knights provides a foundation for the Wife's argument that power relations should be shifted for equality.

A key character in this shift is Arthur's queen, herself a type in traditional Arthuriana. The queen, usually Guinevere (though she is unnamed in the Wife's tale) is often little more

than wife or mistress in Arthurian tales, but the Wife's tale alters her type and gives her a voice and authority. In fact, the queen takes on Arthur's role as rule-maker, recentering the Arthurian world around a female power:

> But…the queene and other ladyes mo
> So longe preyeden the kyng of grace
> Til he [the knight's] lyf hym graunted in the place,
> And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,
> To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille.
> ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 894-98)

The queen takes responsibility for teaching the violent knight a lesson about what women most desire; in other words, she initiates the knight's quest and insists upon a female-driven challenge. The unnamed queen is responsible, according to Susan Carter, for the feminization of Arthur's court (334-35) as she rules with her court of women over the knight's rape case in Arthur's stead.

Whereas in *Sir Gawain*, the courts of both Arthur and Bertilak function "normally" with the male as at least ostensible head of the noble household and the female as her husband's confidante, the Wife's tale sets Arthur to the side and allows his queen to take his place, at least in the case of the knight. Here, the first instance of the knight's obedience to a female power occurs, but only after "sorwefully he siketh" for "[h]e may nat do al as hym liketh" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 913, 914). The erring knight must adjust his value system and submit to female power once he is exposed for his crime, but he is not entirely gracious about the opportunity the queen has given him because he is not fully in control and may not do as he pleases. Thomas A. Van notes: "Now, not only is he limited by a promise, a calendar, a woman, and the spectre of failure and its deadly consequences; he has

acknowledged the boundaries of his own understanding and agreed to make a quest to expand on them" (186). He realizes that his life is in the queen's hands, so he accepts her quest, "[a]nd taketh his leve, and wendeth forth his weye" (918), knowing that the queen has the power to take away something that he desires very much (his life).

When the knight returns, he does not face Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. Instead, for his final judgment, the knight faces a court of women with Arthur's queen as its head:

> Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,
> And many a wydwe, for that they been wise,
> The queene hirself sittynge as a justise,
> Assembled been, his answere for to heere.
> ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 1026-29)

Carter comments on this upsetting of norms: "The queen…briskly usurps the male prerogative of justice, redistributes it to the women of the court, and puts the knights of the court in the shadows off the edge of the narrative, the spot usually reserved for the ladies" (335). Thus, even the secondary women of the tale have power over the knight on trial, at least in regard to physical space. The knight explains to his judges: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / …[o]ver hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above" (1038-40). The queen, assuming the knight has successfully completed the challenge, accepts his response and allows the knight to live. Bernard F. Huppé notes: "[The knight] technically satisfies the Court of Love; in actuality the problem of his inner conviction is still unsettled" (380-81). This is because, as Van argues, "Telling a rapist that women desire control and ascendancy over him is hardly the way to changes his values or his behaviors" (188); therefore, the knight's quest is not quite over.

Arthuriana has its type for queen, but it also has its type of magic woman who usually functions outside Arthur's court. Such is the case with the "wyf" that the knight finds along his journey, a woman whom many scholars have described as a "hag," an "old woman," but most notably, a "loathly lady," a motif that recurs throughout Arthuriana for various purposes. Critics such as Carter find that the "loathly lady" motif is a useful way to characterize the role of the old woman in the work, but others, like Susanne Sara Thomas, reject the idea of the "loathly lady." Thomas argues that the magic woman is only referred to as "wyf" ("woman"); because I agree with Thomas' decision to use this less derogatory term, I will also refer to the magic woman as "wyf." When the knight comes across the wyf, she is surrounded by nature and magic. Before he sees her, he sees twenty-four women dancing in the forest: "Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne, / In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne. / But certeinly, er he cam fully there, / Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 993-96). Carter notes that these women seem to be the wyf's chosen embodiment of herself (336). Clearly, the wyf understands precisely what will attract the noble knight: women and pageantry. Once the dancing women disappear the knight approaches the wyf sitting upon a green. Compared to the ethereal vision of women dancing, the wyf, "[a] fouler wight ther may no man devyse," is unimpressive (999). Van argues that the wyf's "ugliness is what [the knight's] own fear makes of a world which does not necessarily exist to accommodate his appetite" (188). But the knight recognizes that because of her "aged wisdom," the wyf may have something to offer him, so he chooses to cooperate, as he did with the queen. The wyf's assistance can only help the knight, so again, as is convenient for his benefit, he acts courteously. He pleads for her help: "Koude ye me wisse, I wolde wel quite youre hire" (1008). The wyf knows the knight needs her help, so she manipulates a concept with which he is familiar, the

chivalric *trouthe* or honor, so that *she* may benefit. She requires: "Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand" (1009). The knight desperately and quite carelessly hands over his pledge without thinking twice: "Have heer my trouthe…I grante" (1013). Only a year earlier when the knight had raped the maiden, the knight neglected his *trouthe* to his king (Arthur), so the knight's reliability is certainly in question. He plights his *trouthe* anyway, failing to consider the consequences for neglecting his *trouthe* to the wyf, or perhaps believing that no consequences will result from breaking a *trouthe* with someone outside of the court. Perhaps because court life might be the only one the knight understands, or thinks he understands, he does not quite know how to function beyond the limits of the court. Certainly, he does not yet understand that he must pay for his crime. But the knight must also learn the meaning of the knowledge the wyf shares with him, so they enter their agreement and travel back to Arthur's (or Arthur's queen's) court.

