

Introduction

This book examines the function of gender in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, arguing that an understanding of the particular construction of gender in Malory's text is critical to any attempt to engage with its narrative project. Like many other medieval romance texts, the *Morte d'Arthur* focuses on the masculine activity of chivalry—fighting, questing, ruling—while simultaneously revealing the chivalric enterprise as impossible without the presence of the feminine in a subjugated position. However, Malory's text differs from other Arthurian and medieval romance literature in the explicit legislation (as opposed to implicit coding) of chivalric values, most notably in the swearing of the Pentecostal Oath, an event unique to Malory's text. This study examines how the institution of the Oath defines and sharpens specific ideals of masculine and feminine gender identities in the Arthurian community, arguing that a compulsion to fulfill these ideals drives the narrative of the *Morte d'Arthur* forward to its inevitable ending. While I generally agree with scholars who see the *Morte d'Arthur* as, at least in part, a comment on the strife and instability of fifteenth-century England, I feel also that the *Morte* is a text that does much more than simply reflect and engage the anxieties of the author's time by turning nostalgically to a long-distant past for guidance and reassurance. Malory's text examines the very idea of chivalry by setting into motion the knightly enterprise and following it through to its ultimate conclusion.

A sustained, book-length treatment of gender in the *Morte d'Arthur* is long overdue; while the works of other medieval authors—most notably Chaucer—have in recent years been subjected to rigorous and fruitful scrutiny by scholars with an interest in gender and feminist studies,¹ the *Morte d'Arthur* has received comparatively cursory attention in this area. In part, this may be due to what some scholars view as Malory's "de-feminization" of his source material. Terence McCarthy argues that Malory's

text is "essentially military" in spirit, and that while "in the French texts we will find long soliloquies and analyses of private feeling . . . their absence from the *Morte Darthur* is of vital importance. . . the interest in love and amorous reputations is dispensed with by Malory, and the difference is considerable. . . . On the other hand there is always time for combat and war."² Similarly, Andrew Lynch (who himself has offered some very fine analyses of gender in Malory), has recently privileged a reading of the text as concerned with martial activities, suggesting that "the role of Malory's women can often be interestingly understood through their implication in the language of knightly combat."³

My position is somewhat the inverse of Lynch's: I contend that knightly combat and its language are, in a sense, produced and given meaning by Malory's women, or, to put it more precisely, *by the text's understanding and construction of women*. Critics like McCarthy quite rightly point to Malory's excision—or "stripping away"—of moments in his sources concerned with expressions of emotion and love; yet, such a move—even as it reveals a favoring of the public over the private, a privileging of exterior actions over interior feeling—does not diminish the significance of the issue of gender and construction of the feminine in the text. Indeed, if Catherine LaFarge is correct and in Malory "the feminine is located as both the inner and the utterly outside . . . [and] . . . the masculine and the feminine, the public and the private, [exist] in a new and uneasy tension,"⁴ then an analysis of gender in Malory is vital to lay bare the structure and workings of the narrative.

While there has recently been a long-awaited and long-overdue increase of insightful articles that address the issue of gender in Malory,⁵ I contend that gender issues "pressure" the *Morte d'Arthur* differently at different moments in the narrative, so that the relationship of gender to the other ideals of chivalry expressed in Malory's text must be studied as a force that develops and changes as the story progresses. Thus, the function of gender in the *Morte d'Arthur* can only be adequately explored in a book that traces in depth the development of gender constraints from the beginning of the "Tale of King Arthur" to the "Day of Destiny" and its aftermath.⁶

