Suppressed, Separate, Supernatural:

A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis of Female Agency in Le Morte Darthur

Ailsa Nice

Undergraduate Student, University of York

Laidlaw Scholar

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With the guidance and supervision of Dr Lucia Aiello

UNIVERSITY of York

Abstract

The stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are almost universally known, full of popular iconic male figures such as Lancelot, Galahad and Arthur himself. When considering the female characters however, their stories are far more often overlooked and the women themselves consigned to the background, or only perceived in the context of their relationships with men. In this report I use feminist poststructuralist theory to analyse women's agency within the text, using a definition of agency outlined by Bronwyn Davies to decide to what extent the female characters experience transformation and demonstrate control. This definition argues that agency is "to resist, subvert and change the discourses...through which one is being constituted."

Intentionally using an abridged version of the text in order to make it more accessible to the ordinary reader (myself included), I delve into the narrative and writing, examining the actions and choices of the women, both as a collective and as individuals. Special consideration is given to Guenivere, so often discarded as the adulterous wife, as I analyse her actions after the death of Arthur, evaluating if her choice to join a nunnery could be an example of feminist separatism, and detailing how her ascent to the position of abbess is a method of regaining control, while ensuring that public perception of her remains favourable. Other women included are the powerful Dame Lyonesse, and the passionate Elaine, as well as the devious Morgan Le Fay. Along with the other women who possess supernatural abilities, I consider how her powers both allow her to match the knights in terms of strength, and to live outside of men's influence, offering her agency. Other examples of power include women's influence at a narrative level. For the majority of women within the book, they never experience agency, even if they demonstrate resistance, making the examples of female agency shown even more touching.

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Report

When naming legends which are almost universally known, one of the first to come up would be King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Arthur is an iconic figure, and these stories are incredibly pervasive, returning every few years in the form of books, films and television shows. The source materials are pored over, analysed and studied by scholars from all around the world. One of these texts is *Le Morte Darthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory and first published in the late 15th Century. With stories compiled from various French and English sources, such as the Vulgate Romances, the book follows Arthur's life from conception to death, as well as the stories of other characters, mostly his knights and family. For this report I used the abridged Winchester Manuscript, edited by Helen Cooper (an expert in Medieval English). This was a deliberate choice, as Cooper aimed "to re-create...something of the experience of the original readers of the Winchester manuscript," with text that is "familiar and lucid." (Cooper, H. 1998). It was crucial to use a text that was accessible to someone who was not a Malory scholar, myself included. All necessary scenes are present, ensuring readers still gain a comprehensive understanding of the story and characters. Some of the most overlooked characters in the text are the women, with only two or three being well known in popular culture (Guenivere, Morgan Le Fay and possibly Igraine). Despite this, women's stories are strewn throughout the book, telling tales of love and betrayal, showing how women of the time were treated and perceived. Women in the book can be controlled by the men in their lives, and suffer horrifically, but also make their own choices, demonstrating their agency. This is what this essay analyses.

Using a feminist poststructuralist approach, this report will consider to what extent the women of *Le Morte Darthur* demonstrate agency, as perceived by the reader. Feminist poststructuralism was a logical critical approach for this analysis, as it allows the reader to consider the mechanisms of power in the text, specifically how power and control are expressed through discourse and how the women's "micro-practices of resistance," (Encyclopedia of Case Study Research, 2019) gradually give them agency. It is important to note that these acts of resistance themselves do not equal agency, but that consistent resistance would lead to regaining control and therefore agency. Under this approach, women "are constantly creating new identities and subjectivities," (Ibid.) which frees them from labels and cultural expectations. Power is fluid, and this approach concerns itself more with power in everyday life than in "institutional power dynamics." (Ibid.) That is to say, how women reshape and reform their lives and stories outside of the influence of the powerful institutions: here the court and the Church, both controlled by men. We can analyse women's participation "in their own creation as subjects," (Ibid.) and how they resist, or do not. We can ignore Malory's intentions, instead taking a modern perspective on the women's actions and agency. This report uses the definition of agency set

out by Bronwyn Davies in *The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Postructuralist Analysis.* The definition is opposed to the humanist perception of agency as an individual act. Instead, agency is "a particular individual...having access to a subject position in which they have the right to speak and to be heard," the "person as author of their own multiple meanings and desires," and "a sense of oneself as one who can go beyond the given meanings in any one discourse, and forge something new, through a combination of previously unrelated discourses." In summary, agency is resisting and subverting the way one is constructed through the discourse, redefining oneself as someone with authority.

