

Women in the Vulgate Cycle: from saints to sorceresses

Article

Published Version

Noble, P. S. (2004) *Women in the Vulgate Cycle: from saints to sorceresses*. *Reading Medieval Studies*, XXX. pp. 57-74. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84552/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: University of Reading

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Women in the Vulgate Cycle: From Saints to Sorceresses

Peter S. Noble
The University of Reading

The Vulgate Cycle, consisting of the *Prose Lancelot*, *La Queste du Saint Graal* and *La Mort le roi Artu*, belongs to the first quarter of the thirteenth century and was written by at least three different authors and possibly more.¹ Subsequently later writers added preludes and sequels, *L'Estoire*, the *Merlin* and the *Continuation*.² The authors drew heavily on the work of their predecessors, Chrétien de Troyes, Wace and Geoffroy of Monmouth who had established the Arthurian legend as a major literary theme in Anglo-Norman circles in the twelfth century. The themes of love and honour which are so important in the work of Chrétien reappear in the prose cycle, but the prose writers give more attention to the masculine issues of military valour, comradeship between knights and in *La Queste* the relationship between the chivalric code and spirituality, which is probably inspired by Cistercian teaching. This interest in military and religious matters inevitably results in a decline in the importance of women, as both domains were seen as purely masculine activities. We also have no idea who the patrons of the prose writers were, so that, whereas in the case of Chrétien we can speculate that his interest in the position and emotions of women was due, at least in part, to the fact that he wrote two of his romances for a female patron, Marie de Champagne, we cannot do the same for the prose.

Female characters have a considerable role to play in most of the *Lancelot*, but in the last part which is preparing the way for the story of the Grail their importance abruptly diminishes. In the

Queste itself there are almost no female characters of any importance apart from Perceval's sister whose importance lies more in her symbolic role than in her existence as a character. In *La Mort* women reappear but for the most part in no very favourable light. The authors of the later parts were clearly familiar with the work of their predecessors and the *Queste* and *La Mort* clearly try to make their work consistent with the *Lancelot* as far as the details are concerned although there is not the same consistency over character.³

In addition to the main female characters of whom the most consistently important is Guinevere with a major role in all sections of the story except *La Queste*,⁴ there is a host of minor and often nameless female characters who act as messengers or even more frequently become the objects of the knights' attention as objects of their lust or victims. Their desperate situation will give the opportunity to other knights to display their chivalry and their prowess by defending or rescuing them. Such women reflect clearly the relative powerlessness of thirteenth century women who in many cases would depend on their male relations to defend their interests. If the oppressor was their husband, father or brother in real life, such women were unlikely to find a champion as easily as the ladies in Arthurian romance who were able to turn to the knights of Arthur's court amongst whom they could usually find a champion to defend their interests.⁵ The authors' lack of interest in such women is shown by their failure to individualise them, whereas it is rare indeed that a knight is not identified by name when he has a solo role, however minor, to play.⁶

The women who attract the suspicion and dislike of the authors are the women who dare to challenge the authority of the male. The prime example of this is Morgain la Fée who is a permanent feature of the legend, but she is joined by other women of power, Queen Sedile and la Reine de Sorestan, who are her friends and allies.

... ce estoient les .III. fames ou monde qui plus savoient
d'enchantement et de charaies sanz La Dame del Lac.
(IV, LXXVIII, 1)

In the same category of women who pose a threat to male superiority are Brisane, the nurse of the daughter of King Pellès, the unnamed governess of the daughter of King Brandigorre and, the most important of them, the False Guinevere. A serious threat is posed to Arthur by Canille, the Saxon enchantress. In a different category is La Dame du Lac, who as the protector and guide of Lancelot is one of the rare women with supernatural powers who is seen as beneficent rather than malevolent.⁷

