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Abstract This work attempts to study the principal characteristics of a variety of archetypes found in the main female characters from Arthurian legends, as well as how such characters have evolved throughout the multiple versions of the stories. In order to do so, female roles in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* will be compared, reviewing how women were perceived at the time of composition and how that same representation affected the characters. By focusing on the characters of The Lady of the Lake, Morgan le Fay and Queen Guinevere, this paper will analize the way in which the tropes of supernatural aid, evil sorceress and high queen have affected their respective roles in Malory's story, as well as seeing whether they can be considered fully fledged individuals or merely stock characters that fulfil a role in the tale of King Arthur, his son Mordred and the several knights who took the centre-stage in the Arthurian canon.

Keywords: Malory, Arthurian legend, Female archetypes, Gender studies, magic.

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Female Archetypes in *Le Morte d'Arthur*

0. Introduction

Written between 1469 and 1470 during his imprisonment, *Le Morte d'Arthur* is Sir Thomas Malory's most renowned work as well as one of the most well-known adaptations of the Arthurian legend. In this compilation, Malory took many of the legends and stories of King Arthur and his court and rewrote them, adding new characters and original material of his own, adapting it to be more in line with other works of the time while showing the mentality

of the Late Middle Ages and beginning of the Modern Age in Great Britain. The book was published in 1485 by William Caxton, who was also behind the publications of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Malory's work is considered one of the most important rewritings of the English-speaking world as it has become a source of inspiration for most modern works based on King Arthur and his knights. It also constitutes as a source of study for its representation of women, which mirrors how medieval society viewed them at that time since "[His] work reflects the Middle-Age stereotype of women as evil and responsible for the original sin only to a certain degree, the influence of courtly romances in which women were praised and adored creates a more favourable depiction of them" (Štefanidesová 5)

The reason for choosing Malory's retelling over other interpretations of the legend results from his work being considered the most well-known classical compilation of all the stories of King Arthur and his court. Previous works such as the earlier romances or the Vulgate cycle had yet to come into its full potential, not having characters such as Lancelot or Galahad, while more modern interpretations have evolve and been adapted in order to fit with the current society's views on gender and morality. We have to look no further away than to *The Mists of Avalon*, which tells the story from Morgan's point of view, painting her as another victim of the patriarchal mentality of that time. It is because of these reasons that *Le Mort d'Arthur* becomes a good middle ground to serve as the main source for this study, providing both a plethora of character interactions and development while still maintaining the medieval ideology concerning gender roles.

By comparing the main female characters in *Le Mort d'Arthur*, Queen Guinevere[1] and Morgan le Fay,[2] this paper aims to analyse female archetypes found in medieval literature, focusing on the Evil Sorceress and the High Queen as the two main opposing sides of the moral spectrum in which the representation of women could be. In addition, the work studies the connection between women and magic by approaching Malory's division of the Lady of the Lake into two different characters and how, while remaining on the sidelines for most of the story, they were able to influence King Arthur's court by acting as an example of Campbell's "Supernatural Aid" (*Hero* 63-71).

1. The Ladies of the Lake: The Duality of Women and Magic

The Lady of the Lake is one of the most famous female characters in the Arthurian legend, as she is one of King Arthur's main supporters. While not a central character for most of the story, the Lady of the Lake provides several key elements to the narrative of Arthur's life, the legendary sword Excalibur and the mighty knight Sir Lancelot du Lac. She is, through Campbell's theory, the "Supernatural Aid" (*Hero* 63-71). It is to be noted that this trope has been present since the times of ancient Greece, where gods would provide heroes with enchanted items as a way to aid them in their quests, an example of this being the myth of Perseus, hero who received aid from Athena, goddess of wisdom, in the shape of her own shield so as to help him in his quest against the Gorgon Medusa. This example parallels that

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[1] Often written as Guenevere or Guenever.
[2] Alternatively known as Morgana, Morgaine, Morgane, Morgen, and Morgue among other names and spellings

of the Lady of the Lake, who rose from the waters to give the legendary sword Excalibur to King Arthur. Campbell tells us how "all these Arthurian romances are based on old Celtic myths. The [characters] of these tales are the gods and heroes and heroines and goddesses of Celtic mythology" (*Romance* 29). The Lady of the Lake, also known as Nimue, is no exception, with that same name being an evolution of Mneme, short for Mnemosyne, a water-nymph who would grant weapons of power to those in need of them. (Nash Ford)

A most interesting aspect about Malory's Lady of the Lake is that two characters shared the name, the first to appear was the previously mentioned Lady of the Lake, who presented Excalibur in exchange for a favour from the king. This ended up being the head of Sir Balin, at the hands of whom she dies when King Arthur refuses to fulfill said request.