The wyf accompanies the knight into Arthur's, or more appropriately, Arthur's queen's court, a space from which she, as the "magic woman," is usually excluded, as Carter argues: "In generic tales of the loathly lady, the court represents the seat of patriarchal government whereas the forest is an uncharted space where societal stricture fails" (330). The wyf breaks free of her liminal boundaries, "revealing the limits of the court's control" (Crane 128), and functions quite normally outside of these boundaries. Though the queen and her court are satisfied with the knight's answer, the wyf intends to elongate his quest. She calls the queen's attention to the knight's promise made in the forest, thus asking the queen to require the knight to obey chivalric duty and to respect his *trouthe*. For the first time, the knight cracks under pressure, for he can find nothing desirable, nothing that he wants, in a marriage to the wyf. He begs: "Taak al my good and lat my body go" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 1061). Martin views this "wailing" "as if someone were trying to rape *him*"

(58). The knight attempts to manipulate his honor yet again, but neither the queen nor the wyf will accept a broken *trouthe*. The tables have turned and the magic wyf is amused. She asks the knight: "Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye? / Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous? / Is every knyght of his so dangerous?" (1088-90). She pokes fun at the noble class and the ideals by which the nobility are supposed to live. The wyf questions these ideals by proving that one of Arthur's knights is inadequate and incapable of keeping his knightly *trouthe*. In fact, this knight seems misplaced in the ideal Arthurian world.

The knight is not at all amused by his betrothal to the wyf. His feeling of loathing may be justified. Martin points out: "[I]n addition to marrying someone who seems to be of a lower class, he is trapped in a reversal of sex roles" (57). The situation also reverses the type we might expect for a knight's bride: a beautiful virgin as lover, not an elderly magic woman. Mustering his noble pomp and gall, the knight lashes out at the wyf, calling her loathly, old, and low-class ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 1100-01). The wyf argues in reply that gentility is deserved, or gained from the life one leads. Her speech is another example of her manipulation of the Arthurian universe. She denies the noble ideal that *gentilesse* is granted a person at birth, arguing that gentility comes from God alone (1162). The wyf attempts to recalibrate the knight's ideas about virtue since his have gone awry, or, which, because of his skewed and pompous interpretation of his experience as a nobleman, were never fully functional, much less "ideal," from the start.

Once the wyf has delivered her monologue, she expects a change from the knight. The wyf gives the knight a choice:

> "Chese now…oon of thise thynges tweye:
> To han me foul and old til that I deye,
> And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,

And nevere yow displease in al my lyf,

Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,

And take youre aventure of the repair

That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,

Or in som oother place, may wel be.

Now chese yourselven, wheither that yow liketh."

("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 1219-27)

The knight does not reflect long. Instead, his response resembles that of the Wife of Bath's fifth husband after she has won the debate and thrown his "book of wikked wyves" in the fire: "I put me in youre wise governance; / Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance / And moost honour to yow and me also" (1231-33). The wyf, like the Wife of Bath, wins sovereignty by mastery, again recentralizing the authority in the tale from male to female. The wyf is granted the choice to rule her life and relationship as she sees best. The decision she makes benefits both parties in the relationship.

Thus, the shapeshifting wyf transforms into a beautiful woman: "[S]he so fair was, and so yong thereto" ("The Wife of Bath's Tale" 1251). The wyf is very much a woman both before and after her transformation, but when she becomes beautiful, she becomes more desirable for the knight, the expected type. The knight, once he sees this new version of his wife, "[f]or joye…hente hire in his armes two. / His herte bathed in a bath of blisse" (1252-53). The wyf proves via her transformation that beauty as is associated with "woman" is a social construction, an idea which again calls into question the knight's understanding of *gentilesse*. The knight gives the wyf the power to choose how she will appear, despite social norms, thus allowing her mastery over her own body and choices.

While the *Gawain*-poet depicts only the aristocratic class, Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath and her tale to portray several classes. His use of the Wife's middle-class experience and voice adds another layer of interest and complexity to observation of the tale's female characters. The female characters of the Wife's tale are each granted a sort of resolution to the marginalizations she has associated with their types: the raped maiden, though deflowered, is granted the solace of the knight's punishment and eventual amendment; the queen is allowed to rule over her court of women in the knight's case, thus permitting her advantage instead of Arthur; the wyf is given the opportunity to exceed her boundaries and live at court with her husband, meaning she has married up in class, and she is further granted the ability to decide the knight's fate. Through the justices these women attain, the Wife of Bath weaves a tale of women's power over men.

But, again, the telling is two-fold. Chaucer allows these female characters to function as they do in order to portray, as in *Sir Gawain*, their responsibility for showing a knight of Arthur's court the error of his ways. As fourteenth-century English women were, Chaucer's characters are defined relationally, and all, even the wyf, are reliant on the knight's choices in the end. The women who do not attend the court are only protected if proximate to the court: the maiden is raped, while the wyf is protected only when she appeals to the queen. The wyf herself, while ultimately winning the argument, is chastised bitterly by the knight for daring to violate expected parameters by claiming his hand. Chaucer's characters, even in the Wife's voice, still reflect fourteenth-century English realities. The difference in representations of Arthur's knights between the two texts, honorable Gawain and dishonorable knight, can most likely be attributed to Chaucer's experience with and sympathy for various social classes. The understanding of class represented in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" by the female characters' interactions with the knight demonstrates more clearly

than *Sir Gawain* realistic representations of fourteenth-century women's voices, and the range of them.

Valuable conclusions can be drawn based on the similarities and differences between *Sir Gawain* and "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Clearly, the writers of both works use a similar framework for organizing a quest structure, and both works feature many of the same characters and types, in different guises, in some cases. Both texts portray Arthur and both texts focus on one of Arthur's knights, Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the unnamed knight in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," but these men are portrayed in remarkably different ways. *Sir Gawain*'s Arthur plays a far more significant role than Chaucer's Arthur, who hands his rule over to his queen for the duration of the knight's case. Chaucer's knight, an impeccably unimpressive representation of Arthur's court and chivalry, pales in comparison to *Sir Gawain*'s title character. However, the two texts' female characters are very much alike in many ways. Arthur's queen is portrayed in both works, though she is significantly more powerful in the Wife's tale, while the wyf, in many respects, seems to be an amalgamation of the *Gawain*-poet's Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak. The difference between them is the result of their relationships to their respective heroes, Gawain and the unnamed knight: Morgan and Lady Bertilak are ambivalently characterized temptresses, but the wyf is beautiful and a powerful helper.