It is abundantly clear from the very beginning how little agency many women in the book have, at least in their lives. The reader's first impression of women's agency in the text is through the opening scene of the story, the conception of Arthur. It demonstrates clearly how women are frequently robbed of their agency, as men work together, conspiring against them. The woman in question is of course Arthur's mother, Igraine. When King Uther lays eyes on her she is already married to the Duke of Tintagel and refuses to sleep with him, not wishing to be "dishonoured," expressing this to her husband. Igraine and the Duke leave that night, slipping away so that they will not be stopped. This does not please Uther. He declares war on the Duke of Tintagel because he will not return, leading the Duke to protect Igraine by placing her in a "strong castle." Uther cannot cope with this and falls "sick for anger and for love of Fair Igraine." He decides he will have her. No matter that she is married and does not want him, no matter that this war resulted in "much people slain." Uther does not care for Igraine's personal wishes, deciding that he will have what he desires, denying her agency. Rather than someone who can make their own choices or express their own desires, Uther considers Igraine as someone on whom he can enact his own wants.

He does not target Igraine alone. Uther is aided by Sir Ulfius, described as "a noble knight," and Merlin the wizard. Both men stand to gain from Uther's successful conquest of Igraine. Sir Ulfius does not state a specific desire, but he is demonstrating his loyalty to the King. Merlin's wishes are clear. He will help Uther if the child conceived when he sleeps with Igraine is "delivered to [him] for to nourish." For this is Uther's plan. He does not want to simply take Igraine away and marry her, horrifying as that is in itself. He wishes to rape her. Igraine has no agency, to the extent that these men consider her body not her own, but theirs. They, outside of any wish of Igraine's, decide that she will be forced to conceive a child, whose fate she cannot even decide, while her husband is murdered. This is not where the horror stops. In exchange for raising Arthur, Merlin uses magic to transform Uther to look like the Duke, who by the time Uther reaches Igraine, has been killed. While the text does not portray the event as any kind of sexual assault, it is clear it is, Cambridge Dictionary defining rape as

forcing “someone to have sex when they are unwilling.” Igraine is certainly unwilling, having already refused to sleep with Uther, only assenting because she believes him to be her husband. In this way Igraine is deceived, believing Uther to be her husband and he “begot on her that night Arthur.” The language here is crucial, as it shows Igraine as a passive participant, the baby being “begot on her,” rather than being a child she wanted. Before he goes he “was sworn upon the four Evangelists,” (the four Gospels), a strange contradiction between his religious beliefs and his actions, suggesting he believes that what he has done is sanctioned by God, as well as the men around him. The dominant discourse is Uther’s, and centres on his desires and decisions.

