

Spring 5-14-2016

An Almost Threesome: Erotic Love Triangles and Authorial Choice in Malory's *Le Morte D' Arthur*

Maria L. Avery

Seton Hall University, maria.avery@student.shu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Avery, Maria L., "An Almost Threesome: Erotic Love Triangles and Authorial Choice in Malory's *Le Morte D' Arthur*" (2016). *Seton Hall University Dissertations and Theses (ETDs)*. 2183.

<https://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/2183>

**An Almost Threesome:
Erotic Love Triangles and Authorial Choice in Malory's *Le Morte D' Arthur***

Maria L. Avery

M. A. Seton Hall University, 2016

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

Seton Hall University

May, 2016

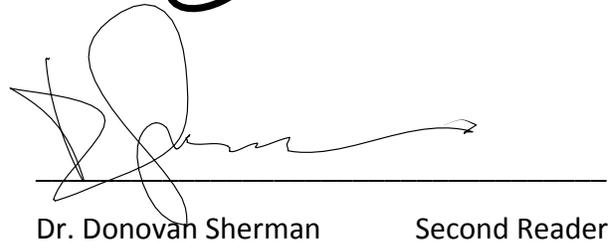
© Maria L. Avery, May 6, 2016

All Rights Reserved

Approved by:



Dr. Angela Jane Weisl Thesis Advisor



Dr. Donovan Sherman Second Reader

By translating and compiling a multitude of sources such as the French Vulgate Cycle (1210-30), the already established English chronicle tradition of King Arthur stemming from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britaniae* (c. 1136), and the *Stanzaic Morte Artu* (c. 1350), Sir Thomas Malory formulates a narrative, *Le Morte D' Arthur* (completed 1469-70, Caxton publication 1485) that has since shaped a myriad of adaptations as well as the contemporary perception of Arthur as the ruler of the ideal society Camelot (Norako, Benson). Malory had a certain agenda when approaching the task of compiling and translating this narrative from his history as a rebel, a very active knight, and at times a fugitive as Eugene Vinaver's introduction notes (v). It is therefore imperative to question and problematize the adaptations that he makes, the additions he creates, the deletions he chooses, and the overall focus of his version of the narrative in order to begin to attempt to glean full, holistic understanding of Malory's true intentions and how much his militant and violent background bleeds into his compilation. Upon creating this narrative, Malory approaches the storyline of Sir Lancelot with the unwavering attitude that Lancelot must remain a central figure within Arthur's development from the French sources. This deep sense of friendship and comraderie between Lancelot and his king is also reflected in nearly all of the relationships between Arthur's knights, a very important component of the romances that becomes increasingly more evident as the narrative progresses. In order to underline these highly influential male-love relationships, Malory invokes and attempts to redefine the use of erotic language and the varying functions that this language—or its absence—serves. This is likely to be the case because the most erotic conversations almost never take place between traditional lovers; rather, this language appears more often between the adulterers or even between the knights themselves in a variety of constructions. By constructing the most erotic language within the two latter relationships

Malory then begins to question the value of marriage in the romances and how the act of adultery and the acknowledgment of the erotic affect the Code of Chivalry that each of the knights must uphold, as well as asking what role the female plays within that code.

Furthermore, critical discussion of the love triangles in Malory's work often focuses not on the triangular nature of the relationships, but rather focuses more on the act of adultery itself. Thus, only two characters are truly involved in the romance, with the third (King Arthur and King Mark) often being presented as the inadequate spouse who leaves his partner unfulfilled and also seeks masculine fulfillment in the company of another man, thus pushing that partner to be unfaithful. By exclusively discussing the relationships as only traditional acts of adultery a discussion of the other (often more erotically charged) relationships is overlooked. In order to discuss the constructions of all of the pertinent relationships, it is necessary to look at the discourse between all parties as interconnected, multifaceted love triangles instead of basic binaries, which has seemingly become the critical standard of discourse. This approach will therefore invoke the use of Tison Pugh's queer Middle Ages and Eve Sedgwick's discussion of the erotic love triangle within medieval literature, and by doing so, attempt to unveil Malory's use of love languages as the invocation of the erotic in order to prioritize certain legs of the triangles over others. Through Malory's adaptations, shifts, and exclusions from his sources, he quite literally queers his narrative by shifting the focus on the adulterous legs of the triangles (as his sources tend to do) and focusing instead on the male legs of the triangle. However, by collectively queering this narrative, Malory also shifts his narrative focus from that of the adulterous relationships to the veiled homoerotic, homosocial relationships between kings and their knights. It is also important to note that this discussion includes the authorial choices that Malory makes that take the narrative further away from the sources texts, as these choices

ultimately become the defining factors of the success of Arthur and his knights. Therefore, taking into account the two most notable and arguably most influential adulterous relationships in Malory's romance (Sir Tristram and Queen Isode and Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenevere), as well as the deep friendships between the knights, the language that the English writer uses in both narratives allows for a deeper consideration of the reception of adulterous relationships, love, the erotic, and what varying definitions of the term "lovers" can mean in a realm based strictly on chivalry and honor.

Critical reception and discussion of Malory and his translation and compilation of the Arthurian narrative have naturally become vastly rich and diverse, ranging from standard gender and chivalric criticism to more recent discussions on the persistence and continued representation of Arthur and his knights in both literature and film. While historians have determined that the Winchester manuscript of Malory's work is most likely to be a closer and more accurate source of Malory's intentions, the Caxton publication has become the source of much of the post-medieval infatuation with the narrative "from Tennyson to Disney" and thus is the text to which many scholars refer (Aronstein 149). What seems to have become standard criticism of Malory's notions on courtly love begins with critic Charles Moorman's "Courtly Love in Malory." Moorman's article not only has become the basis for many following critics' work, but it also attempts to compile the discourse from some critics prior to himself in order to find some commonality between those critics and his attempt to start a larger dialogue on Malory's apparent hesitation regarding the construction of courtly love. Moorman does this by first discussing portions of the Vulgate Cycle in particular and then problematizes the adaptations that Malory makes to Lancelot's storyline from that source material.

More recently, critics such as Elizabeth Archibald have sought to discuss Malory's version of the narrative in relation to the French sources but also to gain a deeper understanding of why Caxton's publication has shaped the persistent perception of the Arthurian narrative for generations. Archibald, for example, notes that: "Much attention has been paid to Malory's French sources and his use of them [...] Less attention has been paid to what Malory's readers, and readers of earlier English Arthurian texts, may have known of such sources" (199). Thus, she seeks not only to determine what presentations of the narrative can be gleaned from the sources, but also what prior knowledge Malory's contemporary readers would have come to his version of the narrative with in particular regard to Lancelot. Other critics such as Betsy Bowden, Kevin J. Harty, Aaron Isaac Jackson, and others have continued in a similar vein to Archibald by seeking to find a particular reasoning why the Arthurian narrative (mostly based on Caxton's publication) has persisted in a variety of mainstream, contemporary media and adaptations.

There has not been much critical discussion on Malory's use of triangular relationships, while there is a great deal on his construction of adulterous relationships. However, Peter Korrel has broached the topic of the Arthurian love triangle tracing the narrative from early Welsh stories of Arthur to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* ending with Malory's version. Korrel's discussion is different from the discourse on the "traditional" adulterers (Guenevere and Isode) because instead of discussing the two sets of lovers, he defines the love triangle to consist of Arthur, Modred, and Guenevere. In the final section of his book *An Arthurian Triangle—A Study of the Origin, Development and Characterization of Arthur, Guinevere and Mordred*, Korrel looks at the final section of Malory's work, paying particular attention to the death of Arthur. For Korrel by looking at *Le Morte Darthur* in its totality "Arthur, especially in the first tale, is greatly to blame [for the destruction of Camelot], because

of his incest and because of his marriage to Guinevere in spite of Merlin's warnings" (282). The blame he is noting here is the blame for the downfall of Arthur and Camelot. Because of these two grievous sins, Arthur's incestuous relationship with Morgan la Fay results in the birth of Modred and the ill-advised marriage to Guinevere creates a tragic familial triangle that ultimately leads to the death and destruction of the Arthurian legacy.

