

Tennyson and Malory: The Arthurian Legend and its representations of love and involvement in
“The Woman Question”

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16 October 2023

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Introduction

Love is perhaps the most common literary theme of all time. Romance novels are the highest-grossing fictional genre with roughly one in four books sold being of this genre since the 21st century began (Teo). The seemingly innate interest in the nature of love continues to show in human creations, through practices of languages, symbols, rituals and art forms, here among an extensive collection of literature. By analysing these creations, a kind of ‘semiotics of love’ as Marcel Danesi calls the method in his book with that very name, we can come to better understand how people throughout time thought about love. The ways that these creations express love can provide us with an idea of the lives and values of those who came before us. In Danesi’s book, he writes a chapter about love stories and how literature reflects the philosophical questions surrounding the many impulses of love as well as love’s relation to social issues in whatever time the literature is written (Danesi 83-106).

As will be further accounted for and defined in this paper, scholars find that contemporary Western society considers romantic love as the primary form of love. It is also generally accepted that romantic love became popular during the British romantic period of the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century. Many writers of that time sought inspiration from the idealised love of medievalism and the French troubadours’ courtly love in the Middle Ages, seeking a simpler life in an otherwise tumultuous and fast-paced industrial revolution.

The intent of this paper is to analyse two works from the Arthurian legend: *Le Morte D’Arthur* by Thomas Malory (1469) and *Idylls of the King* by Lord, Alfred Tennyson (1859). These two works symbolize two time periods with distinct ideas of love and different values regarding women’s place in society. The theory is that there exists some correlation between the perception of love and the women question and that this can be observed by analysing these two works with a New Historicist perspective.

Methodology

In this paper, I will argue that a correlation between the general societal perception of love and the perception of women exists. To explore this thesis, I have chosen to focus on a commonly known British legend: The Arthurian Legend, or King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. This legend stems from the Middle Ages and has been edited and added to throughout the centuries and has inspired hundreds of pieces of literature and art across the world. As will be discussed

later in the paper, the legend has also given us some of the greatest love stories and chivalric adventures. I argue that the characters and their actions have inspired changes in social etiquette, particularly regarding interactions between men and women. The ways of expressing love and affection - some of which we still use today - can be seen in the knights' actions and the ladies' reactions. I argue that such codes of behaviours and expected manners stem from society's understandings and attitudes towards women and female nature. As female nature and women's role in society are explored, debated, and negotiated, so is the definition of love and its practices.

With such a large compilation of Arthurian writings, I have chosen to do a qualitative analysis and limit the primary material of this paper to two works: Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* from 1469 and Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* from 1885. These books have been chosen for their placement in time as this will show how the social, political, and economic differences have affected the writers' portrayal of love and women in their respective texts. I have also chosen these works for their contents; both are almost complete telling of King Arthur's life from birth to death. They are also both full of knightly quests, which gives a greater insight into the individual character's actions and reasons behind such, which aids in the paper's analysis. The works follow the same storyline but vary in detail, which makes a natural comparison. Malory and Tennyson's additions to the Arthurian legend are also two of the most commonly known, which supports the argument of influence on society.

The paper begins with a review of academic literature on the topic of the Arthurian legend and the two works individually. This is to show prior research into everything King Arthur related and what the consensus is surrounding the topics, plots, characters, and themes that exist in the legend. It also expresses the enormity of material, both literary, artistic, archaeological and visual, that exists, and the many ways one can approach these. After the literature review, one will find pages of theory on the chosen approach for this paper, followed by an account of the two forms of love that were observed during the time periods that the two primary texts were written during: Courtly love and Romantic love. Along with these accounts, I have also chosen to outline the time periods' perception of women, which are known under the concepts of 'Le Querelles des Femmes' from the 15th century and 'The Woman Question' from the 19th century. These accounts function as background information and as an outline of manners and ideas to look for during the analysis of the primary texts. The analysis is split in two, based on the two works, and is followed by a comparison and discussion of the findings.

I have chosen to approach this thesis through a New Historicist perspective. New Historicism is a critical approach that looks at literature and other products of culture and attempts to place them within a historical context. The general concept of this approach is that literature does not exist in a vacuum but is rather a product of a specific culture, whether it be political, social, or historical (or a combination of these). In New Historicism, the critics find it important to acknowledge that their analyses can be biased, particularly as a critic is not shielded from their own historical position nor their own ideologies (“New Historicism”). The approach functions as an opposition to the formalist New Criticism approach, which considers texts as self-contained, often aesthetic objects. While New Criticism focuses on a text’s form and meaning, New Historicism emphasises the context surrounding the creation of the text, which I find to be highly relevant and helpful in answering the thesis statement.

Literature review

My research began with a Google search: The Arthurian legend. I found various sources that gave overviews of the origins and history of the legend. Most of these sources mention a few pieces of literature that have influenced the legend, either in the form of an addition to the legend or the popularity of the same. One of the sources that I have leaned against a lot is the *Cambridge Companion on the Arthurian legend*. This source functions as an outline of the Arthurian legend’s evolution. It also includes analyses of some of the major themes and motifs that appear in Arthurian literature, here amongst religion, love affairs and ideals. The Cambridge Companion gives a great overview of the literature in chronological order and spans not only the stories directly including Arthur but all stories that take place within the fictional world of Albion, such as the journeys of the knights of the Round Table or the Lady of the lake. However, one corner omitted in this source is that of Arthurian art and music. It also limits its material to English, Latin, and French, but omits Scandinavian, Italian and even Hebrew literature. The Cambridge Companion separates the evolution in Part 1 into 7 chapters, split up according to the centuries. This particular source was also the one that helped choose the particular texts used in this paper. Since the source accounts for the literary and historical importance of each of the texts, I could easily find the most influential story of different eras and then limit the scope even further by eliminating all but the British stories (i.e. those written by British authors). Another source that helped to decide on texts was the article *Guide to the Classics: The Arthurian Legend* (2016) by Amy Brown from The Conversation, who

wrote the article after the trailer of Guy Ritchie's film "King Arthur: The Legend of the Sword" was released. Brown, an academic of Medieval English, accounts for some of the works within the legend as a way to explain whether Arthur was indeed real, and to show where most of the inspiration for Arthurian TV and film stems from. Brown also writes that members of *Arthuriana* (a quarterly journal of the international Arthurian society) rarely care if Arthur was real. At the end of the article from *The Conversation*, Brown refers readers to *The Arthurian Handbook* and to The Camelot Project, which contains not only a library of texts involving the legend but also a digital database of all things Arthurian, including characters, symbols, creatures, and places that appear in the texts. These texts were mostly beneficial as foundational information for this paper. The Cambridge Companion tells the chronological story of Arthurian literature over the centuries and gives an overview of the major themes that continue to be central in the stories. However, it does not discuss why these stories were written when they were, nor why these themes have not been subject to changes or erasure like so many other parts of the story of Arthur. I then continued my research on the legend within the academic world. With such a large amount of data, I expected a lot of discussions, perspectives, and approaches on the subject. Some of the more eye-catching articles and books were *The Construction of Gender: Knights and Fairies or Animus and Anima in the Arthurian Legend* and *Legal Archetypes in the Arthurian Legend: The Theme of Incest* both by Anca Magiru (2014), and *The Eco-tourist, English heritage, and Arthurian legend: Walking with Thoreau* by Kathleen Coyne Kelly (2013). The first explores the representation and relationships between genders in medieval legends. It comments on Lancelot's manliness and the fairies and witches as the anima (the feminine part of a man's personality, according to Jungian psychology), often linking them to darkness, devilishness, and spirituality. The second considers the theme of incest from a historical and psychological perspective, first explaining how and why incest was common, especially with royalty, and why it was a common theme in literature through a background of morality and psychological reasoning. The latter takes an eco-critical approach and examines the natural sites connected to the Arthurian legend instead of the literature and analyses the sites turning to tourist attractions and the modern, nostalgic tendency to "'locate' nature in the past, paradoxically existing *once* (the vanished wilderness) and *future* (the restored wetland)" (Kelly 20). Magiru's works use feminist and historical/psychological criticism while Kelly's is of eco-criticism. These approaches all lean towards contextually based approaches. I have found these to be more common in more contemporary literature while the textual, formalist approaches

were more commonly used in the 20th-century articles. Academic sources especially apply formalistic approaches to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, analysing the narrative poems from a textual rather than contextual perspective. In W. David Shaw's "Idylls of the King: A Dialectical Reading" (1969), he restructures the texts based on the Hegelian dialectic, focusing on analysing opposing beliefs and conflicts portrayed. In *Deception and Artifice in 'Idylls of the King'* by E. Warwick Slinn (1973), the focus lies on how appearance and reality oppose each other and how deceit forces action.

The academic interest does not only lie within literature but also in film and TV. Many articles make a comparative analysis between a film/TV series and textual sources, showing how adaptations to the screen can force changes to both the narrative and sites. In *Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television* by Lorraine K. Stock (2015), the discussion is on the detachment from the "medieval exemplars" (67) and their loyalty to the sources. The writer and critic Adam Roberts analyses popular interest in Arthurian literature and media in the modern period by examining the most prominent cinematic features in Arthuriana in his work *Silk and Potatoes: Contemporary Arthurian Fantasy*. In this, Roberts comments on the anachronism between the literature from the Middle Ages and the modern age, as well as the aesthetics-political implications of Arthuriana's success. Both Stock and Roberts give great examples of how contemporary Arthur has been adapted and changed to fit into the ideals of today's entertainment and storytelling through dedicated discussions of the difference in interest between the centuries.

The sources above show the wide variety of ways to read and analyse material about the Arthurian legend, and how academics have almost endless opportunities to work with this one subject. It also shows how specific or general one's material and method can be; one can work with just one text or many, focus on literature or art or media, take a feminist or eco-critical approach, etc. and with a database as large and plot-diverse as the Arthurian legend, both qualitative and quantitative methods can give insights. Some of the articles and books commented on above make use of the same approach, or at least similar, to their texts as I do in this paper. Maguri's work on incest in Arthurian literature takes a New Historicist approach by targeting a specific topic (incest) in Arthuriana and relating the observations to both historical and psychological knowledge on the topic. Maguri's findings suggest that the incestual relationships in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* are a cause of moral decay in the kingdom, and she compares the

theme to several ancient societies where incest is used to strengthen and preserve power among gods, kings and pharaohs (Maguri 1110). Thereby, she fortifies the relationship between history and literature through a sociological and psychological perspective. While *The Cambridge Companion* accounts for the Arthurian legend, the book also has a part regarding the themes appearing in the texts. This part contains, for example, a chapter called “Questioning Arthurian Ideals”, which considers the glamorization of the royal court and the topic of chivalry from a historical perspective.