> 'Ye say well,' said the king, 'ask what ye will and ye shall have it, and it lie in my power to give it.'
>
> 'Well,' said the lady, 'I ask the head of the knight that hath won the sword, or else of the damosel's head that brought it; I take no force though I have both their heads, for he slew my brother, a good knight and a true, and that gentlewoman was causer of my father's death.' (Malory 64; vol. 1)

This first Lady of the Lake is presented as a darker version of the supernatural aid, as, while she is the one to present Arthur with Excalibur for the first time, she does so at a great cost, the life of a knight and one of her own servants. While we later come to learn how the Lady of the Lake blames Sir Balin and the damsel for the deaths of her family, her death is not presented in an overly negative way and, while Arthur does punish Balin for decapitating her, albeit, in self-defence, the knight is only sent on a quest alongside the damsel so as to atone for breaking his oaths of protecting women and those in need. In this way, this Lady of the Lake jumps from being a helpful entity into a temptress. While she doesn't offer her body or her love to Arthur, she uses his honour and his oaths to try and force him to do her will and enact he revenge, all of which fail when she is slain. In the end, her grey morality, as she is both helpful and an obstacle, makes her into a warning against wolves in sheep's clothing; against women in power, be it political or, as in this case, magical, who may present themselves as good-natured but have a darker goal in mind.

The second lady of the lake, who receives the name of Nimue in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, was later given the title of Chief Lady of the Lake by Mallory and, while based in the character of the same name present in previous works, where she was a cruel sorceress, here in *Le Morte d'Arthur* she is a more sympathetic character. In fact, Holbrook theorises her to be the same damsel who first arrives at Arthur's court carrying Excalibur and who is later saved by Sir Balin when facing the death wishes of her Lady of the Lake.

Where the first Lady of the Lake could have easily fallen under the Evil Sorceress trope just as much as she is Campbell's "Supernatural Aid" (*Hero* 63-71), Malory's Nimue is presented as a benign character that, while guilty of Merlin's fall and imprisonment, possessed a good reasoning behind her actions and took the wizard's place in King Arthur's court as one of his main advisors out of a sense of duty rather than out of lust for power.

She acts as a protector for the king several times, foiling Morgan's plans to destroy him more than once:

> The meanwhile that they were thus at the battle, came the damosel of the lake into the field, that put Merlin under the stone; and she came thither for love of King Arthur, for she knew how Morgan le Fay had so ordained that King Arthur should have been slain that day, and therefore she came to save his life. (Malory 130-131; vol. 1)

Holbrook goes on to explain how, while she "made Merlin go under the rock […] and left [him]" (Malory 118; vol. 1), her reasoning behind those actions was of concern. This was due to the fact that the wizard had become too enraptured with her to be of use to King Arthur, something Merlin himself knew would happen, as he had told the king how "for all his crafts he would be put in the earth quick" (Malory 117; vol. 1). Book IV of *Le Morte d'Arthur* shows us then an interesting relationship between Merlin and Nimue, in which he treats her as an equal, both in the sense that she is his apprentice as well as his demise. Still, he accepts the outcome as he appears to know Nimue's abilities will be of great use for Arthur.