One reason the *Morte d'Arthur* merits a sustained study in terms of gender is due to its status as the most comprehensive and sustained medieval treatment of the Arthurian legend by a single author.⁷ Starting with the Arthurian prehistory of Uther and Igrayne, Malory traces the progression of the chivalric community from Arthur's ascension to the throne and

consolidation of power through to the ultimate destruction of the Round Table and the collapse of the kingdom.⁸ Malory by and large successfully maintains a linear temporal progression toward a definitive end point and marshalls his sources to conform to the movement of the narrative. This fact makes Malory's text utterly unique in the canon of medieval Arthurian literature. Although it draws heavily on the French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Arthurian texts for source material, the *Morte d'Arthur* is more focused and unified than this sprawling collection (now more commonly referred to collectively as the *Lancelot-Graal*), the sections of which were composed by a variety of authors over many years. It is likewise more comprehensive and broad in its scope than the shorter Arthurian romances (such as those of Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), many of which focus on a single episode, adventure, or event, cut loose and extracted from the larger story of the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. It differs also from somewhat longer works that contain several episodes, such as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*; in the *Morte d'Arthur*, Malory rewrites and incorporates the events of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* into a narrative that is far larger in its vision of Arthur's reign. Micheau Gonnot's compilation of Arthurian texts for the Duke of Nemours, completed in 1470 (BN MS f.fr 112), is the closest analogue to Malory's text in terms of subject, scope, and period of composition, but Gonnot understands himself as a compiler, assembling the writings of others, while Malory, I believe, sees himself as reworking the same sources used by Gonnot to make something new.⁹ In short, there is nothing else like Malory in all of medieval Arthurian literature.

Although unique, it must be acknowledged that the *Morte d'Arthur* is not at all an "original" work in the modern sense. Malory draws on a variety of sources—both French and English—in creating his account of the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom, and does not hesitate to argue for the "historical veracity" of many episodes by telling the reader on several occasions that he is faithfully conveying information from his sources—"the Freynsh booke makyth mencion" (253.14);¹⁰ "the Freynsshe booke seyth" (1217.12–13)—or that he is unable to relate certain details because he has lost a source text, or his sources are silent on particular matters—"And bycause I have loste the very mater of Shevalere de Chayrot I departe from the tale of sir Launcelot" (1154.12–13). While Malory often closely paraphrases or, on some occasions even almost directly translates his sources into fifteenth-century English (the Roman War and Grail Quest episodes being the two most-cited examples), he also makes important additions

and revisions to the source material. What he chooses to omit from his sources seems in some instances more significant than what he chooses to retain, and *where* in the narrative of the *Morte d'Arthur* he chooses to include certain episodes found in his sources is frequently more notable than the fact that he chooses to include those episodes at all.

Much attention has been paid to those moments in Malory for which there is no known source: for example, the Pentecostal Oath appears to be original to Malory, and a clear source for the "Tale of Sir Gareth" has yet to be unearthed.¹¹ Malory "unlaces" the complex *entrelacement* of the French Vulgate, moving the episode of the "Knight of the Cart" to a much later position in his own text than would be in keeping with the source. He also radically rewrites the ending of another source text—the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*—in telling the story of Arthur's Roman War. While it is right to examine these "original" moments for what they might tell us about Malory's conception of the Arthurian legend, it is wrong to dismiss whole sections—as Eugène Vinaver does the Grail Quest—as being "for all intents and purposes, a mere translation."¹² As McCarthy has put it: "Our critical assessment must cover the 'hoole book,' as Malory called it, must take into account the overall impact of a literary recreation for which he is entirely responsible, however little he invented himself."¹³

Malory has made a "new thing" in his massive opus. Thus, while I will engage with and analyze certain episodes that faithfully follow the source text from which Malory drew them, this does not render these episodes any less significant in terms of the *Morte d'Arthur's* chivalric narrative project or the question of gender. For example, Morgan le Fay (whom I discuss at greater length in chapter 1) is more or less the same hateful figure in the thirteenth-century *Suite du Merlin* as she is in Malory's account of the early days of Arthur's kingdom; yet, her destructive actions resonate differently when placed in the context of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. The Morgan of the French text resists her prescribed gender role just as I claim she does in Malory, but the significance of her actions in Malory has a different effect when considered in light of the overarching plot. The Morgan of the *Suite* does not live in a world where knights swear annually to follow the rules set out in the Pentecostal Oath; the Morgan of the *Suite* does not have quite the long career of mischief-making ahead of her that Malory's Morgan does; and the Morgan of the *Suite* will never make a final appearance in a positive and supporting role to carry her wounded brother away to Avalon to be healed: "A, my dere brothir! Why

have ye taryed so longe frome me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede have caught overmuch colde!" (1240.23–25).¹⁴

