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### The Queen's Feud: Women and Kinship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

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The Queen's Feud: women and kinship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

by

Elsa K. Anderson

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Paul Oppenheimer

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Abstract

The Queen's Feud: women and kinship in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

by

Elsa K. Anderson

Adviser: Professor Paul Oppenheimer

The impact of blood feud on the knights of the Round Table in Malory's *Morte Darthur* is clear and has been well studied. Likewise documented is the shift to an institutionalized political system focused on individual chivalry after the founding of the Round Table. This study focuses on the feuds and political changes, which also swept up the women in and around the Round Table including Nynyve, Lyonesse, Guenivere, and Morgawse. Individual chivalry gives women significant independence in action and changes the values they are celebrated for, but their family connections are always considered as primary motivations. The women of the Round Table, while trying to uphold individual chivalry and the Round Table value system, are nevertheless always judged by others in terms of the old blood feud loyalty system. These misinterpretations hasten and heighten the fall of the Round Table.

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Arthur's founding of the Round Table in Malory's *Morte Darthur* signals a political shift from a family and clan-based system to an institutionalized political organization. By creating the Round Table, Arthur attempts to transfer loyalty from kinship groups to the fellowship of knights and to himself as the king. This political shift, and its effects on knights and kinship groups, contributes to increased independence and more political participation for women. The weakening of the kinship system corresponds with a change in female sexual roles, from imposed arranged marriages to voluntary extramarital relationships that strengthen political alliances. As the women of the Round Table act independently and in support of the new Round Table system, their actions are interpreted by knights within the new Round Table system, as well as the pre-Round Table value framework.

Prior to the founding of the Round Table, England lacks a strong central authority. Uther rules over a semi-unified land consisting of many individual small kingdoms, geographically dispersed and linked through marriages and kinship.<sup>1</sup> Local kings, nominally subject to the high king, in practice share political power amongst themselves in a local area of jurisdiction, in arrangements shaped and mediated by family ties.

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<sup>1</sup> Armstrong and Hodges wrote the definitive discussion on geography and its connection to family and kinship in Malory. I have drawn extensively on their analysis of kinship and geographical ties. See Dorsey Armstrong and Kenneth Hodges. *Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies in Le Morte Darthur*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

One notable example of a family grouped around kinship and location is the Orkney clan, ruled by King Lott, ruler of the Orkney Isles and Scotland. His sons, Gawain, Gaherys, and Aggravayne, show a constant focus on family honor that often supersedes a concern for their own individual honor. In contrast with the Round Table code of individual moral rectitude, kin-based honor codes emphasize gaining honor through the physical achievements of the family and the demonstration of loyalty to other family members. The family-centered code requires prioritization of the family's success and mutual defense over the rules of Christianity or of loyalty to the High King.<sup>2</sup> Actions considered dishonorable in the context of chivalry are applauded within the context of kinship-honor. Likewise, under this system, individuals of great chivalric prowess regarded as gaining both individual renown and family honor.

These kinship ties are also linked to and often studied in the context of regional families, particularly in Scotland. Some scholars draw parallels between the politics of Malory's time and the impact of blood feuds and kinship within the Round Table<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have drawn parallels between the political situation of Scotland during Malory's life and the actions and attitudes of the Orkney brothers. See Coleman O. Parsons, "A Scottish 'Father of Courtesy' and Malory." *Speculum* 20.1 (1945): 51-64; Matthew Strickland, "Treason, Feud and the Growth of State Violence: Edward I and the 'War of the Earl of Carrick', 1306-7." In *War, Government and Aristocracy in the British Isles, C.1150-1500: Essays in Honour of Michael Prestwich*, ed. Ann Kettle (New York: Boydell Press, 2008), 84-113; Sally Mapstone, "Malory and the Scots." In *Arthurian Literature XXVIII: Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the 'Morte Darthur'* ed. Kate McClune and David Clark (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) 107-121.

Other liminal semi-autonomous regions include Cornwall, as studied by Michael Anderson. See Michael W. Anderson, "The Honour of Bothe Courtes Be Nat Lyke': Cornish Resistance to Arthurian Dominance in Malory," *Arthuriana* 19.2 (2009): 42-57; and Hodges and Armstrong 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the research on kinship in the *Morte Darthur* focuses on the kinship relationships in Scotland and on the Orkney brothers, including the impact of location and a tradition of blood feud on kinship relationships. Examples include: Kate McClune, "Gawain." *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romanc*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (New York: D. S. Brewer, 2012) 115-128;



Members of a family are expected and obligated to direct their actions toward increasing family standing and political power. This focus on family honor extends to the actions of women. Women who appear in the *Morte* before the Round Table is founded, such as Igrayne and her daughters, are the subjects of arranged marriages that expand family influence and political control. Arranged marriages create a social focus on the maintenance of the prospective brides' beauty and chastity for potential marriages.