Theory

New Historicism

New Historicism is a literary movement stemming from the 1980s. The American literary theorist and critic, Stephen Greenblatt, coined the term in the journal “Genre” in 1982. The movement was an attempt to reintroduce the historical aspect back into the methods of reading not only literature but texts in general. New Historicism was a response to the then-popular approaches of textual readings, such as New Criticism, deconstructionism, and post-structuralism. “According to Louis Montrose, New Historicism represents an effort merely to refigure “the social-cultural field within which canonical...literary and dramatic works were originally produced” and to *situate* such works “not only in relationship to other genres and modes of discourse but also in the relationship to contemporaneous social institutions and non-discursive practices...” (White 293). By this, Louis Montrose means that New Historicists believe in the intertextuality between text and context, herein meaning the cultural, societal, and political environment within which the text was produced. The purpose is to say something about both a certain text and a certain historical-cultural context, as well as the dynamic between the two. This approach often includes involving knowledge from areas of science, such as anthropology, archaeology, philosophy and geography and considerations of law and religion. New Historicism also believes in the historicity of texts (and the reverse), which means that a scholar often considers how the texts both create and are created with certain values and practices in mind.

“the work of art is not itself a pure flame that lies at the source of our speculations. Rather the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own (most striking in the case of works that were not originally conceived as “art” at all but rather as something else—votive objects, propa-ganda, prayer, and so on), many others

undertaken in the construction of the original work. That is, the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society. In order to achieve the negotiation, artists need to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange. It is important to emphasize that the process involves not simply appropriation but exchange, since the existence of art always implies a return, a return normally measured in pleasure and interest.” (Veeseer 12)

Some keywords in Veeseer’s explanation of New Historicist beliefs are the product of negotiation, an exchange of a product that usually gives pleasure and interest. I would add that literature also can be an exchange of knowledge. Granted, this could be placed under interest, but knowledge is also a valuable currency, profitable for all. The use of a ‘pure flame’ as a metaphor plays into the New Criticist idea that a text is unmalleable. What Veeseer believes is the opposite; that a text can change its meaning when placed in different contexts, even if the words of the text itself do not change. According to Catherine Gallagher, the New historicist approach has the analytical benefit “where traditional “close readings” tended to build toward an intensified sense of wondering admiration, linked to the celebration of genius, new historicist readings are more often sceptical, wary, demystifying critical, and even adversarial.” (Gallagher 9) However, critics of New Historicism consistently return to the opinion that the movement lacks theoretical reasoning for its connection between text and historical relations and that it in practice is just as generalising as the textual approaches it opposes itself against. Lastly, the movement’s historical perspective of literature has had resistance from critics who emphasise the quality of literature’s timelessness or exceedance of time. (Kjældgaard)

The term ‘New Historicism’ suggests an earlier approach. Old Historicism (or simply Historicism) is a hermeneutic approach which originates from the 19th century. The term was coined by Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), a German poet, philosopher, and literary critic. While he was the one to coin the term, the definition and approach are often:

“associated with the ideas of the 18th-century thinkers Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and Johann Herder (1744-1803). This earlier version of historicism arose in opposition to the Enlightenment ideal of an ahistorical and universal rationality, the inspiration for which was drawn from the growing successes of the natural sciences. Vico and Herder

emphasized the unique and particular over the universal, and the unpredictable over the predictable” (Reynolds 275).

Today, the term is used to describe an approach to history (and literature) with the intent of explaining a certain phenomenon, usually social or cultural phenomena, by studying its history, i.e., the way by which it came to be. However, as Andrew Reynolds argues in his article “What is historicism?” (1999), the term does still have multiple connotations. Reynolds accounts for five different classifications of historicist positions: ‘Mundane Historicism’, ‘Methodological Historicism’, ‘Popperian Historicism’, ‘Epistemic Historicism’ and ‘Total Historicism’. The difference between Old and New Historicism lies in the way they weigh the significance of literature and history. While Old Historicism is much more hierarchal and places history as a background to the literature, New Historicism considers literature and history of equal weighting. Old historicists subscribe to the idea that history is objective and stable but New historicists argue that history is interpretable and can be re-situated based on texts.

Love in Literature

COURTLY LOVE

The idea of courtly love originated from ‘fin’amor’ or ‘true’ or ‘fine’ love, translated from the medieval Occitan dialect from southern France. It was in connection to an article analysis of Chretien de Troyes's “Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart” (1177) that the French literary historian Gaston Paris penned the term ‘courtly love’. In his 1883 article, Paris explains courtly love, or *amour courtois*, as a practice of discipline in the name of proving oneself to one’s subject of affection, attempting to prove oneself worthy of the woman’s love through a show of honour, skill, and spiritual stability (Boase 667-668). The definition of the term and its practices are however still debated in circles of literary and history critics. While the term did not become popular until the late 19th century, the literary practice stems from the twelfth-century French troubadours who through music and poetry told dramatic stories taking place in royal courts, designed to entertain the nobles (Newman). The troubadours were inspired by the ideal lady. This was a woman of high status, often noble, who was rich and powerful as the head of the household when the husband was out. While power and wealth played a role in the image of the ideal lady, so did beauty. The ideal woman was to be desired, chased and won through gallantry and devotion despite her unattainability as an already married woman. “What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights is

neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple, not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. And passion means suffering.” (Rougemont 15). Courtly love was an expression of love that, at the time, was not common in the courts. The more accepted form of love was conjugal love, the love between a married couple, which may have been more platonic than romantic. Marriage was not usually a bond of affection but a contract between two families to gain some benefit. This benefit could be wealth in the form of either money or land or power through politics and prestige. It could also mean peace between two feuding families. Courtly love was much more passionate, even in its more innocent forms. The courtly tradition expressed by the troubadours was created for the French courts and educated population, who in turn could fantasise about a love relationship such as those in the stories.

Aliénor d’Aquitaine, the granddaughter of one of the earliest troubadours and a nobleman, Guillaume IX, was responsible for the broadening and popularisation of the courtly tradition and its poetry (Cholakian and Nelson Campbell 5). Aliénor was first wed to Louis VII, who was the king of France in the twelfth century. She brought her interest in courtly love poetry to his court from her home in the south of France and encouraged the rewritings and translations of some of the works she brought with her. She later separated from Louis VII and married the king of England, Henry II, in 1152. Similar to her influence in the French court, she brought the themes and values of courtly love to the English court while her daughters maintained the poetic tradition in France (Cholakian and Nelson Campbell 5).

In the stories, one of the important characteristics was chivalry. Chivalry was a specific behaviour that was usually followed by the knights and nobles of the medieval period. The behaviour was especially aimed towards women and a good knight, or simply a good man, was to be kind, polite and honest towards the women he came across (Cambridge Dictionary “Chivalrous”). This could be as simple as speaking nicely when near women, or helping them if needed, e.g. offering a hand when going down the stairs or taking on the more difficult or dirty tasks because it was not a proper task for women to do. Chivalrous behaviour also came across in the way a man held himself, in gallantry and honourable opinions, such as respecting rules when duelling and accepting when someone concedes. This behaviour was looked up to and learned in the courts as a chivalric man tended to be respected and admired by both men and women.

The courtly tradition has been of such interest that some of its themes, values and characters have shaped the Western perception of love through the centuries. This impact is especially seen

in the arts - in literature, theatre, paintings, music and films; Some of Shakespeare's works have tendencies from courtly love in both characters and plots; the gentlemen in Jane Austen's books take the shape of the chivalric and restrained men of courtly poetry, lyrics such as "I'm doing all I can to be a better man" (Robbie Williams, "Better Man", 2000) can be found in many modern love songs; the male protagonist heroically comes to the rescue of the beautiful woman falling in that film scene. However, courtly love as a concept has also affected our definitions of what love is, particularly regarding our perception of romantic love; The famous writer and philosopher C. S. Lewis even contends, in his book *The Four Loves* (1960), that our idea of romantic love, or eros as it is referred to in the book, owes a lot to courtly love (Cholakian and Nelson Campbell 7). We also still see aspects of chivalry in the way women often dream of a knight in shining armour or expect a man to be a gentleman, i.e., behaving in certain ways and doing certain actions to show respect, e.g., holding the door or pulling out the woman's chair. The genre and its tropes have set its mark not only on our creations, but our actions.

ROMANTIC LOVE

Romantic love is a rather abstract term that is difficult to define confidently. The term is used to explain a certain type of love that is usually reserved for love between men and women, suggesting sexual attraction, but also an emotion that uplifts the daily life into some idealized life. Scholars in both psychology, sociology, literary history and not the least philosophy have written about romantic love within the last 200-300 years, and the definitions vary based on time and place. Some argue that it is a cultural phenomenon, while others believe it to be universal and can simply express itself in different ways (Karandashev preface). Therefore, a discussion of the terms features would be more efficient than attempting a clear definition. Among literary scholars, there is a common supposition that romantic love is a concept that began largely in Western cultures (Jankowiak, Fisher 149), and is often credited to the late Middle Ages (Bloch 9). The term 'romantic love' was first coined by the French literary critic Gaston Paris in 1883 (Karandashev 7). Paris used it to represent certain attitudes and behaviours in some literature from the twelfth-century kingdom of Provence, a province in now southern France, noticeably geographically and linguistically near the origin of courtly love literature. As suggested at the end of the previous chapter, romantic love has several traits inspired by medieval courtly love. Romantic love has been the topic of many books, debates, and thoughts in multiple disciplines within the humanities, and

this means a plethora of ideas as to what the term signifies. These ideas also vary depending on when they were written, who wrote them, the context in which they were written, and what perspective the writer has taken. The ancient Greeks alone had conflicting opinions on the topic. It would be practically impossible to account for all the ideas in this paper.