While my discussion and analysis of Malory does take into account the historical circumstances in which the *Morte d'Arthur* was composed and the tradition of Arthurian and romance literature from which it derives, the primary goal of this study is not to "ground" Malory in terms of the social, political, and literary realities and conventions of his day.¹⁵ Although I may engage with and use such analyses on several occasions, I am not attempting to excavate historically "real" gender roles and identities in the present study.¹⁶ I agree that in many ways, Malory's text may be read as a reaction to the turbulent fifteenth century and the so-called Wars of the Roses that so affected English society, particularly the knightly class of which Malory was a member. I would hardly be the first person to note the irony of the fact that it is while imprisoned for most unknighthlike behavior—including rape, assaulting an abbot, and cattle-stealing—that Malory composes a massive text seemingly dedicated to the glorification of chivalry and knighthood.¹⁷

While England had enjoyed considerable success in its campaigns into France in the fourteenth century, by Malory's lifetime¹⁸ England had lost all its holdings in France save Calais, and internally the civil Wars of the Roses had created multiple conflicts that affected all areas and levels of English society.¹⁹ For a variety of reasons, including the massive plague-induced depopulation of the mid-fourteenth century, the rise of vernacular literacy, and the development of a precapitalist market economy—marked not only by trade in items such as wool and cloth among large cities but also by an increase in commodity production among peasant communities—fifteenth-century English society was arguably far less rigidly stratified than its neighbors on the Continent.²⁰ Traditional medieval concepts of hierarchical class structure and social order were undergoing transformation in this period.²¹ A series of events over approximately 150 years had contributed to make Malory's England a time and place of social fluidity. It was a time in which it was possible for the daughter of a minor baron, Elizabeth Woodville, to become queen and thereby ennoble her parents, siblings, and children from a previous marriage; in this period, it was possible also for a common family like the Pastons—through a combination of skill in the legal profession and advantageous marriage—to acquire land and wealth on a scale comparable with their noble neighbors, eventually advancing up the social ladder to knighthood itself.²²

It would seem no small coincidence that in this period of social mobility and uncertainty, Malory would produce a massive text concerned with the office of knighthood, which was itself suffering from the pressures of the age. As Felicity Riddy has rightly noted: "Nor is it a coincidence that among the many texts contributing to the nobility debate in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Malory's should be a romance, and not a treatise, a debate, or even an interlude. The myth of class is now appropriately expressed only in a fiction that seems to play with its own fictionality."²³ Indeed, the *Morte d'Arthur* is a story about knights who themselves engage in perpetual storytelling as a means to define and legitimize the office of knighthood and the chivalric community that supports it. By Malory's lifetime and the period in which he composed the *Morte d'Arthur*—roughly between 1468 and 1470—both the practical and idealized aspects of knighthood had been compromised.²⁴ This was due in part to the steady development of advances in warfare from the late thirteenth century on—the increased use of archers, guns, and other long-distance artillery—which rendered the armored knight on horseback inessential and obsolete. Yet, there remained in existence a knightly warrior class, and those men who called themselves "knights"²⁵ often resorted to banditry and thieving as a means of support, or engaged (for profit) in the so-called private wars that so marked aristocratic society during this period.²⁶ Richard Kaeuper has remarked of the fifteenth century that "one of the greatest threats to the peace of the realm came from the day to day conduct of the knightly classes whose violent self-help was often proudly proclaimed and recognized as a right rather than condemned as a crime."²⁷ The throne of fifteenth-century England changed hands eight times (rarely peacefully),²⁸ and the frequency of violent successions necessarily compounded those pressures already attendant on knights and nobles faced with the difficulty of negotiating loyalties within a complex and changing system of loyalty and service.²⁹