In order to discuss the ways in which these two notable love triangles function in Malory's narrative it is crucial to first discuss on what the love triangles are focused, specifically on the homosocial leg of the triangles and more importantly on the king. As a king, Arthur is predestined to be the ideal; whether he ultimately assumes this nearly unattainable role is questionable with the exception of the opinions of his knights and possibly even Malory as he suggests with the title of the second book in the narrative *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur That was Emperor Himself Through Dignity of His Hands*. Whether Malory is determined to present his Arthur as the ultimate ideal knight, lover, and king is not only unclear, but also positioned as lesser in importance than of the relationships between Arthur and his peers, most importantly his fellow knights. This emphasis on the relations between the knights and Arthur is a shift that Malory makes from his original source texts, which not only begins to "queer" his narrative, but also begins to suggest a reasoning behind his apparent apprehension and slight aversion to the adulterous courtly romances later in the narrative. Thus, Malory begins with a discussion and genealogy of sorts for his king in order to allow no further questioning of the validity of Arthur's reign. Susan Aronstein, in *An Introduction to British Arthurian Narrative*, emphasizes the attraction that Malory has to Arthur's legitimacy is a direct connection to the chaos of his own country: "to assure that the line of descent is [...] clear, a fantasy that [must be] particularly attractive to a man who live[s] through the chaos of the Wars of the Roses," which furthers the

apprehension that the author feels toward the formation of the love triangles (151). As a man living through a chaotic wartime Malory would probably desire to find stability in some portion of his life and an element of his world that he can control is his narrative. Thus, by having to include a storyline filled with adultery, betrayal, and potential illegitimate succession to the throne in order to partially adhere to his sources Malory's anxiety on the instability of these portions of the legend still pervades his text. Outside the typical chivalric or courtly love traditions, Arthur has the added responsibility of continuing the patrilineal line in an attempt to maintain peace over his country and in order to assert his masculinity and prowess to his court and kingdom. This desire to maintain his lineage becomes the basis for his marriage to Guenevere and also initiates the foreboding warning from Merlin: "But M[e]rlyon warned the kyng covertly that Gwenyver was nat holsom for hym to take to wyff. For he warned hym that Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne" (Malory 59). The particular attention that Malory pays to that warning from Arthur's friend and advisor underlines the wariness about the pending adulterous relations in the narrative.

In the eyes of most of his knights, Arthur assumes not only the highest ranking of all warriors and lovers, but also of rulers and thus they regard him as such. What is unseen, or perhaps simply ignored, by the knights of the court is the true relationship constructed between Arthur and his queen. It is within this relationship and Arthur's failings as a true, courtly lover that critics have found the most fault with the argument that Arthur upholds any sort of ideal. However, often to look at the language surrounding Arthur and Guenevere suggests that theirs is a marriage of not only fidelity but also of respect and honor, all which correspond with the aristocratic patriarchal marriage tradition. At the start of their narrative, Arthur approaches his wife with love and if not adoration, at least a significant level of admiration for her as both a wife

and a queen even prior to their marriage, following Courtly love traditions: “Ye [...] I love Gwenyvere [...] And this damesell is the moste valyaunte and fayryst that I know lyvng, or yet that ever I coude fynde” (Malory 59). While this presents the narrative with a seemingly idyllic and suitable match for Arthur, it is the language with which Arthur describes Guenevere and his regard for her that causes the most tension within the text. Malory’s strict adherence to many of the French romance traditions, including that of the art of courtly love throughout *D’Arthur* suggests that this declaration is also problematic and an indication of tension to come. Adhering to the courtly love tradition determines that erotic and fulfilling love often functions outside marital constructs. As Charles Moorman classically claims: “Malory is able by such tactics to focus clearly upon the paradoxical nature of courtly love and thus to sharpen its tragic effect. Seen from this point of view, one of the great causes of the downfall of Arthur’s court is a failure in love, or rather a triumph of the wrong kind of love” (166). Thus, Arthur’s claims of romantic and potential erotic love for his future bride provide the text with both linguistic and narrative tension that Malory desires to emphasize. In the moment above, where Arthur externally exclaims and performs his love for Guenevere, he allows an internal emotion to become external and therefore public as both Merlin and readers accompany him in this space. With this declaration Arthur both foreshadows the future fate of his marriage and kingdom, but also reaffirms Merlin’s warning about Guenevere by giving a name to his emotion both externally and publically.

Furthermore, Arthur not only desires to marry Guenevere because he loves her, but also because she is the strongest, fairest, *and* most well-bred woman to take the throne with him. The use of the word “valyaunte” in the previous selection is particularly poignant, not because it is an example of the erotic, but rather as an indicator of Arthur’s (and probably the court’s) priorities

and expectations of the future queen. Not only is this maiden contracted by Merlin to be “the kynges doughtir of Lodegreaun, of the londe of Cameledre, the whyche holdyth in his house the Table Rounde” as well as beautiful, but strength, courage, and honor are associated with Guenevere before she even vocally enters the narrative (59). While this demonstrates Arthur’s ability to desire a woman who does not entirely fit a common domestic female gender role, wherein the female is entirely passive, it is within this “valyaunte” nature that Guenevere embodies the pending doom of her marriage and her kingdom, but also how conflated the two institutions will become. The irony of this conflation is that while Guenevere’s nature impacts so much of the narrative, she has little to no agency in her impending marriage. As in “Courtly Love and Patriarchal Marriage Practice in Malory’s *Le Morte DArthur*,” MaryLynn Saul notes that immediately after Arthur’s exclamation of desire for Guenevere “the emphasis then shifts from love to negotiation when Merlin speaks on Arthur’s behalf [...] Guenevere herself is never consulted about the marriage and does not speak at all [...] In these arranged marriages, therefore, the men’s wishes [...] are emphasized while women have little control over their fate” (51). Regardless of Arthur’s initial portrayal of Guenevere and her “valyaunte” characteristics, she is completely deprived of any authority during the marriage negotiation, subverting the power and courage that Arthur attributes to her previously. This lack of personal and political agency is one of few places where Guenevere loses complete authority over herself but ultimately becomes the example set for the remainder of the narrative suggesting that regardless her of emotions, erotic or otherwise, politically and sexually the queen is subject to her husband; and in order to maintain a homeostatic state within the court her fidelity to this marital oath with the Courtly love tradition is crucial.

An integral portion of the Chivalric Code is the Courtly love tradition, and therefore is also an expected practice for many of Arthur's knights. This tradition requires the devotion of oneself completely physically and spiritually to another, while following the common regulations of courteous male-female relationships. What is often neglected, however, is the role that the lady plays in this erotic discourse as the discussion is often focused on the exploits and quests of the knight fulfilling his chivalric duties. This neglect of both the female body and the feminine agency within the courtly love affair is just that, a neglect, a serious oversight, because it is the woman who often plays the most integral role in the construction or deconstruction of the knight's masculinity and quest toward the ever elusive ideal knighthood. While these women do assume these vastly pertinent roles in the destinies of their lovers, there are still standard guidelines to which they must adhere in order to maintain their own search for their own idyllic stature. MaryLynn Saul notes that "courtly love, an ideal which maintains that love must exist outside of marriage, appears to break those restrictions on a woman's sexuality; nevertheless, this system also imposes limitations on a woman's actions" (50). The limitations, as Saul defines them, are not the same restrictions given to them within their marital discourse; rather, within the adulterous relationship a new set of rules, and therefore, limitations are defined. Similar to those that are given to the women within their marriages, the restrictions within their adulterous relationship are nearly in totality based on the limits, expectations, and assumptions of their gender. As a part of the courtly relationship, the woman is expected still to uphold the expectations of the courtly love tradition. In other words, she is to be fair, kind, virtuous, and respectable while offering support and gentle guidance to her lover wherever possible.

Similar to the way that Malory uses Tristram as a mirror to Lancelot, there is also a comparison drawn between their lovers, Guenevere and Isode. This comparison also underlines

Malory's convictions about the potential for successful courtly love. From the start of the narrative Guenevere is described as "of her beaute and fayrenesse she is one of the fairest on lyve" (59) Furthermore, she is arguably the strongest-willed female character presented in the narrative. As a queen she is regal and intimidating, especially once outside of the restrictions of her marital space. As a lover to Lancelot, she is forthright with her emotions and is quick to fight and push him away as is seen in *The Poisoned Apple*, when she tells Lancelot, "I shall never love the more, and loke though be never so hardy to com in my sight...I forfende the my felyship, and upon payne of they hede that though se me nevermore" (Malory 612). But even more so than just her strong-will, before her marriage to Arthur, Merlin warns the king of her, saying "that Gwenyver was nat holsom hor hym to take to wyff" (59). Thus, in addition to her extreme beauty and force of will there is also something ominous and almost dangerous in Guenevere, which functions as foreshadowing to not only the queen as a character, but also how she will construct her own masculinity and shape the events of the narrative.

