

Interpretation of Guinevere in Arthurian Legends

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This study examines the representative significance of Guinevere in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) to explore how the medieval code of courtly love constructs a dual narrative of idealization and denigration of women. Employing a multidimensional framework, the analysis first investigates the anti-feminist tradition underpinning Arthurian literature, revealing how male knights project their desires and anxieties onto the queen. The function of Queen Guinevere's dowry, the Round Table—externalization of the maternal body is questioned to reveal how the Queen has been transformed from an individual into a symbol of kingdom's harmony. However, when she pursues personal desire through adultery, she is swiftly recast from the "source of harmony" to the "root of national ruin". This dichotomy exposes courtly love not as genuine respect for women, but as an ideological system serving male aristocratic interests—idealizing women to regulate knightly behavior while stigmatizing them to explain social crises. Ultimately, Guinevere emerges as a contradictory mirror reflecting medieval gender power dynamics, embodying both male adoration and fear.

Keywords: Arthurian literature, courtly love, adoration, stigmatization, gender

Introduction

The Arthurian legends, as a core cultural narrative of medieval Europe, have profoundly shaped gender perceptions. With global popularity, King Arthurian literature has been adapted again and again with enduring glamour in its narration of the knights' stories. Among the legends, Guinevere, Queen of King Arthur, however, has not gained the due attention. Guinevere's role in shaping Arthurian literature, though subtle, cannot be ignored. This paper will explore the adoration and stigmatization of the female image of Guinevere from modern perspective. The overt "worship of women" in Courtly Love stands in stark contrast to its underlying "misogyny". Guinevere, the queen of Arthurian legend, embodies this contradiction most intensely, making her an ideal case study for exploring medieval gender ideology.

Symbolic Meaning of Guinevere in King Arthurian Legends

The Concept of Courtly Love

Queen Guinevere is an important representation of "Courtly Love" in Middle English romance. "Courtly love", as interpreted by C. Lewis in his *The Allegory of Courtly Love*, was a romanticized European literary

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Middle Ages product that sublimated a formalized, and often covert, love affair between a knight and a noblewoman, typically of a higher social status. A knight was also expected to be fully devoted to his lady and would regard her as a model of both virtue and attractiveness in this paradigm. He would court her, and would do great things of chivalry, bravery, and refinement to show her his worth so as to win her affections. It was characterized by secrecy, emotional torment, and a strict code of rules, which led the lady to the level of near worship (Liu, 2023; Cobb, 1936). The most famous and perhaps the most tragic hero of courtly love in the Arthurian legend is the illicit romance between Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot (Liu, 2023; Cobb, 1936) in King Arthur's legends which in fact serves as a catalyst to the destruction of the kingdom of Camelot.

Guinevere as Maternal Symbol and the Spiritual Core of the Kingdom.

The knights in King Arthur's legends are generally referred to as "the round table knights". And the central image in the series of stories is the "round table", Guinevere's dowry, which has long been eulogized as the embodiment of the fairness, equity, and harmony among the knights. It seems that the image of knights sitting with King Arthur around the table has been automatically endowed with those honorable virtues associating with the table. However, it functions not merely as a furniture for the knights to get together. Unintentionally or not, it has been long ignored that the furniture itself, is owned by Queen Guinevere. And the shape of the table can be seen as an externalization of her maternal body, signifying its "roundness". A female's body carries one central function—reproduction, with her "round" belly. The mother associates a circle and a closed object which is connected with a mother; hence, the Round Table is a symbolic container just like the maternal body capable of reproducing. Thus, the knights sitting on it make up a family and Guinevere is the mother giving birth at the center. Round table created an egalitarian society capable of giving the knights a happy court, a spiritual home which nurtured and consoled the knights.

The round table existed as a spiritual locality. When knights were back to the kingdom, it was signified by the moment of coming back to their mother and therefore the integrity of the kingdom was proved once again. The epilogue of the Holy Grail quest panorama of feasting supernaturally is the indicator of the restoration of the motherhood symbol that nourished and pacified the knights (Zhang, 2014). It was a religious attachment that helped the knights attain their identities and recognition, providing them not only with emotional sustenance, but also the enjoyment of a company of people in peaceful coexistence (Zhang, 2014). One of active and significant positions is round table, an origin of the knights and their spiritual center. The restoration of the peaceful system that was represented by Guinevere and upon which the kingdom was restored to order symbolizes all reunions. However, one central hidden element buries the later downfall of Camelot—since King Arthur and Guinevere have no child of their own, the symbol of fertility and richness of marriage is a pregnancy simulated and a marriage doomed to fail.