Malory belonged to this knightly class and was himself one of those men who seemed to have difficulty negotiating loyalties. The author of the *Morte d'Arthur* spent the last years of his life in prison, either for his politics or for what seems to have been general lawlessness. Most certainly, he was one of a group of men who ambushed the Duke of Buckingham—his former patron—on a winter's night in 1450. In all likelihood, his political activities and the charges brought against him were at least partially connected; it seems that Malory had initially been a Yorkist supporter, but by 1468 he appears to have changed sides, and in that year was sent to

prison for his role in a Lancastrian plot. Remarkably, it is while imprisoned for such very unknighthlike behavior that Malory composes his *Morte d'Arthur*, a text that many read as celebrating the knightly chivalric ethos. Yet, such a reading is overly simplistic, for, as Elizabeth Pochoda has noted, the *Morte d'Arthur* enacts "a peculiar tension between . . . Malory's faith in chivalry as a world-saving ideal . . . and the fact that the book also damns chivalry in no uncertain terms."³⁰ Indeed, the *Morte d'Arthur* seems to be a text that is *both* nostalgic and cautionary. How it is able to be both at once, and how gender concerns participate in this conflict, is one of the main subjects of this book.

What I think is most interesting and important about Malory's text (and what other critics have failed to recognize adequately) is that he reacts to the trouble of his day by creating a code of conduct—the Pentecostal Oath. By adding this ritual of explicit oath-taking to the beginning of the story of Arthur's reign, Malory effectively sets a series of chivalric guidelines into action; the rest of the narrative tests those chivalric rules, attempting to see how (and if) they function successfully in a variety of circumstances. One of what might be called the "unintentional side effects" of this code of conduct is the formation of a particular gender ideal. A compulsion to fulfill this ideal drives the narrative toward its inevitable conclusion, and the tensions created by the legislation of chivalric behavior and identity are increasingly exacerbated as the text progresses.

In interrogating the function of gender in Malory, I make use of the work of gender theorists such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Eve Sedgwick; however, my analysis is not "theory-driven." Rather, I use the work of these and other critics as tools with which to excavate and better analyze forces and drives that are identifiably present in the text *before* any such approach is applied. In other words, the goal of this book is to analyze how gender functions to produce the movement of the narrative toward its unavoidable tragic ending and to discuss how Malory's version of the Arthurian legend is thereby unique in the canon of medieval Arthurian literature. I am not arguing that Malory deliberately set out to represent a particular ideal of gender relations and identity in the *Morte d'Arthur*. Rather, what I am suggesting is that in representing the idealized noble community of Arthur's court, Malory's narrative unintentionally produces and depends upon a certain model of gender identity that not only creates much of the narrative action but also heightens the significance and impact of many episodes and events drawn from his source material. With this in mind, I would like now to offer an exemplary reading

that I think demonstrates my methodology and goals in engaging with how the question of gender informs Malory's depiction of the Arthurian community. An analysis of Malory's Roman War reveals that even in the most masculine of spaces—the battlefield—gender concerns over masculine *and* feminine identities produce, mediate, and give meaning to the events of the narrative.

Malory's Roman War

The account of Arthur's war against the Roman Emperor Lucius (Vivaver's Tale II) is one of the most interesting portions of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*: while vastly understudied relative to other sections of the text, what critical response it *has* received has been remarkably mixed. Part of what gives the debate over Malory's account of Arthur's continental campaign its shape is that the account exists in two very different forms: that found in the Winchester manuscript, and a much abbreviated version, as printed by William Caxton.³¹ The very fact of Caxton's seemingly deliberate and ruthless reduction of the text has long been viewed as an implicit critique of what most scholars agree is a "rough prosification"³² of Malory's direct source, the Middle English *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, composed in the early part of the fifteenth century.³³

