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A Perfect Reign of Queen and King?: An Analysis of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere  
in their Leadership Roles

In literature, the roles of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere reflect the male-female dichotomy that society wishes to impart on them. As a literary couple that has stood the test of time, their roles as leaders, and roles in their relationship with each other reflects society's understanding and belief of where gender roles belong in respect to leadership roles. Their roles, as defined by various texts taken from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century to present day, offer different opinions of who is the dominant person in the relationship, and who becomes the dominant ruler of Britain. King Arthur and Queen Guinevere shift in their roles as leaders in literature because society needs them to; Arthur becomes a more dominant, active king, and so must Guinevere in her role become a more dominant, active queen for her husband and Britain.

Four texts are used within this essay to demonstrate the development of Arthur and Guinevere into ideal leaders they have become today. *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Idylls of the King*, *The Mists of Avalon* and *The Pendragon's Banner* trilogy help define the roles society wishes to reflect upon literature. Sir Thomas Malory and his *Le Morte d'Arthur* represents the 15<sup>th</sup> century idea in which Arthur's dominance is only shown throughout the beginning of his reign as King of Britain. Alfred, Lord Tennyson is the epitome of what Victorian era British writers who dabbled in Arthurian romances had described Arthur to be. Malory's Arthur is a vastly different character than Tennyson's. Arthur's role drastically changes over a century later with Marion Zimmer Bradley and her novel, *Mists of Avalon*. However, Helen Hollick rejects the Arthur and Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere) of the past, strengthening the argument for a more realistic interpretation of Arthur and Guinevere in their roles as leaders, lovers and people within history. All four writers offer different sentiments as to what Arthur and Guinevere are to Britain, society, and what they shall become for future generations.

## 1. The Idea of a King: Arthur in Literature

There is a perception of what it means to be a king. People's connotations with the name 'Arthur' differ from that of his knights. It is easier to state what an example of a great leader is through literature, because the flaws are not as evident as if we looked at a real leader of a nation, group or idea. In his article *The Image of Arthur and the Idea of King*, Mark Allen discusses what it means for Arthur to be a king in literature. Mark Allen states,

“The literary King Arthur is not essentially a figure of strength, of guile, nor love. He is also not a religious hero for the most part. Arthur's knights are more knightly than he is, his courtiers more courteous, and his cross-bearers more Christian. Gawain is stronger; Merlin is wiser; Galahad, holier; and if Guinevere is any judge, Lancelot is lovelier. Yet what Arthur is that they are not, is king. In a sense, Arthur is kingship; he is the representative figure of the idea of king. No other figure in our tradition more clearly or more directly epitomizes our notion of kingship than Arthur,” (Allen 1).

Arthur, as Allen states, becomes our ideal of what a king should be. Kings are measured up against Arthur. Arthur is immersed in our idea of a king, and is used today. Arthur is made as an example, even after the seven hundred years since Thomas Malory wrote his *Le Morte'Arthur*. Arthur is, as Allen points out, is not the strongest of his knights, not the most religious, but he is the best king for Britain at the times that authors have written him into. Allen makes note that Arthur's relationship as a king has changed, because our idea of what it means to be a king has changed (1). As our idea of what it means to be a king changes, the perception of Arthur shall change as well.

Little did Thomas Malory know that his collection of Arthurian stories would be used as a major source to many writers who contribute to the legends of King Arthur and his Knights of

the Table Round. In some way, shape, or form Tennyson and Hollick have both looked at Malory to determine how they will shape their own Arthurs. Marion Zimmer-Bradley claims never to have read *Le Morte d'Arthur* before starting her works. Malory's king starts the cycle that writers have returned to for centuries, Arthur's parentage. Uther and Igrayne were Arthur's true parents. The idea that Uther fathers Arthur has stayed true to the stories through Tennyson, Bradley and Hollick. Malory uses Arthur as a reinforcement of the belief of the Divine Right of Kings. Meredith Reynolds believes that Malory's work is a textbook for the rulers of that day to be successful rulers and servants. She states, "[*Le Morte d'Arthur*] instructed nobles on how to be proper and successful kings and knights. Karen Cherewatuk identifies in particular the '*The Tale of King Arthur*, which centers on the establishment of the king's rule [and] illustrates both idealistic and practical lessons for the young monarch," (Reynolds 40). Not only is this text in defense of the divine right of kings, but as Reynolds brings up, a sort of reflection as to who the nobles of that should model themselves after. The Arthur that is represented in Malory makes sense, he is a figure to be respected, not a do-er of actions.

Despite the fact that Uther fathered Arthur, Malory stresses the idea that another family raises Arthur. As another man fostered Arthur, a lower ranking man at that, rather than the King of Britain, it helps him grow into a fair leader. Arthur is a leader who does not understand the importance of his coming. Sir Kay's expression of when Arthur brings him the sword in the stone (the test and confirmation of Arthur's reign), is of delight, shock and awe. Sir Ector states to Arthur, "Now, I understane ye must be kynge of this land," (Malory 9). Arthur's confusion at the statement causes Sir Ector to explain that, "God wille have hit soo," (9). This statement, underscores the idea that Arthur is chosen before his coming, and begetting. God's plan is to have Arthur reign, because Arthur is chosen by Divine Right. Reynolds also agrees that that

Arthur's kingship is established by the will of God (Reynolds 40). Despite this source of Arthur's kingship, he misunderstands the significance of his father and brother kneeling to him. Sir Ector had never told Arthur that he was not one of his own brood; Merlin had wished that Arthur grow away from the threats to the life of Uther's heir.