The conclusions of each romance, especially as they relate to gender and society, are very different despite the similarities between them. The often ambivalent noblewomen of *Sir Gawain* serve as representations and complications of the codes by which Gawain navigates his life, while the power of men is apparent throughout the work. In the Wife's tale, men are far less powerful and the women are represented more positively as they work together to correct a knight who chooses not to value the knightly code. These various

messages using similar types demonstrate the many readings possible in adaptable Arthuriana. Similar plasticity in female characters' roles and commentary on social codes comes in yet another Arthurian romance, Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*, to which I now turn.

Chapter IV

THE REALISTIC AND THE FANTASTIC IN THOMAS CHESTRE'S *SIR LAUNFAL*

Thomas Chestre's late fourteenth-century *Sir Launfal* follows the seven-year journey of Launfal, one of Arthur's knights, into various social settings. The work describes Launfal's interactions with characters in these varied settings, thus providing commentary on the nobility and the urban upper class.[5] Though much of the subject matter of *Sir Launfal* is courtly in nature, Chestre's use of "tail-rhyme," unique to Middle English romance, signifies that he was likely writing for a less sophisticated audience (Bliss 1), a much different audience than that for which the popular Norman French writer Marie de France wrote. Her *Lanval*, an Old French *lai,* became much of the source material for Chestre's Arthurian romance. *Sir Launfal* features two courts, that of King Arthur and that of Dame Tryamour, daughter of the King of the Fairies. Beyond these two courts, the romance highlights Launfal's interactions with the urban upper class at Caerleon, specifically with the mayor and the mayor's daughter. Overall, Chestre paints an unflattering portrait of court and upper class life, worlds ruled by desire or the need for wealth and by otherwise uncourtly motives or behavior. Through Launfal's interactions with the courts and with the persons at Caerleon, especially through his relationships with the women of these places and their social milieus, the contrast between the behavior of each group in regards to the chivalric code and courtliness is highlighted. Each woman, particularly Gwennere at Arthur's court and Dame Tryamour at the fairy court, gains power over Launfal by either directly or indirectly taking

[5] *Sir Launfal*, ed. by A.J. Bliss (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960). All quotations from *Launfal* have been taken from this edition.

away or granting him wealth, success, and social stability. The means by which these female characters hold power over Launfal and the ways in which their separate powers conflict illustrate the patronizing of one court to another, Arthur's male-centered court and a supernatural female-centered court, providing a commentary on what real fourteenth-century noble women and real fourteenth-century nobility might have experienced.

Throughout the tale, Chestre depicts the upper classes, both nobility and the urban wealthy class, as motivated by less than noble aims. In more than one instance, we see the courts' sense of worth flourish or falter on the basis of wealth. Similar to the *Gawain*-poet's version of Arthur, Chestre's Arthur "held Engelond yn good lawes" and his "kny3tes…wer profitable" (Chestre 2, 10). Launfal is renowned as the most generous of gift-givers, "[f]or hys largesse and hys bounté" (31), of all of Arthur's knights, for which he has been named Arthur's steward for ten years. A general sense of luxury and comfort is associated with Arthur's court, and Launfal freely gives gifts to other knights and squires. But he is the only knight not given a gift by Gwennere at Arthur's marriage feast, shaming the young knight who has been so generous at court. Launfal leaves court at this shocking lack of courtesy and seemingly undeserved withholding of gifts by Arthur's queen, shamed to be excluded from receiving key gifts or riches. Later, once Launfal has suffered financial ruin in Caerleon by spending all of his remaining money, the two knights who have accompanied him choose to leave him, for they can no longer bear impoverishment, even though noble knights, at least of the fictional sort, were by the laws of chivalry to remain with their brother despite any financial devastation that might befall him or themselves.

Further examples of uncourtly behavior are clear in the lies of several noble characters, including Launfal. When Launfal leaves Arthur's court, he claims that his father has died, so he must leave at once. Because Launfal never speaks of his father's death again,

it appears that Launfal has fabricated a lie in order to escape Gwennere and perhaps, too, public humiliation. Later, Launfal asks the men who are leaving him to tell Arthur that he has been successful in Caerleon, which they do in order to protect Launfal's honor. Gwennere falsely accuses Launfal of pursuing her when he returns to court, a reunion that occurs later in Chestre's text that will be addressed later in this essay. These types of courtly characters differ markedly from those in *Sir Gawain* and in many ways from those of "The Wife of Bath's Tale," proving an interesting contrast amongst the works. Where *Sir Gawain* is tailored for a more sophisticated audience and Chaucer's Wife's "Tale," for a more varied audience, the relatively negative depictions of the courtly cast in Chestre's romance perhaps appeal much less to the nobility and more to the urban upper class.[6]

Though Arthur's world seems to be functioning perfectly well at the tale's beginning, he takes a wife, the Irish king's daughter, Gwennere, at the urging of his counselor Merlin. Before she ever interacts with Launfal, the knights have passed judgment on their new queen: "For þe lady bar los of swych word / þat sche hadde lemmannys vnþer her lord, / So fele þer nas noon ende" (Chestre 46-48). Her reputation, as an "evil queen," precedes her, but instead of suffering at the hands of judgmental men, she manipulates the courtly world, choosing Launfal, Arthur's most generous knight and the knight most likely to be wounded by her ploy, as a pawn in her game of gaining control. Tory Vandeventer Pearman describes her: "Haughty and manipulative, Gwennere actively subverts her proper gendered role and at times seems more powerful than her husband" (134). As Arthur's long-time steward, Launfal has gained a reputation for his generosity, so Gwennere knows that he will be most easily befuddled and manipulated by a gift-giving malfunction. With her bad reputation

[6] See Bliss' "Introduction" to *Sir Launfal* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960).

preceding her, Gwennere must gain power in her new kingdom, and she sees ousting the knight with the most power (the one best at gift-giving) as her first step toward that power:

> Þe queen yaf yftes for Þe nones,
>
> Gold & seluer & precyous stonys,
>
> Her curtasye to kyÞe;
>
> Euerych knyȝt sche ȝaf broche oÞer ryng,
>
> But Syr Launfal sche yaf noÞyng:
>
> Þat greuede hym many a syde. (Chestre 67-72)

Launfal abandons Arthur's court, suggesting that at this point, Gwennere's plan has worked. As Stephen Guy-Bray believes, "the reason for the hero's departure from court is related to the dominance of women in the world of the poem" (34). What is unexpected, though, is that not only does "evil" Gwennere want Launfal out of the court, but "sche wold wyth all her myȝt / þat he hadde be boþe day and nyȝt / In paynys mor and more" (Chestre 178-80); in other words, she wants him to suffer and fail even outside the court. It becomes clear that Gwennere's hopes for Launfal are panning out quite nicely.