His choices receive further approval, as he is able to marry Igraine, urged to by more men, the barons, who “by one assent prayed the King of accord betwixt the Lady Igraine and him.” Half a year after the wedding he asks Igraine whose child she is carrying, which she must answer truthfully “by the faith she owed to him.” He knows, as it is his, but takes advantage of the loyalty she must show him as his wife, to ask a question that clearly causes her distress, as she was “sore abashed.” Igraine reveals that she does not know, as when she slept with the father of the child he was “a man like my lord in speech and countenance.” She “went unto bed with him as I ought to do with my lord,” not for any personal desire but for obligation, demonstrating her lack of agency in her previous marriage. As with Uther, her body was not her own, but was controlled by her husband. At least she had some agency with her ability to counsel the Duke. With Uther, it seems she has none, as shown when Uther reveals he is the father. The text describes that when she hears this “the queen made great joy.” On the surface, this makes little sense. She has just discovered that her current husband, who she already knew had her previous husband murdered, raped her. This would not lead to great expressions of joy. For self preservation, however, this reaction is understandable. Having seen what the King is capable of doing, for the desire of a woman, it would be incredibly dangerous for Igraine to react poorly. She must instead conceal her true feelings, and please the King. She is actively creating a new identity as the King’s loyal wife by her discourse. It will allow her to remain safely at the King’s side, protected. She is enacting multiple positions. It is entirely possible for her to be disgusted with what has happened, while simultaneously playing a role that maintains a useful and safe position for herself. What happened to her was terrible, and denied her agency over her life and body, but by adapting her emotions to those that will be accepted, she is able to resist. This is however, a micro-resistance, which does not lead to her gaining any true control. She is left without agency. She has no right to speak or be heard, she is not forging herself a new identity, and remains trapped, not experiencing transformation or change.

This story unfortunately repeats itself. Later we are introduced to Tor, son of Aries the cowherd, actually fathered by King Pellinore, conceived when his mother was milking cows and "half by force he had my maidenhood." This explanation is unclear on how forceful King Pellinore was. One suggestion is that this explanation was a way of maintaining honour. The woman wished to sleep with the King, but in order to seem respectable, it is essential that she seemed at least partially unwilling (Saunders, C. 2001). The second is the opposite, that King Pellinore took her virginity entirely by force, but that the woman does not wish to criticise the King, similar to how Igraine does not express distress at her treatment by Uther. Once again, either way the woman has no authority to speak or be heard, and must conceal her true feelings. Either way, women are limited in what they can say by societal pressure, and have no agency over their sexuality or the way they speak, instead having to remain respectful to the men around them, even in situations of abject horror.

It is close to impossible to read *Le Morte Darthur* and not note the apparent horror of being a woman within the book's world. Even if they are not portrayed as horrific in the text, the events which occur throughout can leave a modern reader sickened. Plain descriptions of rapes and murders paint a picture of a world where to be a woman is to live without agency and to suffer. This is not a wrong interpretation. Even without emotive language surrounding these stories, it is clear that the women of the text experience tremendous pain, frequently being mistreated by men. They are poorly treated in two ways. Firstly, in the violent events that litter the story, but also secondly in the way that they are controlled by the men around them. Both remove their agency and limit them.

This limitation is most clearly seen in the first way that the women are treated, in a manner that is horrifically violent. It feels like a woman can hardly take a walk or milk a cow, without a terrible encounter. La Belle Isode is abducted by Palomides, after offering him a boon for her maiden "safe and sound." Palomides will take Isode "to lead and to govern her." It is not Isode who assents to this, but her husband King Mark. Isode has so little agency, even as a queen, that her husband can permit another man to kidnap her. She must enact men's desires, rather than her own. This is of course horrifying. The most sickening, however, is the rape and murder of the Duchess of Brittany by a "foul giant of Genoa," who "forced her by filth of himself, and so after split her unto the navel." A genuinely distressing image is painted, of a woman so violently sexually assaulted that she is split in two, murdered. This is of course considered disgusting by Arthur, who discovers the giant has also caused "three damosels turned three broaches," as well as killed men and children. The giant is served a bloody death, his actions abhorrent. Despite this retribution, the ease of the giant's violence, taking the Duchess from "her rich knights," speaks to how unsafe the women of the book are, how commonplace violence against them is, and how little agency they have, that even riding with

powerful men is not enough to save them. These women cannot forge their own discourse or live their own desires, because men violently use them to fulfill their own.