Even at the end of Arthur's life, the Chief Lady of the Lake remains present as an example of the good a woman in power could do as "this lady had done much for King Arthur" (Malory 519, vol. 2). Consequently, there could be said about this character that:

> Far from being the bawd of fabliau or the femme fatale of romance, in *Le Morte d'Arthur* Nimue, the Chief Lady of the Lake, has a secure identity as the bold and helpful female who ever did greater goodness unto King Arthur and all his knights. (Holbrook 762)
>
> […]
>
> Nimue develops with acceptable logic; initially a damosel in distress, transitionally a sorcerer's apprentice, finally a benevolent sorceress on the side of good knights (Holbrook 765)

If we were to consider Campbell's monomyth, it is through this commentary by Holbrook that we can see how Nimue becomes the heroine of her own story, with Merlin as her own supernatural aid. She begins in the "Status Quo" as a member, albeit a minor one, of the Lady of the Lake's court and, after she completes her adventure and returns home, she has ascended and now rules as the new Lady of the Lake. While she goes on to become a secondary character in Arthur's tale, she is an obvious representation of female empowerment, especially when we consider the mentality of Malory's time, who as we will see later with Morgan and Guinevere, while not a feminist by today's standards, was respectful and considerate of his female characters, treating them as the heroines of their personal stories.

2. Morgan le Fay: The Evil Sorceress

Throughout the Arthurian canon, women in possession of magical powers have long been associated with evil and villainy, a fact that is no different in Malory's work for the most part. While we can find exceptions in Nimue, Chief Lady of the Lake, most of the female characters in possession of magic, such as Morgan le Fay, Morgause or the unnamed Lady of the Lake are presented as antagonistic forces against which King Arthur and his knights must fight. After the Christianization of Britain, the Church wanted to endear itself to the Celtic people by keeping their legends and mythos, to do so they transformed their pantheon; gods became kings and heroes while goddesses turned into faeries and witches. The most prominent of these goddesses was Morrigan, who is described as:

> A goddess of battle, strife, and fertility. Her name translates as either "Great Queen" or "Phantom Queen", and both epithets are entirely appropriate for her. The Morrigan appears as both a single goddess and a trio of goddesses. The other deities who form the trio are Badb ["Crow"], and either Macha [also connotes "Crow"] or Nemain ["Frenzy"]. The Morrigan frequently appears in the ornithological guise of a hooded crow. (Dee)

As a goddess of fertility, Morrigan was considered one of the greatest Celtic goddesses (Choronzy 26) but she was also a goddess of death who "flew over battles, shrieking like ravens and claiming dead soldiers' heads as trophies" ("Morgan"). It is no surprise that such a central mythological figure and a powerful woman was to be assimilated into the new *mythos*. Her becoming the base for the characters of Morgan and her sister Morgause, both women of magic who use their powers for dark purposes, is, according to Norako, a popular theory, but not the only one. Morgan le Fay is also linked to Modron, a mother goddess of the Welsh pantheon who was wife to Urian of Reghen and mother of Owai. Since Morgan was wife to King Urien and mother of Yvain in the earlier versions of the Arthurian romance, it is easy to see how a connection between the two of them has been made, but "there is, however, little textual evidence to support this theory" (Norako). Because of this, while we can't accurately point out on whom she Morgan le Fay is based on, it is undeniable how she is a woman of great power and knowledge, something Malory clearly showcases, regardless of her moral alignment, throughout the book.

It is her connection to these goddesses which makes Morgan le Fay the first character most people think when asked for the villain in Arthurian legends. Being half-sister to King Arthur through their mother Igraine she was raised in a convent after Uther defeated the Duke of Cornwall "and the third sister Morgan le Fay was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of necromancy" (Malory 12; vol. 1). While Malory's work refers to the nunnery as such, later adaptations would state in a more direct form what *Le Morte d'Arthur* merely hints at: that it was not Christians who lived there but pagans who led Morgan to the dark arts. According to Scott, who is quoted by Calvo, she is presented as a paradox:

> While [Morgan] is a member of what is perceived as the more passive and vulnerable sex during Malory's time, demonstrated by the nameless women in need of rescuing

that litter the text, Morgan instead exhibits an active presence that rivals even the most masculine of characters in *Morte d'Arthur*. (Scott qtd. in Zafra 3)

Unlike other female characters, such as the Lady of the Lake or Queen Guinevere, Morgan's appearance is never described. Readers know only of her mental and emotional qualities, her magical power and the pride she has in it, but beyond some lines in the first Book we are never made aware of how she learned magic or what motivated her to become what we have come to know of her, Kopřivová goes on to explain how her intellect and morality are the only things to take into account in regards to her: "Being an active female means [...] being evil and scheming. […] She plots against her brother and the Round Table. She is the enemy of the notion of knighthood. It is her mind what is important, and not her body." (36-37) Morgan le Fay being a great beauty or not is unrelated to what the reader should think of her, she is the villain for most of the story and that should be the only concern one should have in mind when thinking of her deeds. Even though she is a woman, Morgan le Fay has a prominent role in her brother's court while, at the same time, she refuses to be at the centre of it. She rebels against the roles imposed to her gender and openly becomes an antagonistic figure of King Arthur, who is the main representative figure of chivalry and masculine society of that era.