Once Launfal leaves Arthur's court, he journeys into a different social landscape; Launfal travels to Caerleon "[t]o þe meyrys hous of þe toune" where, relying on his renown as a Round Table knight, he hopes to receive a warm welcome and lodging (Chestre 89). Instead, the mayor tells Launfal that his home is full, but Launfal and the two knights sent with him, Sir Hugh and Sir John, may stay "yn a chamber by [the mayor's] orchardsyd" (124). Already, Launfal feels dishonored. After a year in Caerleon, he has spent all of his money, and he must live in poverty. Now, Launfal experiences an entirely different social world than the one with which he is familiar. At Caerleon, he is never invited to social events and is ridiculed for his impoverishment. Eventually, even his men must abandon

him, for their worn garb and financial suffering are unbecoming for knights of the Round Table: "Syr, our robes beÞ torent, / And your tresour ys all yspent, / And we goÞ ewyll ydyȝt" (139-41). At least these knights promise to glorify Launfal and not speak of his destitution when they return to Arthur. Upon hearing of Launfal's supposed success, Arthur is pleased, but Gwennere is not: "Glad was Artour Þe kyng / Þat Launfal was yn good lykyng— / Þe queen hyt rew well sore" (175-77). Again, Gwennere shows her unfounded distaste for Launfal, an aversion which is entirely contrary to the hopes of Arthur. While Arthur wants his men to be fruitful, even outside his court, Gwennere "wyth all her myȝt" wants Launfal to fail; her motives, though unclear, are not in the best interest of the court as a united body, but are true to the "evil queen" type.

In this new social setting, instead of being acclaimed for his gift-giving as he is at Arthur's court, Launfal is ridiculed for financial ruin. Launfal continues to suffer, not even being able to attend church because his tattered attire is inadequate, but he is given a glimpse of hope when the mayor's daughter asks him to dine with her "[i]n halle" (Chestre 193). Launfal, "for hys pouerté, / Was not bede to Þat semblé" by the earls and barons of Caerleon (187-88). Though the people of Caerleon have ridiculed the young knight for his impoverished state, despite the fact that he is one of Arthur's esteemed knights, and have based his value on his financial worth and not his knightly renown, the mayor's daughter clearly has a more merciful, loving nature than her father and the other people of Caerleon. Guy-Bray makes a significant point that "[b]oth at court [where Launfal was once the chief gift-giver] and in the town women control the distribution of gifts" (36). A direct comparison is made between the mayor and his daughter to show the differences in their characters: "Þe meyr to Þe feste was ofsent; / Þe meyrys douȝter to Launfal went, / And axede yf he wolde / In halle dyne wyth her Þat day" (Chestre 190-93). While the mayor (like

the earls and barons of Caerleon) is more concerned with social status, the mayor's daughter is more concerned with inviting Launfal, an outsider to the community, to the event. She is clearly a different type, a helpful maiden, whose kindness counteracts Gwennere's cruelty. As Guy-Bray notes, "Chestre appears to be suggesting that the world in which Launfal lives is controlled by women and that if the story is going to end happily he will have to begin to appeal to them" (36). Much like the knight from "The Wife of Bath's Tale," Launfal must learn to operate in a world of women, a realm to which he is not accustomed and one he has not quite learned to accept. Launfal, though appreciative of the woman's offer, cannot accept it for he has bought into the ridicule and knows where he belongs, according to male social standards: "[F]or defawte of clodynge / Ne myȝte y yn wyth Þe peple Þrynge— / No wonÞer douȝ me smerte!" (Chestre 202-04). Instead, he asks that the mayor's daughter lend him a saddle and bridle for his horse, which she kindly does. Launfal travels away from Caerleon in his ragged clothes, and eventually settles underneath a tree to rest.

Just when Launfal imagines he can suffer no more, he is greeted with an interesting opportunity. While resting, Launfal sees two richly dressed maidens emerge from the nearby woods: "Har kerteles wer of Inde-sandel, / Ilased smalle, jolyf and well— / þer myȝt noon gayer go" (Chestre 232-34). The women are clad in fine, embroidered garments and decked in jewels. Launfal greets the women, who respond: "Our lady, Dame Tryamour, / Bad þou schuldest come speke wyth here, / ȝyf hyt wer þy wylle, sere, / Wythoute more soiour" (254-57). As in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," beautiful women associated with nature are presented before the knight encounters the major character on his journey. But while Chaucer's twenty-four dancing women are the embodiment of a much less beautiful old wyf, Chestre's equally magical maidens are the servants of a fairy princess, Dame Tryamour. The servants' offer to escort Launfal to their lady serves as the second instance of the type of a

generous female character in the tale, the first the mayor's daughter when she asked Launfal to accompany her to the town's "feste." But, whereas he quickly denied the mayor's daughter, Launfal does not hesitate to accept the servants' offer.

Launfal, like many other characters in the tale, proves to have less than noble tendencies, so, especially in his state of impoverishment, he is motivated by a need for financial gain on top of chivalric and courtly duties. In the mayor's daughter, Launfal does not see an obvious avenue for financial growth; she is merely a kind woman who has the ability to help him out of a desperate situation. But in Dame Tryamour's servants, Launfal sees wealth. They are cloaked in fine fabrics and ornamented with jewels: "Har manteles wer of grene felwet, / Ybordured wyth gold, ryȝt well ysette, / Ipelured wyth grys and gro," obviously pointing to the wealth and power of their lady (235-37).