So many of these encounters are described with no emotion, or moral judgement that is left to the reader to decide how to react to them. We have already seen how Igraine's rape was written plainly, not even designated as wrong. This continues throughout. Tale after tale of a woman's horrible treatment summarised in one or two lines, with no sign of consternation in the description or from other characters. The lack of emotion continues with describing how women are controlled by the men in their lives. We see it in the first few pages, with the rapid description of the decisions made about Arthur's sisters, and how all three are quickly married, their fates chosen for them. Morgan Le Fay does not choose to enter a nunnery, she "was put to school in a nunnery." She does not choose to wed, "she was wedded to King Uriens." The passive language, as before with Igraine, is crucial as it demonstrates the lack of agency the women have, their every move dictated by the men around them. This continues throughout the book, women (Guenivere included) married to men they have not chosen to marry, their entire lives laid out for them. Their lack of agency is blatant, as they are not able to hold authority over their own futures.

Despite the way they are treated, some women in the text manage to gain everyday power, outside of the conventional patriarchal and hierarchical power structures, becoming "author[s] of their own multiple meanings" (Davies, B. 1991), demonstrating agency. Even still, it is questionable to what extent this is shown. One example of this is Elaine, and her love for Lancelot. The events that occur between them that lead to the conception of Galahad are almost identical to the conception of Arthur, but the gender roles are reversed, and the reaction of others, as well as the length of aftermath documented in the text, are very different. Just as Igraine refused to sleep with Uther, Lancelot is unwilling to sleep with Elaine, because he "loveth no lady in the world but all only Queen Guenivere." Just as Merlin disguised Uther to look like Igraine's husband, a female equivalent, Dame Brusen, disguises Elaine as Guenivere, "so that he shall not wit but that he lieth by Queen Guenivere." Lancelot, like Igraine before him, is entirely taken in and "without any let he went to bed," sleeping with Elaine, conceiving Galahad. It is here that the similarities stop.

Despite the similar situation, the power and agency is not with the coordinating characters. Elaine does not have the same power as Uther, being neither a king nor a man. Her actions fulfill her own desires, but they are also controlled by her father, King Pelles, who "fain...would have found the means that Sir Lancelot should have lain by his daughter." He wishes this so that "Lancelot should beget a pucel upon his daughter," "pucel," meaning boy, in this case Galahad "the best knight of the

world," as is prophesied. Where therefore is Elaine's agency? True, she loves Lancelot, but her father appears to be the one deciding her actions. She is not simply doing what she wishes, she is following her father's orders in order to bring a powerful man into the world. Every aspect of her story seems male-focused; loving Lancelot, conceiving Galahad and obeying her father. While she appears to be happy with this, she has very little power or agency. It is only in the aftermath of this event that we see her express her own wants outside of her father's influence, when she again conspires with Dame Brusen to sleep with Lancelot, tricking him for no reason other than to sleep with him. This causes her to oppose Guenivere, her competition for Lancelot's affections, having Dame Brusen tell Lancelot that "my lady Queen Guenivere lieth and awaiteth upon you," in order to bring him to her bed. We see her make her own choices to obtain her wants, demonstrating some agency, even if it is limited.

After the event of Galahad's conception, something else is demonstrated: even though Lancelot is the one taken advantage of, he still has the power in the situation, and holds the dominant discourse, as shown by how he reacts when he discovers what has happened, compared to how Igraine reacts. Even on a very basic level, Lancelot's reaction receives several pages of writing in the text, while Igraine's reaction is limited to a few lines. Both have experienced the same terrible trick, but only the man is given space to express himself about how he feels, showing agency, while the woman must conceal her true sentiments. When Lancelot realises it is Elaine with him, he takes up his sword, saying to her "thou traitress...thou shalt die right here of my hands." Despite having been taken advantage of, such is Lancelot's power in the situation that he is willing and able to threaten death upon Elaine. He holds all the power, as he is able to decide exactly what will happen; his discourse is still dominant. Elaine must beg for forgiveness, explaining that she is now pregnant with "the most noblest knight of the world." Lancelot forgives her. As before, the conception of an important man is used as justification for rape, and accepted. Lancelot even kisses Elaine again, "for she was a fair lady." He does not kiss her because she asks him to, but because of her beauty. This truly shows how little agency Elaine has. Uther had all the power, and Igraine had to censor her reaction in order to please him. Lancelot threatens death upon Elaine, and she must ask to be forgiven, despite following her father's orders based upon a genuine prophecy. When she does have agency, it is in her choices to attempt to gain Lancelot's love. Love appears to be one of the only ways in which women are frequent active agents, as noted by Helen Cooper in her introduction, citing Elaine, Guenivere and Isode as examples.