However, some commonalities do come across regarding what it means to love someone romantically. “To love someone romantically is... to experience a strong desire for union with someone who is deemed entirely unique. It is to idealize this person, to think constantly about him or her, and to discover that one’s own life priorities have changed dramatically. It is to care deeply for that person’s well-being and to feel pain or emptiness when he or she is absent.” (Gottschall, Nordlund 450) Gottschall and Nordlund attempt with this definition to encompass a variety of definitions they came across in their research of the concept of romantic love. The importance lies here in the way one experiences desire to the point that their life changes. This definition has some apparent similarities with courtly love, particularly if one pays attention to the word choice when they write “to idealize” a person and when they describe that their love becomes so consuming that it is a constant thought that inspires life changes.

While courtly and romantic love do have commonalities, they also do differ on some points: Karandashev refers to psychologist B.I. Murstein (1974) who “noticed [... that romantic love] differed from courtly love: The romanticist sanctioned open rebellion against the mores of his time, while the troubadour adored his lady with discretion.” (Karandashev 113) It appears that one of the main differences between the two forms of love lies not in the feelings but rather in the actions taken because of the feelings. “The romantic lover expressed his love immediately, while a courtly lover did this artfully and travelled a succession of courtship stages. The romanticist was aware of his inevitable end and worshipped death since it represented total fusion with the universe, while the troubadour manifested cheerful optimism and awaited the happiness when he finally joins his lady.” (Karandashev 113) While courtly love was expressed less directly and often more so in stages, romantic love is more rushed which is likely why romantic love is so often indistinguishable from passionate love and usually features a sexual component. This is where romantic love also differs from other concepts of love, such as Plato’s platonic love, familial love, or conjugal love in marriages, all of which fall under ‘compassionate love’, a love genre modern scholars consider distinct from passionate love.

Besides passion, romantic love is also commitment. Commitment refers to the choice that both parts make to love the other (Sternberg). This is often challenged in literature. The challenge can stem from an outer or inner environment. The outer challenges can be infidelity and/or jealousy, i.e., when a third part is included. The inner challenges can be lack of communication and trust or disagreements. Through these, the relationship is tested, and usually ends in either the relationship's end or a happier, stronger couple.

As a literary phenomenon, romantic love grew exponentially in Western culture throughout the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. This is usually credited to the distinct change in socioeconomic and cultural changes that took place during the Industrial Revolution. Love as a topic in literature and storytelling has existed for much longer but the idea surrounding love did not have the same connotations - the interpretations of what love was and when it was present varied. The nuances of love often differed in regard to the connections between love, sex, and marriage (Karandashev 38-39). As seen with courtly love in the late medieval period, marriage was usually a hurdle for love and the emotion was usually dealt with in private and alone. It was not until a few hundred years ago that love and marriage became almost synonymous. The method of expressing one's feelings to the recipient also differs in between time periods. Love could be expressed in actions as they were in the Middle Ages, in words as they were in Shakespeare's works, or through gifts, as became popular in the twentieth century as a result of economic growth and consumer culture (Karandashev 38-39). The value that cultures have put on the components of love has also varied depending on the individual culture's morals. This is seen in the way that passion and desire are dealt with. Certain historical cultures were repressive and condemned any sexual feelings while others embraced them and believed them natural. "The great love stories of Lancelot and Guinevere, Heloise and Abelard, Romeo and Juliet present the well-known symbols of passionate love. The stories were typically tragic because they challenged the moral and societal codes of their cultures." (Karandashev 12-13). In these classic love stories, the Medieval Christian culture was apparent in the way that society censured and denounced their passionate love, attempting to keep them apart in the name of decency. However, the passion between them was also incredibly interesting to the audience. "The characters were pioneers attempting to put sexual desires and corresponding passion above everything and extoll the romantic love. They strived for ideal in opposition to real and pragmatic. The romantic love was always ideal; they wanted more than a society allowed, and they wanted more than a partner could provide." (Karandashev 12-13).

Their courage and disregard for accepted behaviour were what drew the audience in and kept them engaged. Their stories were promises of something most people did not have nor could hope for. The characters were examples of the idealistic dream: a romance so overwhelming that nothing else matters - success stories despite their tragic ends.

The Woman Question

In the most general sense, 'The Woman Question' is a debate surrounding women, questioning the nature of the sex and, by extension, whether women would have the mental capabilities to become educated the same way men were. The debate began during the Renaissance in France, then named *le querelles des femmes*, as a consequence of the changing political and social environment: abandoning the feudal system and making general governments; the rise of commerce; the humanism movement; the invention of printing, and a little later, the Reformation.

The *querelles des femmes* were most often based on religious reasonings. As most of the people in Western Europe after the Middle Ages were of the Catholic faith, most were familiar with the creation myth; God made man in his image and then made woman from man's rib. As man was supposedly created first, the argument was that men must be more important and that women were inferior. With the addition that the story of humans in the Garden of Eden portrays Eve, the woman, as a temptress that made Adam eat the apple and as the reason for humanity's expulsion from Eden, women were considered corrupted and corruptive beings. (Karandashev 85) In his book *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, R. Howard Bloch quotes the ancient theologian Tertullian, one of the founders of Christian literature (Wilken), when he accuses 'the Woman' of seducing man: "You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert - that is, death - even the Son of God had to die." (Bloch 40) They were, in other words, responsible for men's bad doings. This was often regarded as a natural condition of women's sexuality as opposed to a conscious decision made by women. This is in and of itself a contradiction: Women are not actively aware of their influence but are still blamed for men's reactions and actions to their natural way of being. However, women also had another representation in the Christian religion: Mary, the Virgin Mother, who was the opposite of Eve. Mary became a symbol of purity and goodness. She was able to transform a man for the better.

(Karandashev 85) This left a dichotomy between the seducer and the saint, and a hefty discussion of women's worth on a social and spiritual level.

Another reasoning used in *querelles des femmes* was certain philosophical movements. During the Renaissance, classical philosophy (Greek and Roman) became popular through humanism. This meant that the classical philosophical idea that women were physically weaker than men equalled that they were also weaker intellectually became an argument against women's place in education. It also underlined the argument that women were to be subordinate to men since they were supposedly less intelligent beings. However, defenders of women did exist, and they argued for a more empirical approach to measuring women's capabilities instead of using arguments from writings, that were considered outdated and sexist even by 14th-15th century standards. (Kelly 77-78)

The debate had a resurgence in the 19th century, now under the term 'the woman question'. Christina Crosby surmises this renewed interest brilliantly when she writes:

“Women live most intimately with the white men of the English bourgeoisie (those properly manly men), thus the Victorian obsession with “women”, with their nature, their functions, their aptitudes, their desires, with, above all, their difference from men. The nineteenth century is the time both of history and “the woman question”, the time of Hegel and the angel of the house, of the progress of history and the fallen women. Men are constituted as historical subjects, and find “man” in history by virtue of locating women elsewhere. The spectacular inflation of women's value is inextricably a part of the Victorian investment in history, and the tremendous effort to understand women, to manage them, to find out what they want - the ceaseless asking of the woman question - is the price of discovering the truth of man in the far reaches of history.” (Crosby 2-3)

Crosby argues a connection between the Victorian fascination with history and 'the woman question'. The historical interest, she believes, lies in the many changes happening in Britain during this time period. Crosby cites John Stuart Mill when he said that “[the] idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are yet to come, has occurred to philosophers; but it never before was itself the dominant idea of any age” (Crosby 3-4). The Victorian era is known for Britain's economic and political power it had on the world through industrialisation and colonisation. It was also a time of great discoveries and inventions within science and technology. On a cultural and social level, the era is known for its moral code and

strict conduct of behaviour, and its massive growth in literacy. Alongside this, the literary and intellectual movement of Romanticism became popular. The century also had many discussions and reformations of the British system as well as the blurring of lines between social classes. The period had plenty to compare. The fascination with history also led to politicians, philosophers, writers, etc. taking an interest in and inspiration from earlier eras, particularly of ancient Rome and the medieval feudal system. Finally, the interest in history also opened a debate on ‘the woman question’. This stemmed from the desire to define ‘man’ through a historical perspective, and this was approached by considering their position in relation to ‘others’ - which in many cases meant women, who in turn were seen as outside of history. (Crosby 6-7)

“Another positive aspect of romanticism was that it promoted the views on equality of men and women. The proponents of women’s rights increased their voices in America, France, England, Germany, and Italy. Despite this, gender relations mostly remained unchanged, but instead, a compromise between egalitarian and patriarchal views of marriage emerged. Many believed that men and women could not be compared as superior or inferior, but instead, they were completely different in their natures and had distinctive characters. They ought to be appreciated on their own and dissimilar terms. Thus, women were no longer seen as inferior to men.” (Karandeshev 116)

‘The woman question’ was just as much a discussion of what a woman was and what they desired as it was a fight between traditionalism, the romantic ideal and feminism.

Analysis

In the analysis I will explore the two primary texts for paragraphs and details that portray affection and love as well as the treatment of women both from the characters’ and the author’s perspective. This means that there will be a specific focus on the characters’ actions and dialogues with the other sex, but also a broader perspective of how the female characters are portrayed and used in relation to the plot. In order to give some background, an introduction to the works, the reason for their existence, and their authors will begin each analysis. The analysis has been split in two so that the two texts receive individual attention, whereafter the differences and commonalities will be compared to each other. This will give basis for the discussion of the

commentary that each text makes on their respective societies and for the relation between the kind of love and the idea of the woman that were popular in the periods.

Thomas Malory and Courtly Love

Thomas Malory was a knight. At least, the author of *Le Morte D'Arthur* identifies himself as a knight. While the identity of the author has never been confirmed, scholars usually agree that the author would be Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell and Winwick, whose life coincides with the few known facts surrounding the creation of the writings (Whitteridge 257). *Le Morte D'Arthur* was written between 1469-1470 while Malory was imprisoned, supposedly for treason against Edward IV who was king at the time (Whitteridge 263). Only a year after the work's completion, Malory died and was buried at Christ Church Greyfriars. It is still unclear if he was still a prisoner when he died. The substantial work could be considered a result of the growing literary tradition and linguistic revolution that had developed during the late Middle Ages.