Brisane and the governess of the daughter of King Brandigorre have magic powers which they use to enchant Lancelot and Bors respectively.⁸ The governess has a magic ring which has the power to induce love. She persuades Bors to wear it and, as long as he does so, he is attracted to the girl with whom he sleeps and on whom he fathers Helain the White.⁹ As a result Bors's stainless reputation is slightly tarnished, so that in the *Queste* he is represented as the white bull spotted with faint spots whereas the bulls symbolising Perceval and Galaad are pure white. Thus Bors is less perfect than the other two of the three Grail knights. Brisane is slightly more prominent as she succeeds in getting Lancelot into bed twice with the daughter of King Pellès. The first time (when she gives him a magic potion¹⁰) is essential to the plot of the cycle, as Lancelot has to engender Galaad to produce the perfect knight who will achieve the adventure of the Grail; an adventure which Lancelot cannot achieve because of his love for Guinevere. The hand of destiny can be seen at work as Pellès and his daughter carry out the preordained deception. The second time Lancelot mistakes Brisane for an attendant of Guinevere and follows her to the girl's bed, where he thinks that he is making love to the Queen. Unfortunately the Queen, who is in bed at the other end of the room, hears the moans of Lancelot and banishes him from her presence. The result is that Lancelot leaves the court yet again and

goes mad, a madness from which he is only cured some years later, when the daughter of King Pelles recognises him, and her father allows him into the presence of the Grail which cures him. The ambivalence of the author towards women is clear in both episodes, as the women are presented as deceiving and tricking two of the outstanding knights of the Arthurian court. In the case of Bors it seems to be nothing but desire on the part of the girl. King Pelles's daughter is piqued the second time by Lancelot's lack of interest in her, and Brisane's manoeuvre nearly results in tragic consequences. These women are seen as inimical to the happiness and reputation of the knights, although they do not pose a physical threat to them.

Canille, the Saxon enchantress, is a very different case.¹¹ She seduces Arthur on the very night that Lancelot first sleeps with Guinevere (VIII, LXXa, 34-36). The authorial purpose is quite clear. The guilt of the adulterous lovers is considerably lessened by the fact that Arthur is already sleeping with the enemy.¹² Canille is very learned, and her power rests in part on her books of magic.

...si savoit plus d'encantemens que damoisele del païs
et moult ert bele et estoit del lignage as Saisnes. (VIII,
LXXa, 20)

When one of her prisoners, a damsel whom she has brutally mistreated, vengefully betrays the secret of her power to Kay, he promptly burns the books. Canille leaps to her death on the rocks below as she would have preferred to lose four castles rather than those books. Arthur is deeply distressed by her death as he had loved her dearly which reflects badly on him.

Et le roys Artus en fu moult dolans, quar moult
l'aimoit, et elle amast miels a avoir perdu tels .IIII.
castiaus que sez livres. (VIII, LXXIa, 40)

He has been unfaithful with a pagan enemy witch, and as a result Lancelot and Guinevere emerge from the episode in a far more

sympathetic light than Arthur. Canille is in her way a dangerous woman, educated, beautiful and with supernatural powers. Her elimination is essential, as she is a threat to everything that the Arthurian world is supposed to stand for, not least the power of the king and his knights. She is part of the pagan Saxon challenge to the christianising campaigns of Arthur and his men.¹³

Morgain in no way resembles Canille. She is Arthur's sister, and the affection between the two seems to survive throughout the cycle. Her origins are interesting as in Chrétien de Troyes she is not the sinister figure that she was to become in the prose cycle, but rather a great and expert healer.¹⁴ In the prose cycle, however, she is presented, particularly in the *Prose Lancelot*, as a malevolent enchantress feuding with Guinevere and Lancelot, her avowed enemies.¹⁵ Her hatred of Guinevere, her unfaithful sister-in-law, is perhaps not surprising. If Morgain loved her brother, which seems to be accepted by the authors, what could be more natural than that she should loathe his cheating wife? Her hatred for the Queen stems from Guinevere's interference in Morgain's love life for Guinevere had ended an affair between her nephew, Guyomar, and Morgain (I, XXIV, 40).¹⁶ It is intensified once Morgain realises that Guinevere has the eternal love of Lancelot.

kar ele het la roine sor totes autres femmes. (I, XXIV,
38)

Morgain herself was attracted to Lancelot and she cannot forgive him for rejecting her advances. He is in a sense a pawn in the battle between the two women which in some respects Morgain loses, as she can never finally destroy Lancelot and Guinevere despite her skilful attempts to cause trouble between them and Arthur. The most brilliant of these is when she holds prisoner Lancelot who has lost his wits after being banished from her presence by Guinevere. He starts to paint the walls of his prison with murals relating the story of his love for Guinevere. Morgain foresees how useful these could be and long afterwards, in *La Mort le Roi Artu*, when Arthur

comes, perhaps by chance, perhaps by fate, to her castle deep in the forest, she arranges for him to sleep in the room where he cannot fail to see the pictures. Her plan almost succeeds. Arthur leaves the castle convinced of the guilt of the lovers.