Whereas there is description of and action from Guenevere, Isode is nearly a featureless figure who is practically inactive throughout the narrative. Isode is first described as "noble" and "fayre" (Malory 238-9) and as Donald Schueler notes in his article, she "is consistently described as a doting leman, and Malory does not even remotely suggest any moral disapproval of her conduct. If anything, she is, by his standards, a 'good' courtly lady, no more troublesome than his sources allowed him to paint her" (64). To a contemporary reader it may seem as though Malory is attempting to depict one woman (Guenevere) as a "modern" woman, who has agency within a strict patriarchal society and a second (Isode) who assumes the stereotypical female role within the courtly love tradition and has little to no agency throughout the narrative, with the former being more preferable to the latter. However, just the opposite is happening within the

text. Through his descriptions of both ladies, Malory is contrasting the women in order to prove that Isode, even though she is married and committing adulterous acts with Tristram, is the more successful or ideal lover. Malory furthers this notion by straying from his primary French narrative and purposefully having the lovers acknowledge their love for one another *before* the ingestion of the potion, directly after Isode heals Tristram's battle wounds, further legitimizing the couple and the importance Malory imposes on them. Whereas Guenevere is controlling and possessive, Isode is kind and quiet—again, nearly completely inactive, which within the realm of the Courtly love tradition elevates her further toward an ideal scope of femininity. The women's actions (or lack thereof) perform as their own love language; and therefore, Isode's allows her lover to enact his prowess as a knight over her, while also being able to go out on his quests and adventures. In other words, for Malory (as it is to be expected in the Courtly love tradition) Isode is actually the exemplary lover to Guenevere because she *aids* Tristram in his quest to becoming the ideal knight, instead of hindering him the way Guenevere often does with both Arthur and Lancelot.

This assistance in or hindering from becoming an ideal knight, in whatever sense, is rooted in the queens' role in the construction of the knights' masculinity. A queen's—or more widely, a female's—ability to aid in the construction of a male's masculine identity becomes an integral piece in the formulation of her own feminine identity in the rhetoric of courtly love. As Molly Martin's chapter, "Gazing at the Queen: Tristram and Launcelot" discusses, the masculinity of a knight is directly connected to the overt visibility of his performance of that masculinity. This discussion of masculine visibility is crucial because it suggests that in order for "proper" masculinity to be constructed it must be publicly performed. As Martin suggests, this poses a problem for both pairs of adulterous lovers because they must remain *invisible* in order to

survive their affairs, because “masculine standing demands visibility – the continuous production of masculine images for the consumption of the text’s layered audiences – these two great loves disrupt the public political domains and thus enforce a requisite invisibility at the same time” (50). By this definition, both couples should then fail in the attempt toward the ideal, with both Guenevere and Isode being unable to aid in the construction of their knight’s visible masculinity; however, Malory does not suggest *only* this assumption. Rather, Malory begins with this assumption to suggest that as a couple Tristram and Isode have the potential to become a courtly love ideal and thus be a possible saving grace for the imminent destruction of Arthur’s court. As Charles Moorman suggests, while Malory is at times optimistic about love because of his possibility of virtuous love, the “adulterous” and overall “immoral” nature of the courtly love tradition cannot be subverted. As Moorman states, for Malory “‘Vertuose’ love is the way things might have been: its virtues are stability and chastity, and it is [...] compatible with the chivalric ideals of honor and loyalty and with marriage. Courtly love is the way things have gone: its vices are instability [...] and adultery, and it is connected throughout [...] with a debased chivalry” (167). Thus, even this pair of lovers cannot be saved from *or* attempt to act as saviors to the court, creating yet another failed attempt by lovers seeking to embody the ideals of this tradition in order to *become* that paradigm because of the illegitimate and adulterous nature of their relationship. However, this is not simply the fault of adulterous lovers *or* that of the impotent marital relationships; rather, it is a combination of these two sets of lovers and the addition of the third leg of the triangle. The third leg of the erotic triangle is created between the king and his knight, which creates potentially the most erotic and linguistically complex relationship of both presented triangles, and substantiates the inherently male-centric narrative Malory is creating.

Resembling Arthur looking to Merlin for guidance in his marriage contract, as well as his knights at the Round Table, King Mark is fashioned as a negative mirroring image with his many corrupt barons. Similarly to the way that Tristram and Isode's affair in many ways becomes a counter reflection to the affair between Lancelot and Guenevere, Mark nearly becomes the inverted image of Arthur as a king. There has been much critical debate whether Malory's portrayal of Arthur is truly an attempt to create an ideal or not because of his sometimes inconsistent representations of Arthur's strength and prowess as a king; however, he is without question ultimately closer to this ideal than Mark. In the narrative of Tristram, Mark is cast as the traitor to his country of Cornwall and a tyrant to his supposed beloved queen and best knight, which in many ways is Malory adhering to his French sources (E. Kennedy 141). Mark's villainy is based in his inability to separate himself from his own jealousy of Tristram or other knights who are more virtuous and beloved than he. Mark's jealousy of Tristram becomes the crux of not only his demise as a king, but also as a courtly lover. The "jolesy and [the] unkyndenesse betweynte kyng Marke and sir Trystrames" begins when both fall in love with the same queen, the wife of Sir Segwarydes (Malory 244). As Edward Kennedy discusses in "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur," after this moment Mark's jealousy becomes a very real entity within the narrative and leads to Mark "ignoring Tristram's defeat of Marhalte and overwhelmed by jealousy, Mark considers Tristram an enemy and unsuccessfully tries to kill him by treacherously attacking him at night" (140). While this first attempt to dispose of Tristram is unsuccessful, Mark does not give up his murderous attempts on his supposed traitor. For nearly the remainder of the narrative, Mark disregards his responsibility and loyalties to his kingdom of Cornwall and his marriage to Isode in order to defeat Tristram, even after Tristram (and other knights such as Perceval) attempt to dissuade Mark from his anger by reminding him of the immense value of

Tristram as a knight and ally. Kennedy also notes that for much of Mark's portion of the narrative, Malory adheres to his sources with one characterizational exception, "Mark is essentially the same as he was in the source, a vengeful and jealous tyrant. The 'blackening' of Mark that critics have emphasized amounts to only a few additions; Mark's villainy, including his hatred for Tristram and his jealous concern for Isode" (161). In other words, the only tangible change to Mark's character comes from Malory's desire to construct the traitorous king as markedly *more* villainous than he was in prior sources, which becomes a slight queering of Mark's storyline that is only exacerbated by his interactions with Tristram throughout the text. Furthermore, it is the continued depiction of Mark as not only a madman driven by jealousy, but also a tyrant and traitor to his country, that allows Isode's impending adultery with Tristram to be deemed morally acceptable in the medieval standard.

