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**A New Enemy in Camelot: Vilification of the Mother Morgause in
T.H. White's *The Once and Future King***

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To Papa,
for introducing me to Arthurian legend,
and making my life more magical.

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Introduction

One of the greatest works of modern fantasy literature, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) has enthralled children and adults alike for over fifty years. His adaptation of the Arthurian legend has shaped how we view the myth today, and especially highlighted its adaptability in conveying and confronting the social issues of any period in history. However, T.H. White's personal story colors the pages of his greatest work in some very problematic ways. In explicating *The Once and Future King*, therefore, it is fundamental to have a sense of White's early history, and, specifically, his relationship with his mother as he eventually perceived it. By his own admission, his understanding of her early influence on his life has molded not only the figure of the villain Morgause in *The Once and Future King*, but also her trajectory in contemporary Arthurian literature.

Terence Hanbury White was born in Bombay, India, on May 29th 1906, to Constance White, the daughter of a former Indian judge, and Garrick White, a District Superintendent of Police. He spent his early childhood in India, raised with the help of many servants in their home, and, at the age of six, moved in with his maternal grandparents, the Astons, in St. Leonards, East Sussex. There, he lived amongst his cousins and grandparents until he entered Cheltenham College, a public school in Gloucestershire, at the age of fourteen. In 1925, he entered Cambridge University, and pursued a degree in English. Because of his move to England, and his later schooling, White was not around his parents for most of his upbringing – in fact, he never lived with them again after leaving India. But their relationship would go on to haunt White's later recollections of his childhood.

White's parents had a notoriously unhappy marriage, littered with quarrels from the start. The couple wedded in 1905 at the insistence of Constance's mother, who found

her pretty thirty-year-old daughter with hoards of suitors, but still unmarried. Realizing that she couldn't live off her parents forever, Constance agreed to marry the next man who offered, and she did. Both of White's parents apparently quickly regretted the union, foreshadowing the marital troubles that would serve to trouble their household.¹

After their son was born, Constance refused intercourse, and the couple's fights escalated. White even recalls them wrestling over a pistol in his bedroom, screaming that they wanted to kill each other; he only remembered this in psychoanalysis in the 1930s.^{2/3} However, Garrick's sister, who stayed with the couple when White was around two, also depicted their marriage as very unhappy, and observed Constance as a jealous mother, who wanted all of White's attention to herself.⁴ Despite all their problems, however, the two lived together in India until 1915, when Garrick (who had taken to drinking heavily in the preceding years) physically assaulted Constance, and she resolved to move back to England. But though she remained in England for the rest of her life, Constance and her son continued to live separately.

In 1923, White's father petitioned for restitution of conjugal rights, and Constance White responded with a plea for judicial separation. The case received a fair amount of attention in the press because of the rarity of conjugal rights cases. The judge concluded that there was "legal cruelty" and poor conduct on his *father's* part which induced Constance's reaction; she had won her separation and was finally free of her husband.⁵ White's relationship with his father apparently ceased in 1923, too, and his mother took on fiscal responsibility for him.

¹ Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1967) 25.

² Warner 27.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Ed. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 94. Freud posits that "If there are quarrels between the parents of it their marriage is unhappy, the ground will be prepared in their children for the severest predisposition to a disturbance of sexual development or to a neurotic illness."

⁴ Warner 27.

⁵ Warner 32.

Though his parents had this exceptionally tumultuous relationship, White writes in his diary that he “adored” his mother “passionately” until he was around eighteen.⁶ This was undoubtedly the period in his life in which they had the most interaction. However, in his own words, his feelings began to change towards her just as he entered University at Cambridge in 1925. It may be unwise to ignore this fact, for it was at university that his thorough modern education took place. At the time, it would have been difficult to ignore the cultural presence of Freudian thought, which became increasingly popular after World War One.⁷

Though we may not be able to pinpoint absolutely the year when White was introduced to Freudian theories, his work during his college years suggests some familiarity. In 1928, while he was writing his early novel, *The Winter Abroad*, he noted questions to himself concerning the nature of homosexuality, a subject Freud discussed at length. In a notebook, he jotted down questions like, “Is homosexuality inherent, assumed by election, imposed by circumstance?”⁸ Undoubtedly, someone deeply invested in answering these kinds of questions would have turned to popular theories (for which, he wrote in 1928, “I am in my prime”),⁹ and in this search, could not have avoided Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and Freud’s definition of “inverts,” or homosexuals.

Later, in an untitled poem written in 1932, he described a baby boy who “will grow to know desire,” and his “anxious mama,” who, sensing his early signs of rapture and “sensuous wriggles” in the bath, worries that he won’t “despise his genitals and

⁶ Warner 28.

⁷ Benjamin Nelson, *Freud and the 20th Century* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1974) 13.

⁸ Warner 42.