Par foi, fet il, se la senefiance de ces letres est veraie, donques m'a Lancelos honni de la reine, car ge voi tout en apert que il s'en est acointiez; et se il est veritez einsi com ceste escriture le temoigne, ce est la chose qui me metra au greigneur duel que ge onques eüsse; que plus ne me pooit Lancelos avillier que de moi honnir de ma fame. (52, 6-13)

When he returns to Camelot, he finds that in his absence Lancelot came to the court and left almost immediately. Arthur therefore assumes that the pictures are fiction, and for the moment he continues to trust Guinevere and Lancelot.

Morgain's magic powers can be seen to the full in the episode of the Val sans Retor (I, XXI, 13ff.). Any knight who had been unfaithful to his lady and entered the valley would be imprisoned for ever. Ladies could come and go. Only a knight who had never been unfaithful could break the spell, which Morgain had cast to avenge herself on an unfaithful lover. When Yvain and Lancelot arrive in the valley, Yvain immediately falls under the spell, but the presence of Lancelot breaks the spell to Morgain's fury. Once she has identified him, she guesses that he is the Queen's lover and starts to plot the destruction of the Queen. With the help of a magic ring she sends Lancelot to sleep and then imprisons him. With him in her power she is able to remove Guinevere's ring which she then sends to Arthur's court as proof to Guinevere that she will never see Lancelot again. Her messenger publicly accuses Guinevere and Lancelot of being sinners against their lord, but Arthur does not believe her, as the Queen, despite her distress, puts up such a fierce defence of the honourable nature of their love.

Et tant sache Diex, fet ele, et tos li mondes que je n'oi
onques a Lancelot ne il a moi amor vilaine, mais il
estoit li plus bials et li buens et li mielres des
buens...(I, XXIX, 14)¹⁷

Morgain's fury at the failure of her plot makes her decide to keep Lancelot prisoner for a long time to drive the Queen to despair, as Morgain hates her more than any other woman.

Morgain is a very dangerous enemy, but the courage of the knights and in particular the love of Lancelot for Guinevere arm them against her. In the end, however, when Guinevere dies in a convent and Lancelot dies as a hermit, Morgain is still there. At the end of *La Mort* she returns from Avalon to which she has withdrawn after the visit of Arthur to her castle.¹⁸ She had unhesitatingly rejected Arthur's invitation to come to the court and live with Guinevere, an example of obtuse, masculine insensitivity which it would be hard to better.¹⁹ As Arthur lies dying on the seashore, she comes with her retinue, hidden until the last moment in a sudden rainstorm, to rescue him, and the whole episode is watched by Girflet from a distant hilltop, as Arthur takes his horse and his armour on board the boat of his sister. Subsequently Girflet is told that Arthur's body lies buried in the Noire Chapelle having been brought there by ladies. Morgain and her Celtic magic could not prevail over death and fate, and the author of *La Mort le roi Artu* was determined to establish that Christianity would triumph. Morgain, whose otherworldly powers pose a threat to the power of the church, cannot be allowed to triumph. There is a lack of coherence, however, between the *Prose Lancelot* and the *Mort Artu* in their attitude to Morgain. In the former, as the avowed enemy of Lancelot and Guinevere, the perfect lovers, she is both the otherworldly sorceress and therefore a threat to Christians and woman the temptress, descendant of Eve, who brought about the fall of man and his exclusion from the Garden of Eden. In both guises she is repugnant to the authors of the *Prose Lancelot*. In *La Mort* she is still the enemy of Guinevere and Lancelot, but she

seems no longer interested in seduction. She no longer represents carnal sin, but rather the vengeful fury of a woman scorned, and at the end, with Lancelot and Guinevere absent from the death scene of Arthur, she is presented as an altogether softer figure, the sister attempting to save her dying brother. She still represents danger to a Christian whom she attempts to remove to her Celtic otherworld, but her power is insufficient, and Arthur ends up buried in Christian ground, next to the tomb of Lucan whom he had unintentionally crushed to death, as the inscription makes clear.²⁰