This paternal relationship that Arthur has with Ector allows him to understand the importance of his coming. Ector only asks two things of Arthur, the son he raised as his own; that he, "be my [Ector's] good and gracious lord when [he is] Kyng," (Malory 9). Arthur's agreement to Ector's first request demonstrates the lessons learned from being brought up by Ector. Without the subjects of a kingdom, the king truly has little power. The loyalty of the people, even then, does affect Arthur's, and any king's reign. Without the understanding or respect of the people, Arthur could have failed to be a good king. These lessons were learned by being brought up as a lord's son, not a king's. For that, Arthur promises Ector to provide anything that he (Ector) asks of his king, and a promise to never fail his foster-father (9). The second favor is to make Sir Kay, Arthur's foster brother, the "senceall" (10) of Arthur's castle. Again, Arthur's respect for those who are below him in social class establishes trust between king and servant.

Arthur is chosen by divine right, Reynolds brings up the point that no one understands why Arthur should be king—he has no prowess in battle, that has been seen, and no real military intelligence. Malory, I believe, understood that his king needs skills and renown to reinforce the concept that Arthur is the true king of Britain. For the beginning of the tales, Arthur actually is a king of action, though toward the end he falls into the background for his knights to gain renown, and fights only when Britain needs him to, and to recapture his wife who has fled to her lover's castle. By Merlin's counsel, Arthur realizes that other rulers have differing viewpoints, and it is

not a sign of weakness to seek the advice of experienced men. Reynolds makes note that it establishes the focus of *The Tale of King Arthur*, because he needs to learn to be a successful king. As a king, Arthur takes his education into his own hands, in hopes of learning from the experienced men (Malory 14; Reynolds 42), though in present day, a leader would never obtain power and then learn, you learn and then obtain power.

Tennyson differs from Malory's use of Arthur in a multitude of ways. Malory's Arthur has ambiguity written into his parentage, though Arthur is flawed like mortal men. The kings of Britain tend to question the truthfulness of Arthur's birth throughout the first section of the poem, "The Coming of Arthur." John D. Rosenberg contributes to this idea with a comparison between the births of Malory and Tennyson. Rosenberg states that, "Malory's Arthur is born after the normal nine-month term. Tennyson's King, both a Christ figure and a solar deity is born, "all before his time," (Rosenberg 142). Within the "The Coming of Arthur," Tennyson writes that, "all before his time/ Was Arthur born," (Tennyson 210-211). Tennyson's statement that Arthur was not born for his time, but in a time for the future contributes to the idea that the Britain of the time was not ready for the king that was given to them. Instead, it becomes almost a necessity for Arthur to return later, the time that he is meant to, in order to unite Britain as a whole.

The idea that Arthur is more than a man, is demonstrated throughout the *Idylls of the King*; from Guinevere's comments to how he is not of the earth, to his birthing all factor into the idea that Arthur is above mortal man. Tennyson gives another plausible theory of the birth of Arthur. Within "The Coming of Arthur," one of Arthur's most trusted knights states to a king, "Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame;/ And down the wave and in the flame was borne/ A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet," (381-383). This supernatural birth provides a theory of

the conception of Arthur that is greater than mortal men. He is born, not of the womb like Malory's Arthur, but of the roaring flames swept past, presenting Merlin with the heir of Uther Pendragon. Rosenberg expands on this idea of the mystery behind Arthur's birth when he states that, "Arthur's purported parents are the dark-haired, dark-eyed Uther and Ygerne; but Arthur, as befits a sun-king and the Son of God, "is fair/ Beyond the race of Britons and of men, (CA, 1. 410)" (Rosenberg 143). Tennyson's word choice can explain the writer's own thinking that Arthur too, is beyond the British people, for he is descended from Heaven. The fairness of his skin and hair are vastly different than his parents who have a darker complexion. Therefore, Arthur may be the Son of God coming down from Heaven to fix Britain and unite the country.

Elliot L. Gilbert states that readers have concerned themselves with the transformation of Arthur between Malory and Tennyson. Malory's Arthur is seen fighting battles in the beginning of his reign, marching a campaign to Rome, and the result with the battle of his bastard, incestuous-born son ends the tales of Thomas Malory. Tennyson's differing viewpoint on what Arthur means to the writer, and by extension, the land of Britain. Gilbert continues by stating, "[Arthur was] the traditionally virile and manly King of legend and romance, [though] during the nineteenth century, [has turned] into the restrained, almost maidenly Victorian monarch of [Tennyson's] most ambitious work," (Gilbert 863). Despite the fact that Arthur seems maidenly within the *Idylls*, as Gilbert offers, William Vann quotes Henry van Dyke when he states, "His [Arthur] is more godlike than it becomes a man to be," (Vann 98). Just on this note, it should be noticed, the vast change that Arthur has undertaken. Arthur evolves from the King of Britain, Lord of Camelot, to the God-like figure that reigns from the faery-like Camelot. On the same note as Vann, John Rosenberg wrote, "Malory's Arthur is born after the normal nine-month term. Tennyson's King, both a Christ-figure and a solar deity is born "all before his time,""

(Rosenberg 142). Even within the idea of Arthur's birth, contrasting opinions of how this king should come to be exist between Malory and Arthur. Again, Rosenberg has reiterated this point, the coming of Arthur is like the coming of a deity to earth—an unrelenting force of change that will sweep the land is bound for Britain. As Arthur is born before his time, as Tennyson has put it, Britain is not ready for the perfect, ideal king that is needed for the land to thrive.

Despite the contrasting opinions on what Arthur should become, both men have agreed on one purpose of a king—a good king needs to be able to inspire people to work for the greater good, to be a part of a movement that is greater than themselves, in hopes of changing the world for the better. The Arthur of Tennyson though, grasped this concept for a portion of the poem. Vann states that, despite the fact that Arthur was able to inspire his knights, they were unable to understand the motivation behind his thoughts, commands, and wishes (Vann 101). That, ultimately, is his failure, and an agreement between Malory and Tennyson.