“Malory’s Morte is the outcome of a discerning and knowledgeable ambition to create an ‘Arthuriad’ in English, a compendium that draws together sequentially the authoritative accounts (largely to be translated from French sources) of all significant aspects of King Arthur’s life and reign and the history of the Round Table fellowship. Malory’s Arthuriad belongs to a late-medieval Europe-wide fashion for compendious Arthurian compilations” (Archibald 84)

Around 1350, it was a minority of the British population that was literate but those who were were often bi- or trilingual. By the 15th century, a much larger part of the population was literate, and the scholarly culture in Britain grew with the founding of schools and colleges such as Eton College (founded 1440) and King’s College (founded 1441) (“United Kingdom - England in the 15th century”). This is likely also why translation and recopying activity was so high in the 15th century (Cambridge Companion 85). *Le Morte D'Arthur* was but one example of works that were translations or reworkings of earlier Middle Ages texts. Malory’s work is not the first piece on King Arthur, but rather an abundant anthology of mostly French poetry and prose surrounding the legend of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, which Malory managed to translate and rewrite into a collection of books and tales, functioning as chapters of the whole that Malory appropriately named “The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knygtes of The Rounde Table”. The exact works and authors from which Malory has taken his ideas are mostly unknown

or lost to time. Still, some of the texts we know of today are the Vulgate Cycle (unknown author), Chretien de Troyes' poems, Layamon's *Brut* and several stand-alone pieces written about the individual knights. Along with these, Malory seems to have used several Middle Age chronicles and texts supporting the existence of Arthur, such as the *Annales Cambriae* (10th century) and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1138).

While not an original story in and of itself, Malory's text does have significant importance in the history of literature: Years after Thomas Malory's death, a man by the name of William Caxton brought the printing press to England, and in 1485 he printed Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and made it into an official publication. Caxton had some reason to publish Malory's work: "In the epilogue of his translation of Ramon Lull's *Ordre of Chyualry* (printed 1484), William Caxton bemoans the contemporary decline of chivalry. His first prescription for solving the problem—even before such obvious solutions as holding more tournaments— was to have knights read, and his first choice of what knights should read was books about King Arthur" (Hodges 11). Thereby, King Arthur's life could be spread nationwide and read by anyone capable, to inspire and encourage chivalry and proper conduct.

A majority of the chivalric ideas in Malory's text are portrayed in the actions of the knights during their adventures. This means that there is a lack of conversation or overt explanations of the exact ways of the knights, which means that the reader has to come to their own conclusions on what it entails to be chivalrous. These examples of chivalric actions and the results of such will be analysed throughout this paper. First, however, the text does contain one section where the rules and expectations of the members of the Round Table are explicitly laid out:

"than the kynge stablysshed all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys - and charged them never to do outirage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their worship and lordship og Kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladies, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour, strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell, for no love ne for no worldis goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtes sworne of the Table Rounde, both olde and yonge; and every yere so were they sworne at the hyghe feste of Pentecost." (Malory 77)

During the Round Table oath, the definition of chivalry focuses on shared principles and ethics, such as ways to conduct oneself in specific situations or with certain people. This is where the

ideas of gentlemen and courtesy become a defining factor of Arthur's court. Malory's Round Table oath explores several rules of action for the knights. Firstly, King Arthur tells his knights not to act outrageously, i.e., act scandalously or inappropriately. He also tells them not to murder, commit treason or be cruel. These rules are somewhat general and are to be followed in everyday situations. Such behaviour would benefit Arthur by showing both his people and any visitors that his court was honourable, intelligent, and dedicated. It would also keep his knights out of unnecessary harm or politically poor situations so that they could battle at his command. Arthur stands stronger with knights that are level-headed and physically prepared. Secondly, Arthur warns the knights not to fight or go to battle without reason or for petty reasons. He also orders them to be merciful when battle is necessary and to respect when their opponent forfeits or asks for mercy. These rules apply more to their knightly duties of protection and show any rivals that Arthur's court is strong but respectable and forbearing, which could help any business or accords with other kingdoms. Being respected is a powerful thing in a society that cares about outer appearances, and Arthur knows that anything his knights do or do not do will reflect back on his character as both a man and a king. Lastly, the knights are told to help any woman in need of help, no matter when and how. Arthur seems to be highly aware about the fact that women have a role in the social hierarchy. He urges his knights to treat any woman kindly, which is a good policy in a kingdom with powerful witches and vengeful damsels. If the knights do not know the woman or women they encounter, it is better to be kind and gallant in case the woman has a title or some power that could harm Arthur's court. Helping such a woman could also result in a thankful gift or the lady's affections, which would only aide his kingdom either with power, riches, connections, or land.

Throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the knights go on many quests and adventures, and we get to see how they adhere to the rules of the Round Table and what consequences their actions result in. Already prior to the Round Table oath, we see how King Arthur disapproves of Balin's reaction after the Lady of the Lake has demanded Balin's head in return for the sword Excalibur. In the story, Balin cuts off the head of the Lady of the Lake in retaliation for wanting his. Being witness to this, King Arthur immediately admonishes Balin for his actions:

““Alas, for shame!” seyde the Kynge. “Why have ye do so? Ye have shamed me and all me courte, for thys lady was a lady that I was much beholdynge to, and hyder she com undir my sauffconduyghte. Therefore I skall never forgyff you that trespasse.” [Balin argues his case] “For what cause soever ye had,” seyde Arthure”ye sholde have forborne

in my presence. Therefore, thynke nat the contrary; ye shall repente hit, for such anothir despite had I nevir in my courte. Therefore, withdraw you oute of my courte in all haste that ye may.” Than Balyn toke up the hede of the lady and bare hit with hym to hys ostry, and there mette with hys square, that was sory he had displeased Kynge Arthure; and so they rode forthe oute of towne.” (Malory 44)

Arthur scolds Balin for treating a lady as he has. He tells Balin that the Lady of the Lake was someone Arthur was indebted to and was under his protection. By killing her, Balin has undermined Arthur’s power and shamed the court by being disrespectful (and downright hateful) to a guest and acting without thinking of the consequences that it could have for Arthur’s rule. Arthur does not seem to think that Balin’s reasons for his actions are good enough, and that Balin should have restrained himself until he was no longer in court or in Arthur’s presence as not to involve Arthur or his name in a personal affair. So, Balin is banished from Arthur’s court before he officially can become a knight. Balin is understanding of Arthur’s reasoning for the banishment, and immediately regrets his actions, not because he did not think he did right, but because he displeased the king. This story shows how King Arthur already had a high moral compass early in his rule and that he was not to be undermined or opposed. However, Arthur’s disapproval and banishment are not the only consequences Balin experiences. After having been banished, Balin’s journey ends with him unknowingly battling against his own brother, Balan, and they mortally wound each other, forcing Balin to see his brother die at his hands before he himself dies from his wounds (Malory 59-60). Balin’s story is a warning against unjustified murder and as if being banished from one’s home is not enough punishment, Balin spends the rest of his life struggling and in some form of pain. Thereby, the warning is not just a promise of cast from society but of a greater force of destiny and prophecy that will follow you for the rest of your life.

In the 21st century, the story of Lancelot and Guinevere is most often portrayed as a tragic romance. Still, Malory’s version is meant to comment on the issues of adultery and the immoral act of being romantically involved with a friend’s wife. In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Lancelot and Guinevere’s actions are harshly punished as an act of treason against their king. Queen Guinevere is sentenced to death by fire while Lancelot is still in hiding from his own death sentence. However, before Guinevere is to be burned, Lancelot manages to save her. Despite their reunion, they end their days separately. Lancelot spends his days fighting in France before he returns to England to find that Guinevere has become a nun and commands him to leave:

“And therefore, Sir Launcelot, I requyre the and beseche the hartily, for all the love that ever was betwyxst us, that thou never se me no more in the visayge. And I commaunde the, on Goddis behalff, that thou forsake my company, and to thy kyngedom loke thou turne agayne, and kepe well thy realme from warre and wrake.” (Malory 692)

Lancelot then becomes a hermit until he dies from illness. Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship is often analysed as a symbol of the collapse of Camelot and of Arthurian values. However, the relationship is just as much a warning to the readers in court to not commit adultery nor be disloyal to their ruler as the consequences will not only impact themselves but can influence the entire kingdom.

Despite the consequences that Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship has, they are still a great example of courtly love. Lancelot becomes the main character in “A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot Du Lake” (the sixth chapter of the book) when he shows his skills during the tournaments and jousts that were put on in celebration of King Arthur’s return to England. Lancelot is described here as the best of the knights:

“But in especiall hit was prevyde on Sir Launcelot du Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes - and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treason other inchauntement. So this Sir Launcelot encreased so mervaylously in worship and honoure: therefore he is the fyrste knyght that the Freynsh booke makyth mencion of afir Kynge Arthure com frome Rome.” (Malory 151-152)

Lancelot is not only physically strong and skilled in battle, but he is also described as a sensible and mentally strong, overcoming even situations with treason or enchantment involved. This tells that he was not easily swayed by others but rather held his own even when others were deliberately attempting to influence him. This would be an admirable quality both as a person and as a knight as it meant that Lancelot would not follow blindly but think everything through before making any decision or taking action, which could save lives. It also shows how much respect he has for King Arthur, as Lancelot then willingly takes Arthur’s lead and trusts Arthur to make the right decisions. His skill and honour were not only admired by King Arthur and the knights, but also achieved the Queen’s admiration: “Wherefore, Quene Gwennyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the Quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys, and saved her frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry” (Malory

152). Guinevere is shown to favour Lancelot over the other knights, suggesting some affection, and Malory makes it clear that Lancelot is in love with his Queen in the same sentence. This tells us that their feelings for each other were reciprocal. However, their love is repressed for years. Lancelot even dismisses any possible affection and interest in a lover when a damsel questions him about his feelings for the queen. Despite a fairly direct question from the damsel who says, “but hit is noysed that ye love Quene Gwennyvere”, Lancelot does not deny such feelings, but rather responds with a reason for why he should not be romantically involved with anyone. He answers, quite pointedly, that “I may nat warne people to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem. But for to be a weddyd man, I thynke hit nat, for than I must couche with hir and leve armys and turnamentis, battlys and adventures. And as for to sey to take my pleasaunce with paramours, that will I refuse - in prencipall for drede of God, for knyghtes that bene adventures sholde nat be advoutrers nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys ...” (Malory 164). Here, Lancelot explains how his knighthood is incompatible with having a romantic partner. He argues that both the knight and the partner will be unhappy, especially because of the adventures that a knight is sent on would lead to loneliness, and that the knight will be unlucky in battle. It even seems that he is trying to convince himself, not the damsel. However, Lancelot’s actions speaks louder than his words. Throughout Lancelot’s knightly duties, he dedicates himself to Queen Guinevere, and his dedication is seen in the many chivalrous deeds Lancelot performs in the text. These deeds include winning tournaments, defeating Sir Turquine, slaying giants, and overcoming a damsel’s betrayal. Lancelot is a classic example of a man trying to prove himself in order to gain a woman’s affection through a show of honour, skill, and spirituality - the core of courtly love. In turn, Guinevere is also a great example of the kind of lady that courtly love would idealise. As Queen, Guinevere is of high status and power and functions as the head of the household when her husband, King Arthur, is away. Her power and wealth paired with the beauty she is described to be several times in the text, makes her the perfect woman to pursue. She is supposedly unattainable as a married woman, and knights should stay away from her out of respect for their king. However, their affection for each other is more powerful than respect and morality in the case of Lancelot and Guinevere, which is exactly why the characters struggle, and their relationship fails in the end.