Another is in matters of the supernatural, looking at women with unique magical abilities, or access to supernatural devices. This immediately allows them to step outside of conventional power structures and of the dominant discourse, as they have power that the majority do not. Morgan Le Fay, Arthur's sister, is the obvious example here, as "a great clerk of necromancy." She is able to live fairly

independently, despite being “wedded to King Uriens,” in a marriage she did not choose. She is Arthur’s most consistent and greatest adversary, powerful and scheming, causing him and his knights frequent problems, to the point that “many knights wished her burnt.” Unlike in some of the Old French prose-cycles, Morgan seems inherently evil, with few redeeming qualities, using her powers for evil. Despite her frequent attempts, she is rarely successful. She is, however, one of the only truly uncontrolled women in the text. After her time in the nunnery and forced marriage, no one controls her power or orders her around, her decisions are her own. This demonstrates her agency, and how strong it is. She fulfills the criteria of someone with agency, having authority and using her powers to “forge something new,” (Davies, B. 1991) outside of the dominant discourse, in this case a position of power and freedom outside of the male-controlled courts.

Another powerful woman is the Lady of the Lake, who is able to decide whether or not to give Arthur Excalibur. No one can force her to, showing her agency, instead Arthur must “give me a gift when I ask it you.” Other women use magical aids, including Isode’s mother with the love potions, Dame Brusen, Hallewes the Sorceress and the fiendish women who aim to disrupt the search for the Grail. Not all of these women are portrayed as evil, but all are shown to benefit from having powers. These help to equalise them with the knights and their physical strength, providing them with authority, although the extent to which they can show this varies. It is curious how the most powerful women possess witchcraft, which links agency with being unnatural. For these women their supernatural abilities are the only way they are able to hold any power or resist men.

Outside of these ways, women hold power in a second, less expected manner. The narrative. We have already seen how some women have shaped the narrative: Elaine with the conception of Galahad aided by Dame Brusen, Isode and her love for Tristam, and the supernatural women and their powers. Later we will discuss Guenivere’s agency and impact. There is however another woman who has a strong impact on the story, Dame Lyonesse. She is key to Gareth gaining honour, and being acknowledged as Sir Gareth, nephew of King Arthur, when she proposes a tournament where he can secretly prove himself. Prior to this “she was sore questioned,” but holds strong, lying to the King about her knowledge of Gareth’s whereabouts, proving her ability to act of her own accord. She wishes to protect Gareth and so she does, influencing the narrative. Outside of these influential characters, many minor female characters enter, sometimes not even for a line, but help to direct the course of the story. Frequently they are of course damsels in distress, but this is not problematic in terms of their impact. Within their own world they have very little power or agency, but within the narrative their impact is large. Within the narrative women speak and are heard, shaping the discourse. It should be noted that men also hold this role, and have a greater number of influential characters

which impact the narrative, but without the women the story would not be the same. They have the ability to shape the story, an impressive power.

Two women with more influence over the narrative and more agency within the text's world than most are Morgan Le Fay and Guenivere. The arcs of Morgan Le Fay and Guenivere, while not mirror images of each other, demonstrate interesting similarities, as well as strong differences, which speak to their own journeys and how their agency manifests. Both women have men decide who they will marry, and are heavily controlled, although this lasts longer for Guenivere. Morgan experiences far more freedom and demonstrates more agency than Guenivere, using her own power from her supernatural abilities, rather than the power that Guenivere has, because of her marriage. An interesting connection between the two is that they both gain agency from their time in a nunnery. Morgan learns necromancy while there, which permits her freedom. Guenivere separates herself from a controlling world by entering one. The two women are both controlled and free themselves from this control at different points in the text, demonstrating agency, although Morgan to a higher level. Despite both displeasing Arthur throughout the text, it is Morgan Le Fay who accompanies him on his final journey by barge to Avilion, where he dies.