Arthur's knights are the most noble, honorable, and chivalrous of men in all of Camelot. However, as Malory constructs him, Sir Lancelot is meant to be even *more* virtuous than the others, if that is at all possible. It would be highly reductive of Malory's romance to say that Lancelot accomplishes this by only being Arthur's best and strongest warrior. This is, of course, true; Lancelot has been depicted repeatedly as not only the greatest ally, friend, and confidant for Arthur, but also his strongest and most agile knight of the Round Table. However, what actually sets Lancelot apart distinctly from the other knights is his romantic love for Guenevere. In "Malory's Lancelot: 'Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man,'" Beverly Kennedy notes that Lancelot must remain "chaste" in order to fulfill the role of the ideal lover for his queen: "if Lancelot is to be the queen's lover at all, and if he is also to be the best knight in the world and the hero of Malory's work, this new context created by Malory indicates that he *must* remain chaste. In other words, he is obliged to be a *true* lover" (Kennedy 416). It is not simply through Lancelot's

actions that he remains chaste but, potentially more importantly, he is forced and succeeds to remain chaste through his language. Lancelot accomplishes this linguistic chastity by speaking to and about Guenevere in terms of worship and loyalty instead of in terms of lust and passion; thus, Lancelot is gesturing toward his chastity and ideal knighthood, while still having “many resrotis of ladyes and damesels” desiring his company or potentially marriage (Malory 611). For Lancelot to find a wife of a similar station to himself would be, as Kennedy writes the, “ideal expression” of fidelity under the constructs of courtly love (Kennedy 417). This is not the case for Lancelot, however, and even when temptation calls to the knight in the form of young maidens, he often resists (with the exception of Elaine, of course). In Malory’s tale, *Sir Lancelot du Lake*, the writer retains some scenes in which Lancelot is faithful to the queen, such as when Lancelot is taken prisoner by Morgan le Fay who attempts to seduce him:

This is an harde case,’ seyde sir Launcelot, ‘that other I muste dye other to chose one of you. Yet had I lever dye in this preson with worship than to have one of you to my peramoure, magre myne hede. And therefore ye be answeyrd: I woll none of you, for ye be false enchaunters. And as for my lady, damn Gwennyvere, were I at my lyberte as I was, I would prove hit on yours that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng. (Malory 152)

Here, even with the four queens who are described previously to be “of grete astate” and therefore are beautiful and of high standing even in the regard of queens, Lancelot has the ability to resist them in order to stay faithful to his own impotent relationship with Guenevere. Furthermore, by expressing these terms of worship and adoration to his “treweste lady [...] lyvyng” Lancelot is also able to retain Kennedy’s notion of linguistic chastity.

The queens, as many others, mention the love that is shared between Lancelot and Guenevere. Perhaps they mention this to draw forth some reaction, negative or violent from Lancelot, but he does not give in to that temptation either. First he refuses the queens because they are “false enchaunters” and he knows that Morgan le Fay has enchanted him once already. He chooses to mention this first, which proves what he believes to be his true reason for refusing their offer; thus, he is attempting to prove some level of wit in this scene instead of engaging in his own sexual desires. Next, he broaches the topic of Guenevere, and the language that he uses to converse about her reflects the language that he uses in the presence of Guenevere. That language is not language of passion and love, but rather of respect and loyalty coupled with adorations from a knight to his queen. Furthermore, Lancelot does not speak of himself and Guenevere in relation to each other. Instead he says that Guenevere “is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvyng,” which connects her to her husband, the king, instead of connecting her in any way to himself. This coupled with Lancelot initially saying “were I at my lyberte as I was” shows an immense amount of respect for the marriage of Guenevere and Arthur. Thus, his final comment to the queens not only removes him from Guenevere but also demonstrates the privacy and the intimacy of marriage that Lancelot wants to respect by not divulging more information about a husband and wife without their consent.

In order to accomplish this feat of proclaiming his love to and for Guenevere while maintaining his virtue and chivalry, Lancelot’s love language is very specific and does not have the opportunity to stray into the erotic. To a contemporary reader, Lancelot’s love language may not necessarily seem like a “love” language; however, within the realm of medieval text, his language becomes his attempt at a coded way of conveying his love and desire toward the woman married to his lord, the woman whom he cannot be with in the foreseeable future. In

“*Cortes’ Amor* in Medieval Texts” Joan M. Ferrante carefully details this careful code that knights and ladies must follow throughout a myriad of medieval lyrics: “The name used by many now is *fin’ amor* because that phrase occurs fairly often in medieval poetry [...] certainly represents an aspect of secular love, the most exalted perhaps, but it does not include the elegant disguising of the sexual impulse which is what makes courtly love different” (687). As Ferrante continues, the notion of courtly love becomes the preferred terminology because it encompasses both of these elements, sexually charged attraction and the courteous nature of knighthood in general. This connection is found by Ferrante in multiple sources, including many French Arthurian lyrics that influenced Malory such as *Roman de Brut* and Chretien de Troyes’ romances. In *Roman de Brut* Ferrante notes, “Courtliness is connected with bravery and chivalric activity, but also with love: the lady Arthur’s father falls in love with is ‘cortoise...bele et saige’; Guenever, when Arthur marries her, is ‘bele estoit et cortoise et gente.’” Similarly in Chretien’s romances “*cortoisie* is commonly ascribed to Arthur and Guenever—Cliges’ father goes to Arthur’s court for *cortoisie*—but when Arthur’s court begins to decline, as in *Yvain* and *Lancelot*, *cortoisie* declines as well” (691). Thus, Lancelot attempts to couple these two opposites, love and chivalric activity, through his discourse with and surrounding Guenevere. It would seem for Lancelot the simplest way to accomplish this task is by staying as virtuous and chaste in his love language as possible, even though this begins to underline Malory’s discomfort with the adulterous couple as well.

In Malory’s tale of the illicit couple, *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, there is a great deal of dialogue between the queen and her most beloved knight and even though it is nearly never a private conversation, it gives a great deal of insight into how effective Lancelot’s love language is with his lover. Throughout his *Book*, Lancelot speaks with

Guenevere regularly; therefore, Lancelot must prove repeatedly that he is capable of showing his devotion for his queen first as his queen, second as his king's wife, and thirdly as his lover.

These levels are, of course, complicated and they cause a great amount of strife between the lovers. First, in the story *The Poisoned Apple*, the way in which Lancelot attempts to express his love language is initially misunderstood by Guenevere. Since Lancelot's return from the quest for the Holy Grail, Guenevere does not feel as if he still cares for her the same way he had prior to his departure and that his "love begynnyth to slake" (Malory 611). Lancelot, in an attempt to calm Guenevere's worries, explains that he "drede them [rumors and slander of their love] more for youre sake than for ony feare I hae of them myselffe, for... ye muste abyde all that woll be seyde unto you" (612). Although he is attempting to prove to Guenevere that he is trying to keep "shame and sclaudir" away from her, Lancelot ends his speech not with words of love and devotion to the queen in order to set her mind at ease (612). Instead, he finishes informing her that he is basically basking in the attention of other women as a way to hide his love from the other knights. As Alan Gaylord describes in his short, but close analysis of Lancelot's speech, "Back from the *Queste*: Malory's Launcelot Enrages Gwenvere," Lancelot's conversation with Guenevere is "a speech by a noble gentleman, but a very stupid lover. What could he have been thinking? It is probably all there in view, just as said, neither hidden nor insinuating: honest, brutally honest, well-intended, but foolish" (Gaylord 80). Furthermore, there are no thoughts or feelings of real love in this speech to Guenevere. The speech is formal and direct, and it does not offer comfort to the woman who believes her lover to be straying. In regard to Kennedy's argument, this speech is another attempt by Lancelot to show the court his virtue by keeping his feelings concealed in order to avoid suspicion. That does in some respects, seem to be the case; however, more than that, this scene shows Lancelot's *inability* to assume both roles, the devoted

servant and the true lover. Lancelot may love the queen, yes; but with his blatant lack of empathy and understanding for her fears and emotions, any love he is trying to convey is lost. Lancelot is shown to be unable to divide himself into the two separate roles and must act in one or the other but never both at the same time. Furthermore, Lancelot is unable to assume both of these roles with Guenevere because much Malory prioritizes his relationship with Arthur over his relationship with Guenevere. This prioritizing of the male-leg of the love triangle, much like Malory does with the Mark-Tristram relationship, is one of the starting points for Malory's subverting or queering his narrative from some of his sources. However, while Malory does begin queer his narrative in this fashion in both male-legs that does not mean that the author then completely disregards the traditional adulterous storylines. Rather he spends a good deal of time constructing individual love-languages for those couples as well.

With some exceptions such as the above scene, Lancelot can be very adept in his language in regard to the queen. Continuing in the discussion of *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, Lancelot speaks as a dutiful servant to his queen. Sir Lancelot uses phrases that he knows will not only please the queen, but ones that will prove to those around them in the court that he is loyal and faithful to his queen and his king. Language such as, "worshyp" "promysed" "I wol be ruled by youre counceyle" "oure love" "peramour" all in relation to the queen show Lancelot's attempts to be the ideal, chaste knight that would be able to accept the love and marriage of Guenevere if she ever became detached from Arthur. However, even though in context, much of this language is beautifully executed by Lancelot, Gaylord brings a counter point into the discussion. Lancelot never states that he does not love Guenevere, or that his affection for her is untrue, but he neglects to acknowledge that the love is *his* personally. Instead, he uses "oure love" as if the affection must be shared between the lovers in order to exist

(Gaylord 80). Perhaps, then if Guenevere's love for Lancelot were to cease Lancelot's love for his queen because one's love cannot exist without the other.