It was the courtly love that made noble women such as Guinevere who were involved in nobility to be the rulers of the knightly behavior and made them placed in a better position and led the knights through their courtesy. Eager to win her compliments or approval, the round table knights employed their heroism and pledged their allegiance to Guinevere as they did to a lord. She is the queen of beauty and love, the giveaway of favors, the motivator of all knight virtues, the containment of evil acts, as C. S. Lewis commented. No wonder Guinevere dictates Lancelot's behaviors: the Knight of the Cart, when Lancelot foregoes his honor to visit her and goes to visit her on the account of his service to her (Cobb, 1987). This report demonstrates that Lancelot is at her absolute and entire possession in body and soul. Furthermore, Enide, in Erec and Enide, though not born into a noble

family, guides her husband and, through her guidance and bravery succeeds in reviving his knightly reputation. All these are signs of how courtly love allowed women of high status to instruct and to rule the demeanor of knights, paving the way for the furthering of their relationship. Queens were no longer a passive component of the feudal marriages; they received the status of the ethical center of the court and the spiritual head of the state. The feudal loyalty to their lords was replaced with the obligation of the knights to their women, and the ultimate goal of this direction was to gain the goodwill of the queen (Zhang, 2014).

Guinevere has then her own occupations as well as that of a symbol of political order of the state. The symbolic meaning of the rebellion by Mordred indicates that he tried to marry Guinevere as a sign of his efforts to rule the throne, which, however, was broken by her affair with Lancelot. Guinevere serves as just a symbol, signifying the throne itself, where herself, her voice, her image, and her feelings are hidden under and shadow of the crown, invisible to men in power. And Mordred's desire to marry Guinevere was not out of love, but the thirst for power, for Guinevere's status as the Queen, a tradition which is inherited in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This feudal politics where emphasis is laid on the clash of desires, the needs of the inner passion, and the loyalty to the king is what ruins Guinevere as a result of this affair.

Guinevere in the Arthurian literatures indicates the representation mode of the females that was idealized as harmonious, courteous, and loving, only ignoring their agency as a human being (Miller, 1974). Women were regulated in the social context under the confinement of such abstraction. The definition of this order is the fact that Guinevere engages in adultery and this fact recalls the incompatibility of virtues of courtly love with feudal politics. The system of values that qualified people to be called knights is revealed to be weak because her affair is an indication that time and again women were symbolic.

This was the case with Guinevere through the stigmatization as the target of the early philosophical tradition, of women as the source of moral weakness and aggression (Miller, 1974). All these traditions were the roots of her being femme fatale, whose actions provided an escape of the destruction of the kingdom. The narrative shifts the blame of the political failures on her part and conceals the inner political fights. The story advocates the hierarchy set in which men are dominating since it portrays women as morally corrupted and thus protects the honor and the authority of the knights (Liu, 2023).

Guinevere is a model of the duality in the gender power in the middle ages. She is also desired and hated simultaneously as an icon of harmony and hypocrisy. Her dual nature brings forth the concealed nature of the power polarities of the Arthurian cast with women being entrapped in reverence and scapegoated. This discourse demonstrates how courtly love made it easy to dominate the male by restraining female's free will to reveal the patriarchal trait of a medieval society significantly attached in modern gender stereotyping (Manning, 1964).

The Mechanism of Female Abstraction and Dehumanization

The Significance of Guinevere for the Kingdom

Guinevere in King Arthur's legends functions not only as a queen of the king but also a moving image of the royal stability and order in the court. To have her is to assert the authority of entitlement to the kingdom. A typical example is in the Mordred's rebellion in which he made use of the situation that King Arthur was at war to usurp the throne and also attempted to marry Guinevere forcibly. This is what made Mordred realize and therefore he attempted to tempt the Queen in the same manner that Arthur did and by doing so he would be doing what a king has done in all aspects. To a large extent, this act serves to show that Guinevere is behaving like an icon of kingship. Political order of the kingdom of Arthur did not make people produce an heir to the throne by

means of the sperm, but, through the Queen, the bonaise of the harmony. It was to possess her, which was to control the entire courtly logistics as well as spiritual energy that she was and thus to possess the right to power. In this way, individual identity of Guinevere was also not left outside in conjunction with the political order of the kingdom. She was an embodiment of both royal legitimacy because she embodied the symbol of harmony. In a negative analogy, the deeds of Mordred are presented as the one that were the most direct means to upset the authority of Arthur, as they were not merely to fight him in battle but to seize away Guinevere, which was the very symbol of this order. This ultimately transforms Guinevere into the center of the Arthurian political legend, not just as a speaker of a love idol, but more importantly, the most important political figure of keeping the balance in the kingdom and transferring the power.