Treatment and Representation of Women in *Le Morte D'Arthur*

Women in Malory's text play important roles in furthering the plot and functioning as judges of the knights' chivalry. Women are the catalyst of action in almost every knight's tale, including Arthur's own. This occurs already in the first chapter of the book, where Ygraine catches King Uther's affection despite being a married woman. Ygraine becomes the object of desire and causes war between King Uther and her husband, The Duke of Cornwall. As his mother, Ygraine is also the beginning of Arthur, of Camelot and of the Round Table. Despite her importance, Ygraine's character is treated terribly. She is tricked, widowed, and remarried without being asked of her wishes. She is then unmentioned until she is accused of adultery and treason in an attempt to question Arthur's right to the throne, whereafter her name is no longer mentioned. Besides Ygraine, many women have similar roles, but only a few have names. Guinevere is the more obvious one, but her role does not become particularly relevant until Sir Lancelot falls in love with her. The book contains many mentions of damsels and ladies, and the vast majority of those women have one of the two roles mentioned. In the beginning of book two (Malory 40), a damsel is the one to bring the sword to Arthur's court and tell them of its powers, which then sets Balin's tale in motion. Merlin falls in love with one of the ladies of the lake and dies by her hands in the fourth book (Malory 78). In the same book, Morgan le Fay is introduced properly as the vengeful half-sister of Arthur, who wishes Arthur dead after he killed her husband. In book seven (Malory 177), a damsel comes to Camelot to ask for help to save her lady from the Red Knight, thereby setting the tale of Sir Gareth in motion. The pattern continues throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

The other role, that of a judge, is slightly less common but does appear a number of times throughout Malory's work. For example, Sir Gawain and Sir Uwain meet twelve damsels who complain about Sir Marhaus for hating women (Malory 96-97). A few pages later, Sir Gawain, Sir Uwain and Sir Marhaus meet three ladies and take one each. Sir Gawain's lady judges him for the poor treatment of a rival knight and tells him that she thinks he did not want to help the other knight: "'No,' seyde the damesell, 'methynkes ye have no lyste to helpe hym!'" (Malory 101). She questions his conduct and sincerity before she leaves Sir Gawain for a dwarf, as she does not find him appropriate for her. Lancelot is also judged for his feelings towards Guinevere in his tale (book six). A damsel says to him:

"'but one thyng, sir knyght, methynkes ye lak - 'Ye that ar a knyght wyelves, that ye woll nat love som mayden other jantylwoman. For I cowde never here sey that ever ye loved

only of no maner of degré, and that is grete pyté - 'But hit is noysed that ye love Quene Gwenvyvere, and that she hath ordeyned by enchauntemente that ye shall never love none other but his, none other damesell ne lady skall rejoice you - wherefore there be many in this londe, of hyghe astate and lowe, that make grete sorow'" (Malory 164).

The damsel finds it a pity that Lancelot will not consider any other woman despite there being many available. It shows his dedication and loyalty to Guinevere. This is also an indirect judgement of Lancelot's honour and loyalty to his king, as well as his character as he will not attempt to give up Guinevere and find another woman to love and marry. It seems that the women portrayed in *Le Morte D'Arthur* usually have the moral high ground and are the ones to decide whether or not the knights are chivalrous enough. The women are generally eloquent, intelligent and 'fair', and their good graces are highly sought after by any man. Even the damsels who do not appear to have any titles usually have a positive description of their character to them. This is befitting the idealised perception of women that one finds in works of courtly love.

Malory's text gives some conflicting ideas regarding the treatment and perception of women. Despite living in a patriarchal society, the women do have some form of agency and a say in the workings of society's structure and ethics. This is also illustrated brilliantly in Janet Jesmok's *Guiding Lights: Feminine Judgement and Wisdom in Malory's 'Morte Dathur'*, where she uses Ygraine's situation to exemplify women's strength in a gender-unequal society:

"Malory puts the words 'I am a woman and I may nar fyght' into Igraine's mouth as a challenge to the male community to support this woman's righteous cause. Like Sir Urry, who searches for a noble healer, Igraine demands a defender. Her words and character centrally place women in this budding (and buddy) society that has yet to find its moral and social footing. Furthermore, as E. Jane Burns has noted, 'The very fact that a woman actively speaks the stereotypes that are typically uttered by men about women allows for a different reading... .' Voicing that she cannot fight is her way of fighting; this comment, like the one about conjugal duty, highlights the gender inequality of the society and, again from Burns, change [s] the terms of the standard hierarchical equation.' Thus Igraine's words and actions set Arthurian society in relief, demanding that the system uphold her truthful statement and inviting the reader to observe the beginnings of the chivalric code." (Jesmok 38)

Ygraine knows the truth, speaks it, and expects the men around her to be good and righteous by supporting her and defending her honour after the treason accusation. Similarly, The Lady of the Lake is right in her demands as she had an agreement with King Arthur but is still punished (beheaded). The Lady of the Lake is not necessarily a good person but in the case of Excalibur, she does have reason to ask for the head of either the knight or the damsel that were responsible for the Lady of the Lake's brother and father respectively. Guinevere's ending is perhaps the most important representation of the ideal woman in Malory's period. Malory chooses to portray Guinevere as a repentant woman in God's favour before she dies. When Lancelot comes to find her at the convent, she publicly admits to the affair, shows remorse, and asks God for forgiveness before she sends Lancelot on his way, alone. She even denies him a last kiss (Malory 691-693). Generally, the female characters in Malory's work seem unimportant to the story, despite being the catalysts for many of the tales. Not counting Ygraine and Guinevere, the two women closest to Arthur, the women are usually unnamed and barely described as other than beautiful. In most cases, their perspectives also not considered. Guinevere, for example, is given to Arthur without any mention of her wishes. The women of Malory's version of the legend essentially become beautiful objects that the men can use for their benefit, either in life or on their quests.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Romantic Love

Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) is perhaps the most famous of the Victorian writers, and was "the embodiment of his age, both to his contemporaries and to modern readers" ("Alfred, Lord Tennyson"). He was appointed the Queen's Poet Laureate in 1850 after William Wordsworth's death, and much of his poetry reflects his life but in a way that also seemed to resonate with the Victorian population. Particularly his poem *In Memoriam* (1850), a piece inspired by the loss of his close friend, became his most popular work for its commentary on "most of the intellectual issues at the centre of the Victorian consciousness: religion, immortality, geology, evolution, the relation of the intellect to the unconscious, the place of art in a workaday world, the individual versus society, the relation of man to nature, and as many others." ("Alfred, Lord Tennyson").

Idylls of the King is a literary cycle of 12 poems written by Lord Tennyson. The cycle was published in pieces throughout the years 1842 to 1888, but it is generally considered to have been officially published in 1859. The poems tell the story of King Arthur and his reign written in blank

verse, mostly in iambic pentameter. Lord Tennyson wrote these poems with Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* as his main source and inspiration, drawing clear parallels but also adding, adapting and omitting parts of the story at varying levels. The 12 poems are defined as 'idylls' in the overall title. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term 'idyll' has two definitions. Firstly, the term can be used to describe "a simple descriptive work in poetry or prose that deals with rustic life or pastoral scenes or suggests a mood of peace and contentment". Secondly, 'idyll' can also refer to "a narrative poem... treating an epic, romantic, or tragic theme" ("Idyll"). In the case of Tennyson's take on the Arthurian legend, the second is a more appropriate descriptor. Tennyson's work is not simple nor deal with the pastoral or suggest peace and contentment. While the Arthurian legend does take place in the Middle Ages - which would generally be thought of as rustic and a form of simple living by the Victorian audience - most of the characters are of higher status and live in castles. The narrative is full of murder and intrigue, and the characters face great dilemmas. The text would be the opposite of the 'idylls' of the pastoral scenes and peacefulness the first definition accounts for. However, the poems do portray a narrative that is both epic, romantic, and tragic.

In the first idyll, "The Coming of Arthur", we are introduced to Guinevere before Arthur. She is described as "the fairest of all flesh on earth" (Tennyson 21, l. 2) and as her father's only delight. She is immediately idealised, a trait of both courtly and romantic love. Arthur and Guinevere first lay eyes upon each other when Arthur and his knights come to save Cameliard from the questing beast and she meets them at the gate. Arthur looks indistinguishable from his knights, with a lack of kingly symbols, so Guinevere does not pay any attention to him. Arthur, however, is immediately entranced.

"And Arthur yet had done no deed of arms,
 But heard the call, and came: and Guinevere
 Stood by the castle walls to watch him pass;
 But since he neither wore on helm or shield
 The golden symbol of his kinglihood,
 But rode a simple knight among his knights,
 And many of these in richer arms than he,
 She saw him not, or marked not, if she saw,
 One among many, though his face was bare.