Guenivere is not onboard the boat. Perhaps this is due to a moral judgement: she is unworthy to accompany the King because of her adultery. This does not seem a logical reason, considering that Morgan le Fay, Arthur's enemy, who is never shown to reconcile with him, is present. More likely it is due to simple practicalities. When Arthur is taken away on the barge, Guenivere is locked away in the Tower of London, hiding herself from Arthur's nephew Mordred, who wishes to marry her. It is a strange repetition of the beginning of the book, when Igraine is put in the Castle of Tintagel to protect her from King Uther's advances. Thankfully for Guenivere, unlike Igraine she remains protected in the Tower until she is informed of the King's death. This can be considered as Guenivere breaking the cycle, on two levels. Firstly, she breaks out of the typical mistreatment of medieval women, leaving behind a life where she is controlled, to one where she can take control. Secondly, she breaks out of a narrative cycle. Twice already, with Igraine then with the story of Tor, we have seen women raped by powerful men, producing noble knights. Igraine's situation in the tower was a mirror image of Guenivere's situation, up until the point she is deceived and raped. This is not the case for Guenivere. She steps away, reshaping her own story, claiming agency when she has the opportunity, when Arthur's death is reported to her.

Upon receiving this information, Guenivere must decide what to do next. For perhaps the first time in her life she has no male figure directly looking after her, no father, husband or lover. She is a *feme*

sole, with almost complete agency. “To be a widow in Medieval England was in general a more powerful position than to be a wife,” (Sheridan Walker, S. 1993). “The legal status of a widow was far greater.” She would truly have the capacity to make her own choices. Guenivere’s position is unique, in that she is a widow, but also the former queen, so one can assume she would be surrounded by people looking after her, potentially trying to control her. The reader can see this demonstrated in Guenivere’s choices. When notified of Arthur’s death she “stole away, and...let make herself a nun.” This phrase tells us two useful details. Firstly, that she herself chooses to become a nun, demonstrating her agency, but also that she does not wish to publicise her choice, as she “stole away.” We must consider why she chooses to become a nun, and then why she chooses to leave stealthily. The obvious reason that Guenivere chooses to become a nun is as penance for her sins. This is a logical conclusion, as her remorse is detailed in the text: “great penance she took upon her.” According to the norms of the time this would make sense. She has committed adultery, which led to a horrific war with many casualties, including her husband. Why would she not enter a life of prayer, showing her repentance? The modern reader may see it differently, especially when considering deeper levels of meaning. That is not to say that adultery is no longer frowned upon, but that Guenivere’s situation is unique, and would elicit compassion. It is no wonder that she chooses to leave.

Furthermore, by entering a nunnery to live a life of holiness, Guenivere is reclaiming her sexuality, her independence and by therefore her agency. For her entire life, like many of the other women in the book, she has been an object of desire controlled by men, given away by her father, claimed by both Arthur and Lancelot, wanted by Mordred. Her life was never wholly her own. By becoming a nun and embracing celibacy, Guenivere claims something that never seemed entirely her own. This could be considered a form of feminist separatism, as she removes herself to an entirely female place, in order to escape the patriarchal system in which she was living. That is not to say that Guenivere has entirely left the system, as she has done something which was an approved choice. However, she has escaped the pressures of being under the influence of men in her day to day life, leaving her free to thrive. Through this choice we can see Guenivere using her everyday power. She may not have the power of a king, but she has power over her own body, and agency over her life. This could be why she chooses to steal away. Perhaps she is ashamed or maybe, instead, she is escaping those who wish to control her, not publicising her choice, allowing herself to leave without being confronted or stopped. With her she takes “five ladies,” and no men, a culturally acceptable choice which also allows her to leave behind male influence on her life, beginning to form a new identity for herself, beginning to shape her own discourse. Guenivere uses her newfound freedom to enter a new life, away from the drama of court and the fear of horrific treatment at the hands of powerful men.