After her introduction in Book I, Morgan le Fay remains absent and neutral until Book II, in which she has already been married to King Urien. It is at this moment, during the funeral of King Lot and the eleven knights that Merlin informs Arthur of the magical properties of Excalibur's scabbard, "for ye shall lose no blood while ye have the scabbard upon you, though ye have as many wounds upon you as ye may have." (Malory 77; vol. 1) The powers of the scabbard link back once more to the Celtic influences of the story as it was a matriarchal society. The link between the magical protection of the scabbard, which possess a womanly shape, towards not just the sword but also its bearer, acts as a reference towards the belief that women were in possession of magic only privy to them. Because of this, once Arthur gives it to Morgan for safekeeping, we are presented with a subtle acknowledgement to her magical powers. Still, magic is sinful from a Christian perspective and, as such, Morgan acts in an evil way creating a replica of the scabbard and giving the original to her lover, Sir Accolon of Gaul.

> So after, for great trust, Arthur betook the scabbard to Morgan le Fay his sister, and she loved another knight better than her husband King Urien or King Arthur, and she would have had Arthur her brother slain, and therefore she let make another scabbard like it by enchantment, and gave the scabbard Excalibur to her lover, and the knight's name was called Accolon, that after had near slain King Arthur. (Malory 77-78; vol. 1)

It is in this passage that we first see how Morgan's priorities lie not on the welfare of her brother and his kingdom but on her own personal interests. She is presented as a selfish woman blinded by the desire for a man who is not her husband and thus an adulteress. Just like Guinevere, Morgan is an adulteress but, unlike the queen, she is not given a story of courtly love that might have swayed the reader's opinion to be, if not in favour of the

relationship, at least tolerant towards it. While nowadays many would sympathize with her for being forced into a political marriage at the age of sixteen and would understand her desire to find another man to love, during the Middle Ages women belonged to the men in their families, be it their fathers, husbands or even sons, should they be widows. As seen in the case of Guinevere, adultery committed by women was a crime punishable with death. Because of all these factors, it is easy to see how Morgan fell into the archetype of villain but it is not until later on Book IV that her full plot is discovered:

> And right as Arthur was on horseback there came a damosel from Morgan le Fay, and brought unto Sir Arthur a sword like unto Excalibur, and the scabbard, and said unto Arthur, 'Morgan le Fay sendeth here your sword for great love.'
>
> And he thanked her, and weened it had been so, but she was false, for the sword and the scabbard was counterfeit, and brittle, and false. (Malory 130; vol. 1)

An interesting point to take into consideration is the origins of the scabbard's power. As heavily rooted as the Arthurian Legend is in Celtic mythology, we can't help but notice how such a matriarchal society has affected the legend. The scabbard, an object which resembles the feminine body, has the main function of protecting the sword, commonly associated with the masculine. As such we are able to see how, even at a time were patriarchy has become the norm in medieval Europe, femininity and the powers associated with it from the Celtic era are still very much present in the story.

We see the most of Morgan's dark influence at the court of her brother in the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which, as Norako claims, "Morgan wields otherworldly magical powers." Although she continues to be a force of discord among her brother's and husband's court through a great part of the story, it is noteworthy to point out how, in the end, Morgan le Fay came to regret her actions and carried her brother to Avalon in order to care for his body and atone for her misdeeds. As Malory narrates, "thus he was led away in a ship wherein were three queens; that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan le Fay" (Malory 519; vol. 2). This hints towards redemption for Morgan le Fay, as it is stated in other versions of the legend that Arthur would rise again when England needed him most so it would be easy to assume that, until that time came, someone would have to look out for his body. The last words we hear Morgan speak are towards Arthur's corpse, "ah, dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me?" (Malory 517; vol. 2). Her words give the impression of a woman who has come to regret many of her actions with regards to her family and who mourns the time she could have had with people to love, had she not gone to a path of vengeance and dark magic. This is not the last time we see remorse in a character's last moments being of remorse, since Nimue and Queen Guinevere, who also ends her arc in regret as will be seen in the following section, were there alongside Morgan at the moment of Arthur's departure.