Dame Tryamour's power is clear, and it becomes even more so once Launfal encounters her in her pavilion for the first time. The destitute Launfal gladly accompanies the beautifully clad women to Tryamour's luxurious and intricately designed pavilion in the forest:

> Vpon þe toppe an ern þer stod,
> Of bournede gold, ryche and good,
> Iflorysched wyth ryche amall;
> Hys eyn wer carbonkeles bryȝt—
> As ȝe mone þe schon anyȝt,
> þat spreteþ out ouyr all.
> Alysaundre þe conquerour,
> Ne Kyng Artour yn hys most honour,
> Ne hadde noon scwych juell. (Chestre 268-76)

Even King Arthur's court at the height of its prestige cannot compare to Dame Tryamour's lavish pavilion and its intricacies. As the daughter of "kyng of Fayrye, / Of occient, fer and nyȝe, / A man of mochell myȝte" (280-81), Tryamour is a noble magic woman, and thus her pavilion constitutes another court. Interestingly, though, Tryamour rules a supernatural court that seems to be comprised entirely of women, setting it in opposition to Arthur's more true-to-life, male-centered court. Like Chaucer's wyf who is first presented outside Arthur's court, Tryamour represents a world outside of Arthur's court. As foils, these two courts contrast in several important ways, with the strengths of Tryamour's court illuminating the weaknesses of Arthur's court.

Launfal's first interaction with Tryamour is a markedly sexual one, suggesting that, like Chaucer's wyf, she is both magic woman and beautiful lover. In the middle of Tryamour's lavish pavilion, the fairy princess lies on a "bed of prys": "For hete her cloÞes down sche dede / Almest to her gerdylstede: / Þan lay sche vncouert" (Chestre 289-91). The remainder of this stanza describes her snow-white skin, rosy complexion, and golden hair, all making Launfal believe that "[h]e seygh neuer non so pert" (294). Tryamour's incomparable beauty makes her even more appealing to Launfal.

In comparison, Arthur's court lacks the female power for a few reasons. On one hand, Arthur's world is a patriarchal one, ruled by men. This is why Gwennere must assert herself in the way that she does (ousting Launfal from his esteemed position). In a patriarchal world and court that thrives on war and conquest, Gwennere believes that she must fight unfairly to maintain her position of power; otherwise, she has no authority. But in Tryamour's world, a female-centered, supernatural court outside of Arthur's domain, females are granted authority and power, and behavior like Gwennere's would certainly not be customary and would therefore be unacceptable behavior for a queen.

At Tryamour's court, Launfal again finds wealth and success, but this time, his rewards are more substantial and meaningful than any monetary riches. Tryamour gives freely unto her beloved Launfal. She supplies him with a horse, "Blaunchard, [her] stede lel"; the invisible "Gyfre, [her] owen knaue"; invincibility "[i]n werre ne yn turnement"; and other riches and gifts (Chestre 326, 327, 331). Launfal claims that he has never before been given better gifts (226). Tryamour is the greatest gift-giver Launfal has come across, while Gwennere never gave gifts to Launfal. Launfal loves Tryamour all the more in comparison to Gwennere because she excels where Gwennere failed Launfal. More than material gifts, though, Tryamour gives freely of herself to Launfal; she spends time with him and tells him precisely what he wants to hear: "Þer nys noman yn Cristené / Þat y loue so moche as Þe, / Kyng neyÞer emperour!" (304-06). She builds his confidence in himself and in their love, thus strengthening his masculinity. After a rich supper complete with fine meats and wines, they go to bed, but "lytyll Þey sclepte Þat nyȝt" (349), implying the sexual consummation of their relationship. Before Launfal leaves, Tryamour promises him that she will come to him if he calls on her from "a derne stede," or secret place: "Well priuyly I woll come to Þe— / Noman alyue ne schall me se— / As stylle as any ston" (355-57). But then, she complicates the terms of their relationship further:

> "But of o Þyng, Syr Knyȝt, I warne Þe,
> Þat Þou make no bost of me
> For no kennes mede!
> And yf Þou doost (y warny Þe before)
> All my loue Þou hast forlore!" (361-65)

Launfal's happy and fruitful relationship comes with a price, but because he appreciates the material and emotional wealth he has gained at Tryamour's court will be substantial, he has

no qualms about her terms. Launfal believes that he can excel with what Tryamour has given him, but he will soon learn that those things with Tryamour's stamp on them (Blaunchard, Gyfre, etc.) are not as good as his beloved herself.

With his his self-esteem and financial security restored and the comfort of his lady's love and protection to guide him, Launfal journeys again. Launfal travels away from Tryamour's court back to Caerleon where the mayor, seeing Launfal's changed estate, invites Launfal to eat with him. Launfal comments on the mayor's fickle taste in company, reminding him that when Launfal was living in poverty, the mayor wanted nothing to do with him. The mayor, shamed, "away ȝede" (Chestre 415). Launfal, with the help of Gyfre and Tryamour's promise of invincibility, dominates in the tournament at Caerleon. Later, hearing of Launfal's renown, Sir Valentyne, a fifteen-foot-tall knight (512), seeks out the supposedly invulnerable knight for a joust:

> "…for loue of hys lemman
> (Yf sche be any gantyle woman,
> Courteys, fre oÞer hende)
> Þat he come wyth me to juste,
> To kepe hys harneys from Þe ruste—
> And elles manhod schende." (523-28)

Tryamour assures her knight that he has nothing to fear, so Launfal accepts Valentyne's challenge to joust in his lady's (and his manhood's) honour. Valentyne puts Launfal's skills to the test, but Launfal is eventually the victor. With Tryamour's supernatural power, Launfal succeeds, but the more he gains, the more unaware he seems to become of the terms of their agreement. Eventually, at the peak of his success, he forgets the terms altogether, a point to which I will shortly return.

Launfal's restored acclaim renews King Arthur's interest in his former steward. Word of Launfal's success travels back to Arthur, so Arthur invites him back to court for a feast. While returning to Arthur's court means returning to one of "merthe and moch honour," Launfal must once again encounter Gwennere (Chestre 628). Very much fascinated by Launfal's success, the queen sees another opportunity to manipulate the young knight and to potentially gain power. She tells her ladies-in-waiting: "He ys Þe fayreste bachelere— / He ne hadde neuer no wyf; / … / I wyll go and wyte hys wylle: / Y loue hym as my lyf" (650-54). Her changed perception of the knight is clearly due to his new renown, wealth, and seeming self-sufficiency. What Gwennere does not know is that Launfal's new appeal has been handed to him by his supernatural lover, Dame Tryamour. The queen's reputation, the reason for the disapproval of her by the Round Table knights, proves true: she lusts after another man, this time Launfal, even though she is married to the king. She is also inconsistent; though she insists that she will "loue [Launfal] as [her] lyf," her earlier desire was for the knight to suffer "day and nyȝt" (179).