Dorsey Armstrong reads these arranged marriages as an exchange of women's bodies for the sake of a patriarchal power structure. According to this arrangement, women's marriages are negotiated in exchange for, or to facilitate, political alliances. In her reading, women's marriages support friendships and alliances between men, alienating and separating women. Beverly Kennedy also addresses this topic in her description of the knightly types; she uses Gawain and his approach to seduction and female autonomy as an example of Heroic Knighthood. She suggests that Gawain, and through him most knights following kinship honor rules, feel that "if any female member of his family should engage in illicit sexual intercourse, her loss of chastity dishonors him . . . Gawain shows clearly that he regards women as property, more specifically the

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Kenneth Hodges, "Sir Gawain, Scotland, Orkney." in *Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies in Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Dorsey Armstrong and Kenneth Hodges (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 73-101; Carolyne Larrington, "Sibling Relations in Malory's Morte Darthur." *Arthurian Literature XXVIII: Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the 'Morte Darthur,'* ed. Kate McClune and David Clark (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 57-74; Sally Mapstone, "Malory and the Scots." In *Arthurian Literature XXVIII: Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the 'Morte Darthur'* ed. Kate McClune and David Clark (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011) 107-121; Kate McClune, "'The Vengeance of My Brethirne': Blood Ties in Malory's Morte Darthur." *Arthurian Literature XXVIII: Blood, Sex, Malory: Essays on the 'Morte Darthur,'* ed. Kate McClune and David Clark (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 89-106.

property of men."<sup>4</sup> Gawain is Igrayne's grandson and lives by the familial code that governed Igrayne's life.

Four arranged marriages start the *Morte Darthur*, setting the up the kinship relationships that shape the political landscape. When Uther falls in love with Igrayne, she and her husband flee to protect Igrayne's honor, starting a war between Uther and his liegeman. Although Igrayne's husband initiates a war to protect Igrayne's chastity, Uther uses Merlin's trickery to seduce her. When Igrayne discovers that her husband's death preceded Uther's seduction, she "merveill[s] who that myghte be that laye with her in lykenes of her lord. So she mourn[s] pryvely and [holds] hyr pees."<sup>5</sup> The implication is that admitting to a loss of chastity will dishonor Igrayne, and make her already uncertain future more dangerous. Her own court pressures her to marry Uther quickly, ending the war and returning Igrayne to a role in a man's house. Igrayne is praised for two things: her beauty, and her chastity. Admitting to unchasteness, even inadvertently, would significantly weaken her political and social position.

Igrayne's rushed marriage may also reflect a political concern: ending the war is politically advantageous to all, and if Igrayne does not marry then the fate of her husband's lands may be in doubt. If she marries a prince from outside the region, for example, this might destabilize the existing network of alliances that kept peace in the area, as well as introducing a new military player. Igrayne's arranged marriage therefore supports the status quo and a return to political stability.

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<sup>4</sup> Dorsey Armstrong, "Malory's Morgause." In *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001), 155; Beverly Kennedy, "Adultery in Malory's "Le Morte D'arthur", " *Arthuriana* 7, no. 4 (1997): 65.

<sup>5</sup> All citations from Sir Thomas Malory, *Malory: Works*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford, 1971: 5.

Igrayne's is not the only marriage which celebrates the end of the war. As she is married to Uther, her daughters Elaine and Morgawse are married to the kings Nentres of Garlot and Lot of Lowthean and of Orkney. Her youngest daughter Morgan goes to school, but is later married to King Uryens of Gore. The grouping of Morgan's marriage with her sisters' in the text may indicate an equivalence. These marriages are likely intended to establish alliances and tie the problematic, far flung areas of Cornwall, Orkney and Gore more tightly to the High King Uther. These marriages intend to ensure that Lot, Nentres and Uryens will always support Uther politically and militarily, and ensure a smooth transfer of power to Uther's heir. They fail their intended purpose after Uther's death, with the wars that precede and follow Arthur's ascension to the throne. Politically, these marriages are not successful in binding the realm together; they are even less successful in their role as individual relationships and in ensuring continuity of power.

Morgan's marriage is unhappy; she takes lovers and attempts to murder her husband, an extreme even in Malory's most difficult relationships. Elaine never appears again in the text, so it is impossible to know her feelings about her marriage. Part of the design of the alliance marriage system is the ability to carry alliances on to the next generation through children, particularly sons. Here too these marriages are not entirely successful; Morgan's son Uwain becomes a knight of the Round Table and earns some renown, but is never one of the best or most famous knights. His kin do not help to advance him and he does not receive significant benefits from his kinship to King Arthur. Although Elaine's husband King Nentres appears as a Round Table knight in the tale of Sir Urry, there is no mention of whether he and Elaine have had children.

Morgawse' marriage is less easy to characterize. She has four children with King Lot, suggesting mutual affection, but she also has an affair with Arthur. The marriage fails to create lasting political alliances, as Lot is one of the first to rebel against Arthur. Morgawse then comes to Arthur's court with her four sons 'for to espy'<sup>6</sup> on Arthur.