Whereas the author of *La Mort* marginally softens the portrayal of Morgain, he undoubtedly darkens that of Guinevere. In the *Prose Lancelot* Guinevere is the inspiration of Lancelot, the lady – *dame* or *dompna* – who controls his happiness and even his life.²¹ When he loses her favour, he loses his mind and goes mad. The thought that he might be unfaithful, which he never willingly is, drives her to fury, but Lancelot accepts her wrath without query and suffers until he is forgiven. Throughout the narrative they are the examples of the perfect lovers, but the reader is left in no doubt that it is Lancelot's affair with the Queen which hinders him from achieving the highest feat of knighthood, admission to the secrets of the Grail. Instead it is his destiny to father the perfect knight, Galaad, who, in the *Queste du Saint Graal*, will be admitted to the innermost secret of the Grail. Guinevere is therefore both the inspiration and the evil genius of Lancelot. Without her he would not reach the heights of chivalry that he does, but because of her he cannot show himself the perfect Christian knight.

In *La Mort*, however, the author is harsher on Guinevere. She is no longer the young and radiant Queen. She is a middle-aged woman, 50 according to the text, although still supremely beautiful.

...car a celui tens meïsmes qu'ele iert bien en l'aage de cinquante anz estoit ele si bele dame que en tout le monde ne trovast l'en mie sa pareille. (4, 20-23)

Nonetheless she is terrified of the threat posed to her by younger, beautiful women who, of course, abound in Arthurian romance. She has no difficulty in believing the gossip that Lancelot has fallen in love with the Demoiselle d'Escalot, who is also recognised as one of the great beauties of the kingdom, and, without ever giving Lancelot a chance to explain, banishes him from her presence. She is woman the temptress, who causes Lancelot to break his vow of chastity sworn whilst he was on the Grail Quest. Their reunion after his absence on the Grail Quest is all the more damaging because where once they had been discreet, now they behave *follement* (rashly), and their affair is soon an open secret.

Et se il avoit devant maintenu celui pechié si sagement
 et si couvertement que nus ne s'en estoit aperceüz, si le
 meintint après si folement que Agravains...s'en aperçut.
 (4,10-16)

They behave even worse after Lancelot has saved Guinevere from the accusation of Mador de la Porte that she poisoned his brother. Their affair becomes the talk of the court, so that Arthur can no longer pretend to himself that they are innocent. The result is the shattering of the society of the Round Table and the end of the Arthurian world, as Lancelot understands all too well.

Or poons nos bien dire, fet Lancelos, que jamés
 n'avrons pes au roi Artu ne a monseigneur Gauvain por
 amour de Gaheriet, car or commencera la guerre qui
 jamés ne prendra fin. (96, 11-15)

Guinevere undoubtedly has to take some of the responsibility for this, as the war between Arthur and Lancelot starts with Lancelot rescuing her from the stake where Arthur was going to burn her as a traitor and an adulteress. While she is not alone in causing the downfall of the Arthurian world – the wickedness of Agravaing and

Mordred plotting against Lancelot and Guinevere, the obsessive quest of Gauvain for vengeance for the death of his brothers at the hands of Lancelot, the weakness of Arthur in allowing himself to be dominated by Gauvain must all take their share of the blame – the downward spiral of events to the fight round the stake is largely inspired by Guinevere and her emotions.²² Her jealousy and insecurity in Lancelot's love make her an unsympathetic and dangerous figure, but after Lancelot has returned her to Arthur, for the sake of her honour, the author seems to lose interest in her. She has one powerful scene when she resists the overtures of Mordred and outwits his scheme to marry her and rule jointly. Terrified at the news of the return of Arthur, as she doubts that he will believe that she is innocent of taking part in the schemes of Mordred, she withdraws to a convent where she dies without ever seeing Lancelot again. She is allowed to die a truly pious death, but has no role in the glorious reconciliation of Lancelot with God which marks the climax of *La Mort*.