But Arthur, looking downward as he past,
 Felt the light of her eyes into his life
 Smite on the sudden, yet rode on, and pitched
 His tents beside the forest. Then he drave
 The heathen; after, slew the beast, and felled
 The forest, letting in the sun, and made
 Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight
 And so returned.” (Tennyson ll. 46-52)

The instant strong desire is one of the main characteristics of romantic love. Arthur arguably experiences the classic love trope ‘love at first sight’. This trope has existed since the concept of love arrows and cupids in Greek mythology. Cupids would shoot love arrows and the person would feel a sudden extreme desire towards whoever they laid eyes on first. Tennyson plays on the version from courtly love where it was believed that the woman’s eyes were the source of the love arrows. This trope is common in romance stories, as it functions as a metaphor for the unexplainable immediate desire one can feel simply upon seeing a person. The phenomenon of love at first sight is the explanation, albeit a vague one. It also exemplifies the speed of passion and of feelings. In a story, the author can benefit from using this when the plot does not focus on the development of a relationship but rather what happens after a relationship has been established.

It is only a few stanzas later that he declares his wish to marry her and make her his queen (ll. 74-93). Arthur’s main goal is from then on to prove himself worthy by slaying the beast and winning the battle. After managing this, Arthur’s priorities quickly shift from knights honour to love. He asks the father for her hand, but the father is sceptical of his lineage and will not give Guinevere away to anyone but a king (ll. 139-143). The idyll continues in a trial to confirm Arthur’s claim to the throne until finally the father agrees and Arthur and Guinevere are married within a few months of their first meeting (ll. 449-474). The idealisation and fast-paced relationship are repeated several times in Tennyson’s version of the legend.

The fourth Idyll, “the Marriage of Geraint”, begins with a description of both Geraint and Enid’s love for each other. Enid is compared to the heavens, the sun, moon and stars, and as being the loveliest only second to Queen Guinevere (Tennyson 76, ll. 1-18). Enid is spoiled with “fresh splendour” (Tennyson 76, l. 14), making her beauty “vary day by day, In crimsons and purples and in gems” (Tennyson 76, ll. 9-10), establishing that she wears beautiful dresses and jewels,

along with the Queen's personal help with 'arraying and decking' her as "the loveliest" (Tennyson 76, ll. 17-18). Here, love is expressed with extravagant gifts and attention. This gives way to a more materialistic way of showing love - one that has grown more and more important as British society has become capitalistic. While gifts were appreciated in earlier days, the value of gift-giving has become more apparent during and after the industrialisation, as material things have become easier to acquire. Geraint is a prince and would therefore be of significant wealth, meaning that his gifts would be somewhat expected to be lavish. However, had Tennyson considered the time period of which his story takes place, he would have realised that such gifts would not be as typical nor suggest the same level of adoration. Clothes and jewellery of that style would be fairly accurate, but they would be a sign of wealth and status, not the husband's love. Geraint's (and Guinevere's) display of love through gifts are more likely a tendency from Tennyson's own time, when public portrayals of love had become more common, and gifts therefore had become more of a symbol of one's love.

It is established that Geraint loves her despite having "first had found and loved her in a state of broken fortunes" (Tennyson 76, ll. 12-13), which suggests an instant connection and true affection between the two. Geraint's affection was decidedly not based on Enid's unattainability or her status - a romantic concept that goes against the traditions of courtly love. Geraint and Enid's relationship is not without its drama when Geraint begins to think that Enid is unfaithful to him. Because of this, Geraint attempts to be more affectionate and attentive to his wife, but this has the adverse effect, as he is also neglecting his duties and gains a reputation of a poor ruler and knight. Enid feels bad that Geraint is spending all of the time on her instead of his duties, and Geraint misunderstands her struggle as guilt of an affair. This leads to the fifth idyll "Geraint and Enid", where the couple is travelling on a quest. They do this in silence since Enid has been ordered to be quiet, and Geraint is busy being jealous and broody about the assumed affair. When they face struggles in the form of enemies attacking, Geraint only scolds his wife when she goes to warn him. Despite this, Geraint does slay all the enemies. They then arrive at an inn, where they meet a former suitor of Enid's. This suitor plots to 'save' Enid from her moody husband, which Enid loyally tells Geraint, and by the time the husband and wife has escaped the former suitor, Geraint is so wounded that he collapses. Enid stays by his side, taking care of him and cries for him. An Earl attempts to persuade Enid that the knight is dead and that she should join him, but she refuses. After the many tribulations and Enid's consistent show of loyalty and love, Geraint is convinced

that she is not unfaithful to him, and they arrive back home as a happy couple. This idyll portrays some of the common issues that can occur in romantic relationships. Geraint becomes paranoid from the fear of losing his lover to another, and this paranoia affects both him and Enid individually, as well as their relationships stability. They do not manage to communicate their thoughts, which makes both of them unhappy and allows other's to come between them. Their love story becomes one of jealousy and miscommunication, but Tennyson shows how love and loyalty to one's marriage and partner will help overcome any troubles.

It is also during Geraint and Enid's story that Lancelot and Guinevere's affair is first mentioned.

“But when a rumour rose about the Queen,
Touching her guilty love for Lancelot,
Though yet there lived no proof, nor yet was heard
The world's loud whisper breaking into storm” (ll. 24-27)

At that point, it is only a rumour, but it is quickly confirmed to the reader when Tennyson writes that Guinevere lays until late in the morning, dreaming of her love for Lancelot only a few stanzas later (ll. 157-159). This is the first time the relationship between the two is commented on, but it is written as if the relationship is already happening. At that point, readers can only speculate when and how Lancelot and Guinevere fall in love and begin their affair. The only previous mention of the two together is when Lancelot is tasked with escorting Guinevere to her wedding with Arthur. They are barely referred to together until “Merlin and Vivien”, where Vivien confronts Merlin about the couple's affair. Merlin has to concede to Vivien's accusations on this topic. Despite this, the couple are yet to see any repercussions for their secret relationship. That is until “Lancelot and Elaine”, where Lancelot refuses to joust because Guinevere will not be there and because he feels guilty for covertly betraying his Lord and friend. He excuses himself from the tournament by blaming injury (Tennyson 170, ll. 85-95). However, Guinevere persuades him not to inspire even more rumours about them and reminds him that she does not love her king as he is too perfect. Lancelot decides to joust in disguise under the Lord of Astelot's name, which unintentionally earns him the affection of the Lord's daughter, Elaine (ll. 158-193). After the tournament, Guinevere has heard of Lancelot and Elaine's relationship and is angry with jealousy, despite Lancelot having no feelings towards Elaine. Guinevere and Lancelot's feelings are tested throughout this idyll, and Lancelot even questions if Elaine's love for him is bigger than Guinevere's (ll. 1382-1390).

Their affection for each other is spoken aloud several times in this idyll. Lancelot especially shows his love for the queen by gifting her jewels while speaking of her beauty and his feelings of worship towards her:

“They met, and Lancelot kneeling uttered, “Queen,
 Lady, my liege, in whom I have my joy,
 Take, what I had not won except for you,
 These jewels, and make me happy, making them
 An armlet for the roundest arm on earth,
 Or necklace for a neck to which the swan’s
 Is tawnier than her cygnet’s: these are words:
 Your beauty is your beauty, and I sin
 In speaking, yet O grant my worship of it
 Words, as we grant grief tears.” (ll. 1173-1181)

Lancelot’s display shows a variety of expressions of love. First, he kneels, showing respect and deference to her. He then presents her a gift, jewels that he suggests can be made into a bracelet or necklace, which is a physical symbol of his love that Guinevere will be able to wear. He also says that he gives something he has won for her. Lastly, he does these calling her his happiness while also complimenting her beauty. While their affair is still technically a secret during this meeting, Lancelot is not discreet in showing his affection. The fact that Lancelot suggests putting the jewels in a necklace or bracelet is a little risky: The entire kingdom is likely to recognise the jewels from the competition, and even though they think a stranger knight won them, it might start some suspicion if Guinevere is seen wearing them later. While they are both aware of the possible consequences, Lancelot and Guinevere do not seem to care that much about keeping their secret by this point. The disregard for other’s opinions, and their own safety, correlates with the idea that nothing else matters in romantic love. Their love is more powerful than their guilt and respect for their friend and her husband.

Love is not always reciprocated in *Idylls of the King*. In “Pelleas and Ettarre”, Pelleas, a newly-made knight, quietly call on a maiden to love:

“In special, half-awake he whispered, “Where?
 O where? I love thee, though I know thee not.
 For fair thou art and pure as Guinevere,

And I will make thee with my spear and sword
 As famous—O my Queen, my Guinevere,
 For I will be thine Arthur when we meet.” (Tennyson 232, ll. 40-45)

There is some irony in the way that he is asking for a love like Arthur and Guinevere's. Pelleas does not know of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, so he has some reason to ask for something like Arthur and Guinevere. He believes that the king and queen are very much in love and a perfect couple, as most characters find anything related to Arthur perfect. However, love is not that simple. Pelleas is immediately smitten with the Lady Ettarre upon their first meet. He even compares her to Guinevere and believes Ettarre to be the more beautiful (Tennyson 232, l. 66). Pelleas eagerly offers his assistance to Ettarre and her knights and damsels, who are lost in the search for Arthur's court. Ettarre, seeing Pelleas' obvious feelings, decides to take advantage of him and his strength: She flatters him and leads him on, only to asks him to win her the circlet (diadem) in exchange for her love. (Tennyson 234, ll. 115-123). Pelleas, blinded by love, wholeheartedly agrees. He gives his all to win the tournament and honours Ettarre with the prize. Her demeanour and actions immediately change after this and leaves for her home, to which Pelleas loyally follows. However, she will not let him in to her castle and orders that he may be kept off. Pelleas persists, settling down outside the castle walls in the hope that his display of discipline in the name of love will persuade her. This story shows a different side of romantic love: unrequited love. Pelleas is subjected to some distressing experiences that he willingly puts himself through in the name of love. He is young and naive, but also determined to achieve the impossible: to make someone love you. At first, he is led on, which is not his fault, but he later knows that Ettarre does not feel for him. Yet he persists. It is not until Pelleas is betrayed by his fellow knight, Sir Gawain, who he finds in bed with Ettarre after Gawain had promised to convince Ettarre to love Pelleas, that Pelleas breaks and becomes angry and pessimistic not only about love but about humanity. He even finds out about Lancelot and Guinevere, and his perception of the world breaks as he wails:

“‘Is the Queen false?’ and Percivale was mute.
 ‘Have any of our Round Table held their vows?’
 And Percivale made answer not a word.
 ‘Is the King true?’ ‘The King!’ said Percivale.
 ‘Why then let men couple at once with wolves.
 What! Art thou mad?’” (Tennyson 245, ll. 222-227)

Pelleas questions even those he thought to be above others. He asks about the king and queen's truthfulness, of their honour. When he realises that not everyone around him are as good as he thought, he states that humans are no better than animals when he says the line about men coupling with wolves. For Pelleas, this becomes a question of common knowledge, respect, and empathy for other humans, which he finds that his fellow knights and his rulers have less of than he thought. Pelleas' story shows how romantic love can affect one's world view, and that breaking the trust that one finds when in love, can change the everything one thought they knew about the world.