3. High Queen Guinevere

Queen Guinevere, King Arthur's wife, is often portrayed as the reason behind Camelot's downfall. She is referred to as the "ultimate traitor" (Bauer) to her husband, as her affair with Sir Lancelot brings up the dangers of a possible heir that is not of Arthur's blood, and yet she is one of the most powerful and politically savvy women, if not characters, throughout the whole Arthurian canon. She is a character who uses diplomacy and her connections in order to pursue Camelot's best interests and, as Hodges writes when talking about medieval queens:

[They] had no official role in government, but worked instead by influence, counsel, and affinity. One way they could exercise power was to work through their husbands by counsel and intercession. This often meant that there could be a royal show in which kings represented stern justice and the queens spoke for mercy; or if errors were looming, queens' counsel could provide excuses for kings to change their minds. (55)

When we are first introduced to her in Book I, Guinevere is mentioned as nothing more than her father's daughter: "and there had Arthur the first sight of Guenever, […] and ever after he loved her" (Malory 43; vol. 1). After this episode, they are immediately wedded and we hear nothing else from her until Book III, in which Malory gives more details of the wedding as it is King Leodegrance, Guinevere's father, who gave the round table to Arthur as part of his daughter's dowry. It is at this introduction that we start to notice how the importance of the women of the story, even one as influential and necessary as Guinevere, is just dependent on the men surrounding them. She goes from her father's hands to Arthur's, without any regard for what she might wish. Still, Malory's representation of Queen Guinevere is one of the most respectful ones we can find in older texts according to Bauer, as the author details her actions in trying to bring peace and harmony to the round table whenever a conflict between the knights arose. Some examples of these are found in *The Poisoned Apple* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in which it is stated how:

[In *The Poisoned Apple*] Guinevere promotes unity in Arthur's roundtable in this story; she does not scheme to destroy his fellowship of knights. Though the party ends in someone's death, Guinevere attempts to do her queenly duty to promote her husband's interests by giving the party. (Bauer)

[In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*] Guinevere is showing sympathy for Gawain and solidarity with him as well. Guinevere does not want Gawain, the knight who has saved her husband, to be humiliated. In this story, it is clear that Guinevere is loyal to the Round Table and cares about Arthur. Maybe this is a representation of a kind, dutiful Guinevere that Malory draws upon in creating his portrayal of Guinevere as respectful in *Le Morte Darthur*. (Bauer)

In both these instances as well as throughout the rest of Malory's book, Queen Guinevere is a fitting queen to Camelot and even her love affair with Sir Lancelot is not displayed in an overly negative light. While Malory still depicts her adultery, she is mainly pictured as the destroyer of the notion of knighthood and the Round Table (Kopřivová 8), while still talking of how the love they have is something many should aspire to:

> Nowadays men cannot love sevennight but they must have all their desires: that love may not endure by reason; for where they be soon accorded and hasty, heat soon cooleth. Right so fareth the love nowadays, soon hot soon cold: this is not stability. But the old love was not so; men and women could love together seven years, and no licorous lusts was between them, and then was love, truth, and faithfulness: and lo, in likewhise was used love in King Arthur's days. (Malory v426; vol. 2)

Malory criticises the way love was at his time, "soon hot soon cold" referring to the fleeting nature with which people treated it. Guinevere and Lancelot's affair, in the other hand, is one that is extremely romantic in the sense that sex, according to Bauer, is not the main goal of their affair; she states how "Guinevere and Lancelot feel romantic love for one another according to Malory. Their love is not based on sex, so it is enduring and faithful." Queen Guinevere goes so far as to say that, should Lancelot be slain, "[she] will take [her] death as meekly [...] as ever did any Christian queen" (Malory vol. 2, 461). Similarly to Tristan and Isolde, Guinevere and Lancelot acknowledge the tragedy of their love and embrace it, as if in doing so they are becoming more than the roles they have acquired through their relationship with Arthur.