Tennyson's attitude toward his king represents the high pride and glory of the Victorian era. Arthur's ideas are different from his predecessors. Tennyson writes about the times before Arthur, where, "For many a petty king ere Arthur came/ Ruled in this isle and, ever waging war/ Each upon other, wasted all the land," (Tennyson 5-7). The time before Arthur fills itself with mass chaos, war and ruin for the people of Britain. Arthur's coming signals a change in the time, with hopes of peace, prosperity and union shall reign as the King's right hand over the land. Arthur's perception of the land falls into line with what Tennyson wants. Upon glancing at Guinevere, Arthur's thoughts are filled with the idea of the perfect reign of King and Queen. For instance, Arthur thinks to himself, "But were I join' with her/ Then might we live together as one life/ And reigning with one will in everything/ have power on this dark land to lighten it/ And power on this dead world to make it live," (89-93). Tennyson's Arthur believes in freeing the



land of the mass carnage that currently reigns on the throne, and imagines what it may take to fix the wrongs in his world. His solution is to marry Guinevere, in hopes that together, they may bring a new peace onto the land of Britain. In hopes to restore the land to its former glory by removing the face of the dead world that they are currently living in.

Hollick's idea of a king differs from Malory or Tennyson's, though aligns with Bradley. Mark Allen's essay explains another important concept that is given to Arthur; that Arthur is the only king that has lived so long throughout literature that his return to us is still going on (Allen 8). Malory chose Arthur as the idea of a king chosen by the higher powers. In an interview with Hollick, she was asked how she had made her Arthur different from the Arthur's of the past. Like Allen has stated, she returned to Arthur, partly because it is the name of a king in which everyone has heard of to some degree. Hollick stated in her interview, "I had no intention of making my Arthur the sort of man who was not certain of what he was doing. The Arthur of Medieval stories, quite frankly, is a weak, inefficient and insubstantial king. One who turns a blind eye to his wife and best friend becoming lovers, one who abandons his king and his people—for several years—to go off on a hopeless religious quest. My Arthur was not like that. He was a strong, able fighter who stood no nonsense to anyone. To lead during that time [Post-Roman withdrawal from Britain] he would have to be," (Hollick Interview). Arthur's reign has changed; the path to how he becomes king is altered. Instead of being chosen by divine right, or born as a deity come to earth, Hollick's representation demonstrates what society believes in a leader; a leader needs to have the ability to lead effectively!

This effective leadership, one of the defining points in Hollick's Arthur's reign is the establishment of a brotherhood who rides alongside their king to the very end. Many writers have had an idea like this: Malory had the Table Round, as did Tennyson, Bradley had her

Companions. Hollick though, has Arthur create a different sort of brotherhood, the Artoriani (Kingmaking). The Artoriani became Arthur's vision of the best soldiers and riders of his army. More specifically, if you are Artoriani, you wish to join the Cymry division of them—the riders of the King's company (Kingmaking). Arthur's ability to lead effectively helps him create this force of elite cavalymen. Throughout the novels, many characters express the desire to join the Artoriani, knowing the renown that comes with being chosen by the king. Arthur trains them to be the best of his army. Their skills fall under great swordsmanship, the ability to ride effectively, and the courage to face opponents that others may not. Arthur's military intelligence allows him to understand the importance of having cavalry units. The petty-lords that meet with Arthur at counsel don't; they are boggled by the idea of a cavalry and the uses for it. Arthur's logic demonstrates his leadership and military intelligence because the Pendragon understands that infantry units will not easily stand against a charging horse with a rider upon its back.

Arthur's ability to inspire in Hollick's novels has a greater effect than that in Malory, Tennyson or Bradley. His ability to inspire adds to his ability to be king. Mark Allen makes a great note that, "Today, Arthur represents what kings should or could have been," (Allen 9), and that idea holds true for Hollick. Hollick's interview helped shine light that the Arthur she portrays is the Arthur she believes could have been. During Arthur's battle in Gaul, his biggest, and only physical defeat in which Arthur's Artoriani are slaughtered by the hundreds, his soldiers continue to fight tenaciously to protect the body of their fallen king. Hollick writes that, "The British were determined that Euric [the Goth] would not have the body of the Pendragon," (Shadow 150). This ability to inspire loyalty and action, even in a time of defeat, is a mark of a great leader, and king. Without the respect Arthur gave his men by dining with them on the

march, being seen by his men, and riding in the vanguard of his army, would he have lived through the battle to see the next one.

*Pendragon's Banner* starts on the note of leading effectively. Four years have passed since Arthur has won the royal torque from Vortigern, the Saxon king. He has assumed the role of "Pendragon," that his father had, a role whose connotations denote strength, power and leadership. Hollick opens up the novel in the first paragraph by stating, "[he] had been fighting to keep the royal torque secure around his neck ever since," (PB 1). Throughout the first page, Hollick recounts the skirmishes that have placed Arthur in this position (2). Instead of being declared king by divine right, like Malory, or being born with deity-like qualities before his time, as in Tennyson, Hollick establishes Arthur's reign by actions. Arthur is a dominant, active king that needs to fight consistently for the land he governs over.

During *Shadow of the King*, Hollick's Arthur can be thought as having too much hubris for his own good, too arrogant and hardheaded to do what is expected of him. Arthur, to those who do not know him, presents this well when he states, "I also have been informed, on many occasions, that I have no conscience or morals. A strong king cannot afford the first, and I have never been over impressed by the latter," (Shadow 114). As Arthur speaks to a courier who is vying for the aid of the Pendragon, Arthur exuberantly informs him that he, the Pendragon, will do as he must by how he believes aid should come, not by how others who are untrained in warfare tell Arthur how to fight. The Pendragon is more concerned with being a strong, effective king for his people, instead of being a king who is well-loved by all his subjects. Due to this, Arthur knows throughout the books that he shall make enemies. Even with this knowledge, Arthur trudges on to help secure his Britain into peace, which makes him well loved for his goal, though, at times, hated for how he achieves that goal. Even with a tinge of dislike for the king,

the people willingly follow the Pendragon, as he is the best of leaders, and the King they need to protect them during the continuous Saxon invasion.