Malory uses dialogue in a very certain way, especially in regard to Lancelot. Lancelot's words often say the exact opposite of what his actions "say" or portray. However, simply because his language when speaking with the queen exemplifies his fidelity to her, his actions do not always match his words. In regard to the genre of romance and its popularity, Kennedy suggests:

Their choice of subject matter suggests that the highly sophisticated court culture of the late twelfth century manifested a strong tendency to idealize erotic love, in spite of the fact that this love, as defined by Andreas and experienced in idealized fashion by Chretien's Lancelot, was the same sort of love which ascetic theologians had always condemned as the deadly sin of concupiscence. Clearly, there was only one way to reconcile the courtiers' idealization of sexual desire with the Christian ascetics condemnation of it, and that was to develop a view of Christian marriage which legitimated sexual pleasure and at the same time allowed young people freely to choose their mates. (Kennedy 410)

This explanation encompasses both the narrative of Lancelot and Guenevere, as well as that of Tristram and Isode, because of its focus on the ideas of pleasure and the erotic. The language that is used in describing the relationship between Lancelot and Elaine (with whom he has sexual encounters, whereas with Guenevere he seems not to have) is much closer to the relationship between Tristram and Isode. Of course, Lancelot's love for Guenevere grows from what seems like a friendship or queen-knight definition of love into a physical desire for her. This is what

Malory describes as a “more hotter” love than the initial “chivalrous love” that Kennedy defines their love to be at the start of the text (Malory 611; Kennedy 417).

It would seem, then, that the erotic language used by Malory is not only designed to describe the physical realm, but also to discuss the value of sexual pleasure within the constructs of a medieval courtly love relationship. It would seem that Malory holds the erotic, the sexually charged and fueled relationship in a higher regard than that of the initially emotionally and politically based relationship like that of Lancelot and Guenevere. If that is true, then it can be concluded that through his distinctly articulated language Malory is suggesting that the relationship between Tristram and Isode is preferable to their mirroring couple, Lancelot and Guenevere. While being adulterous and therefore sinful, the relationship between Tristram and Isode is one in which both lovers have the capability of becoming an ideal, at least at the relationship’s conception. While Tristram does fall in love with Isode with whom he cannot be with legitimately because of her marriage, and because they both then are entering into an adulterous relationship, it is deemed partially acceptable to Malory’s audience as Kennedy notes, “Tristram...is not able to marry Isode, but later he is able to justify an adulterous relationship with her—at least in terms of the secularized moral code adopted by the honorable Arthurian society—because his liege lord and her husband, King Mark, is a traitor” (Kennedy 416). Thus, under the constructs of the Chivalric Code Isode’s marriage is not a true and fulfilled marriage, and she is able to be with Tristram in secret. That being said, the couple is forced to meet in secret, but their meetings are highly sexualized scenes, which show their erotic love language. This language is very different from that of Sir Lancelot and the queen because it has the opportunity to be more erotic and sensual.

Similar to the love language of Sir Lancelot, Sir Tristram also uses the language of devotion and worship with Isode in order to remain in accordance with the art of courtly love. This type of language is to be expected in the dialogue between any knight and his lady to ensure that he does not offend his intended lover. Tristram says that he is devoted to Isode and that he is “trew” to “hys lady” (Malory 239). More importantly, however, is the description that Malory gives during the lovers’ intimate scenes. For example:

sir Trystrames used dayly and nyghtly to go to queen Isode evir whan he might...Than sir Andret gate unto hym twelve knyghtis and at mydnyghts he sette upon sir Trystrames secretly and suddeynly. And there sir Trystrames was takyn nakyd a-bed with La Beale Isode, and so was he bounde hande and foote and kepte tyll day. (271)

Scenes such as this, where the lovers are naked and together in secret on a regular basis are not very common in the *Le Morte D’Arthur*, especially when comparing this couple to Lancelot and Guenvere for who those scenes are non-existent. Tristram’s first meeting with Isode (just before he falls in love with her) is a highly erotic moment as well, “she had searched hym she founde in the bottom of his wounde that therein was poison, and so she healed hym” (238). Malory adheres to common courtly love rhetoric by evoking the healing of wounds, which connects the lovers physically and in a highly spiritual way. The loving connection between the lovers is validated in the next lines of the text because, “sir Tramtryste kyste gret love to La Beale Isode, for she was... the fairest lady and maydyn” (238). These erotic moments are just two examples of many for Tristram and Isode and prove that their love, physical attraction, and sexual encounters are purely for pleasure because they can never marry. This becomes their erotic love language that

Malory is posing as the preferable—albeit still inherently destructive—love language, versus that of only devotion and emotional attachment in the relationship of Lancelot and Guenevere.

Malory's coupled adherence to and deviation from his original sources cause for moments of tension structurally and linguistically, which pervade the narrative. Although the construction of the narrative and Malory's ultimate goal in this retelling are vastly debated, critics seem to agree on one of Malory's major deviations from his sources: the distinction of importance between the romance tale of King Arthur and Queen Guenevere and the quest narrative, in which the ultimate bond is created between the knights of the Round Table, Arthur included. Edward Kennedy notes that while Malory is careful to remain faithful to the French romances in many cases "Arthur's attitude toward Guenevere changes from the devotion of a loving husband to the indifference of a king whose primary concerns are to his realm and the knights of the Round Table" (29). Kennedy continues to rationalize this dramatic shift in kingship as strictly a shift in authorial choice, "the alterations that [Malory] made suggest, moreover, that his original conception of the king's attitude toward his wife changed radically while he was writing his book and also offer evidence about the order in which the tales were composed" (29). In other words, for Kennedy, Malory becomes frustrated and ill-content with the romance narrative once he begins to maneuver the Guenevere-Lancelot portion of the story and decides to switch tactics, more specifically, switch foci or queers his narrative even further. Instead Malory chooses to focus more on the comraderie between the knights as a way to portray the masculinity of the knights and the king, placing less importance on their sexual prowess as a display of this masculinity. This focus on male-male relationships within the narrative allows for serious problematizing of the dialogue between the men in order to determine another example of Malory's construction of the erotic.

The medieval societies in which Malory is depicting there was, of course not the same notions of the hetero versus homosexual relationships as in the contemporary; however, this does not negate the problematic homoerotic and homosocial language that Malory chooses to construct between knights. In particular, the language between Arthur and Lancelot, Mark and Tristram becomes markedly different than that of the language between the married lovers as well as the adulterous lovers. Chapter two of Ruth Mazo Karras' book *From Boys to Men* outlines medieval conceptions of same-sex discourse:

It was not a desire for men that might make a knight less than knightly—that issue did not arise—but simply lack of desire for women [...] those who were not interested in women are implied to socially lower rather than sexually different. For a man, to have a heterosexual relationship was to gain status in relation to other men by dominating a woman; whatever same-sex relationships he may have formed were not part of this game. (51)

Malory's portrayal of these "male lovers" falls into this description as the literature does not necessarily provide direct homosexual conduct, whereas it does suggest the ostensible interest from the knights for potential heterosexual escapades. Furthermore, Karras provides an insightful claim for the fear of the lack of interest in women by a knight. It is clear from Malory's inclusion of examples of Lancelot and Tristram's sexual prowess with their respective ladies that he is not attempting to suggest that either knight is inherently *uninterested* in the female sex; rather, the male-to-male discourse suggests that these knights (through Malory's manipulation) prioritize the comraderie they share with their fellow knights over their female conquests. As Karras continues: "the masculine bonding in which knights engaged led to anxieties that could be resolved by claiming that all that went on among the men was in the service of women and

caused by the desire for the latter” (51). No matter the claiming of the knight, the anxiety still exists and is rooted in the desire for male-male companionship over that of companionship with a female, sexual or otherwise. Thus, Malory’s emphasis on these strictly male-centric relationships creates a space in which male discourse and the erotic take precedent and ultimately become what can only be defined as “queer.”