Guinevere's position in the *Lancelot* had been briefly threatened by the schemes of her bastard half-sister, the False Guinevere. This girl, as beautiful as Guinevere but lacking her nobility of spirit, is distinguished from her only by the absence of the crown shaped birthmark which is to be found on the true Guinevere. Jealous of her half-sister she is a willing tool of Bertolai, a knight disgraced by Arthur for being a murderer. Bertolai plots his revenge by substituting the bastard for the real Guinevere, although the author makes it clear that the False Guinevere had already formulated the plan herself, but was betrayed before she could put it into action and fled into exile.

Et quant la roine Genievre s'en vint al roi Artu en
 mariage, cele s'esmut avecques li pensa de fere sa dame
 autretel traïson com ele li avoit mise sus. (I, VI, 13)

Prompted by Bertolai the False Guinevere tries again, accusing Queen Guinevere of having usurped her place and driven her from

her land (I, VI, 27). She then captures Arthur and holds him prisoner throughout the winter during which time she succeeds in seducing him, so that he slept with her every night.

Et tant com il demora en la prison, gisoit tosjours la damoisele avecques lui. (I, VI, 36)

She gets him to agree that she is the rightful Queen and will proclaim her as such to his barons. During his absence Queen Guinevere is deeply unhappy because of the wrong she has done to Arthur by her infidelity, and she admits to Galehaut that her troubles are caused by her sins. She finds out how much worse they are than she had suspected when Arthur's messengers come to the court to summon all the knights to meet him in Carmelide, where the False Guinevere has won over all the barons to such an extent that they hate Queen Guinevere. At this meeting Bertolai and his supporters swear that the Queen is the impostor, but no one from her followers is called to speak as Arthur has turned against her. The author is careful to involve his readers, however, even further with the Queen as she tells Gauvain that if she is to die, she would like to die at once so that no one else need suffer on her account. Her sentence is cruel in that she is to be stripped of all the symbols of queenship, her head shaved because the crown had rested on her hair, her hands which had been anointed stripped of their skin and then banished for life (I, VIII, 9-10).

The crisis provoked is immense as all Arthur's closest companions, Yvain, Kay, Gauvain are prepared to leave his court rather than accept such a judgement. Kay is determined to fight to defend the Queen, but Lancelot intervenes and challenges the three best knights from Carmelyde, whom of course he defeats. The King has to free the Queen but he is still besotted with the False Guinevere so that when Galehaut des Iles lointaines offers to make her Queen of Sorelois, which lies outside Arthur's dominions, Arthur accepts (I, VIII, 49-52). The False Guinevere has made it clear that any question of Guinevere remaining in the Arthurian

realm is totally unacceptable. Arthur is completely dominated by the False Guinevere who uses her knowledge of drugs to make him totally subservient to her will.

Et ele avoit si conreé le roi par poisons qu'il ne savoit
riens contredire qui li pleust. (I, IX, 5)

The crisis is worsened by the intervention of the Pope who places Arthur's lands under an interdict as Arthur has left his lawful wife and is threatening her with death, almost certainly a clear reference to the interdict placed on Philip Augustus of France when he locked up his Danish wife Ingeborg and replaced her with his mistress, Agnes de Meran.²³

The crisis is resolved by the intervention of God who strikes down the False Guinevere and Bertolai with a horrible wasting sickness for which there is no cure. Aware that they are going to die they endure their suffering with great fortitude and confess publicly their crimes.²⁴ To his credit Bertolai insists that the responsibility is his, as without his guidance the False Guinevere would never have carried out the plot. Despite this admission of her guilt, Arthur remains devoted to the impostor until her death, for she is the woman he has most loved.

Et encore duroit l'autre et vesqui en sa grant dolor
jusques a trois semaines apres Noël, et ce fu li grandres
dels que li rois eust onques que de sa mort, kar il
n'avoit onques altre feme tant amee. (I, IX, 30)

After the death of her half-sister Queen Guinevere is restored to her rightful place with great honour, as she survived the serious threat to her life and happiness with dignity and honour.

The purpose of this episode is quite clear. False Guinevere is, of course, a dangerous, scheming woman, using her beauty and her knowledge to overcome a susceptible man, Arthur, who emerges from the whole episode with his honour seriously tarnished and the

unity of his court badly shaken. Queen Guinevere is the persecuted victim, capable of inspiring great devotion in many of the knights and showing a near saintly capacity for forgiveness, when the imposture is finally revealed and the barons of Carmelyde beg her forgiveness. The love between her and Lancelot is given further justification, as Arthur has behaved so dishonourably towards her and shown himself so unworthy of such a beautiful and noble woman. The whole episode reveals the weakness of men who can be tempted by the beauty of an evil and intelligent woman and who are exposed to the unscrupulousness of women. While the power of love and beauty can inspire great feats of heroism and selflessness in men, women are an eternal threat to men's virtue and to their hope of eternal life.