Arthur's disappearance, and presumable death forces his thoughts away from his kingdom, not because he does not want to lead, but because of the thought of his failure as a leader. A good leader remembers his defeats; a great leader remembers the effects of those defeats—his loyal soldiers dying in a field, crying out for their gods, the screams of agony masking the clunks of swords or axes falling on the next victim. This moment of self-reflection that Arthur has delves into the shadow of the king that shall be carried with him till the end of the novel *Shadow of the King*. Hollick divulges personal thoughts, opinions and fears that Arthur has that could not be fathomed about in Malory and Tennyson. Arthur's reunion with Gwen is full of happiness, fear and doubt. The happiness that his love is alive, though the thoughts of fear and doubt of his success as a king. Arthur shouts at Gwen in the first confrontation, "How could I go back? For months I lay close enough to death to remember nothing of it. Would Britain have taken me back? After I had been directly responsible for all those dead? I had lost everything. My men, my pride! So I thought, you," (324-325). The remorse that fills this king directly correlates to his belief on the success of a king. As the Pendragon has been defeated in battle, so Arthur believes, the Pendragon has been defeated as a fit and able ruler. Arthur's greatest fear is that Britain would never accept the Pendragon's return to rule with the death that would hang over his shoulder. This very personal thought allows Arthur to be perceived in positive light; he is a man, not a god. And because he is a man, he is mortal and has his flaws. Despite his flaws, Arthur's demonstration that he can overcome them makes him a fit ruler who is able to be active; his dominant presence inspires, and the Saxon invasion is at check.

## 2. Redefining the Heroic: Guinevere

A hero means the character is different than all others; they have attributes that set them apart from others. Guinevere's interpretation does just that, though instead of separating herself from other women, which she does, differing viewpoints have been argued as to where she stands as a hero. Hollick's interpretation of Gwenhwyfar transcends Marion Zimmer-Bradley's interpretation of the Queen of Britain. Ann Howey's essay entitled *Queens, Ladies and Saints: Arthurian Women in Contemporary Short Fiction* describes how women have changed the stories to offer a more active role in Arthurian literature. Howey offers three key ideas as to how women have changed in the roles: symbols of power, redefining the heroic and binaries. The second one is where I shall focus most of my attention. Howey begins by stating that Northrop Frye's definition of the romantic hero is a man whose prowess as a man surpasses that of all others (Howey 28).

Howey continues to state that the stereotypical 'Guinevere/Gwenhwyfar' is, "a lover and a queen. She is (often) [a character's] love[r] and Arthur's wife; her relationships to these men propel the plots of various tales, whether because she inspires great deeds, or is the cause of situations which men must resolve," (30). Hollick rejects this idea. Her Gwen is different. Though she still has suitors vying for her attention at the thought that Arthur has died, the main facet of her existence is not an object to be possessed or owned. Her importance in the novels of Hollick, her major change, is the support of Arthur.

Bradley treats Gwenhwyfar in a very different manner. Instead of evolving the idea of Gwenhwyfar, I believe she has taken steps backward in the interpretation of Gwenhwyfar. She is almost a figure to be possessed—her mind is only focused on that of Christ, and not the larger picture of the kingdom of Britain. One of the first times Gwenhwyfar is seen within *Mists of Avalon* is when she wanders toward the barrier between the Old Ways and the Christian ways.

Morgause and Lanclet help Gwen escape, the faery-land, though she is always scared. Gwen's comments in the section "The High Queen," help establish Gwenhwyfar as a weak character with no moral fiber, no backbone and a woman who is better off being killed in a raid than living through the novel. She makes note that the walls were high in her father's land, and it makes her feel safe (Bradley).

Bradley's Gwenhwyfar takes a step back in promoting women's strength to men. Her father, King Leodegranz insults Gwenhwyfar constantly. One of the most common insults that Leodegranz calls his daughter is a 'featherhead,' (Bradley 256). He assumes his daughter is not very intelligent; which she does little to disprove. Her life is controlled by the men around her; she rarely speaks up for herself. Though, the time Bradley is attempting to capture within her novel does not encourage women to speak up against their lord's, Gwenhwyfar's status in society is lower than ever, even compared to the useless object of Malory. Leodegranz orders his daughter to forget about the idea of marrying the king's captain that his plan, if all goes well, is to marry her off to the High King Arthur (256). Bradley captures the weak figure of Gwenhwyfar when she writes, "Gwenhwyfar shank away, saying, "I'd be afraid to be the High Queen!" That is her only remark in response to her father's desires is that she is scared to be the High Queen of Britain (256).

Gwenhwyfar differs also because of her fright of everyday activities. Her belief in unusual ideas also gives Gwenhwyfar a negative connotation due to Bradley's book. When traveling with Igraine, Gwenhwyfar's fear of the Saxons overwhelms her emotions. Igraine asks Gwenhwyfar if she would open the curtains of the litter, though Gwen does not like that. Gwen utters cries of dismay by saying, "I—I feel better with them closed," (267) showing Igraine her true feelings about traveling to Arthur through the lands. Fear consumes and rules Gwenwhyfar;

she has little courage to work with, and no desire to attempt to overcome those fears. The world scares her because it is just so big that she cannot even fathom at the size and scope of all that is around her (256). Gwenhwyfar's fright even scares her when she learns that Igraine is the sister to the lady of the lake, which causes her to ask in fright if that means the Lady is a witch, which Igraine dismisses (256).