In fact, she thrives so much in the nunnery, free of the pressures that come from protecting her virtue, that she becomes "abbess and ruler as reason would." "Reason would" is a curious explanation for her ascent to the head of the nunnery. At this point it should be noted that this description of Guenivere's choices after Arthur's death lasts eleven lines, so Malory does not go into any great detail. It is left to the reader to make assumptions. The assumption here would be that she is a logical choice as abbess for two reasons. Firstly, because she is used to ruling, due to her time as queen. Secondly because of "how virtuously she was changed," which demonstrates her suitability for the top role. However, this change is noted by "all manner of people," not necessarily those who knew her. Reading this one begins to question the veracity of this description, and whether these people are making judgements of Guenivere based on what they have heard. It is difficult to fault them for this, as one can only imagine the gossip that would have spread around the scandal. The fact that many people believe she has changed is crucial. Whether or not she truly changed, what is important is how she was perceived to have changed. She actively changed her public identity from the treacherous queen to the abbess in penance. She has done everything right, skillfully reshaping how she would be viewed by those around her, while simultaneously attaining a position of power, where she can speak and be heard.

This position allows her to manifest her agency explicitly, in her ability to make orders from her own power and shape the discourse. Previously she had the ability to control people and give orders, from her position as queen. As Helen Cooper writes in the introduction, "Guenivere controls Lancelot's passion for her for better and for worse." She has always had some power, however as it was granted to her as the wife of the king, this was never truly her power, so she was not demonstrating agency. In the nunnery her power is her own, supported by her religion, and therefore by God. With such strong support, none can challenge it, including Lancelot. He arrives at the nunnery seeking her out, and on his arrival she "swooned thrice." He has, with no warning, invaded her all-female space, bringing back memories of a darker time, a reminder of why she entered the nunnery. Guenivere reformed her identity without Lancelot or any man, and he returns, almost haunting her. Little wonder that she faints. She rapidly regains her strength, and demonstrates her increased agency, as well as the power that she has from being a woman of God, telling Lancelot when he asks her to come with him "I command thee, on God's behalf, that thou forsake my company." We see how much has changed, that Guenivere can command Lancelot, not because she is queen, but because of the position she now holds, so powerful that she can order him "on God's behalf," and he will listen.

She maintains this strength until the second he leaves, refusing to kiss him once and then "never no more," responding "that shall I never do." Only then does she swoon again, perhaps from the

exhaustion of maintaining composure in front of her former love. It must be noted that not every word said in Guenivere and Lancelot's exchange should be taken at face value, as they are not alone, but with Guenivere's "ladies and gentlewomen." It is therefore imperative to act in a manner that may not necessarily reflect their true feelings. This is especially true for Guenivere, who has a reputation to uphold as an abbess. She tells him she wishes to "have a sight of the blessed face of Christ Jesu," when she dies, which is presumably true, but is also the correct sentiment to express as a woman in penance. It is possible that Guenivere has many conflicting feelings here, both about Lancelot and her position. She never says that she has stopped loving him, only saying that she is rejecting him to ensure her place in Heaven. It is highly possible that she still loves him. As feminist poststructuralist theory explains, women inhabit multiple and possibly contradictory positions at the same time, as Guenivere could here. She is steadfast in her refusal of Lancelot, perhaps because she no longer loves him, presumably because she wishes to enter Heaven, and certainly to maintain her reputation in front of her companions. She is using and combining different discourses to achieve her various desires. While experiencing these conflicting feelings, she has the strength to order him to leave, showing her agency.