While at Arthur's court, Morgawse sleeps with Arthur: 'Wherefore the kynge caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her. And so they were agreed.' Beverly Kennedy and Dorsey Armstrong, citing the above language, both argue that Morgawse' affair with Arthur is voluntary. They read a threatening female sexuality into Morgawse's actions and a foreshadowing of her relationship with Lamorak. In this sense women's sexual agency is a threat, undermining the chastity so important to the kinship-based political system.<sup>7</sup> I would argue that despite the agreement between Arthur and Morgawse, Morgawse's position is tentative. Although she is not "enforced" she has come as a spy for her husband, a rebel king. Unlike Igrayne, Morgawse does not have a husband nearby willing to protect her honor with military force; instead she is temporarily in a hostile kingdom, far from home, with four children. Under the kinship rules of conduct she and her sons would be targets and could easily become hostages, since as relatives of a hostile king they have little protection. Women are valued for their chastity but Morgawse is

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<sup>6</sup> Malory, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Dorsey Armstrong. "Malory's Morgause." In *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001), 155. Beverly Kennedy, "Adultery in Malory's "Le Morte D'arthur"." *Arthuriana* 7, no. 4 (1997): 65. Caroline Larrington notes that Morgawse's guilt varies across different retellings according to Morgawse' overall role in a particular text. Carolyne Larrington, "The Queen of Orkney." In *King Arthur's enchantresses: Morgan and her sisters in Arthurian tradition*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 123.

faced with dangerously competing demands. King Lot also blames Arthur and not Morgawse for the affair, implying an element of coercion in Morgawse's agreement.<sup>8</sup>

These marriages occur prior to the founding of the Round Table and are firmly within the system of kinship loyalties found in Uther's court. Within this system, the main value for women lies in their exchange for the sake of political alliances, and chastity is correspondingly the most valued trait. The unhappy marriages of the Orkney sisters show the difficulty for women that this narrow role creates. As the Round Table is founded and women's roles shift, these changes are embraced enthusiastically by the queens of the *Morte Darthur*.

The founding of the Round Table and the oath to protect women incorporate a new conception of honor and of male relationships. Suddenly the focus on familial honor dwindles, and a new emphasis is placed on individual honor.

The Round Table creates an institutional political structure based on merit, uniting knights from across different kinship groups under a shared understanding of knightly honor. The kinship honor code lacked inhibitions on cruel or violent behavior in circumstances related to revenge. In the Round Table system, revenge is limited and combat follows the rules of chivalry, with honor accruing to the winning individual. The focus of the new system is on individual accomplishments and loyalty to individuals based on their worth, rather than kin-based relationships. This system of individual

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<sup>8</sup> This interpretation was earlier described by Raymond H. Thompson, "Morgause of Orkney Queen of Air and Darknes." *Quondam et Futurus* 3, no. 1 (1993): 3.

loyalty and communal brotherhood is frequently referred to as fellowship, a word that takes on a special meaning within the Round Table.<sup>9</sup>

Every knight in the Round Table does not immediately embrace the change in values from kinship to fellowship. Knights such as Lancelot and Lamerok acknowledge their families and the strong pull of family ties, while focusing their efforts on living up to the Round Table values. Their brothers and kin within the Round Table follow their lead, and focus on individual accomplishments. Some knights, most notably the Orkneys, refuse to make this change. Gawain and Gaherys refuse to end their feud against Pellinor's family until they have won, and only then are they willing to follow the chivalric code of the Round Table.

The institutionalization of chivalry also changes female roles and kin relationships. Once honor becomes based in individual accomplishment, women can act as individuals to gain honor for themselves. The most important values for women shift from chastity to a more flexible combination of generosity, beauty and faithfulness. Demonstrating these values requires significantly more autonomy for women: while in the early books women have a passive role, after the founding of the Round Table there are fewer arranged marriages and more independent women with agency in marriage and honor.

While the women of the Round Table adopt chivalric values, they remain in a vulnerable position in relation to the knights. Queens of this period, despite playing significant political roles, are judged by their kin and relationships instead of their merit. One example is Nynyve. She initially arrives at court with King Pellinor as a damsel

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Archibald, "Malory's Ideal of Fellowship." *The Review of English Studies* 43, no. 171 (1992): 311-328.

seeking assistance. She quickly gains significant magical power from Merlin and uses it to support Arthur, the Round Table, and the Round Table's values of fellowship and chivalry. Nynyve is independent in her decisions and actions, and has tremendous political impact on Arthur's reign.

In the Ettarde episode Nynyve encounters Pelleas and learns that Gawain has betrayed him. Nynyve decides to repair the situation by punishing Ettarde with magic and rewarding Pelleas by taking him as her own husband.<sup>10</sup> Gawayne's behavior in this episode is not particularly admirable. He tricks Ettarde and betrays Pelleas, apparently for his own amusement. Gawain's success in these deceptions involves trading on his family's name; he announces to both Pelleas and Ettarde that he is "sir Gawayne, of the courte of kynge Arthure and his sistyrs son." Arthur is attempting to establish a system of individual responsibility as Gawain trades on his connection to Arthur to seduce women. Pelleas later "loved never aftir sir Gawayne but as he spared hym for the love of the kynge." Gawayne uses his famous uncle's name to get what he wants, but refuses to take on the individual code of chivalric conduct that Arthur asks of him.