When establishing how her Gwenhwyfar is different from previous interpretations, Hollick spoke about how she read *Mists of Avalon*. For clarity purposes, I shall use "Gwen" to refer to Hollick's Guinevere, and Gwenhwyfar to refer to Bradley's. Hollick states that, "Bradley's character [Gwenhwyfar] was such a useless girlie idiot! That was not how I saw the woman. The solutions...write my own version," (Personal Interview). Hollick's Gwen, as she has stated, is a direct reaction to Bradley's. One major difference between the two is the physical capabilities between Gwen of Bradley and the Gwen of Hollick. Hollick's Gwen has grown up in the mountains of Gwynedd. Her father was a liege-lord to Uther, and fought alongside the Pendragon (Uther's title, supreme king) during his first rebellion. Gwen has learned to ride horses, shoot bows, and wield swords, while Bradley's Gwen was a scared young woman living within the confines of her father's home.

The most drastic shift between the Gwenhwyfar of Hollick's time and the Guinevere of Tennyson and Malory, is that she becomes an active queen. Howey speaks about 'redefining the heroic' in terms of the role Guinevere plays within Arthurian literature. Howey states in her article that, "the process of redefinition reveals the gendered nature of traditional quests and challenges, where women are placed to inspire, reward or enable, but never to achieve, heroic action," (31). Arthur's relationship so far with Guinevere has been the tool to which he has been inspired to action, for positive or negative reasons. Without Guinevere, it seems Arthur has no

love which can enable some of the tales that have been retold about the couple. Guinevere has played the role of reward to Arthur by being the woman he marries after fighting for his throne; she has enabled him to go to war over her behalf as she sat within the castle of Lancelot (Malory). Though she has not been the actually quest-seeker within these novels, until Hollick that is. If it is the knightly stereotype to go questing, then Gwenhwyfar becomes a 'knight.' She boldly declares to some of her husband's men that she is going to Less Britain, in hopes of, "find[ing] what I seek," (289). The object of her desires is her husband, to squash or confirm the rumors of the death of the Pendragon. This role reversal makes Arthur the person who inspires the person who becomes the reward, and enables the quest. Gwenhwyfar's heroic action allows her to discover that her husband lives; which aids his return to Britain because the husband lives for the wife.

### 3. Relationships between Arthur and Guinevere

Malory has the Guinevere within his novels play a less active role in his tales than Tennyson, Bradley or Hollick do. Mark Allen makes a note that Arthur "is not a [king] who does, but one who has others do for him," (Allen 7). Arthur's major battles are seen at the very beginning of the book, and the very end. The latter battle is to have Guinevere punished for her adultery, and the role she plays in the death of some of the Knights of the Round Table. Arthur's fights throughout the *Le Morte d'Arthur* take up only a fraction of the book. Most of Malory's tales are focused on the Knights doing the will of Arthur, especially during "Tale of the Sangreal."

Tennyson brings Guinevere into a more active role within his poem, though her evolution has not stopped there. To start, she is seen and heard more than her husband. Like Malory, most of the literary works drifts away from Arthur to demonstrate the ideals that this king has for his



people—his knights leading by example, though without understanding. Despite Guinevere playing a role that is seen, the connotation associated with her is that of an object to be possessed by Arthur, like Excalibur. The figure of a princess, if married to a man who is the claimed king of Britain, can solidify the necessary treaties between the various parties that oppose him. The man is blatantly Arthur, the princess is Guinevere.

The relationship between Arthur and Guinevere reflects the roles men and women had during the Victorian era. Gilbert states that, “a major theme in the poem as well as to one of the central problems of Victorian society: the growing assertion of female authority,” (865).

Guinevere does just that within the Tennyson’s *Idylls*. Her dominance seems to overshadow Arthur’s—Arthur is talked about, Guinevere is seen being active. For instance, in poem “The

Last Tournament,” Guinevere scolds her lover

Lancelot into competing for a grand prize of a precious gem. Her logic behind this stems from the gossip she is hearing about their relationship. Guinevere’s motivation is not to have it be known to others that she has feelings for a man who is not her husband. The assertion of female dominance in Tennyson, though sexist, explains Arthur’s feelings toward his former wife.

Her feelings for another man raises another point of Guinevere’s dominance in the



*Idylls*: who exactly can have Guinevere? The answer is that, Guinevere wants her say in the matter, and not to be claimed as a trophy. She wants respect the way Arthur has respect. That though, is her downfall of herself, and that of Arthur. Guinevere explains this to Lancelot, in the tale of “Lancelot and Elaine,” when she states:

But, friend, to me

He is all fault who hath no fault at all.

For who loves me must have a touch of earth;

The low sun makes the color. I am yours

Not Arthur's, as ye know, save by the bond (130-135).

Guinevere's response to why she is Lancelot's and not Arthur's is simple—Lancelot has ‘a touch of earth,’ upon him, meaning he is from the realms of men, and not the realms of the mystical, or supernatural. The only bond Guinevere shares with Arthur and not Lancelot is the marriage bond that she speaks about with Lancelot. Despite the marriage bond, it means nothing to her because she had little say to whom she marries. Stephen Ahren makes the same note, but expands with the idea that since Arthur has never suspected her of infidelity, it must mean no love exists between them (Ahren 98). Ahren also brings up the point that Guinevere believes her husband is, “too pure for mere mortals to bear,” (98), which leads to the conclusion that even Guinevere does not believe Arthur is truly of the same, natural land that she and Lancelot share.