Chestre continues his characterization of Arthur's queen as a wholly negative type as she exchanges her former loathing for the knight for love. The queen wastes no time admitting her new-found "love" to Launfal, but the knight is not fooled; he responds: "I nell be traytour, Þay ne nyȝt, / Be God Þat all may stere!" (Chestre 683-84). Launfal's honor in his retort can be understood as two-fold: he refuses to be an uncourtly lover to his lady Tryamour who has granted him brilliant success, nor will he neglect to honor his former lord, King Arthur. Gwennere, shocked and embarrassed, reverts to her original loathing of Launfal, calling him a "coward" (685). She insists: "Þou louyst no woman, ne no woman Þe: / Þow wer worÞy forlore!" (689-90). Reeling from such a blow, Launfal reveals his love for Dame Tryamour: "I haue loued a fayryr woman / Þan Þou euer leydest Þyn ey vpon, / Þys

seuen yer and more!" (694-96). He tells the queen that his beloved's least attractive servant is more fair than she; Launfal adamantly refuses to be cowed by the queen again, but in so doing, he violates his agreement with Tryamour and sacrifices his relationship with her. At the peak of Launfal's success, he fails according to the terms of his agreement with Tryamour, but the fairy princess is true to the terms of their agreement: any remnants of his fairy lover, including Blaunchard, Gyfre, and his gifts and riches, disappear after he lashes out at Gwennere (733-55).

The queen understands how to use her power in a male-centered world. She craftily manipulates a lie in her favor, which she knows will work because she is Arthur's queen. Gwennere resumes her plot to destroy Launfal's renown and utilizes her queenly power to turn her lusting after the young knight around in her favor. She relays her "understanding" of the confrontation to Arthur and attempts to gain her husband's sympathy and to evoke his anger against his former steward. Indeed, her plan works, for Arthur insists that "Launfal schuld be sclawe" (723). On Gwennere's authority, Guy-Bray argues: "Although Arthur is nominally the highest authority and it is he who orders the trial, it is obvious that Gwennere controls both him and the court" (43). She presents her initial speaking to Launfal as "a game," marking her side of the conversation as quite innocent, so Launfal's response, according to the queen's version, is malicious and cruel.

After Chestre has sufficiently characterized Gwennere as an adulteress and an evil queen, Launfal's trial begins. Launfal tells the king that Gwennere questioned his manhood and his love for his lady, so he was provoked to respond in the manner that he did. The barons ruling over Launfal's case "knewe Þe maners of Þe quene," so they consider the queen at fault and Launfal true if "Launfal schuld hys lemman brynge" (Chestre 788, 806). Gwennere, pridefully certain that Launfal's lady-love does not exist, feels confident enough

to pose what she imagines is an empty vow: "ȝyf he bryngeÞ a fayrer Þynge / Þut out my eeyn gray!" (809-10). Launfal, too, is sure that he cannot bring Tryamour to Arthur's court, but he is given one year to do so. For that year, Launfal laments his certain death with no sign of his beloved, and at the end of the year must eventually return to trial.

At last, Gwennere and Tryamour are presented in the same scene when Tryamour's court of women attends Arthur's court. Finally, Launfal is given a glimpse of hope, and Gwennere now fears that Launfal's beloved is no fabrication and that she will be shamed before all of Arthur's court, thus losing her power. She encourages Arthur to hurry Launfal's sentence along (918-24), but Tryamour enters the court as she is speaking: "A damesele alone / Vpoon a whyt comely palfrey; / Þey saw neuer non so gay" (927-29). The following three stanzas proclaim her exquisite beauty and regal appeal until finally, Launfal sees her and is overjoyed. Tryamour speaks directly to Arthur, telling him that she has come to free Launfal of guilt and to prove that the queen tempted Launfal, contrary to the queen's earlier explanation of the event (992-1002). The king responds: "Ech man may yse Þat ys soÞe, / Bryȝtere Þat ye be" (1004-05); Tryamour is indeed more beautiful than Gwennere. To fulfill Gwennere's pretentious proposition that she could be blinded if Launfal's "fayrer þynge" were brought to court, "Dame Tryamour to Þe queen geÞ, / And blew on her swych a breÞ / Þat neuer eft myȝt sche se" (1006-08). Dinah Hazell finds that Gwennere's punishment is "the axis of Chestre's moral and social observation, and the absolute condemnation of Arthurian society; rather than gratuitous violence or superfluous appendage, the punishment of Gwennere recalls all of her sins and, by implication, the weaknesses of Artour and his culture" (124).

The blinding of Gwennere by a morally greater female character silences the manipulative and dishonorable queen and exposes the moral wrongs of Arthur's court.

Tryamour's supernatural female power rules even outside of her natural realm of the forest. Tryamour and her servants, with their evident wealth and regal character, function comfortably in Arthur's court. Pearman comments on this battle royale between Gwennere and Tryamour, suggesting that "Tryamour's intervention…showcases [Arthur's] court's incompetence and its need for an alternative administration of justice" (142). Because Tryamour rules with truth and honor, she dominates Arthur's corrupt court. Tryamour, who functions via truth and honor, is able to prove easily Gwennere's falsehood and punish her by carrying out Gwennere's own curse. Guy-Bray comments on female power in the tale: "[W]hile Gwennere's actions demonstrate Launfal's masculine weakness, they also create a space in which other kinds of female power can operate and Tryamour moves into this space" (43-44).

Tryamour's representations of chivalry and courtliness are unvarying, while those at Arthur's court are easily manipulated. In the end, Launfal chooses to abandon his former life for good in order to lead a life with Tryamour marked by truth and honor. Launfal follows his lady away from Arthur's court after the trial: "Þus Launfal, wythouten fable, / Þat noble knyȝt of Þe Rounde Table, / Was take ynto Fayrye" (Chestre 1033-35).