Whereas the depiction of Guinevere in the literature of the Arthurian allows various interpretations to reflect honoring and praising of women and accentuate their importance, it comprises many descriptions, where women objectify themselves and are claimed to be offending.

Guinevere's Adultery: Maternal Betrayal and Political Collapse

Women in the courtly love story such as Guinevere are hypothetically idealized as an icon of harmony, courtesy, and boldness, disregarding the personal strength and female supports, fertility. That is what comes in reducing women to submissive objects capable of acculturation in the principles of the aristocratic of knightly nobility which provides a disciplinary regime that tightens the social order. Guinevere, also known as Anima in Psychological Interpretation, is the woman part in the male psyche. The marriage between Guinevere and Arthur is symbolic that is the equilibrium of the inner world of Arthur (reason and emotion) and the external order of the court (Manning, 1964). This is a biological role of a queen and in courtly love stories; the role has been overridden conventionally—she had to raise heirs. *The Wounded Heart* shows people that in the time it was written, no one thought about divorce between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII and believed it was necessary to feed people with romanticized narratives on how to represent her as a patron of love (Miller, 1974). She also does with her daughter, Marie de Champagne reportedly the editor-in-chief of courtly love theory, ousting her in the political position as the brokered of marriage and substituting it with love and iconography of courtesy.

The stories are combined with a highly strict code of behavior with masculine idealism in feminine. The identified woman in the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the Lady Bercilak symbolizes the knight through scenarios that anger the code of behavior of a knight. Gawain must strike the right balance between loyal to his lady and loyal to his host (Miller, 1974). Since women are indispensable accusers of such conventions forever, they are accentuated as the donors of favor and as the engines of the punishments of admirability in knights (Capellanus, cited in Miller, 1974). The respect of the women per se is not expressed through this romanticism but is dehumanizing and serves to end the women as a cultural icon. Trying to make women abstract and a representation of unity and love, the aristocratic society of the medieval period regards her and changes her into the creature that could be easily handled, as in the case of spoils of war, which knights might know in the battlefield. The society exercises the chain of command among the women and knights who are even punished.

The situation when Guinevere makes adultery causes the undermining of the role of a symbolic mother and a queen. Her personal desire is the absolute renouncement of this dreamed innocence and maternal virginity she should i.e. adhere to the courtly standards. The Guinevere in Psychological Interpretation is said to be the embodiment of the virtue of femininity in the mind of the man of Arthur and hence guaranteeing the court stability (Manning, 1964). Her affair with Lancelot turns her, nevertheless into an irreducible and yet unalterable being to

a woman who walks with the pure longing which defeats her as mother of the knights in the spiritual meaning. Such exposure of her affair leads to internal disunity and condemnation in the round table fellowship. Political impeachment of the queen through revealing the affair is an aspect of betrayal of the sons who learn about the infidelity of their mother (Miller, 1974).

Queen joins the king with the knights and during the feudal system, she is the bridging and offers them dedication to each other and esteem to one another. Adultery done by Guinevere is partnered with betrayal of her husband, Arthur, as well as her son who are also knights. This derailment causes partial obedience between the king and the knights as they had to make a decision on whether to go to battle with Arthur, and to defend Guinevere (Liu, 2023). The infidelity of Guinevere in turn appears to compromise the beliefs of the personal and political order that reveals the disparities between the notion of courtly love and the fact of feudal politics.

As established in the tale of Guinevere we may observe that there are indeed strict rules that are supposed to be followed in the roles of the woman that in fact are created to continue a male dominated political workforce. Once these standards are violated as it is the case with the case of an adultery of Guinevere, it destroys the whole structure to the point where the round table and the peace of the kingdom are ruined. This illustrates the deadly sarcasm of the courtly love literature; the role of overwhelming control of women therein is not nurtured to benefit women but their position of male dominated power set up.