It has become a commonplace in Malory studies to point out that Malory's adaptation of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* maintains much of the alliteration found in his source. C. S. Lewis famously noted that Caxton's revision made this tale "more Malorian, more like the best and most typical parts of Malory."³⁴ McCarthy, who has argued for a reconsideration of Malory's story of Arthur and Lucius as an important element in the *Morte d'Arthur*'s overall narrative, notes that Tale II "is not a book with occasional stylistic blemishes; it is, as it were, all blemish."³⁵ It is due to the "closeness" of Malory's Tale II to its source and its "rough" and "unfinished" quality that several scholars contend that Malory most likely composed this portion of the *Morte d'Arthur* first; it seems to show him in the early stages of his project, not yet fully comfortable as an adapter or translator.

I disagree with such an assessment; I think Malory had a clear idea of his project from beginning to end, and that he saw the Roman War as following directly on the heels of the events that take place in the "Tale of King Arthur." Its deliberate placement in his text—as the second narrative block—is critically important to my argument about how gender works in

the *Morte d'Arthur*. However, I choose to engage with this episode first—here in the introduction—because I think it provides the clearest example of how Malory's alterations to his sources produce remarkable effects, especially in terms of gender. It is precisely the fact that Malory has *seemingly* done so little in adapting the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* that makes it a compelling site to stage an exemplary reading of his larger text in terms of gender. Although Malory has made some small but significant changes to the account of the Roman War, the way in which he has *framed* this episode is most important for understanding the different valence that the concerns of gender have in the *Morte d'Arthur*. In effect, a critical analysis of Malory's Roman War—and in particular, the episode of the Mont St. Michel giant contained within it—reveals how and why the issue of gender informs and structures the whole *Morte d'Arthur*.

The ultimate source of the story of Arthur's Roman War is Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century Latin chronicle, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, completed in 1136 or 1138.³⁶ Less than twenty years after the completion of Geoffrey's text, the *Historia* was translated into French octosyllabic couplets by the "clerc lisant" known as Wace, and in the early thirteenth century, the English priest known to us variously as "Lazamon," "Lawman," or "Layamon" translated Wace into an "archaicizing" English that seems to hearken back to an Anglo-Saxon past in both its form (the alliterative line, although rhymed couplets are also used) and its sympathies. In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, the account of Arthur's continental campaign was adapted and expanded by the anonymous author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.³⁷

Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is quite different from these other texts—not so much in the specific concerns that it represents, but more important, in the *way* it represents those concerns. The distinction of the *Morte d'Arthur* from these other texts lies in its status as a romance—not a chronicle or history.³⁸ Although Malory's text arguably deploys several other modes—including epic, chronicle, and tragedy—the *Morte d'Arthur*'s predominant mode is romance.³⁹ The "romance coloring" of Tale II is partially effected through the undeniable generic status of the narratives that frame the "Tale of Arthur and the Emperor Lucius." The "Tale of King Arthur" and the "Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake" are both reworkings of Old French romances.⁴⁰ Although he has preserved many of the important episodes that occur in earlier accounts of Arthur's continental campaign, Malory has changed the tenor and the interpretive mode in which one reads the conflict between Arthur and Lucius. By relocating this event

early in Arthur's career, by recasting it as an unmitigated success, and by framing the Roman War with two romances, Malory has greatly changed the significance of this episode. In earlier texts, the Roman War usually stands as both crowning achievement and final catastrophe for Arthur, an event that colors the whole of his reign.⁴¹ In Malory, it stands as the high point of Arthur's career as an individual player on the field of chivalry, and seemingly makes possible the marvelous adventures that will be performed by Arthur's knightly agents in the episodes that follow. Although Malory is working with a long-famous and well-known story, his placement of it within his larger narrative creates a new effect and significance.