This is an episode in which the Dame du Lac has no role, as the character under threat is Guinevere. Although the Dame du Lac is not an enemy of Guinevere's, her interventions come only when she feels that Lancelot needs her support.²⁵ A sorceress of exceptional power, she has acted as his guardian angel ever since she saved him from the vengeance of King Claudas and brought him to her court where she brought him up to excel in all knightly feats. She is Niniane who tricked Merlin into teaching her all he knew and then putting him to sleep so that she could seal him into a pit (VII, VIA, 8-11). The author emphasises that Merlin was the child of a demon and that all his knowledge of sorcery is therefore the work of the devil. His nature was that of his father, treacherous, disloyal and deceitful. His weak point is his love for Niniane who completely outwits him, something she is able to achieve, only because he is half mortal. In this way Niniane removes Merlin from the story and ensures that Lancelot will play a major role in it by preserving him from Claudas who had overthrown his father, King Ban. Thus Niniane or the Dame du Lac is a very ambiguous character, deeply versed in sorcery which belongs to the devil, a temptress and deceiver like so many of the other female characters, and, on the other hand, the guide and protector of the hero. The

author takes great pains to emphasise that she is a mortal, although a particularly skilled and learned one.

A chelui tans estoient apelées faes toutes icheles qui
savoient d'enchantement et moult en estoit a chelui tans
en la Grant Bretagne plus qu'en autres terres. (VII, VIa, 1)

Before he leaves her at the age of eighteen she explains to him the meaning of knighthood. As a sign of her approval of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere she sends a broken shield to Guinevere which will become whole when the lovers are united. Thereafter her appearances in the romance are rare indeed. Unlike Morgain, she is not evil although the sources of her power are. She chooses to use it for Lancelot's good and, as Harf-Lancner says, to give the world of chivalry its most outstanding champion. Nonetheless the author is clearly uneasy with this figure. He devotes some time to explaining her background and that she, like the other fairies of the period, was not an immortal but a woman skilled in necromancy. Her lake is an illusion behind which she can enjoy a life of ease and luxury befitting a lady of her rank. Unlike Perceval's mother, she is not afraid of the world of knights and men and has no hesitation in sending Lancelot out into it when he is ready. She is an independent woman, secure in her knowledge and her power, unintimidated by the brute force of the masculine world around her.

The theme of woman as temptress is particularly marked in the *Queste*. The devil twice assumes the shape of a beautiful woman to try to seduce Perceval and Bors. The first scene is close to farce as Perceval is just about to make love to the girl, when he sees the cross engraved on the pommel of his sword. He realises the sin that he is about to commit, and the devil flees. Perceval had already been tempted by a woman who gave him a beautiful black horse which turned out to be the devil who was trying to destroy him. As they were about to cross a river, however, Perceval made the sign of the cross and the devil had to flee, throwing his rider into the

water. Bors is also tempted by a beautiful maiden who, when he refuses to sleep with her, throws herself to her death along with her companions. When Bors crosses himself in horror, the whole scene disappears, and he too realises that the devil had tried to seduce him. There are good women in the *Queste*, in the shape of the religious recluses, but the only saint in the Cycle is Perceval's sister. In keeping with the Cistercian author's lack of interest in women, she never emerges a rounded character, but as a virgin – virginity is the supreme virtue for the author of the *Queste* – her blood can save the life of a lady who is dying of leprosy. She volunteers her blood and dies making her brother promise to place her body in a ship which will carry it to Sarras, the Grail city. In her own way she achieves the same glory as her male companions, but, the cynical modern reader may well ask if the sacrifice was worth it as after her death the castle is destroyed by a divine storm which kills all the inhabitants as punishment for the blood spilt uselessly trying to find the virgin who could save the chatelaine. For the author of the *Queste* women in any role other than that of virgin and martyr are dangerous, deceitful creatures who will destroy the immortal souls of men, who will follow the example of Adam into sin and damnation.