The Ideological Roots of Female Stigmatization and Guinevere as Scapegoat

The origins of female stigmatization are the misogyny of the Patristic, e.g. St. Jerome, and the classical, such as Juvenal. Women as portrayed in these traditions were longstanding ideologically viewed as inherently immoral and dangerous, and this, in turn, led to the road of post-ideological treatment of Guinevere as a femme fatale. In his article, Miller extensively cites the book of St. Jerome's book *Against Jovinian*, in which Jerome mentions the women he is describing as "the gate to the fiend" and "the way of the wickedness" (Miller, 1974). He formed the systematic association between femininity and moral barbarism, following the appeals of the ancients to refer to the passion in woman as the insatiable monster (Miller, 1974), and the Biblical teachings. He was adamant to advise men and particularly the cleric to resist temptation of women to enable them focus on philosophy and faith, because he linked women with moral deficiency. Similarly, another major source of medieval misogyny texts mentioned by Miller is the *Sixth Satire* of Juvenal of Rome literary misogynist (Liu, 2023). In this, the work presents an outburst of a furious attack on a luxurious life, matrimonial unfaithfulness, and the unfaithfulness of men and women. All these send-ups of women by classical and Patristic authorities were united to form a theory of creation pegged on the evil nature of a woman. The literary narrative of the Guinevere adultery, here, would present not only a personal sin, but a stylistic element of the masculine species of woman of its entire corruption. She is inconsistent specifically because she is the best advocate of the image of female lightmindedness that Juvenal developed and the far-reaching consequences of her actions on the court of King Arthur appear to be crucial evidence of the verdict that St. Jerome gave about woman being the gateway of the fiend (Miller, 1974). Therefore, it is not coincidental that such a description of Guinevere in the Arthurian lore represents her as a bad woman, who contributes to the destruction of the kingdom. It carries within it a misogynistic ideology, which had been established under the combination of both the powers of the classical influence and the Christian influence. Only with the help of this speech might personal actions of Guinevere be so readily puffed up and to uphold the so-called original stain on her gender in general. It is the character that undergoes condemnation, and in a way, this literary tradition is a continuation of an entire tradition of misogyny.

The narration of the Arthurian legend implicitly changes the internal conflict of power within the kingdom such as the ambitious greed of Mordred and the devastation of the knightly order into the moral tragedy so as to blame the guilt of a femme fatale. So Guinevere's adultery bears the responsibility of political conflict. The victim Guinevere at the end of it all had become the victim flunky within the rank of the male rule ended her life so that she could protect the egos of the male knights and the code of honors in chivalry (Manning, 1964). In *The Wounded Heart* by Andreas Capellanus, every woman is stamped with the sin of grasping and greedy temperament, and no woman has ever loved man (Liu, 2023). This attitude of directing its attention to systemic problems at the female nature has a theoretical predecessor in which Guinevere was scapegoated. As far as the political conflict is concerned, it is safe to say that Morgan le Fay is the primary offender since he excelled in the role of the action. Nevertheless, the focus on narrative remains to be on the infidelity of Guinevere and Gawain blames to be ruined by betrayal by a woman (Manning, 1964). Consequently, by portraying women as the agents of the moral corruption, the internal power crisis behind Mordred's usurp could allow King Arthur and the Knights of the round table to envision themselves as victims of enticements (Liu, 2023). This method of narration does expose the logic of working patriarchy. Through penalizing women, they transform institutional failure into gendered moral issue problem, and substantiate the image of superficial cohesiveness of male community.

Conclusion

The figure of Guinevere embodies the core contradictions of medieval gender power structures, serving simultaneously as a sacred symbol and a sinful scapegoat—both intensely desired and profoundly feared. This dual nature reveals how worship and stigmatization function not as oppositional forces but as complementary narrative strategies employed by the same patriarchal power structure to control women and discipline men. Such reinterpretation of Guinevere fundamentally breaks with traditional romantic readings of Arthurian legends, instead exposing the underlying power dynamics and gender politics that have long been obscured by courtly love conventions. This analytical approach not only provides a critical model for interpreting other marginalized female figures in medieval literature but also contributes significantly to tracing the historical origins of the persistent “Madonna-Whore” dichotomy that continues to permeate modern popular culture, demonstrating how contemporary gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted in medieval narrative patterns and power structures.

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