Guinevere's downfall of Arthur is different from Malory's trophy because of the more active role Guinevere has played throughout the *Idylls of the King*. Her love for Lancelot consumes her, which raises her dislike for her husband Arthur. The ideals that Arthur shares with his with do not match up to her own. Lancelot's ideas, whatever they may be, are the ones Guinevere seems to fall into the same belief with, the ones she wishes to fight for, and toward the

end, feels some remorse about. During the section “Guinevere,” as she sits in a nunnery, she reflects towards the difference between Arthur and Lancelot, thinking to herself that Arthur is, “Not like my Lancelot,” (Guinevere 404), though she is quickly taken aback by that thought. Her lust, dishonor and misunderstanding of her husband, Arthur leads them to their downfall.

As Arthur knows he is standing in the vestibule of his downfall, he places one task before he meets his eminent doom; he wishes to seek out his wife. Tennyson’s Arthur decides to take the road of forgiveness, and uses that as his motivation for seeing Guinevere before his last battle. Arthur’s first words of Guinevere are to remind her of the children she has brought into this world, “The children born of thee are sword and fire,/ Red ruin, and breaking up of laws/ the craft of kindred and the godless hosts,” (Guinevere 422-424). As a mother’s womb brings life into the world, Guinevere’s brings death and destruction to Britain. Fire and red ruin have swept Britain like a plague, bringing the ‘godless hosts’ to a land that is in a perfect place to claim for another. Ahren makes the note that any comments that Guinevere makes toward Arthur are, “the most damning because she is the supposed personification of his ideal,” (Ahren 99). Arthur held her to the highest ideal of a woman before they even met. As states previously, Arthur believed that Guinevere was the key to his success to ruling Britain and restoring the light that the country needed, while banishing the darkness that seemed to consume them.

Arthur’s return to Guinevere symbolizes his need to forgive Guinevere before his forthcoming death. Arthur speaks to Guinevere about his death, which can lead her to more fully believe that Arthur does not have a touch of the earth about him. “Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies/Have err’d not, that I march to meet my doom,” (Guinevere 446-47) tells her that the knowledge of this, and Guinevere’s actions have ruined the purpose for his coming (450), thus the downfall of the Round Table, and Arthur’s ideals. Despite Arthur’s harsh words to his wife,

his wish wasn't to curse her (530), but to, "forgive thee, as Eternal God/For gives! do though for thine own soul the rest./ But how to take last leave of all I loved?" (541-543). This forgiveness, like the forgiveness presented by God gives Arthur the ability to allow Guinevere to know all the feelings he once had for her, and the man who stood before her is going off to a death that has long been foretold. Gilbert states that this means the whole of Arthur's society is gone, "by the carnality... by an irrepressible female libidinousness...can neither be contained nor directed," (Gilbert 873) due to the lust Guinevere had for another man.

The downfall of Arthur is recorded by Tennyson in the next passage, entitled "The Passing of Arthur." Paralleling the coming of the great king, the title of the poem itself signifies that the time for Arthur is passing; he is to move on from this land, and return to the realms of the supernatural. He comes into the world as he entered it, in a supernatural fashion that exhibits the myth and mystery that surrounded his birth. Tennyson speaks of a barge that shall take Arthur away from Britain, led by, "Three queens with crowns of gold," (PA 282). Arthur knows that his time has come, though also knows that Merlin has spoken of his return to the land (191). Arthur's downfall has the same result in Tennyson as it does in Malory—he shall not be forgotten. Tennyson writes, "And rook it [Excalibur], and have worn it, like a king; And wheresoever I am sung or told/ In aftertime, this shall be known," (201-203). Arthur's knowledge of his return is presented to him by non-human means, adding to the supernatural. The knowledge that he shall be known in the end gives him a little hope, though crushes the last knight that follows him. Arthur's passing marks an important moment in Tennyson's tale, that, "the true old times are dead," (397). Arthur returns to the realms where no mortal man may enter, awaiting his time to return to Britain.

Bradley's Gwenhwyfar brings the downfall of Arthur in a different way than Tennyson or Malory has used her for. Bradley's interpretation of the relationship of Arthur and Gwenhwyfar reverses the roles that define a dominant figure in the relationship. Throughout the section dedicated mostly to Gwenhwyfar, "The High Queen," she finds herself in a pool of fear. Arthur attempts to make his wife happy, though does what every Arthur before him has done to his future wife—staked a claim to her. Gwenhwyfar's reaction to the High King's claim of herself is fear. The High Queen cannot fathom a life without the walls of her father's court protecting her. This fear, which continues to grow is a primary reason for the downfall of Arthur in the *Mists of Avalon*. Gwenhwyfar fears that she cannot bear a child for her husband, which she can't. She holds her belly, attempting to protect her womb (Bradley 361). The lack of self-esteem and confidence of herself affects not only the Queen, but will, unfortunately affect her husband, the High King. The time Gwenhwyfar does take a stand are not the most appropriate of times.

Gwenhwyfar's second act of courage becomes the point in which Arthur's realm starts to collapse around him. She confronts her husband about fighting under the pagan banner of the Pendragon. Stating that, "I like it not, Arthur, that you should raise a pagan banner your standard. You should fight under the cross of Christ so that we may tell friend from foe," (379-380). Gwenhwyfar is a Christian woman, and does not understand Arthur's need of having the backings of the magic of Avalon, and the Christian warriors who fight for Britain. As the Saxons are starting to invade the Isle of Britain, Arthur, deep down, knows it is necessary to unite all of Britain. Every person who calls Britain home should fight for her, pagan, and Christian alike. Though Gwenhwyfar does not see or understand that Arthur's vows to Avalon and to Christ hold him in power. Having council from two different perspectives allows him to judge for himself, and pick the best option for the land.

Arthur's response to this is to say that he treats people of all religions equally.