To define the relationships between Arthur and Lancelot, Mark and Tristram as queer it is crucial to determine how these lovers function both singularly as well as in the constructed totality of their respective love triangle. In *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature*, Tison Pugh traverses the multiple definitions of the queer or queerness: “one might think of the queer as the abjected alternative to, if not as an escape route from, cultural normativity, but queerness can be appropriated and systemically deployed to tame disruptions to the prevailing social order by reconstituting the genders and sexualities of men who might otherwise upset the status quo” (2). With regard to the four lovers in question, both attitudes to the queer are relevant and necessary, but for vastly different reasons. To approach the first attitude that to be queer is an escape from or subversion of some cultural normativity anticipates the notion that there is actually a space to which one can escape. Arthur needs to escape an impotent marriage and seeks out companionship with his fellow knights. Furthermore, the impotence of his marriage imposes a need on Arthur to attempt to locate a new source and performance space for his masculinity. Through his relationship with Lancelot, Arthur has the capability to assert his masculinity in an inherently masculine space. For Lancelot, the male-centric relationship becomes an additional space in which he may assert a varying form of his own masculinity—the warrior—that becomes unhindered by the absence of Guenevere. It is also within this space that the erotic becomes the most overt in nearly any portion of Malory’s

narrative, suggesting not only the potential for homoerotic occurrence, but also a genuine sense of pleasure from both men in the relationship. This sense of pleasure Pugh describes as coming from: “Queerness refuse[ing] to function monologically, as it [is] frequently defin[ing] and construct[ing] normative masculinities for heterosexuals by allowing a space of pleasure that must be foresworn in the advent of the discontented heterosexual subject” (Pugh 3). The pleasure that Arthur and Lancelot gain from each other’s company also becomes their desire to subvert their own heteronormative communities at court, and on a smaller level, their corresponding relationships with Guenevere.

In an overtly simplistic and reductive sense, by shifting his focus, by attempting to disassociate with the adulterous romance plots that are at the core of the French source texts, Malory is queering his own narrative. The major shift that Malory makes in his narrative is in his focus as a whole. Malory’s wariness and anxiety about Guenevere’s adulterous relationship can be deduced from the simple fact that Malory retracts as much focus as possible from that portion of the narrative. Rather, he attempts to draw more focus to that which he deems more appropriate, the chivalrous knights of the Round Table. At the center of the Chivalric Code is an individual knight’s prowess as a warrior and adventurer; therefore, that becomes a crucial thread in Malory’s narrative. To be a successful and esteemed warrior means that a knight not only wins battles and jousts, but also can show mercy to his opponent when necessary (Aronstein 155). Furthermore, the battlefield or joust pitch is a space of exceptional performance, in which these knights may assert and perform their codes of masculinity in accordance with their Code of Chivalry. Naturally, this suggests that these spaces are also inherently male or masculine spaces, which leave little or no room for feminine occupation. The knights become entrenched in the

companionship of their fellow knights in a space where each knight is attempting to further perform his masculinity and surpass the others.

In the opening chapter of her book *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick outlines what she calls the “graphic schema” on which she will be drawing in order to discuss the outlaying of power in a relational triangle. Throughout this chapter, Sedgwick relies heavily on the previous discussions of Rene Girard, Jacques Lacan, Richard Klein, Freud, and the critiques of Levi-Strauss in order to map out her own interjections into the conversation on homosocial desire and relations within these triangles. Drawing from Lacan, Sedgwick notes: “by distinguishing (however incompletely) the phallus, the locus of power, from the actual anatomical penis, Lacan’s account creates a space in which anatomic sex and cultural gender may be distinguished from one another and in which the different paths of *men’s* relations to male power might be explored” (Sedgwick Ch. 1, location 761, par. 7). This gestures ultimately to the four knights in question, Arthur, Lancelot, Mark, and Tristram; they are not presented as being interested in homosexual relations with one another, but rather occupy a space (either willingly or not) in which they attempt to struggle with the others for power. This power is obviously crucial to the success and persistence of not only an individual knight, but the kingdom as a whole. This persistence, however, is what Sedgwick also deems crucial to a deeper understanding of this homosocial environment: “In addition, it suggests ways of talking about the relation between the individual male and the cultural institutions of masculine domination that fall usefully under the rubric of representation” (Ch. 1, location 761, par. 7). This translates particularly well to the Arthur-Lancelot relationship, as both men turn from their impotent relationship with the same woman to the companionship of a man in order to assert their culture’s masculine expectations. However, this space also becomes an inherently *non-feminine*

space in which the male desires become engulfed in the desires and prowess of another man, which seeks to subvert the expected heteronormative standards. Whereas, Karass suggests that this space is what becomes the probable cause for the homosexual anxiety, Sedgwick, drawing on Gayle Rubin, suggests that “patriarchal heterosexuality can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (Ch. 1, location 792, par. 11). This is evident in both of Malory’s triangles as both Guenevere and Isode become only vehicles for both pairs of male lovers to exert their masculinity and homoerotic desires. Thus, in the constructing and active functioning of the erotic triangle, the female is pushed yet again into invisibility in order to act as the platform on which the males may perform their patriarchal masculinity and homosocial desires. In both triangles in Malory’s narrative, this exceeding visibility of the masculine and the furthering invisibility of the feminine not only is extremely prominent—as Molly Martin also suggests—but also becomes the ultimate power dynamic within the triangles. In this sense, Karass agrees in the general construction of medieval masculinity which excludes the female intentionally:

if medieval men understood masculinity as being about relations among men—who is more and who is less of a man—and women figured only incidentally in this conceptual scheme [...] If men vie to prove to each other that they are more manly, then they prove at the same time that they are *not* womanly, and this rejection of the feminine is implicit if not explicit in all understandings of masculinity. (153; my emphasis).

Not only is this competition for power a way in which medieval men assert their masculinity, but it also becomes a way to remove themselves from the feminine space and assume their own

hyper-masculine space. By doing so, the masculine eclipses the feminine space and becomes the phallus or “the locus of power” in a homoerotically charged side of the triangle of desire. Thus, as Malory chooses to construct his narrative, his obvious aversion to the adultery narratives becomes the opportunity to construct this notion of the erotic triangle: King Arthur and Lancelot, no matter their true feelings for Guenevere, are able to distance themselves from the impotent relationships with her by turning to their companionship with each other and King Mark uses Isode as an excuse for his obsession and rage that he imposes and exacts on Tristram.

In order, therefore, for these male lovers to be constructed as queer and as the power absorbing sides of the erotic triangle, they also have a similar and yet markedly different developed erotic love language to that of their heterosexual counterparts. For Pugh this becomes the moment “when heterosexuals resist normative constructions of their subjectivity they inhabit a queer position of conflicting with a social system that would otherwise reward them for their normativity” (Pugh 3). This development and confrontation with the social system comes from another area in which Malory feels most comfortable and one in which he deems the most highly respectable space: the space of battle. In “Weeping, Wounds, and Worshyp in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*” K.S. Whetter similarly states that while Malory was often “capable of rearranging, splicing and cutting” across many portions of his sources, the author:

Also at times updates the fighting of his sources, rendering equipment or techniques (or both) more in keeping with fifteenth-century practice rather than the [...] martial mores reflected in the prose Vulgate [...] This awareness of and focus on combat must reflect Malory’s own interests and reading habits [and] presumably, his own life experiences. (64)

It is through this emphasis on combat and the results of combat (blood and wounds) that Malory is able to construct not only this hyper masculine performance space, but also a uniquely masculine love language centered on adventure, worship, combat, and bleeding.