Throughout the books under discussion women have a large role to play. They are presented as the guides and the inspiration of knights. Love for them is shown to be an ennobling as well as a destructive force. The common theme, however, which is taken furthest in the *Queste* but is certainly there in all the other volumes is that women are temptation, just as Eve tempted Adam. They are a disruptive force in the masculine world of chivalry and knightly companionship, the source of many of the disputes between the knights. They are dangerous because of their beauty and, in many cases, their knowledge of and reliance on sorcery. They can weaken the resolve of men by giving poor advice which is contrary to their honour or, like Perceval's mother, try to remove them from the world of knighthood altogether, which it is their destiny to enter. Beneath the superficial glorification of the love of Lancelot

and Guinevere, then, which is one of the most striking themes of the *Vulgate Cycle*, it is easy to see the clerical misogyny which can be found in so many medieval texts.²⁶

NOTES

¹ All quotations are from the following editions. *Lancelot*, ed. A. Micha, Paris, Geneva, I, 1978; II, 1978; III, 1979, IV, 1979; V, 1980; VI, 1980; VII, 1980; VIII, 1982; IX, 1983. References are by volume, section and paragraph number. *La Mort le Roi Artu*, ed. J. Frappier, Geneva, Paris, PUBL, 1964. References are LMRA by paragraph and line number. On the problem of multiple authorship see François Mosès, *La Fausse Guenièvre, Lancelot du Lac III* (Paris, Livre de poche, 1998; Les Lettres Gothiques 4553), p. 6.

² These works will not be discussed in the article.

³ An obvious example is the character of Bors who, in the *Queste*, is presented as one of the three Grails knights, the third most perfect knight in Christendom. In *La Mort le Roi Artu*, he is a devoted adherent of Lancelot and one of the main participants in the war between the descendants of King Ban and the family of Gauvain.

⁴ The exclusion of the Queen from the *Queste* seems to symbolise the misogyny of the author. By excluding Guinevere from any participation in the action the author is tacitly condemning the courtly life associated with the Queen and her lover.

⁵ Historical examples are not difficult to find. In the twelfth century the Empress Maud depended on her bastard half-brother, Robert of Gloucester, to champion her cause against Stephen, her cousin who had usurped the throne of England. Maud's husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, showed little interest in defending the cause of his wife. In the thirteenth century Philip Augustus imprisoned his Queen, Ingeborg of Denmark, to replace her with mistress Agnes of Méran. This episode may have been in the minds of the authors of both the False Guinevere episode and *La Mort le Roi Artu* when they have the Pope intervene by threatening to place Arthur's kingdom under an interdict (LMRA, 117, 6-16).

⁶ There are exceptions as in *Lancelot*, II, LIV, 12 where the abductor of the *amie* of Margalen is not named.

⁷ This can be seen in her instructions to her tutor in magic, Merlin, when she threatens to withhold her love if he teaches anything false: 'Mais bien gardés,

fait ele, que vous ne m'enseigniés chose ou il ait point de menchoigne, car bien sachiés que jamais a nul jour n'avriés m'amour ne ma compaignie' (VII, VIa, 1).

⁸ The description of the governess is stereotypical but still important: 'La maitresse estoit vielle dame, si savoit de charaies et d'enchantemens a grant planté' (II, XLVII, 14).

⁹ 'kar ves ici .I. anel que je li porterai de par vos qui a si grant force qu'il vos amera, vueille il ou non...' (II, XLVIII, 17-22).

¹⁰ 'Et je ai aparillié .I. tel boivre dont je li donrai et puis qu'il en avra beu, la force li sera montée el cervel, ge ne dout mie qu'il ne face ma volonté tote...' (IV, LXXVIII, 13).

¹¹ In the Micha edition she is called Gamille.

¹² M-L. Chênerie, *Lancelot du Lac* (Paris, Livre de poche, 1993; Les Lettres Gothiques, 4535), II, p. 15: 'l'union charnelle des amants n'a lieu qu'après l'infidélité d'Arthur avec l'enchanteresse Canile...'