Gwenhwyfar, in essence, wants him to be a Christian King. A Christian king who would banish the pagan and the Old Ways from Britain and place Christ upon the throne. Arthur though, sees his wife's ignore and attempts to explain to her that, "I am no tyrant. Whoever wishes to do so may bear the cross of Christ on his shield, but the Pendragon banner stands in token that all the folk of Britain—Christian, Druid, Old People too—shall fight *together*," (380, emphasis mine). Arthur sees the bigger picture his wife cannot—that the Pendragon is the symbol of the people, not of religion. The High King presents an interesting analogy that the dragon is the king of the beasts, great and small, new and old, and "so the Pendragon is over all the people," (380). Arthur comprehension that the people of Britain need a sole figure to look up to, to rule over them in the best possible way, is what makes Arthur a great king. He favors no single entity of religion or otherwise. Gwenhwyfar's understanding does not reach that far—her belief is in the power of Christ, and not the power of the king who will aid his people now. Gwenhwyfar's failure to understand and believe in the Pendragon, and turn to Christianity, is a failure to understand, and believe in the High King, her husband.

Helen Hollick and her *Pendragon's Banner* trilogy offer a differing opinion of what it means to marry off Gwenhwyfar to Arthur. Her interpretation poses the most realistic, and the most positive opinions in the contrastive nature of a king and a queen. Gwenhwyfar's position within the novels of Hollick is the most active and dominate in her role as a queen. She is a Queen who does, not a Queen who says. Meaning, she is often performing actions of her own, as she is the wife of the Pendragon, the Lady Pendragon as Hollick bestows this epitaph on her, which means much is expected within a land where the Saxons invade the coasts nearly every day. Gwenhwyfar and Arthur have known each other since they were children, according to

Hollick's interpretation, and because of that, Arthur has to do much to prove he is the right person for her to marry. Even before their marriage, Arthur needed to prove himself to this woman that he loved dearly, in order to get her to consider marrying him.

The marriage between the two central characters in this trilogy differs greatly than anyone else's. The lust did not turn into action, or a demand for her hand in marriage, there was no hope that Gwen would be married off to him as a symbol to demonstrate Leodegranz's belief that Arthur, despite his appearance, is the true-born son of Uther and Igraine. And there surely is not the moment when Arthur sends for Gwen to marry him to respect the old and new ways of the lands of Britain, and to demonstrate respect for a petty king of Britain. Instead, Hollick has her Arthur demonstrate his worth to a woman whose animosity for the Saxons that sit on the British throne convinces her to do her part for her land, Gwynedd, if the Saxon-king should rise against her father to declare war on one of Uther's previous supporters. Arthur bestows on Gwen a different epithet, *Cymraes*, on the woman he loves. At the early ages where Arthur lives among Gwen's people as Uther's servant, he tells her that it is a British title he bestows on her, meaning "Little British Woman," (Kingmaking 85). Arthur and Gwen's relationship already differs at the start of the trilogy because, like modern day, a man must court a woman successfully. He must show confidence, not arrogance, to win a woman's heart. Arthur must prove to Gwen that he loves her, and that he is the best person for her to marry, instead of demanding that she marry him.

The relationships that Arthur has with Gwen's family play a vital role in distinguishing him from different Arthurs that have lain out a path for him to take. Previous tales of Arthur and Gwen have failed to let light on the matter about how Arthur deals with Gwen's family. Mostly because Arthur receives Gwen's hand in marriage, and the tale turns to focus on how Arthur

keeps his throne, and his wife for a period of time. Hollick's interpretation of the marriage of Arthur and Gwenhwyfar delves deeper into the reverence Arthur has for his elders, like Gwen's father Cunedda, her brothers, and the respect he has for men who have superior skill in riding and training horses, and swordsmanship that exceeds the skill of a fourteen year old man.

Gwen's stance in their relationship marks her as an equal, a woman who has as much authority over the rule of Britain as her husband does. And Arthur does not mind that. Gwen becomes a means of support for the Pendragon, without a strong, abled woman behind him, his successes would have turned into drastic failures. Gwenhwyfar demonstrates her equality to her husband when approaching the council of Britain to discuss the matters of leadership. Hollick writes that, "Gwenhwyfar had attired herself carefully. It would not be wise to appear disheveled and slovenly before such austere and august company. At her throat, her gold-twined torque, shaped as a dragon. And in her hand, blade down not that she was through the doors, her unsheathed sword," (Shadow 109). Gwen's knowledge, understanding and acceptance that she is the Lady Pendragon, the strongest woman in the land, allows her to save the life of another; a young woman who was practicing the Old Ways in a Britain that is in tumult between the Christian ideals and the Celtic ways of old. Gwen's ability to walk into a King's hall with her sword unsheathed, to a council full of pro-Roman British men demonstrates confidence, and the knowledge, and law of the King's voice that follows her. An instance like this, demonstrates how far culture has come to place a woman in an equal setting behind her husband, or placing a husband on equal footing of his wife. Gwen's act of bravery in arguing with men who were not pro-Arthur and his ways, exhibits great courage in anyone, and the love and respect of the man who she has married and decides to follow. If, perhaps, the Guinevere of Thomas Malory or Alfred Tennyson had attempted such a feat, she would have probably been killed for the



insubordination and disrespect of men. However, the Gwen of present day has more to fear, though more to gain by taking a stand.

Upon Arthur's disappearance from Gaul, at his great defeat by Euric the Goth, Gwen, presumably would be a widow. During this time, Gwen still holds the title of Lady Pendragon, and is still a young woman. Arthur's enemies swarm toward Gwen, in the hope to be taken as her new husband. Through the mass of suitors, Gwen retains hope that her love, her husband, her best friend shall return to her, refusing to believe that he has died. One of the suitors points out that, "Ambrosius [current Governor of Britain] needs to have you placed somewhere that gives him security. You are, however unintentionally, a threat to him," (219). Society has moved away from the stigma that women are to be possessed, that women are trophies to be displayed. Though some of those stigmas radiate by the portrayals of male characters within the trilogy, Gwen's presence as a widow, as a suitor points out, is a threat to the Governor of Britain. This is an important move in the relationship between Arthur and Guinevere. Arthur is the threat when steel is held between his hands, Gwenhwyfar is the threat if she is unmarried; she is a symbol of hope that is connected to the Pendragon, the hope that he will return. Or at least that someone will uphold his ideals to protect post-Romano Britain.