Although Malory appears to have had a clear idea of the tragic ending of his text, the consequence of his decision to rewrite the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and make Arthur's continental campaign an unqualified success cannot be overstated. This campaign comes not long after Arthur's creation of the Round Table order and its Pentecostal Oath and shows chivalric ideals functioning at highest efficiency. It also offers for Malory's readers an alternative fantasy to the reality of fifteenth-century English geography, one in which those lands lost to the French during the Hundred Years War still belong to England, and English dominion expands to include most of continental Europe. Felicity Riddy and Patricia Clare Ingham have both recently discussed how Malory's text (and in particular, the Roman War episode) seem to reflect a general longing in fifteenth-century English society for a golden age—or at the very least, for the days of Henry V's glorious victory at Agincourt.⁴² This fantasy of English dominance, as Riddy has so aptly put it, is in Malory's day best expressed in a romance.

In writing the complete story of Arthur's reign but writing it primarily from the romance as opposed to chronicle tradition, Malory's Roman War and the episodes it contains take on a new valence. Each of the earlier texts contain the well-known story of the giant of Mont St. Michel's abduction and/or rape of the Duchess of Brittany embedded within the larger narrative of Arthur's military exploits on the Continent. Although the basic elements of this episode are more or less consistent in all of these texts, Malory's particular treatment of this narreme enacts a construction, understanding, and function of gender and its relationship to communal order that differs substantially from that depicted in the sources and analogues.

The main elements of the episode vary only slightly from text to text and run roughly as follows: Some time after his coronation, ambassadors

from Rome arrive at Arthur's court and demand that Britain pay tribute to Rome. After some debate, Arthur decides that instead, he will conquer Rome and incorporate it into his kingdom. Shortly after the arrival of his army on the Continent, Arthur receives word that a giant who has been troubling the people of the land has kidnapped the daughter/niece of his kinsman Hoel and absconded with her to Mont St. Michel. Arthur, usually accompanied by Kay and Bedivere, sets out to avenge this injustice, but arrives too late: the duchess has died, leaving behind her old nursemaid to lament her. Arthur then kills the giant, exacting vengeance for the duchess and freeing his continental subjects from the fiend who has been plaguing them.

In each version of this story—from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Malory—the episode of the giant's abduction and rape of the Duchess of Brittany plays an important role in producing the overall effect of the text, especially in terms of the issues of gender and community. The immediate effect of the encounter with the giant is to depict and explore concerns over boundaries and the integrity of bodies—both individual and political. Arthur's voyage across the channel is a drama in which lands that are identified as foreign are able to be conquered and thus incorporated into his own kingdom; the alien threat from the outside is subdued and remade into that which is inside. The giant represents the utterly outside—the alien and unknown. Never able to be fully translated or incorporated into that which is known, he must be destroyed.

In all of the versions of the Mont St. Michel episode, the abduction of the duchess, her rape, and Arthur's killing of the giant help to define the king as a masculine agent of justice, prefiguring and in some sense validating his victory over the Roman Emperor Lucius. Kathryn Gravdal has famously discussed rape as an important narrative device of many medieval texts, particularly romance texts, noting that "Sexual violence is built into the very premise of Arthurian romance. It is a genre that by its definition must *create* the threat of rape" (emphasis in original).⁴³ In their compelling comparative discussion of the Mont St. Michel giant in both Wace and *Lazamon*, Martin Shichtman and Laurie Finke engage with Gravdal's theory of rape in medieval literature. Situating their reading of these accounts of rape in the sociopolitical climate in which the texts were composed, they argue that the episode of the Mont St. Michel giant "coalesces several anxieties about the maintenance of boundaries during times when they are being redrawn in potentially disturbing ways" and that the enactment of this scene is an attempt "to shore up the boundaries between those

born to wealth and those born to poverty, between those trained to fight and those who are not, and, most significantly, between the familiar and the foreign."⁴⁴