Treatment and Representation of Women in *Idylls of the King*

Tennyson's text makes several comments on a topic he viewed as a societal issue of the time: the power of women. In *Idylls of the King*, the women are split into stereotypes of good and evil, corresponding with the prudish Victorian mentality and domestic ideals.

“He focused with some passion on what he saw as the very human problem of the role and power of women, recently dealt with – negatively – in *Maud* and *The Princess*. The first two Idylls written were ‘Nimue’(later ‘Merlin and Vivien’) and ‘Enid’(later divided into ‘Geraint and Enid’ and ‘The Marriage of Geraint’), and they appeared in a trial edition under the title *The True and the False*. Here in both title and text woman is stereotyped for ill and good” (Archibald 113)

The women of *Idylls of the King* are portrayed as responsible for the success or failings of the male characters - and in connection to this, dividing women as either good or evil. In ‘Merlin and Vivien’, Vivien comes to Camelot seeking sanctuary from Arthur's enemy, claiming that she is an orphan maiden when she is in actuality the enemy's lover. She spends her time at the court causing problems and manages to befriend Merlin. At the time, Merlin is lonely and depressed and Vivien ‘takes advantage’ of his weakened state and convinces him to share a spell as a show of love and trust. While Merlin is smart and manages to distract and deny her this for a while, he is seduced by her affection and teaches her the spell, which she then uses on him, turning him invisible to anyone but her. Vivien's manipulation lies in her sexuality and Tennyson portrays Merlin as morally weak for giving in to her but supposes that it is not Merlin's fault for falling for her act. Vivien is the one to blame, wrong for using her sensuality and prying on a weak man. She is the evil. On the other end of the scale is Enid. In ‘Geraint and Enid’, her purity, patience and loyalty to her husband is what saves Geraint from being killed on several occasions even though Geraint

believes that she is unfaithful to him and is trying to punish her. Again and again, Enid shows her love for Geraint, but it is not until the end of the story that Geraint regrets his unreasonable allegations, and they return home as a happy couple who are later blessed with children and long lives.

“But Enid, whom her ladies loved to call
 Enid the Fair, a grateful people named
 Enid the Good; and in their halls arose
 The cry of children, Enids and Geraints
 Of Times to be; nor did he doubt her more,
 but rested in her fealhy, till he crown’d
 A happy life with a fair death, and fell” (Tennyson 124, ll. 961-967)

So, Enid is responsible for Geraint’s survival and happiness through her commendable domestic womanly qualities and is then ‘rewarded’ with children and a community that praised her. This were in line with the strict expectations of women in Tennyson’s time and shows how it was generally accepted that a good woman was a supporter of their husband. It also perpetuates the idea that raising children and being a housewife was the ultimate goal for women. Enid functions as an example of the ideal woman by showing loyalty, morality, and stability in the relationship with Geraint, even when faced with difficult circumstances.

The importance of the female characters in *Idylls of the King* can already be seen in the chapter titles. Six of the twelve chapters (not including the ‘Dedication’ and ‘To the Queen’), have a female character’s name in it. The five of them are named by using first the name of the chapter’s main male character and then the name of the chapter’s main female character. This suggests not only the hierarchy between man and woman, in the sense that the man is always put first but also that the woman is considered an addition to the man, attached as a secondary to help. The only exception to this is the chapter ‘Guinevere’, which is only the queen’s name. This could symbolise the story’s plot, as it is the chapter where Guinevere and Lancelot are caught and forced to leave Camelot, and Arthur and Guinevere’s relationship is officially broken. Guinevere then stands alone just as her name does in the chapter title.

Guinevere’s punishment for her infidelity is first motivated by her own guilt. After having been found out by Mordred and Vivien, Guinevere sends Lancelot on his way and she flees to the

nunnery Almesbury, where she seeks refuge and anonymity. Her guilt, and the judging thoughts from those around her, saddens her. Then Arthur comes to confront her about the whole ordeal.

“Liest thou here so low, the child of one
 I honoured, happy, dead before thy shame?
 Well is it that no child is born of thee.
 The children born of thee are sword and fire,
 Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,
 The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts” (Tennyson 280, ll. 419-424)

Arthur’s first thought is to say that he is happy that Guinevere never had a child, arguing that any such children would be evil and godless. This shows the meaning that children had for women. The text suggests that children would take after their mother, and that their actions would be a direct representation of the mother’s character. It also speaks to what value children had for women in the eyes of the Victorian society. By saying that he is glad they did not have children, Arthur is practically denouncing the validity of their marriage, saying that Guinevere had not been able to do her job to provide offspring. Arthur then blames Guinevere for his war with Lancelot and Mordred’s revolt. Essentially, her womanliness is being accused of being Camelot’s downfall. Despite this, Arthur does forgive her when she grovels at his feet (Tennyson 284, l. 577). He speaks of how he loves her, of her beauty, and how he had always been faithful, but that he cannot ignore her trespasses. Because of this, he orders her to stay forever at the convent, away from him and any eyes that could judge her. After Arthur leaves, Guinevere’s thoughts are flooded with guilt, acknowledging that she has committed a sin that could never be erased. She even comes to the realisation that she does in fact love Arthur:

“I yearned for warmth and colour which I found
 In Lancelot—now I see thee what thou art,
 Thou art the highest and most human too,
 Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none
 Will tell the King I love him though so late?” (Tennyson 286, ll. 642-646)

Previously, she had thought Arthur to perfect and boring, and had gone to Lancelot to find “warmth and colour”, suggesting excitement and adventure. However, she realises that Arthur is “most human too”, a flawed and feeling person. Guinevere comes to this realisation much too late, and she lives the rest of her days in regret and mourning, knowing that Arthur and Camelot has fallen.

Discussion

Now that an analysis of the two texts has been made, I will compare the tropes and messages of the two texts. This section also includes an interpretive discussion, considering what the individual texts says about their periods' views on romance, love and women, and what kind of social and political environment Malory and Tennyson would have been involved with through these two pieces of literature.

Comparing he Works: Differences and Similarities

Despite technically being the same story - the story of King Arthur and the rise and fall of the kingdom Camelot - the two versions have many differences. First and foremost, I would argue that the authors' focus lies far apart. Malory's work is split up in the telling of the separate knights, and while the text does contain a lot of dialogue, its central point is the plot, i.e., the adventures and quests. Malory uses the knights' tales to exemplify acts of morality and loyalty by putting the characters in certain situations, whereafter they are rewarded or punished based on their choices. These are often unique cases, with magic and beasts, situations that real people never would face, but the dilemmas would still resonate with the audience. Tennyson, however, focuses his attention on the characters and their relationships. His interests is on the social aspect, of conduct and feelings. The characters are put in situations that are meant to showcase their emotions and other's reactions. This difference is likely occurring because of the change in interest when it comes to storytelling. Malory's period demanded action and fantasy as the work was intended for courtly people, i.e., the people who had ample time on their hands. Tennyson's era was much more tumultuous and busier, and people lived much closer together as a result of urbanization, so the intended audience was more interested in the characters and drama - aka. gossip.

The other main difference between the two works is the portrayal of women. The female characters are largely the same and have similar stories and roles but the way that they are presented varies massively. On a general level, Malory rarely gives the women names. This makes them almost faceless and generic. At the same time, it tells the reader that these women are unimportant. This is not unusual in fiction - to leave minor characters unnamed - but when comparing the lack of female names to the abundance of male names, it suggests a distinctive disinterest in women in particular. The women in *Le Morte D'Arthur* are irrelevant as people and

only used to further the male characters in their quests. The only exceptions are the women who are in direct connection with King Arthur: his mom, his wife, his sister. Despite being named, their names still follow the narrative that they exist to further a man's storyline. On the other hand, Tennyson names quite a few women; He even decides to use their names in half of the chapter titles, showing that their characters matter. However, while Malory's women were largely background characters, Tennyson uses the female characters to exemplify 'good' and 'bad' women, mostly telling the audience how a woman is 'best' when standing by her husband, being loyal and servicing him when needed.

Lastly, a substantial difference between the works is that of love. The means of which the characters handle and expresses their affection shows the jump that the perception of love has taken between the 15th and 19th century. The idea of love and romance for the higher classes in the Late Middle ages was mostly inspired by the idea of unobtainability. This could be because of the tradition that women, especially of status, rarely were allowed to choose her own husband. Marriage was a contract of convenience, which means that married couples did not necessarily 'love' each other, let alone 'like' each other. Since they would be trapped in a marriage, they could not publicly venture out and find love. Marriage was considered sacred and binding, and the punishment for adultery could be quite harsh, especially for women. So, if a woman fell in love outside of her marriage and the feelings were mutual, she could not act upon it, essentially making her unobtainable, sometimes even before the actual marriage since betrothals of children were common among the families of nobility or status. Marriages were meant to benefit entire families; choices were made not based on the individual's feelings but rather on building one's family name. We see something similar in Malory's version of Arthur and Guinevere's beginning where, as already commented, Guinevere is practically given to Arthur without her say. Her father is happy to give not only Guinevere, but also land and the Round Table. In the Victorian era, women had a much larger say in who they wanted to marry. This, I would argue, is a change brought by the growing interest in the individual at the time. The individual's wants and emotions became more important as sciences, particularly psychology, found its place in social discussions during the romantic period. This also meant a significant increase in topics of jealousy and guilt within marriages and relationships, which is something Tennyson uses to a much higher degree than Malory. The shift from courtly love to romantic love occurs because of a shift in society. Changes in societal structure, such as the workings of the Industrial Revolution, along with scientific

discoveries, causes humans to adapt their perceptions of themselves and their ideals, which then translates into a repositioning of interests and mannerisms. Literature can then replicate those shifts, and thereby further establish the new adaptations as the new standard. With Tennyson and Malory's texts, one can see some of these changes that happened when shifting from feudal society to capitalism. The common ideas of love evolved from courtly to romantic along with the changing social structures.