Hollick's Arthur portrays, embellishes and becomes the epitome of the love between a man and a woman. Arthur lives his life in solitude with a healer named Morgaine, who saves him from death. Arthur's wishes during his defeat were to be reunited with Gwen. He had perceived Gwen's death from the flu, though that was not the case. In solitude with Morgaine and his son, Medraut, Arthur is filled with remorse that he should live, and Gwen should die. The relationship between these two surpasses the material and corporeal pleasures that they enjoy or hate of each other. It reaches the heavens. Arthur believes that, "Better would it have been to have died there

in that stinking goatherd's hurt. For without reason to live, it was all, all of it, so pointless," (Shadow 211). The tenderness and affection that Arthur displays makes him out to be a more realistic character whose thoughts, feelings and emotions are known to the reader. It contradicts Malory and Tennyson—both of which have not allowed the thoughts of King Arthur known to whoever read their works. Hollick's glimpses into Arthur's mind makes it known that he is a person who loves first, a leader second. Without the support of the woman he loves, his greatest fears are alive—failure.

In the end of Hollick's trilogy, Gwen does not bring about the downfall of Arthur. Instead, she fights alongside Arthur at the greatest battle of his time. She restores his confidence in his ability to lead men into battle, to rule Britain as a nation, and move away from the Roman ways that have been dominating Britain in the King's absence. Gwen's faith in Arthur reminds him of an important aspect of leadership—the ability to inspire. Gwen tells Arthur upon his expressing doubts of his leadership capabilities that, "For those who once followed you, it will be as if you had never been away," (Hollick 371). Gwen's confidence and knowledge of Arthur's skill leads to believe, and is confirmed later, that Arthur is a great leader. The men who followed Arthur once return to follow him again in his last battle. The shadow of the king waves in and out of his mind, an ever foreboding thought, though with his wife, he accomplishes much and more during the final years of his reign.

The relationship between Gwen and Arthur reaches its most promising, and fulfilling point at the end of the trilogy. Upon Arthur meeting his bastard son, Cerdic, who is leading Saxons to the coast of Britain, Arthur takes it upon himself to make one last stand against the invasion. Arthur's defeat leads him to his doom, where he passes away from this world. She tells him during the last scene of the novel that he will never be forgotten. Gwen's statement

continues with, “None shall forget the man who was once the Pendragon. Arthur. My king,” (646). Gwen’s belief in her king allows him to overcome, to a certain extent, the fears he had been harboring about his defeat in Gaul. The necessity for Arthur to stand up to Cerdic, the old taking on the young, in order to protect Britain is crucial in defining the leader that Arthur has become within literature. Arthur needs to be seen doing, and not just saying. Arthur leads by example, demonstrating courage, prowess with a blade, and the necessity to fight for something greater than one man. Arthur and Gwen fought for Britain.

#### 4. Conclusion

Arthur and Guinevere have changed, and that cannot be argued. Perceptions are an ever-changing idea that cannot sit still for more than a few moments. King Arthur’s evolution from the king Malory created so long ago depicts a man who is heard, but is never understood; while the Arthur of Hollick’s becomes the king of action. There were never any internal thoughts of Malory’s Arthur expressed to those who were attempting to understand him. Tennyson reached far in attempting to make the ‘perfect king.’ The response from Tennyson’s readers may fall along the lines that Tennyson’s Arthur is the king Britain deserves, but perhaps not the one that best suits the time and place. Bradley and Hollick reinforce the concept of the ‘real Arthur.’

Arthur is a man who is respected by his soldiers and friends; a man who has his own internal struggles while attempting to unite a country that is torn between the British and the Saxon; a man who attempts to do what is best, but a man who may not always succeed. Hollick’s Arthur is my Arthur. The Arthur whose internal struggles depicts him as a man who is confused about where he should be; who does not fully understand himself, but has a strong wife who is necessary to his success. In the end, Arthur and Gwen work around his failures.

Guinevere follows a similar path. She is the object to be possessed in Malory. In Tennyson, she is the woman who is attempting to break gender stereotypes. Bradley depicts her as a useless twit of a girl who does not know how to inspire or lead men; let alone be a woman who can be counted on by her husband. Gwenhwyfar of Hollick is the Gwen I believe has the most connection with the present day generation. A woman who follows Arthur, but also leads him; loves him, but hates him at times; a woman who completes Arthur to make him a better man; Gwen has become all of this, and more.

Their relationship as King and Queen, husband and wife, friends and lovers have led them to be in a position that helps define our beliefs of what it means to be a man and a woman. Society shapes these literary figures to represent the prevailing ideals and beliefs of today. Mark Allen states that, “we look to the past, rummaging in our mental attics to find a story that offers a stable standard or ideal,” (Allen 9). Allen’s sentiments hold true to society’s perception of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. He continues by stating that these rulers are the ideal leaders of our culture—our return to these ideas helps comfort us with what is happening in the present (9). Arthur and Gwen have become the timeless couple that future authors will return to, in hopes of changing them into what Arthur and Guinevere need to be. Their perfection is not defined by the absence of flaws; it is the presence of flaws that helps define them and makes them husband and wife that is respected and admired. They have, and always will be the two figures I turn to for some piece of advice that I cannot obtain from anyone else. They truly are, the once and future rulers of literature.

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