Nynyve originally came to court with Pellinor, and supports the Round Table values of fellowship and chivalry by judging against Ettarde and marrying Pelleas. Sometime later she saves Arthur from an attempted coup attempt masterminded by Gawayne's aunt Morgan. She later clears Guenever's name after Gawayne's accusations have almost resulted in Guenever's death. Nynyve's support of chivalry often pits her against members of the Orkney family. All of Nynyve's actions punishing the failure of individual honor also damage the Orkney's standing within the Round Table. While

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<sup>10</sup> Malory 101, 109.

Nynve supports the new institutional structure she has chosen a side in the Orkney/Pellinor feud despite her intent.<sup>11</sup>

The role of alliance marriages also shifts after the founding of the Round Table. Igrayne, Morgawse, Morgan and Elaine all participated in arranged marriages to celebrate the end of a war and to form kinship alliances. A generation later, Morgawse's sons Gareth, Gaherys and Aggravayne also all marry to celebrate the end of a war and create new alliances. These weddings double the marriages of their mother and aunts: siblings marry to celebrate the end of hostilities and form new political alliances. The circumstances of marriage within *The Tale of Sir Gareth*, however, are significantly different than that of Igrayne and her daughters.

Morgawse's feelings about her marriage to a stranger are, as previously discussed, not explicitly stated but likely mixed. In contrast, her son Gareth marries Lyonesse for love. Lyonesse also knows Gareth and is excited to marry him. Lyonesse took the opportunity to meet Gareth under a false identity, allowing them to fall in love. They meet because Lyonesse is under siege by a knight, presenting a military threat to her domain as well as a political threat to take her lands and a personal threat of marriage against her will. The knight Sir Ironsyde is protected and supported in this attempted military coup by his brothers, who each go by a different color. The succession of fights emphasizes Gareth's military prowess; it also evokes the kinship ties that the knights depend on for political and military support. The conflict contrasts Gareth's independence with the blood ties that his own family rely on.

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Hodges, "Swords and Sorceresses: The Chivalry of Malory's Nynve," *Arthuriana* 12, no. 2 (2002): 78-96. Janet Jesmok, "Guiding Lights: Feminine Judgment and Wisdom in Malory's 'Morte Darthur,'" *Arthuriana* 19, no. 3 (2009): 34-42.



While Gareth defeats Sir Ironsyde, Lyonesse remains in control of her own destiny. She creates her own tests and gathers information about Gareth, including his family, before consenting to marry him. Chastity remains an important value after the founding of the Round Table but here it is policed by women, not men, and for women's individual advantage. Lyonesse's sister Lyonette prevents Gareth and Lyonesse from consummating their marriage prematurely, to protect it. In addition to the value of emotional fulfillment for its participants, Lyonesse's marriage creates a political alliance, and ensures Gareth's future assistance with military threats and political intrigue.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, neither the knights nor the ladies can escape the bonds of kinship. When Gareth hides under the assumed name Beaumains, Lyonette and Lyonesse refuse to take him seriously, despite his obvious skill, until they know that he is also of royal blood. Gareth's interactions with Gawain and Lancelot reinforce this theme: Gareth can conceal his identity, but others will always see him in terms of his family even as he chooses independence and an allegiance to Lancelot instead.

The sibling wedding parallels continue through the *Morte D'athur*. Lyonette marries Gaherys, and her cousin simultaneously marries Aggravayne, in a symmetrical end to conflict and to celebrate the new knights Gareth has brought to the Round Table. Lyonette never expresses a personal interest in Gaherys, but she has engineered events up to this point; recruiting Gareth, policing Lyonesse's virtue, and concealing Gareth's

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<sup>12</sup> Karen Cherewatuk makes a case for the dual nature of the wedding ceremony in Malory's time, with women's choice regarded as important but marriage still requiring church and family approval in Karen Cherewatuk, "Pledging Troth in Malory's 'Tale of Sir Gareth'." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101, no. 1 (2002): 19-40. In Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur*. Vol. 67 Arthurian Studies, (New York: D. S. Brewer 2006), Cherewatuk points out that Gareth does not have to marry Lyonesse. He is related to royalty and Arthur expresses doubt about their marriage. Lyonesse is the one dictating the terms and has no hesitation about claiming love and marriage in front of Arthur to her own greater honor.

identity. Lyonette travelled alone, put Gareth through a series of tests, possesses powerful magical artifacts and resolves her sister's military situation. It seems reasonable to speculate that Lyonette wouldn't have felt compelled to marry against her wishes.

Gaherys and Lyonette's marriage is interesting for another reason. Gaherys's most independent action is the beheading of his mother Morgawse when she takes the son of her husband's killer as her lover. Morgawse is an independent woman, who makes her own decisions about sexual and romantic relationships following the death of her husband. Gaherys murders Morgawse yet marries Lyonette, an independent, magical woman who takes control over a wide swath of political and romantic relationships.