Historical context: The texts as societal commentary

The mid-15th century, when Malory wrote *Le Morte D'Arthur*, was a time of political and societal unrest. The Lancaster-York feud about the crown, named The War of Roses, was pervasive in the political environment. England also lost their fight for territories in France in the 1440's and stood in a economic recession, which created political and social tension (Broomhall 85). The tension inspired an intent to change the country for the better. "One of the impulses stressed in this period was the moral regeneration of the whole of society to which everyone, including young people, men, and women, could contribute with their particular abilities." (Broomhall 86). This set a somewhat covert reform in motion, led by the upper classes (the gentry and merchants) efforts to set good examples of morally 'good' households, teaching their children and servants how to think and act in a way that would benefit society. Writers caught on to this and began intentionally writing pieces that would appeal to those upperclassmen. Malory himself was supposedly a man with a title and an active member in the War of Roses; He was jailed for treason. However, it was not until *Le Morte D'Arthur* was edited by William Caxton, England's first book printer, that the work became a commentary to the political and social agendas. Caxton added his own prologue that encouraged the readers to apply and compare the story to the political climate: "Two highly politicized books printed by Caxton, *Le Morte Darthur* (1485) and the *Order of Chivalry* (1484) contain prologues and narrative choices which reveal the political and social agendas of contemporary literature and the connections of these narratives to the macro-politics of the time. Both texts were responding to wider political anxieties and problems within the social order." (Broomhall 91). *Le Morte D'Arthur* became an example of good morals, conduct and chivalry while also reminding people of a time of British greatness. In his prologue, Caxton wrote his intentions for printing this particular text.

“And I, according to my copy, have done set it in imprint, to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in those days, by which they came to honour, and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke; humbly beseeching all noble lords and ladies, with all other estates of what estate or degree they been of, that shall see and read in this said book and work, that they take the good and honest acts in their remembrance, and to follow the same. Wherein they shall find many joyous and pleasant histories, and noble and renowned acts of humanity, gentleness, and chivalry. For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renown. And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in, but for to give faith and belief that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty: but all is written for our doctrine, and for to beware that we fall not to vice nor sin, but to exercise and follow virtue, by which we may come and attain to good fame and renown in this life, and after this short and transitory life to come unto everlasting bliss in heaven; the which He grant us that reigneth in heaven, the blessed Trinity. Amen.” (Preface by William Caxton)

Here, Caxton calls out to both men and women, encouraging them to learn from the stories and act like the characters - noting that they should only mimic the good and ignore the evil. He even states that one will achieve fame and renown if they act as such. This would have been highly motivating in a time where the main issue was the question of who the rightful owner of the crown was.

While *Le Morte D'Arthur* was written during a time of great revolt and fighting, *Idylls of the King* were written in a time of greatness for the British. However, the height of the Industrialisation caused different worries. As poet laureate, Tennyson was stuck between a duty to compliment the country's world-changing developments and his own feelings of disdain towards the corruption of the romantic that he was so taken with. “The matter of Arthur and Camelot had obsessed Tennyson since boyhood, and over the years it became a receptacle into which he poured his deepening feelings of the desecration of decency and of ancient English ideals by the gradual corruption of accepted morality.” (“Alfred, Lord Tennyson”) *Idylls of the King* seems to be Tennyson's attempt to please both sides as the text functions as both a critique of the lack of morals of the age, and also appraisal of the monarchy and its achievements. “The decay of the Round

Table came increasingly to seem to him an apt symbol of the decay of 19th-century England.” (“Alfred, Lord Tennyson”).

While the work was a commentary on the powerful nation overall, it also spoke to the individual Victorian, encouraging a rediscovery of what Tennyson found to be good morals and proper conduct. Much like Malory’s work, *Idylls of the King* speaks to both men and women, urging certain perspectives of behaviour and domesticity. Tennyson is especially critical of women and their role in society. Tennyson’s depiction of women was not unique to him. In Victorian society, men and women were imposed with rather strict stereotypes and ideals that were expected of both sexes.

““The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure war, and for conquest.. but the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle – and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision... she must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise, wise not for self development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she man never fail from his side.”” (Cossar).

John Ruskin's commentary on male and female stereotypes summarises the characters of Tennyson’s work well. The men are the actors, while the women (or at least the ‘good’ women) are the helpers or non-participants. They are to complement the men in their endeavours but not seek their own. In Victorian society, this was seen in the way women were expected to stay at home and take care of the kids and all the domestic chores while the men were out working, making money to sustain the family (Cossar). This caused a power imbalance, which fit into the idea that men were generally better - being stronger, smarter, and more capable, much fitting to Charles Darwin’s theory of ‘survival of the fittest’. This imbalance of power was excused as natural, arguing that the nature of women made them fitter to run the house and the man fitter to work. This was also an excuse used to argue against women’s voting rights. Even Queen Victoria was a believer in this (Cossar).

Idylls of the King was not only a reflection of the Woman Question but a participant in the discussion. The idyll “Guinevere” was written around the same time as the debates on the Divorce Act in 1858 and Tennyson has his say in the debate, indirectly arguing against divorce by showing the “extreme dependence of the masculine upon feminine stability and coherence” (Linley 366).

The feminine stability was based on their nurturing nature and played a role in the ideology of man and woman being in different spheres of a united whole, which was the basis of the domestic ideology that pervaded Victorian society - Men went out to work and women stayed in to work. “The codes of domesticity and chivalry reveal the way in which images of sexuality and nationality are deployed as mutually reinforcing deconstructive forces of value and virtue.” (Linley 365). When Guinevere is unfaithful and leaves in the idyll, Arthur blames her for the failings of the nation; a mirror of the idea that women had to take good care of the home so the men could take good care of the nation.

The two pieces of Arthurian literature not only reflect their periods but also played a role in the debates of the very same periods. They show the circularity of text and context; how they play on each other and can have defining effects on the other. Malory’s prose reflects a kingdom at war with itself, of debates about legitimacy and the meaning of a nation, of the female nature and rights, and in turn argues for a certain perception that guides the same debates towards a conclusion. Tennyson’s poetry participates in the discussion of woman’s place and roles, of the future of a nation at its greatest, and reflects the worry that all great things must come to an end.

Conclusion

The Arthurian Legend has survived through almost 1500 years. The story has been added, edited, picked apart and used as inspiration for thousands of pieces of art, including two works that have influenced most later variations of the story of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* was the first complete English collection of the Legend’s stories, and portrays the Late Middle Ages’ courtly love, full of quests, knights and ladies, and their chivalric acts in the name of the King. The women are mostly unnamed damsels, but Arthur’s mother, wife and sister - Ygraine, Guinevere and Morgan Le Fay - become examples of woman in its good and evil. They have a good amount of agency but are still subject to the patriarchal expectations that think of them as secondary to men. Lord Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* is much more romantic, idealising love within marriage and the good, loyal wife, while it punishes the unfaithful. Tennyson’s work has more women of importance, but they are still secondary to their male counterparts. The women’s treatment of ‘their’ men showcases the strict morals and ideals of Victorian society by rewarding the domestic, loyal wife, Enid, and punishing Guinevere

and Lancelot for their affair and betrayal towards Arthur. The analysis in this paper shows how this all come to show in the two pieces of literature by considering the representation of the forms of love and the women in each and likening the results to the societal standards of their times. The result shows the imbalance between genders and how the ideas of what love is can affect the thoughts surrounding 'Woman Question'.

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Abstract

This Master Thesis explores the presentations of love and women in two works from the world of Arthuriana. The first text is Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, a compilation of stories about the legendary King Arthur and the knights of his Round Table written in 1469. The second primary text is 12 idylls written by Lord, Alfred Tennyson and published in 1859. Tennyson was inspired by Malory's piece of prose and wrote his own version of the Arthurian Legend in blank verse, adapting and editing where he saw fit. The two texts are written roughly 400 years apart, and this paper will discuss how the texts differ - with a particular interest in their portrayals of love and their representations of women. The thesis is based on a hypothesis that the texts' portrayal of these are influenced by the social and political environment of the periods they were written in. With this in mind, the paper includes the definition and history of the two forms of love that were popular during these times: Courtly love in the 15th century and romantic love in the 18th. Courtly love was the genre of the French troubadours and defined by chivalry, longing, affairs outside of marriage and the act of proving oneself. Romantic love was inspired by courtly love but had evolved into something more emotional and materialistic in the eyes of the Romantics. The paper also accounts for society's idea of woman and femininity, i.e. "the Woman Question" in the same eras - the late Middle Ages and the Victorian era respectively. Both eras had important discussions of the nature of women, of their place in society and of their roles as ladies of the house. After having established these, an analysis of the two texts follows. Here, we dive into each text to find how exactly the kinds of love appear, chivalry was expressed, and how the women were idealised and unobtainable while also divided in between 'good' and 'bad' women. With this analysis, it continues into a discussion of the two works' differences and their historical contexts. Malory wrote at the end of the Middle Ages, and his work was published the year of the beginning of the Renaissance, when William Caxton printed *Le Morte D'Arthur* in 1485. Malory wrote for the British nobles and courtly who had an interest for stories of courtly love and knightly quests. His presentations of women were based on a society where marriage were contracts, not love. His book shows women as unimportant objects, unless they functioned as catalysts of a knight's quest or as a judge of a knight's character. Tennyson wrote at the height of the British Empire and he compared Britain and Camelot in his prologue and epilogue that he dedicated to the Prince consort and the Queen, respectively. The rise and fall of the legendary kingdom was one of Tennyson's worries. His work also functioned as a commentary on what he

(and many others at the time) thought to be woman's role inside and outside the home. The rigorous and strict ideals of the Victorian era had woman placed as a caretaker despite the sex getting many more freedoms outside the house. The paper ends with a resumé of its points and the conclusion that there seem to be some correlation between the presentation of love and women in the Arthurian legend and the context in which the works were written in.