Hazell draws an apt conclusion: "[The] intrusion of a supernatural agent into human justice exposes the problems of the court not only in Chestre's text, but also in his time" (141). Such an argument seems true for all three texts that I have discussed. Morgan le Fay's manipulation of the knightly code through the supernatural Green Knight in *Sir Gawain*, the shapeshifting wyf's amendment of the rapist-knight in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," and Tryamour's blinding assertion of female power, truth, and honor all illustrate the necessity of the supernatural, the type of the magic woman, to correct the corrupt part or whole of Arthur's court. The supernatural forces or types in each text are female-driven,

thus providing a comment on the fragility of male-centered worlds. Female power in these texts functions best in the form of the supernatural, which allows for a starker contrast against the corrupt, male-centered worlds, or male power.

At the same time, even the powerful, supernatural magic woman and her fellow types, as well as Gwennere and the helpful maidens, reflect the social realities of the fourteenth century in England. All are defined as good or evil relationally, by their cooperation and assistance to Launfal. All except Tryamour are ultimately reliant on Arthur or Launfal's cooperation to retain power, although Tryamour derives her magic from her father's power as fairy king. The female characters of *Sir Launfal* are also defined by proximity to court, with even Caerleon's mayor's daughter rejected by Launfal himself. Finally, the female character who steps outside the societal parameters and seeks male power, Gwennere in this case, is characterized as unnatural, unchaste, and inconsistent. Chestre's molding of Arthuriana in *Launfal* thus challenges the ethics of the courts of his day, but not the social ideals applied to fourteenth-century women and their literary counterparts.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how a fourteenth-century author might reflect medieval society in the representations of his characters, but the very limited number of types possible for female Arthurian characters provides for a more significant statement about real fourteenth-century women's roles and how they were perceived by men. In different ways, each text explicitly represents the code of knighthood, a code with distinct roles for men. Women, on the other hand, have no set place in the male-dominated knight's world. Instead, women are manipulated by men to enhance the code, just as, in each of our texts, female characters are set as types and manipulated by the author in order to enhance the code or suffer the consequences. Each author's representation of the code, and especially the functioning of women within it, differs slightly according to the social milieu of each author's audience. While each text provides a critique of the code, at least to some extent, it is the ways in which each text's female characters coexist, or cannot coexist, with the code and its male allies that actualize fourteenth-century realities about women's unstable place in a feudal, male-dominated fourteenth-century England.

As we have seen, the range of Arthurian types for female characters includes the fair queen, the old woman, the magic woman, and the beauty (be she maiden, lover, or would-be lover). An Arthurian character can be one or a number of the types in one, but she will be defined as good, evil, or ambivalent based on a male relational perspective. As she helps the "hero," she will be a good queen, a fairy godmother, or fairy princess, and either a kindly

maid or beautiful love interest. As she challenges, guides, or tricks the "hero," she will be the opposite (evil queen, ugly hag, wicked witch, wanton adulteress) or ambivalent mixture (tricky temptress). Each author explores or addresses a slightly different social milieu—the *Gawain*-poet appeals predominately to the upper-class, Chaucer to the upper and upper-middle classes, and Chestre to the upper urban classes—so their representations of these female types are used differently, according to the social message delivered.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the author uses a few types in the representations of Morgan, Lady Bertilak, and Mary. The mastermind of the plot, Morgan, embodies the type of the magic woman. A fairly well-established Arthurian character by the fourteenth century with both positive and negative representations, depending on her relational role in a given work, Morgan can raise some questions. Even though she is noble, implying a positive characterization, she manipulates the entire plot of *Sir Gawain* as a test of Arthur's court. Her familiarity with his court allows her to formulate a series of "tests" of Gawain's honor. So she might be a trickster in some senses of the word, but on the other hand, she leads the hero to a greater sense of himself and of the complexity of the conflicting codes of knighthood. The other type used by the *Gawain*-poet is that of the beautiful woman embodied by Lady Bertilak. Like the magic woman, the beautiful woman can be interpreted as positive or negative—positive as a love interest and negative as a temptress—depending on her function. Lady Bertilak, part of Morgan's master machination, tempts Gawain's honor in the three bedroom scenes and serves to test Gawain's adherence to the courtly code. She is indeed a temptress, but, like Morgan, while she tricks, she also helps Gawain and technically obeys her husband. Mary, a "magic" or supernatural beauty, is characterized positively as Gawain's faith in her guides him safely along his journey.

Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale" illustrates a blending and altering of types in the characters of Arthur's queen and the old wyf. The queen type, as most others, can be used to depict a positive or negative character; in the case of the queen, she is rarely an ambivalent figure. Chaucer's noble queen, though unnamed, is given a great deal of power in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Arthur gives her power to rule as court justice over the lusty knight's case, and it is she who assigns the knight his quest, to learn what women most desire. Chaucer's queen helps the knight along his quest by giving him a chance to change and by working together with the wyf to amend the careless knight's attitudes and behavior. So she is a positive queen, a rare find in the Arthurian tradition since Arthur's queen is usually depicted as an untrustworthy adulteress. Perhaps her positive portrayal in this case reflects her relational role to the young knight, or perhaps Chaucer strayed from the tradition in order to provide an opinion consistent with that of his middle-class narrator, the Wife of Bath. Another interesting type used in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is the old woman. Chaucer's old woman is incredibly multidimensional and embodies at least three Arthurian types for female characters. As a shapeshifting "wyf," this old woman is also a magic woman like Morgan in *Sir Gawain* and a beautiful wife/lover in the end. By marrying him against his will, questioning his and Arthur's court's honor, and finally giving Gawain the opportunity to choose how he will have her look and act for the rest of their lives together, the wyf forces the knight to recognize how he is manipulating both the chivalric and courtly codes. She gains control by teaching, and magically transforms for the benefit of her changed knight and for herself. Relationally, Chaucer's old woman, or wyf, is a helper to the knight, a positive contribution to the knight's quest and a significant part of his change of heart, and she, in all her forms, is represented positively.