There are multiple symmetries evident, not only between Gareth and Gaherys' marriages, but between their marriages and that of their mother. Gareth and Lyonesse choose each other as Morgawse was not able to; Gaherys marries a woman who doubles his mother in personal characteristics and influence. The symmetry reinforces the changes that the founding of the Round Table has brought to the institution of marriage and to women's roles within society. The new values and more impersonal political structure mean that women, even in arranged marriages, gain significant control over their own destiny and marriages. They are able to choose husbands and marriage based on the Round Table values such as honor, individual chivalry, and even love.

The formality of marriage in these relationships after the founding of the Round Table is an exception. Taking lovers replaces the place of arranged marriages as the most common entanglement of sexual and political alliance. Many of Malory's queens and great ladies take lovers or attempt to do so. Once the Round Table is founded and individual honor gains in importance, queens gain in power and worship by taking a

lover, since having a powerful paramour increases the queen's influence. When a queen chooses a great knight as a lover it increases the queen's own personal fame and influence. In addition, the alliance created retains the significant political and military advantages of arranged marriages to cement kinship bonds.

A notable example comes early in the *Tale of Sir Lancelot*, where four queens capture Lancelot. The Queen of the Northgales, the Queen of Eastland, Morgan le Fay and the Queen of the Out Isles are all from the small, liminal places frequently associated with kinship values and feuds. The queens demand that Lancelot select one of them as a lover, threatening to keep him imprisoned and spread the rumor of Lancelot's love for Guenever if he does not. Lancelot refuses to choose and can only escape through the help of King Bagedemous' daughter, who rescues Lancelot on the condition that Lancelot help her father in a tournament against the King of the Northgales.

Lancelot does as she requests and fights for King Bagedemous against the King of the Northgales. The effects of the rescue do not end at this tournament, either. Lancelot fights with King Bagedemous and against the King of the Northgales for the remainder of the *Morte Darthur*. By rescuing Lancelot, King Bagedemous' daughter creates a long-lasting military alliance with political implications, as King Bagedemous gains in honor and influence through winning tournaments and through association with Lancelot. Hypothetically, if Lancelot had chosen the Queen of the Northgales as a paramour he then might have assisted the King of the Northgales in the tournament instead, creating the antithetical alliance.

Lancelot was captured by the queens for reasons beyond the romantic or sexual. For any of the queens, a romantic attachment to Lancelot would have created a powerful

political and military alliance that would benefit both the queen and her entire family. As Lancelot's brother and cousins prefer to fight on Lancelot's side in tournaments and jousts, getting Lancelot as an ally creates a military alliance with his family. Political influence comes from military strength, so these alliances can increase political as well as military power. The queens capture Lancelot precisely for this dual political and personal advantage, which would benefit the queens both in gaining individual worship and supporting their families and kin. Ironically, when Lancelot escapes with help from another woman, it creates a political and military alliance of the kind the queens were seeking for themselves against them.

Arranged marriages to end feuds would theoretically be cemented by children, establishing the continuation of alliances across generations. Thus, the presence and absence of children in Malory takes on significance. Only two of the original arranged marriages at the beginning of the story result in children: Morgawse has the Orkney brothers who later bring down the Round Table, and Morgan has one son who always sides with his cousins, supporting the kinship alliances. In both of these cases the children from the alliance marriages actually exacerbate tension. They refuse to adopt Round Table values of individual chivalry, trade on their close relationship with Arthur to escape punishment for unchivalrous acts, and refuse to adopt the values their Arthur is trying to institutionalize. Guenever and Isode are also barren, either because the idea of illegitimacy was so threatening or, as Ruth Morse suggests, because the barren queen becomes the symbol for political disunity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Morse expands on implications of barrenness, including threat to the future of the kingdom, as a marker that the alliance of alliance marriages is in name only, and because the idea of an illegitimate heir is a threatening one. Ruth Morse, "Sterile Queens and Questing Orphans." *Quondam et Futurus* 2, no. 2 (1992): 41-53.

Queenly political power is also described as a power of affinity by Hodges.<sup>14</sup> Affinity is a political faction, often but not exclusively based on kinship ties or personal loyalty; Lancelot, for instance, first joins Guenever's affinity after she brings his sword to him at his first tournament. Members of the major affinities ultimately follow their leader in terms of loyalty to the Round Table. Guenever's affinity is tied closely to supporting the Round Table and Arthur. As Gawayne is mostly concerned with kinship alliances his affinity does likewise and consists almost entirely of his own relatives. Guenever also ties herself closely to Lancelot's affinity through their relationship, creating a significant political alliance through affinity and an adulterous love affair.

Kenneth Hodges proposes that Guenever is related to Pellinor through her sister's marriage.<sup>15</sup> If this is the case, Guenever has strong family ties to Pellinor and would be expected to take his side and support his family as well as Arthur's. Guenever, however is not only Arthur's wife but the actual founder of the Round Table, bringing it and many knights as her dowry. Guenever attempts to uphold Round Table values rather than support Pellinor, particularly against the threats that come from following kinship and bloodfeud values.