But even then, for Malory, "Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot was only a secondary event" (Kopřivová 82) as it was an example on his view of women, whom he only portrayed "as secondary characters who are important only as far as men's sins are concerned." (Kopřivová 82) While their romance started in a most innocent way, reminiscence of classical courtly love, as "Queen Guenever had him in great favour above all knights, and he loved [her] above all other ladies damosels in his life" (Malorey 194; vol. 1) it is most interesting to see how she becomes a nun at the end of the story. This is analogous to Lancelot's becoming a hermit, representing in both cases an attempt to atone for what their actions brought to both Camelot and its king. Alan Lupack is able to summarise her life and romance with Lancelot in just one paragraph:

> Malory's Guinevere is jealous and demanding but also a true lover. Her jealousy and anger drive Lancelot mad and lead her to say she wishes he were dead. Nevertheless, she remains true to him. She is accused several times of crimes—infidelity and the murder of Mador's relative—and must be saved by Lancelot, as she is once again when their love is discovered and she is sentenced to be burned at the stake. (Lupack)

As stated before, both of them, but especially Guinevere, embrace the tragedy of their relationship. The queen is shown to be an extremely well-rounded character, with jealousy,

as Lupack states above, as well as devotion as her fatal flaws. While she is no longer the warrior queen she once was in the pre-Vulgata, Malory gives her a new strength in the way she fights for her beliefs, which are not always right, as we see with the relationships between her and many of the men in the story. It is to be concluded then that, while not an active participant in the many wars and quests Arthur and his knights were part of, Queen Guinevere is one of the key characters who drive a great part of the story forward through both action and inaction, being more than just a damsel in need of rescuing, and providing a great example of the power once held by medieval queens.

4. Conclusion

Throughout not just *Le Morte d'Arthur* but all of the Arthurian canon, women have had two main roles when in power, the temptress and evil sorceress; the latter aiming for her own selfish wishes above all else, while the pure lady, serves the purpose of being both a goal and a reward for the questing knight, but both Morgan le Fay and Queen Guinevere show a duality and a depth not common in the literature of the time. Morgan, starting as the main antagonist, is partially redeemed when she becomes one of the queens who carry Arthur to Avalon. Guinevere's main focus remains on her own, personal love without taking into consideration the wellbeing of Camelot as much as her position would have her do.

They both showcase each end of the moral spectrum that exists in the balance between women and power, with the Chief Lady of the Lake, Nimue, as well as her predecesor, as a middle ground who balances the moral responsibility of Guinevere with the magical power of Morgan. While, as mentioned before, female characters in *Le Morte d'Arthur* are nothing more than a means to the end that is the fulfilment of the male characters' quest, it is undeniable how the women of the story, and these three, in particular, are of the utmost importance both towards the general plot as well as the emotional development of the men around them Morgan le Fay is an iconic villain, having inspired multiple other female characters who fall into the archetype of 'Evil Sorceress' because of her, while Guinevere showcases a combination of vulnerability and power not often seen at the time of the text's composition. In addition, while she constantly becomes a damsel in distress, she acts in regards to her own desires, which not always align with what its best for Camelot, but that only makes her a well-developed character who we see evolve in more modern adaptations of the story.

Finally, Nimue is perhaps the most interesting of the three as, even though she is the least present of them all, she has the most impact in Arthur's life. Both her and her predecesor present themselves as a middle ground, balancing the moral responsibility of lawful women such as Guinevere with the magical power of more chaotic ones, such as Morgan le Fay. Nimue is able to take the advantage that is Merlin, using the sorcerer to enter the court and adquire a possition of power within it. She is the one who evolves the most as she is the protagonist of her own journey, going from another damsel in distress to a seeker of knowledge and a trusted advisor of the king.

As such, these characters, while a product of their time, show how the view of women had started to change and how them holding power was something that should not be

feared. It is a precedent of how influential this book was that even now characters are inspired by Morgan and Guinevere, adapting them to our modern views.

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