¹³ See Chênerie, p. 12, where she argues that the episode is designed to give Lancelot heroic status. 'Lancelot, après avoir délivré le roi et sauvé le royaume de la barbarie maléfique qui rappelle le passé (avec la domination de l'enchanteresse Canile), sauve la vraie reine et donc les valeurs de la civilisation qu'elle représente, celles d'une royauté courtoise.' (my italics).

¹⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. J-M Fritz, Paris, Livre de poche, 1992 (Les Lettres Gothiques 4526), 4512-20. *Le Chevalier au Lion*, ed. D. F Hultz, (Paris, Livre de poche, 1994; Les Lettres Gothiques, 4539), 2951-55. In both romances Morgain is the provider of a wonderful ointment with great healing powers.

¹⁵ L. Harf-Lancner, *Les Fées au moyen âge* (Geneva, Champion, 1984), p. 267. 'Or le personnage littéraire de Morgane [...] est avant tout une figure dangereuse et inquiétante.'

¹⁶ M-L. Ollier, *Le Val des Amants infidèles, Lancelot du Lac*, IV (Paris, Livre de poche, 2002; Les Lettres Gothiques, 4554), p. 22, points out very justly the contrast between the idealised portrait of the Queen in much of the romance and her less than attractive behaviour in this episode. 'Le récit nous conte en effet les tribulations amoureuses de la fée, demi-sœur d'Arthur, et l'on y apprend que la reine, source de toute beauté, seule digne, dans les desseins de la Dame du Lac, d'être l'amie de Lancelot, est aussi celle qui jadis s'abaissa à épier les amours de son propre neveu, Guïamor de Carmelide, avec Morgue qui était alors sa suivante, jusqu'à les surprendre en flagrant délit.'

¹⁷ Ollier, p. 32. 'Ainsi la reine a-t-elle dit la verité, et ce lui est la meilleure couverture.'

¹⁸ 'Biaus frere, fet ele, de ce ne me requerez mie; que ge vos creant loiaument que jamés n'irai a cort, mes sanz faille, quant ge me partirai de ci, ge irai en l'ille d'Avalon ou les dames conversent qui sevent toz les enchantements del siele.' (LMRA, 50, 73-78) In *Erec et Enide*, Chrétien says that the *sire de l'ile d'Avalon* was the lover of Morgain (1950-54).

¹⁹ 'et puis que il plect a Dieu que ge vos ai trouvee saine et haitiee, je vos enmenrai avec moi a Kamaalot, quant je me partirai de ceianz, si que vos demorroiz desormés en avant a cort et feroiz compaignie a la reine Guenievre ma femme; et ge sei moult bien qu'ele en avra moult grant joie et moult en sera liee, quant ele savra la verité de vos.' (LMRA, 50, 66-73)

²⁰ Harf-Lancner, pp. 263-316, gives a very full discussion of the literary development of Morgain, who comes to represent the lustful immortal bent on taking her earthly lover away to her own realm.

²¹ Ollier, p.23. 'En acceptant qu'il soit son *ami*, accord scellé d'abord par un baiser, puis par le don de son anneau, la reine a instauré entre eux une Loi d'Amour qui, loin de toute facilité, requiert de l'un et de l'autre une vigilance sans relâche: à l'amant le devoir de soumission absolue, à la dame celui d'exercer une souveraineté qui ne l'est pas moins.'

²² For a discussion of the intertwining of narrative threads see Adie D. Zuurdeeg, *Narrative Techniques and their Effects in "La Mort le Roi Artu"* (York, South Carolina, Summer Publications, 1981), passim but especially the figures on p. 88 and p. 90.

²³ See LMRA, p. 286, note to paragraph 117.

²⁴ Chênerie, p.19 gives an excellent description of the development of this character. 'Ce dernier personnage, dans son traitement laconique, a d'abord, lui aussi, la beauté du diable, puis les traits pathétiques d'une victime, presque d'une martyre du mal.'

²⁵ Harf-Lancner, p. 303: 'La Dame du Lac ne cesse en effet de protéger Lancelot de loin, par l'intermédiaire de ses innombrables pucelles, ou de près, intervenant en personne dans les situations les plus délicates.'

²⁶ The first draft of the of this paper was given to the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. I would like to thank Professors Alison Stones and Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski for inviting me and their generous hospitality. My wife and my colleague, Françoise Le Saux, read the first draft of this paper, and as always, I am extremely grateful for their comments.