Guenever's responsibilities as queen require her to sit in judgment of the violators of the values of individual chivalry. This responsibility brings her into conflict with the

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Hodges, "Guenever's Politics in Malory's "Morte Darthur"." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 1 (2005): 54-79. Hodges expands on the concept of affinities and how they play out, within the *Morte Darthur* and within Malory's England.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Hodges, "Of Wales and Women: Guenevere's Sister and the Isles." In *Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies in Le Morte Darthur*, edited by Dorsey Armstrong and Kenneth Hodges. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Orkney brothers, who are also the ones most likely to interpret other's actions in light of kinship. Guenever needs to judge Gawayne multiple times for violations of chivalric rules, despite Gawayne's close relationship to Arthur. Gawayne may also expect that Guenever would be biased against him because of her connection to Pellinor. Guenever gains independence of action and honor from the Round Table and her support of its institutionalized code of behavior, but her own kinship relationships create ties that cast doubts on her neutrality.

Many of Guenever's interactions with Gawayne and the Orkneys involve judgment for failing to live up to chivalric ideals. As Gawayne still primarily upholds kinship relationships, his actions frequently conflict with the Round Table values and require Guenever to judge Gawayne guilty. While Guenever's actions support the Round Table values she is expected to uphold, Gawayne and the Orkneys may see her as acting along the old kinship rules as they are, contributing to resentment and hatred of Guenever. Guenever's ties to Pellinor and later relationship with Lancelot only heighten this resentment.

Gawayne and Guenever's conflict stems from their first interaction. Gawayne is a new knight, but has been knighted after Pellinor's sons even though he is related to Arthur and they are not. He has reason to be concerned that Arthur will not favor his own kin; this is an early indication of Arthur and the Round Table's focus on individual accomplishments and not kinship ties. This is particularly galling for Gawayne as Pellinor killed Gawayne's father Lott, and yet Arthur supports Pellinor over Gawayne. Shortly after his knighting Gawayne, through lack of chivalry, accidentally beheads a lady. This criminal act is referred to Guenever as the queen, who sentences him to be

judged by a court of ladies and receive a special charge from them to follow chivalrous behavior. Gawayne is receives a light punishment for his crime, but instead of following chivalric values more closely he begins to resent Pellinor and Guenever. The same is true of Nynyve's judgment of Gawayne for his treatment of Sir Pelleas and Ettarde; Nynyve is also associated with Pellinor.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of adopting kinship values in response to these rebukes, the Orkneys focus on their kinship feud. Gawayne and his brother discuss when they should kill Pellinor in revenge: should they go ahead and murder him now, at the court? Gaherys recommends moderation, but only so that Gaherys can kill Pellinor himself. Within this context Guenever's actions against Gawayne must seem additionally unfair and as though Guenever is acting within kinship values herself.<sup>17</sup>

The judgment against Gawayne and his punishment does seem fair in light of the crime. It is also an early assertion of women's value and independence within the Round Table. Not coincidentally, this murder and the resulting judgment lead directly to the Round Table oath to protect women.<sup>18</sup> The oath gives any woman the right to call on any Round Table knight for protection and support, increasing women's military and political independence. It changes women's roles from subordination to family desires, to independent players in their own right. Instead of blind obedience and chastity, Arthurian women can now decide on the correct course of action for themselves and call on knights for political support. This gives women significant independence, including from their own families.

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<sup>16</sup> Malory 104, 75.

<sup>17</sup> Malory 63.

<sup>18</sup> Malory 75.

Guenever has other instances of trying to support all of the Round Table knights, only to have the Orkneys wildly misinterpret her actions. For example in the episode of the Poison Apple Guenever hosts a banquet with foods Gawayne particularly likes, and invites knights from all the major family alliances to attend. It may have been prompted by a quarrel with Lancelot but is still a gesture of peace and solidarity for the entire Round Table, including knights of all affinities as Kenneth Hodges notes.<sup>19</sup> It fails because Lamerok's cousin attempts to poison Gawayne in revenge for Lamerok's murder. There is no reason in the text why Guenever should have a particular grudge against Gawayne outside of kinship feuds. Under the kinship value system however, Guenever is related to Pellinor, Lamerok was her nephew, Gawayne's major rival is Lancelot and it is plausible that Guenever would attempt to kill Gawayne.

The independence that women gain under the Round Table now works against her as it is assumed Guenever might take direct action to try to avenge her nephew, or alternately that her patronage of Lancelot will drive her to attempt to murder his rival. This implication ignores Guenevere's support for the Round Table in the past, focusing only on Guenever's kinship and romantic ties. Guenever tries to support the Round Table values that give her independence, but many within the Round Table - including Lancelot's own family - still have not entirely absorbed these chivalric values. When anything untoward happens, they turn to explanations based on kinship frameworks. An additional reinforcing factor is that kinship feuds are the actual cause the murder. The only mistake is the identity of the murderer.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Hodges, "Guenever's Politics in Malory's "Morte Darthur"." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104, no. 1 (2005): 54-79.

<sup>20</sup> Malory 612-621.



Guenever also supports the Round Table, paradoxically, through her affair with Lancelot. Adultery within the Round Table is a complex topic, but there is a change from an emphasis on chastity to an emphasis on alliances and individual loyalties. Affairs create personal connections, and with them political alliances similar to the arranged marriages preceding the Round Table. Political combination of kin groups is precisely the point of arranged marriage, and adulterous relationships do have this effect.