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen similarly discusses how the figure of the giant in Middle English literature is traditionally the site of such boundary anxieties, but is also contradictorily the place in which such anxieties are also reassuringly expressed and contained: "Throughout his long history in the England of the Middle Ages, the giant conjoined absolute otherness with reassuring familiarity."⁴⁵ Focusing primarily on Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the Mont St. Michel giant, Cohen argues that concerns of gender, community, and individual masculine identity are brought together in this scene in important ways, noting that "the defeat of the giant is a social fantasy of the triumph of corporeal order (in all of its various meanings) written as a personal drama, a vindication of the tight channeling of multiple somatic drives into a socially beneficial expression of masculinity."⁴⁶

Interestingly, Cohen (in his discussion of Geoffrey), and Finke and Shichtman (in their discussion of Wace and Lažamon), all borrow the idea of the *point de capiton* from Slavoj Žižek to interrogate the episode of the rape. Finke and Shichtman argue that the giant's rape of Elaine "serves as a nodal point (*point de capiton*) that 'quilts' together networks of ideological relations these histories were designed to produce, while itself producing a certain excess . . . that exceeds the rape's ideological and structural function."⁴⁷ Cohen suggests that "the heroic name of Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth's text becomes a *point de capiton*, a 'quilting point' where the contradictions that inevitably undergird any subject, any ideology, are temporarily allayed by finding embodiment in a 'rigid' signifier. Arthur is autonomous, his will and his desires are efficacious, but at the same time, his identity is radically contingent on his place in the community. . . . Arthur sutures a set of free-floating and potentially contradictory signifiers (community, hero, monster, empire) into a coherent meaningful narrative."⁴⁸

I find these critics' use of Žižek's theorization of a *point de capiton*—in which "the multitude of 'floating signifiers' . . . is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' . . . which 'quilts' them . . . and fixes their meaning"—significant and instructive.⁴⁹ I would like to argue that it is precisely the function of this episode as a "quilting point"—a place in which so many seemingly disparate concerns are brought together in significant relational tension with one another—that

makes it an exemplary site to discuss the imbrication of gender with all aspects of Malory's chivalric community. Indeed, it seems that in comparison with these early chronicle accounts and with his immediate source, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Malory's treatment of the episode of the giant of Mont St. Michel "quilts" together the concerns of gender, community, individual identity, and kingship by means of tighter and more elaborate stitching (as it were) than any of the antecedent texts. While Finke and Shichtman point to the episode of the rape as the important "nodal point" in the quilting of concerns of gender and empire, and Cohen sees the figure of Arthur as the *point de capiton*, I would like to suggest that in Malory, it is neither Arthur nor the episode of the giant itself that functions to produce meaning; rather, the figure of Guenevere—absent from all earlier accounts—suddenly appears to bind together the threads that trail off from either end of the Roman War. The figure of the queen stitches the issues of gender, community, power, and rule—those that coalesce in the continental campaign—to the rest of the *Morte d'Arthur*.

It is interesting to note that among all the texts that treat the story of the giant of Mont St. Michel, the greatest changes to this episode are made not by Malory but by the author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. In Geoffrey, Wace, and Lazamon, Arthur sets out to avenge the abduction of the duchess—here described as either the daughter (Lazamon) or niece (Geoffrey, Wace) of Arthur's kinsman Hoel—accompanied by Kay and Bedivere. Arthur sends Bedivere ahead to scout out the situation, and it is he who encounters the old woman—the duchess's nursemaid—in these three early versions. Her account of what has happened to her mistress is similar in all of these accounts. In Geoffrey's text the nurse relates that after her abduction but before she is actually violated, the Duchess of Brittany dies:

serenissima alumpna recepto infra tenerrimum pectus timore dum
eam nefandus ille amplecteretur uitam diutuniori luce dignam finuit.
Ut igitur illam que erat michi alter spiritus, altera uita, altera dulcedo
iocunditatis fedo coitu suo detur pare nequiuit, destanda venere
succensus michi inuite . . . uim et uilentiam inegessit.

[when this foul being took her in his arms, fear flooded her tender breast and so ended a life which was worthy of a longer span. Since he was unable to befoul with his filthy lust this child . . . in the madness of his bestial desire he raped me, against my will.]⁵⁰