The knights, and more specifically Arthur, Lancelot, Tristram and Mark, can only seek adventure with other men and thus become enthralled with the notion of male companionship as a means of gaining that adventure. If completed virtuously, this adventure (the act of the quest) will then result in the knight approaching ideal status. However, this adventure often leads to or includes a battle of some kind and ultimately the inflicting of injury and the pouring of blood. As Whetter notes, while gruesome at times, for Malory this bodily harm is not always negative: “is not axiomatically a sign of weakness in the *Morte D’Arthur*. On the contrary, the text, the narrator and the characters all repeatedly associate wounds with worship: pain is obviously not desirable, but it is accepted as a measure of chivalric attainment. To some extent, blood is simply a way of keeping score. It is also an ever-present accompaniment to adventure” (63-64). Thus, in a similar fashion to the discussion of Courtly love and the duty and *worship* that the knights have to their ladies, here again within this male space they are described repeatedly as worshipping wounds and bleeding as a connection to their spiritual quests toward idyllic knighthood as “the winning of worship is primarily established through fighting” (66). However, because of this coupling of blood/bodily injury with adventure/male companionship the knights begin to fetishize their own adventure. Not only are these adventures and battles often posing as an escape from impotent heterosexual relationships, thus adhering to Pugh’s definition, but they are also ostensibly focused on the injury and disfigurement of the male body as a byproduct of that escapism. This results in a near homoerotic atmosphere that could be declared the basis for Karras’ notions about medieval homosexual anxiety. While many of these adventures begin in a

quest for a lady or religious object (the Grail for example) and are thus deemed adequate dismissals for this anxiety, this fetishizing of the homoerotic violence of knighthood dramatically problematizes the ends for which these knights seek.

The erotic love language that this emphasis on warfare, blood, and bodily injury develops more significantly in the discourse between Mark and Tristram, which exemplifies the updating and adapting that Malory uses in this narrative. In Gottfried von Strassburg's adaptation of *Tristan* (Germany, c. 1200-1210), Mark and Tristan have moments of conflict over Isode, but they have moments of balance as well, that underscore the homoerotic anxiety surrounding the couple. In Von Strassburg's version Mark and Tristan's bond is a loyal and often times loving bond and is a larger focus in the narrative than the violent encounters between the men as they are for Malory. For example, in the moments when Mark becomes aware of the affair between Tristan and Iseult (because he finds them in bed together) there is a scene immediately that follows creates an almost marriage ceremony:

But even as Mark turned to go Tristan awoke, and saw him, and said within him thy body and thy life, that know I well, they rest on me [...] Let me see my life in thee, if it may well be so, and see thou thy life in me! Thou guardest the life of both. Now come hither and kiss me. Tristan and Iseult, thou and I, we twain are but one being, without distinction or difference. This kiss shall be a seal that I thine, and thou mine, remain even to death but one Tristan and one Iseult! (Von Strassburg 129-30)

Mark, in front of Tristan and Iseult, vows his body and life to the adulterous lovers and much like a wedding asks the pair to seal his vows with a kiss. Furthermore, even though Iseult is present in this scene, her space is diminished by the two men. Mark's speech blurs the lines

between gendered spaces and physical bodies and therefore the vows he makes are directed more toward Tristan than to Iseult. In some way, Mark attempts to valorize or pardon the adulterous nature of Tristan and Iseult's relationship by making these vows, which in turn, heightens the erotic nature of both the adulterous relationship and the emerging homosexual (or at least homosocial) relationship in this triangle. Because of this valorization, it is clear why Malory chooses not to include this scene in his own adaptation of Tristan, because not only does it attempt to excuse an adulterous relationship, but it also shows a moment of tenderness between the knights that Malory does not want to acknowledge. Instead, Malory chooses to construct the same connection between Tristram and Mark as Von Strassburg does but makes it violent and aggressive in order to eroticize the relationship in an alternative and ultimately more queer way.

Whereas Arthur and Lancelot begin the narrative as friends and once Lancelot transgresses that friendship by committing adultery with Guenevere, Arthur's "attitude toward the affair [...] shows willingness to forgive," Mark's relationship with Tristram is riddled with tension nearly from the start with absolutely no consideration of forgiveness (E. Kennedy 149). Instead Mark spends nearly the entirety of the narrative in a jealous rage over Tristram for one reason or another and cannot distance himself from that jealousy in order to rule Cornwall properly or to be a fulfilling, competent husband to Isode. Furthermore, this rage and jealousy nearly *always* result in acts of violence. For example, when Mark assumes that both he and Tristram are in love with the same lady, he acknowledges his jealousy and immediately acts with violence: "And as sir Trystrames cam rydyngge uppon his way with his speare in his hande, kyngne Marke cam hurlyngge uppon hym and hys two knyghtes suddeynly, and all three sote hym with their sperys, and kyngne Marke hurt sir Trystrames on the breste right sore" (Malory 245). The near constant violence between these men is also coupled with the phallic imagery of the

knights' "sperys" and even more erotically charged, the penetration of one man from another. This is not an isolated incident as nearly every act of violence Mark inflicts on Tristram is bathed in phallic imagery because (with the exception of one attempted poisoning) Mark is always attempting to thrust his sword into Tristram in order to *release* his rage onto him. Furthermore, following scenes such as this, Malory takes care to discuss the wounds inflicted: "And so in hys ragynge he toke no kepe of his greve wounde that kynge Marke had gyffyn hym, and so sir Trystrames bledde both the oversheter and the neyther-sheete, and the plyowes and the hede-shete" (245). Instances such as this invoke Whetter's early discussion on the presence of blood being a way for knights to continue "keeping score." Between Mark and Tristram, the appearance of blood and the presence of wounds definitely becomes a way for the conflicting knights to take stock of where they each stand in their struggle for power and for Isode. However, it is Mark who is able to prevail over Tristram, while still maintaining his traitorous ways as he murders his knight (which is not directly conveyed in the narrative but instead told by Lancelot): "that false traytour king Marke slew hym as he sate harpynge afore hys lady, La Beall Isode. Wyth a grounden glayve he threste hym in behynde to the hearte, whych grevyth sore me" (681). Inflicting pain and wounds unto Tristram never seems to relieve any of Mark's hate and rage toward him, except for what can only be assumed to be pleasure in the moment of Tristram's death. Even Lancelot's description of the murderous act evokes the phallic imagery of Mark penetrating Tristram's back and through his heart with his lance, further fetishizing not only the inflicting of wounds, but also the eroticism of Mark's rage and jealousy toward Tristram, while also representing Sedgwick/Lacan's ideology of the locus of phallic power. The erotically furious and jealous love language in which Mark and Tristram are represented and

invoke then becomes a stark and pertinent contrast to that of their mirroring male lovers, Arthur and Lancelot.

The relationship, and thus, the love language used between Arthur and Lancelot is very different from that of Mark and Tristram, even though Malory continues his focus on bodily injury with this set of male lovers. However, what is more significant to Arthur and Lancelot's leg of their respective triangle comes from their shared language of devotion. This language of devotion is comparable to Lancelot's language in regard to Guenevere, who he "loved [...] agayne aboven all other ladyes days of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chivalry" (149). For Lancelot, not only is Arthur a king and commander, he is also his closest and most precious friend. This is why Lancelot's transgression with Guenevere is both more severe than that of Tristram's to Mark, but also distinctly more infertile than Tristram's relationship with Isode because Arthur is his friend and considered to be virtuous. However, that transgression does not negate the devotion that is exchanged between both Lancelot and Arthur separate from their shared lady. For Malory is careful to note at the start of Lancelot's narrative *A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake*, that when Arthur returns to England, Lancelot is the first to greet the king, which Malory finds important enough to discuss in this section of the narrative: "So this sir Launcelot encresed so mervaylously in worship and honoure; therefore he is the fyrste knyght that the Frey[n]sh booke makyth me[n] of aftir kynge Arthure come frome Rome" (149). Malory's emphasis on the virtue and "honoure" of Lancelot seems to pardon the transgression he makes with Guenevere and allows the friendship between him and Arthur to be sustained. Furthermore, this sense of devotion and worship becomes expected from Arthur as he invokes the Lord's name in order to gain assistance from Lancelot during his own narrative: "I pray the, sir, as thou *lovys* me take

hede to thes other knyghtes [...] to be kepte surely and they me love wool have, and yf only rescowe befalle, moste I affye the in me, as Jesu me helpe” (127; my emphasis). Moments such as these formulate a foundation of devotion and love between these two knights that they may continue to build upon throughout the narrative.