Guenever, Morgawse and the other queens likely see arranged marriages and adultery as quite different; within the Round Table system they are able to choose the knight they want and define the relationship, and gain in individual honor for doing so. The other difference is that while alliance marriages were created to support local and family-based political power, Guenever is loyal to the Round Table. This includes actions to support the Round Table as a whole, such as the Poison Apple banquet and selecting the Queen's Knights from all factions, as well as bringing Lancelot and therefore his kin closer to the Round Table as a whole. Lancelot and Guenever love each other as individuals and support the Round Table value system through their actions both individually and as a couple.

As Lancelot becomes more tightly allied to the Round Table through Guenever, so do his kin. Lancelot's relations, such as Ban and Sir Ector de Maris, follow both Round Table values and the old kinship ones. They gain individual worship through their own jousts and performance in tournaments, but also gain recognition as part of the famous Lancelot's family. Since Lancelot's loyalty is to Guenever as well as to the Round Table, when the Round Table breaks Lancelot stays loyal to Guenever and so his family does as well, as though Guenever and Lancelot were related by marriage. When

Guenever is accused under chivalric rules Ban is willing to defend Guenever for Lancelot's sake even though he believes Guenever to be guilty. Guenever and Lancelot's relationship acts as a de facto alliance marriage for the purposes of creating a political alliance.

Arthur tacitly recognizes Guenever's relationship with Lancelot for this reason. Guenever and Lancelot's relationship is based on individual merit and love, but for Guenever's sake Lancelot strongly supports the Round Table. Because Lancelot's kin consider themselves bound by Lancelot's alliances under kinship expectations, they follow him in support for the Round Table and support for Guenever. This creates an unstated alliance between Ban's kin and Pellinor's, as supporting Guenever involves supporting her kin also. As Lancelot's family sees the increase in Lancelot's fame and closer relationship with Guenivere, the Orkneys see it as well. The Orkneys are jealous of Lancelot's fame and valor on an individual level but also for the influence Lancelot's family gains as a result.

Guenever's role as the queen and founder of the Round Table is to attract the best knights, and to encourage them to remain part of the Round Table through generosity and individual recognition. Although she acts as an individual to strengthen Round Table values, her actions are interpreted by both allies and foes in terms of family alliances. Through family ties, her relationship to Lancelot and her individual actions she is able to create strong bonds with every major affinity except the Orkneys. As the Orkneys consistently refuse to act on Round Table values until they have avenged their father's death, they consistently draw censure from Guenever as she tries to support the Round Table. The more conflict threatens the more all the knights involved retreat to the kinship

alliances instead of the Round Table until finally the Round Table fractures along kinship lines.

Morgawse is the final queen caught between the older kinship-based values and the newer Round Table female independence. Her marriage is one of the arranged marriages that celebrate the peace after Uther's war and I have already discussed the problematic nature of her relationship with Arthur.

Once King Lot is dead Morgawse does not appear for some time. She arrives during the *Tale of Sir Gareth* to ask why Arthur is forcing his nephew Gareth to work at a scullery boy. "For . . . ye made a kychyn knave of hym, the whyche is shame to you all . . . A, brothir!" seyde the quene, "ye dud yourself grete shame whan ye amongyst you kepte my son in the kychyn and fedde hym lyke an hogge." She focuses on the shame to Arthur in how he has treated Gareth; under Round Table values Arthur should have recognized Gareth's value as an individual and under kinship values Arthur has betrayed and insulted his own kin. This shame to Arthur is twice over and accrues under both value systems, although Arthur was not aware of Gareth's identity.

As a queen, Morgawse has broad discretion in her actions and as a widow she enjoys a remarkable independence even from her own family. Her sons Gawayne, Gaherys, Aggravayne and Modred are entrenched in the kinship mentality and a feud to avenge King Lott, but Morgawse is not. She has no reason for personal loyalty to the Round Table, particularly given her uneasy relationship with Arthur, but still lives within the new value set. She demands full independence in her actions instead of deferring to the men in her family, and like Guenever and Isode she acts independently by taking a lover of great individual renown.

When Guenever takes a lover she creates an alliance that joins Ban and Pellinor's families. Her ability to take a lover based on individual worth and create political alliances through extra-marital relationships comes from the freedom and values of the Round Table. Although Morgawse may not love the Round Table she takes advantage of the new freedoms available to women. Her lover Lamerok is Pellinor's nephew, and Pellinor killed Morgawse's husband King Lot in battle. For Morgawse to then take Lamerok as a lover appears strange.<sup>21</sup>

Nowhere is there any indication that Morgawse has loved Lott or that she had loved Arthur, but Malory specifies that Morgawse and Lamerok are in love: "she made of hym passynge grete joy and he of her agayne, for ayther lovid other passynge sore."<sup>22</sup> Morgawse's initial marriage was under kinship values and she was willing to spy on Arthur, seeing him as a threat to her kin. Once her marriage ends she appears occasionally to support her sons, still within the older value system. Now as a widow with five grown sons, Morgawse abandons kinship values entirely. She adopts the Round Table values of individual honor and independence, although she has no reason to love the Round Table. Through this value system she chooses a renowned knight as a paramour, and gains in honor for loving someone so well respected.<sup>23</sup>

Her choice has broader political implications. When a queen takes a lover she starts an individual romantic relationship and creates a political and military alliance

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<sup>22</sup> Malory 377.