In *Sir Launfal*, Chestre uses the type of queen in the forms of both Gwennere and Dame Tryamour. Though these female characters are both queens, they do not have the same moral characterization in the text. Gwennere, Arthur's queen, is designed as an entirely negative character. As an adulteress, her negative reputation precedes her, leaving her with no ally at Arthur's court apart from a duped Arthur. Where Chaucer's queen is noble, Chestre's Gwennere queen fits better into the traditional Arthurian representations of Arthur's queen as an adulteress. Gwennere also attempts to win power in the male-centered court of Arthur by manipulation, gaining her and Arthur's court even less esteem. Chestre's Gwennere is an "evil" queen, one who works against the court system of brotherhood and knighthood, and, not coincidentally, against the hero and his king. On the other hand, Chestre's other queen, Dame Tryamour, daughter of the King of Fayryre, in addition represents a magical woman, one who rules her court of women with truth, honor, and generosity. Embodying the beautiful woman type, she serves as Launfal's love interest. She proves to be the better woman and serve as the better ruler when she saves Launfal and blinds Gwennere, allowing truth and honor to prevail over Arthur's corrupt court. In all of her many roles, Tryamour is considered a positive female character, one who helps the hero while Gwennere only hurts his pride and reputation.

As we have seen in each of these texts, the female characters are depicted as powerful and important catalysts without whom the heroes would not take or complete their respective journeys and learn their individual lessons. At the same time, the female characters are defined relationally to their male counterparts and are reliant on the male characters for decisions and judgment, just as fourteenth-century women were defined by their relationships with men, as daughters, wives, mothers, widows, virgins, or adulteresses.[7]

[7] See Chapter I (p. 9) of this thesis for notes on women's roles according to Henrietta Leyser.

The female characters of *Sir Gawain*, a text written for a noble audience, work together with the text's male characters to uphold the code of knighthood. Morgan and Lady Bertilak, the magic woman and the temptress, are characterized as at best ambivalent because they tamper with the hero's morals and trick him, but these women can only manipulate Gawain's journey and cause Gawain to question different parts of the code through their alliance with Lord Bertilak. Gawain's tirade against women, in which he laments the undoing of great biblical men by women, is legitimized by Christianity, a pillar of knighthood—for him represented by Mary—that is infallible and consistent. The Virgin Mary is much different from Morgan and Lady Bertilak in that she does not tempt or trick Gawain. Instead, as the Christian ideal, she remains as she should, constant, always available and waiting to love and bless Gawain. Because Lord Bertilak works through Morgan and Lady Bertilak to "test" Gawain, the female characters' tricks and temptations can be considered unthreatening to the code. Further, these women exert power—with the help of a male ally—for the "greater good" of the court, the code, and the tested knight.

Chaucer's queen only gets her power because the king grants it her, while the wyf transforms into precisely the woman the rapist (though seemingly reformed) knight desires. The wyf might not have been protected outside of the court, but he plighted his *trouthe*, allowing her the security of the court. "The Wife of Bath's Tale" might prove that even under the cover of a woman's voice as narrator, men are ultimately still in charge, and women will still rely on them for decisions and judgment.

The preservation of court, code, and individual knight presented in *Sir Gawain* also resonates in "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Written for the upper and upper-middle classes, Chaucer's text works through similar issues as *Sir Gawain* (namely, the conflicting imperatives of the knightly code), but the tale's female narrator lends a slightly, though not

entirely, different perspective on how women coexist with the code. As in *Sir Gawain*, the female characters of this text together weave the necessary pieces of a properly functioning knight's code, but only with the cooperation of the king. Arthur gives his queen power to rule over the knight's case, thus granting her the authority to govern a Court of Love rather than Arthur's traditional male-centered court. The wyf, the text's magic woman, may only marry the knight at the queen's approval, power granted her by Arthur when he gave her control over the knight's case. Traditional (male-dominated) order must be restored by the tale's end, so the wyf transforms. Chaucer's supernatural figure, the magic wyf, transforms so that the knight, the code, and the court are satisfied. The supernatural women in both "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and *Sir Gawain* are manipulated in ways so that their powers illuminate the knightly code by each work's end.

Chestre's romance provides two noblewomen who play different roles in the life and journey of the hero, Launfal. An adulteress and therefore characterized as a negative force at Arthur's court, Gwennere consistently attempts to gain power for herself and assert that individual power instead of working with others for the greater good of the court. In so doing, she actively works against the hero. In contrast, Tryamour, who has attained all of her great riches and power from her father, works together with the hero for his happiness and success. Between Gwennere and Tryamour is the mayor's daughter whose company Launfal rejects at Caerleon. These different types, when used by authors from and for different groups of social backgrounds, indeed reflect fourteenth-century social realities of Englishwomen. These women were defined by men, subjected to their decisions and their judgment, expected to adhere to a specific framework or face negative judgment, and, if lower class, expected to be less protected than women at court.

Sir Launfal, written for the upper urban classes, realistically critiques the code, especially the upper classes' preoccupation with the material and financial, but, as in *Sir Gawain* and "The Wife of Bath's Tale," the code is ultimately protected. The magic woman and supernatural force of *Launfal*, like those of *Sir Gawain* and "The Wife of Bath's Tale," uphold the code of knighthood. Essentially governed by the rule of her father, Tryamour too is under the thumb of male control, but Tryamour proves to be emblematic of the virtues of the code of knighthood. On the other hand, Gwennere, the "evil" queen, tries to elude male control and gain power for herself, thus acting contrary to her prescribed role as queen in a male-dominated world. Because Gwennere acts against traditional "queenly" roles, she might be considered threatening to the system, so she is punished (blinded) by a female upholder of the code.[8]

The male authors of these texts, aware of the fourteenth-century knightly code and the necessity of its implications for women, reflect in their texts the possibilities for women within the code. The supernatural female characters in each text ultimately uphold patriarchal order. Lady Bertilak, too, can be considered an ally of male order as she works with her husband and Morgan to test Gawain and Arthur's court. The differences among the queens of Chaucer's and Chestre's works show how a fourteenth-century English society might have reacted to a defender and an enemy of the patriarchy. While the female characters of these texts are powerful and intelligent, they are still subject to their material situation, just like the fourteenth-century women they are meant to represent.

[8] See Chapter I (p. 10) of this thesis for notes on the expected roles of aristocratic women according to Leyser and Mavis E. Mate.

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