When she dies, several years later, it is with an incredible display of her continued power and agency. Lancelot, now a priest, has a vision charging him "to haste him unto Amesbury," where he will find Guenivere dead. Guenivere hears that Lancelot is coming, and says "I beseech Almighty God that I may never have power to see Sir Lancelot with my worldly eyes." Within two days she is dead. Such is Guenivere's determination not to see Lancelot that she would rather die than lay eyes on him. Her wish is fulfilled, which could be seen as a final demonstration of her own agency. Guenivere speaks and God himself listens. This request being answered also supports the idea that Guenivere has holy backing of her actions, which lends further power to her. Throughout her story we see Guenivere change, gaining power and agency at various stages of her life and journey. It is only when she practices separatism, however, that she is able to experience and demonstrate her own agency, in a position of authority where she is able to shape the discourse, even if it is within a situation that is approved of by those who control the authoritative discourse. In the end she is buried next to King Arthur, returned to his side in death. It seems unlikely that she would mind, having chosen her own death and reshaped her identity, all while receiving public approval. Through her choices in the last portion of her life, Guenivere, unlike many women in the book, gains, while not complete, partial agency.

Due to its status as an iconic legend, when it comes to analysing women's agency in *Le Morte Darthur*, it can be difficult to detach one's own thoughts from the cultural perceptions of the most

well known women, primarily Guenivere, and to ignore the perspective of Malory. By considering the text from a feminist poststructuralist perspective we are able to dig deeper, questioning how the female characters' actions could be demonstrations of agency and of everyday power, outside of conventional power structures. By using Davies' definition of agency, we can analyse how women exist within the discourse, and how some are able to "forge something new, through a combination of previously unrelated discourses." From the very beginning, learning of Arthur's conception, it is clear that many women lack any agency at all. Like Igraine they must censor themselves in order to satisfy the men who surround them, to remain safe. While men who experience similar situations, like Lancelot, still hold the power and agency in the situation, women are rarely in control. They are ordered around by their fathers or husbands, leading them into uncomfortable or unsafe situations, sometimes all to produce a child. For some women it is even worse, as they experience sickening violence, such as rape, abduction or murder, which is sometimes not even recognised by or within the text as an act of horror, instead described and reacted to emotionessly, or even with approval, particularly by the men who stand to gain, such as Merlin being able to choose where Arthur is raised. Some men conspire in order to rob women of their agency, deciding they are best placed to choose what occurs to them, even that they must be deceived.

When women do demonstrate agency, it is normally through one of two ways: love or supernatural powers. Women such as Isode and Elaine love their respective men before the men consider them, and will work, even conspire to cause the men to love them. Even so it is debatable how much agency they have, their choices being approved or even ordered by men. Many women exhibit micro-practices of resistance, such as Dame Lyonesse lying to Arthur about her knowledge of Gareth's whereabouts, which do not lead to regaining control. Women who have supernatural powers are able to resist more overtly, as their powers help them to equalise themselves with knights and their physical power. These women are able to demonstrate agency, actively working for what they want, helping or hindering the male characters, speaking and being heard. The supernatural women frequently oppose the knights, which portrays their agency as both wrong and unnatural to the knights. Having these powers also allows them to separate from men and the patriarchal society, as they are able to survive outside of it, which permits them even more power. Separation is also how Guenivere is able to finally gain partial agency, by entering a nunnery, removing herself from men entirely. This separation permits her to attain a powerful position of her own, not afforded to her by being the King's wife. Such is her power and agency that she is able to banish Lancelot from her forever, achieving so much agency over her own life that she chooses when to die. While this choice still fits within the dominant discourse, as her actions are approved of by the institution of the Church,

she manages to "go beyond the given meanings in any one discourse," (Davies, B. 1991), forging herself a new identity, speaking and being heard, gaining agency.

In summary, the majority of women in *Le Morte Darthur* have little to no agency, being controlled by men, experiencing horrific acts of violence and infrequently expressing or acting upon their own desires. It is only by separation, whether from the natural world by having supernatural abilities, or by physically leaving to somewhere further from male influence, that a woman can achieve agency.

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