While the friendship of these lovers does build and develop over the course of the rest of the narrative, it is seen most overtly in the closing pages of the narrative. First, from Arthur, his love for Lancelot comes from his ability to forgive his transgression with the queen. Sir Aggravayne tells the king that “sir Lancelot holdith [his] queen, and hath done longe” and Arthur eloquently responds:

Gyff his be so,’ seyde the kyng ‘wyte you well, he ys non other. But I woulde be lothe to begyn such a thyng but I might have prevys of hit, for sir Launcelot ys an hardy knyght, and all ye know that he ys the beste knyght amonge us all, and but if he by takyn with the dede he woll fight with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I know no knyght that ys able to macch hym [...] the kyng was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his queen; for the kyng had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the queen so many tymes that wyte you well the kyng loved hym passyngly well. (674)

While Arthur is clearly unsettled by the naming of Lancelot and Guenevere’s sexual transgression, Malory is careful to note another clear distinction between Arthur and Mark here. Whereas Mark is reminded by Tristram, Perceval, and other knights that Tristram is the greatest knight in Mark’s command and that he has assisted the king on many occasions, Mark is unable to separate himself from his own jealousy in order to fully comprehend this logic. Arthur, on the

other hand, comes to this rational conclusion by his own consciousness. Arthur's love and understanding of Lancelot's reciprocating love allows the king to remove himself from his own "lothe" for the transgression and forgive Lancelot, proving not only Arthur's true respect and love for his knight, but the undying devotion that he has for his greatest warrior. Similarly, Lancelot's truest moments of devotion, and thus love, come when he is not in the presence of the king or, more importantly, after the king's death. After Arthur's death Lancelot chooses to stay faithfully devoted to his king *and* Guenevere by rescinding Guenevere's proposal that he marry another lady of the court: Now, my swete madame [...] would ye that I shuld turne agayne unto my contrey and there to wedde a lady? May madamne, wyte you well that shall I never do, for I shall never be so false unto you of that I have promised" (Malory 720). Lancelot's devotion to his "contrey" here is ultimately his devotion England and to his deceased king over his own concerns with Guenevere. This final gesture of true friendship, honor, and devotion from one man to another is yet another way in which Malory is underscoring the pertinence of the male lovers over any other; thus, subverting heteronormative constructions and creating another queer element of Malory's adaptation where the presence of the female only retracts from the success of the male relationship.

While Malory takes liberty to adapt and shift much of the narrative in order to construct his own narrative, he stays mostly true to his sources with the close of the narrative and the death of Arthur. Arthur is struck by Mordred and it would seem Malory believes the king to be dead upon the close of his tale. However, he does retain a sense of ambiguity: "Yet some men say in many p[art]ys of Inglonde that kynge Arthure ys nat dede, but h[ad] by the wyll of our Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wynned the Holy Cross" (Malory 717). This seems to be one of very few places in which Malory acknowledges

his uncertainty as a researcher and/or complier and he “now more of the deth of kyng Arthur coulde [he] fynde” (717). He seems to understand that this closing to Arthur’s life could be argued and attempts to save himself from criticism in this final moment where he does not seem as concerned with any changes he has made prior. Perhaps the other unacknowledged edits or changes made to the narrative become more legitimate because they are unnamed, silenced in a sense. This would coincide then with Malory’s inclusion of Arthur’s self-damnation at the start of the narrative when he names or labels his love for Guenevere, which ultimately becomes the catalyst for the slippage each character takes away from an “ideal.” However, it is within these changes, these shifts that Malory makes from his French sources texts that allow for the queering of not only the individual characters, but also the text in its totality. By queering his narrative, Malory is able to shift his main focus from the acts of adultery to his notion of virtuous love: the love shared between battling and devoted knights. This does seem to be one of Malory’s intention; however, it is also left to question if he truly acknowledged the implications of this queer narrative. Malory’s construction of the erotic triangle in two different formations presents an impotent, unsuccessful marriage, an impotent and potentially de-masculinizing adulterous relationship, and finally a visible and power-destabilizing homosocial love affair. By doing so, the author attempts to focus on what he would deem to be the most important social relationships in his courtly world. Instead, Malory constructs two distinctly different erotic triangles that present a nearly invisible female body, failed marriages, and men caught in both homosocial and homosexual anxieties. Both of these triangles reside and attempt to function in a kind of liminal space; in other words sexually and socially these triangles are ill-defined and slippery, which as Pugh notes as “fluctuation in regard both to sexual acts and to cultural normativity, sexuality refuses to be taxonomized into epistemological certainty, and its murky range of meaning carries

the potential to cast many subjects under clouds of sexual suspicion” (2). Thus, whether consciously or not, Malory steps away from his French sources in order to “better” construct his narrative, and by doing so creates this undeniable sexual and social suspicion that ultimately lead to the death of the “rex quondam rexque futurus” and the probable destruction of Camelot.

Works Cited

- Aronstein, Susan. *An Introduction to British Arthurian Narrative*. UP Florida: Gainesville, 2012. Print.
- Ackerman, Felicia. “‘Always To Do Ladies, Damosels, And Gentlewomen Succour’: Women And The Chivalric Code In Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.” *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 26.1 (2002): 1-12. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
- Benson, Larry B. “*Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and Alliterative *Morte Arthure*: Introduction.” *Middle English Text Series*. University of Rochester. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- Bowden, Betsy. “Gloom and Doom In Mark Twain’s *Connecticut Yankee*, From Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.” *Studies In American Fiction* 28.2 (2000): 179. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
- Brewer, D.S. “Form in *Morte Darthur*.” *Medium Aevum*. 21.1 (1952): 14. *ProQuest*. Web. 25 April 2016.
- Dichmann, Mary E. “Characterization In Malory’s Tale Of Arthur And Lucius.” *PMLA: Publications Of The Modern Language Association Of America* 65.5 (1950): 877-895. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 25 April 2016.
- Gaylord, Alan. “Back from the *Queste*: Malory’s Launcelot Enraging Gewnyvere.” *Arthuriana* 16.2 (2006): 78-83. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 4 May 2015.
- Harty, Kevin J. “A Note on Maureen Fries, Morgan le Fay, and Ugo Falena’s 1911 Film *Tristano e Isotta*.” *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001. Print.
- Jackson, A. I. “Writing Arthur, Writing England: Myth and Modernity in T. H. White’s *The*

- Sword in the Stone.*” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 33.1 (2009): 44-59. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 April 2016.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Print.
- Kennedy, Beverly. “Malory’s Lancelot: Trewest Lover, of a Synful Man.” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 12 (1981): 409-456. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 1 May 2015.
- Kennedy, Edward Donald. “Malory’s King Mark and King Arthur.” *King Arthur—A Casebook*. Ed. Edward Donald Kennedy. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. Print.
- Korrel, Peter. *An Arthurian Triangle—A Study of the Origin, Development, and Characterization of Arthur, Modred and Guinevere*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984. Print.
- Lumiansky, R. M. “Malory’s ‘Tale Of Lancelot And Guinevere’ As Suspense.” *Mediæval Studies* 19.(1957): 108-122. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 25 April 2016.
- Malory, Thomas. *Malory: Works*. Ed. Eugene Vinaver. Oxford: Oxford UP. 1977. Print.
- Martin, Molly. “The Female Gaze: Constructing Masculinity With and Without Men.” *Vision and Gender in Malory’s “Morte Darthur.”* Boydell & Brewer, 2010. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
- Moorman, Charles. “Courtly Love in Malory.” *ELH*. 27.3 (1960): 163-176. *JSTOR* Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
- Norako, Lelia K. “Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*.” *The Crusades Project*. University of Rochester. Web. 25 April 2016.
- Pugh, Tison. *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Saul, MaryLynn. “Courtly Love And Patriarchal Marriage Practice In Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*.” *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 24 (1998): 50-62. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. *Kindle* ebook file.
- Schueler, Donald G. “The Tristram Section of Malory’s ‘Morte Darthur.’” *Studies in Philology* 65.1 (1968): 51-66. *MLA International Bibliography* Web. 4 May 2015.
- Von Strassburg, Gottfried. *Tristan and Iseult*. University of Toronto. 2 (1907): 2-176. PDF file.

Wilson, Robert H. "The Prose Lancelot In Malory." *University Of Texas Studies In English* 32. (1953): 1-13. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 25 April 2016.

Wheeler, Bonnie. *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C. Field*. Boydell & Brewer, 2004. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 April 2016.

Whetter, K. S. "Weeping, Wounds and Worshyp in Malory's *Morte Darthur*." *Arthurian Literature XXXI*. Ed. Elizabeth Archibald and David F. Johnson. Boydell & Brewer, 2014. 61-82. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.