<sup>23</sup> Dorsey Armstrong reads this moment as part of Morgause's threatening sexuality, with her sons responding both to kinship feud expectations and Oedipal ones in Dorsey Armstrong, "Malory's Morgause." In *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed Bonnie Wheeler, 149-160, (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001).

between kinship groups. These alliances are as strong as those created by arranged marriages. Under the Round Table values, Morgawse taking Lamerok as a lover could have created a political alliance between the Orkneys and Pellinor's kin. This possibility is dashed by Morgawse's own sons' refusal to abandon kinship feuds and their murder of Morgawse.

When Morgawse is killed Lamerok sees "the blood daysshe uppon hym all hote, whyche was the bloode that he loved passyng well."<sup>24</sup> This provides a gruesome image of death at close quarters, but also evokes the kinship associations of blood. For Morgawse Lamerok will love anyone of her blood. Lamerok is willing to end the feud, putting aside his own father's death, for the sake of peace and for Morgawse. He has chosen loyalty to his lady and chivalric values instead of the kinship values and is proving his choice by forgiving Pellinor's death and selecting Morgawse as his queen.

The Orkney brothers follow the kinship values in life and death, and this episode perhaps represents their ultimate rejection of chivalry. Gaherys tells Lamerok "for thou haste put my bretherne and me to a shame; and thy fadir slew oure fadir, and thou to ly by oure modir is to mucche shame for us to suffir. And as for thy fadir, kynge Pellynor, my brothir sir Gawayne and I slew hym."<sup>25</sup> Morgawse and Lamerok's relationship has the potential to end the feud and create an alliance, but Morgawse' sons will not allow it. Reading Morgawse' actions within kinship values instead, her sons see only lack of chastity leading to dishonor. They may also see threatening independence in a woman, acting alone with political implications for their family. Gaherys murders his mother for following individually chivalric values. This murder only makes sense if the kinship

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<sup>24</sup> Malory 377.

<sup>25</sup> Malory 378.

values for Gaherys overrides other sets of values, including Round Table values, Christian duty and filial affection. The Orkney brothers will not accept Round Table values until they have 'won' the feud in terms of kinship.

Kinship rules are also what determines the method of Morgawse' murder. Within the Round Table, accusations of infidelity or political power struggles are often settled in a trial by combat. This is true across different political factions, and is accepted as a matter of course. Under this law Gaherys should have challenged Lamerok to single combat or made an open accusation against Morgawse to allow her to choose a champion to defend herself. Instead, his tactics are classic for kinship rules: women's value is chastity and an unchaste woman is a danger to the reputation of her family. Women cannot individually gain worship so there is no value in a romantic alliance, even with a powerful and respected knight. Anyone who disrespects or endangers family honor should be killed quickly and without challenge, honor or mercy. This is how Morgawse is murdered and the surprising thing is only that Gaherys is willing to follow chivalric rules enough to let Lamerok escape her bed. Gaherys's actions may also reflect practical calculations; if he allows Morgawse to choose a champion she will certainly choose Lamerok, and Gaheris and Gawain together are no match for Lamerok in honorable combat under chivalric rules.

Once the Orkneys have won the feud by killing Pellynor and Lamerok, Gawayne and Gaherys are willing to drop the kinship value system and follow Round Table chivalry values instead. This is a significant change. Gawayne, indeed, is 'wrothe that sir Gaherys . . . lete sir Lamerok ascape" instead of wrothe over the matricide, and Lamerok's eventual death is murder. But once Gawayne and Gaherys feel completely

avenged, they willingly adopt the Round Table values to the point of refusing to go along with their brother Aggravayne's plan to trap Guenever and Lancelot. Gawayne continues to defend Guenever's honor to Arthur, and Gaherys sides with Gareth for the first time in refusing to carry arms in Guenever's burning procession. Once their own father has been avenged and their mother is dead Gawayne and Gaherys are willing to move from kinship values and participate fully under in the Round Table chivalric values, going against Aggravayne and Modder for the sake of supporting the Round Table.<sup>26</sup> This adoption of chivalric values comes far too late to save the Round Table or to take back the harm their previous refusal has caused.

Once the Round Table is founded there is a political shift from kinship-based affinities to a set of chivalric values based on individual choice. This shift changes the knight's role but alters the roles of individual women even more, before and after the founding of the Round Table. Women's values shift from a focus on chastity and family loyalty to independence and individual honor, and on supporting and upholding Round Table values. Queen Guenever and Queen Morgawse try to take advantage of the possibility of freedom and individual nobility, but cannot escape the old kinship values that eventually break up the Round Table.

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<sup>26</sup> Malory 673.

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