⁹ Warner 43.

sinews, / won't know that it is 'bestly' to be kissed."¹⁰ She quickly decides to send her boy to Eton, where he will learn to that "he must hate" his beautiful body parts.¹¹ Though White did not explicitly note Freud's influence on his poem, Freudian analysis lends itself to an examination of mother/son relationship. The mother in the poem demonstrates her own sexual repression¹² by attempting to repress her child's normal infantile sexual excitation.¹³ While the child is likely unaware of social stigmas associated with open shows of sexuality, the tone of the poem is ominous and suggests that the child will soon, following his mother's lead, learn to hide his sexuality and find it shameful. By 1932, White had already developed problematic feelings towards mothers in general, and particularly his own mother, whom he described that same year as "a vampire."¹⁴

It is not entirely surprising to learn that that White was studying and undergoing psychoanalysis in the mid-1930s; the exact date is unclear. He quickly became a fanatic, seeing his analyst every day at the time he was writing *The Once and Future King*, and calling psychoanalysis, in a letter to a friend, "the greatest thing in the world (how not, since it had made me happy?)"¹⁵ And this is also the period in which he started documenting increasingly hateful feelings towards his mother. He may have been drawn to psychoanalysis because of its validation of previously formed dark feelings towards Constance, or psychoanalysis could have uncovered feelings he had not previously known he possessed. Whatever the cause, the boy who had "adored" his mother no longer existed from the 1930s onwards.

¹⁰ Warner 54.

¹¹ Warner 54.

¹² Freud 85. Freud says that sexual repression/inhibition (i.e. "shame, disgust, pity...") occurs earlier and to a greater extent in females than males. Furthermore, Freud posits that "A mother would probably be horrified if she were made aware that all her marks of affection were rousing her child's sexual instinct," (Freud 89).

¹³ Freud 98. Freud also finds that repression, or "blocked currents," often leads to perverse tendencies. These blocked currents occur because of taught social norms, which create barriers against natural sexual impulses.

¹⁴ Francois Gallix, *Letters to a Friend: the Correspondence between T. H. White and L. J. Potts* (New York: Putnam, 1982) 52.

¹⁵ Gallix 72.

Most of what we know of White's changed feelings towards his mother comes from letters to his two best friends – L.J. Potts (his tutor at Cambridge, a scholar and author) and David Garnett (an author, publisher, and member of the Bloomsbury group) – starting in the 1930s. Though White did not have many close friends, he did carry on detailed correspondence with these two men during his life, and apparently felt that he could trust them with intimate family details. These letters, coupled with selections from his diary, have been documented and published, and they plainly exhibit his shift in feelings towards Constance White in the 30s and beyond, during the period when his interest in psychoanalysis also peaked.

This speculation about the effect of Freudian theory on White's perception of his mother is not to say that Constance was the best mother in the world. She was, by all accounts, notably absent in the upbringing of her child. But so was his father. However, it is Constance who bears the whole brunt of White's later negative parental feelings, demonstrating an increasing tendency to "blame the mother" for all family members' woes.

White's father exists only in his documented recollections as a figure with whom White demonstrates Constance's many failings as a mother. According to White's diary, his father's alcoholism was "the usual" response to a "strong-willed, imaginative, selfish, beautiful...wife."¹⁶ For White, the mere fact that this woman was "strong-willed" was enough to indict her for his family's maladies. White was able eventually to forgive his father everything, and even seemingly forget him. His mother, on the other hand, he despised. But though he continuously makes such disparaging comments about her, he describes almost no actual incidents in their relationship, nor exactly why he hated her so

¹⁶ Warner 26.

vehemently. He depicts her personality in vague, hateful words, without offering up much information as to her real nature. In his parents' turbulent marriage, his father was the one deemed to have been "legally cruel" in court (by a male judge in 1923 no less). But to White, his mother remains the one to blame in their marriage – she actually drove Garrick to abusive alcoholism. She was imaginative and selfish in her relationships with the men in her family, and to White, these were quite sufficient qualities to vilify her.

For the rest of his life, White specifically blamed Constance for *his* lacking relationships with women, and Freud's conception that it is the mother's "task" to "[teach] her child how to love"¹⁷ may have given White's darker sentiments academic validation, because Constance was certainly not the most devoted mother. He writes in his diary in 1952:

I didn't get much security out of her. Either there were the dreadful parental quarrels and spanking of me when I was tiny or there were excessive scenes of affection during which she wooed me to love her – not her to love me. It was my love that was extracted, not hers that she gave....Anyway, she managed to bitch up my loving women.¹⁸

Constance, here, is manipulative, calculating woman who actually "woos" her son like a suitor. White takes issue with her for her inconsistent attention and attitude toward him, and his reference to spanking and scenes of affection highlights a sexualized/Oedipal relationship. He describes her seductive behavior and blames her for his admitted misogyny (which he confirmed in a letter to L.J. Potts' wife)¹⁹ and even his inability to love a woman – she "bitched that up." Likely referring to his own "inversion" or homosexuality here, Freud's own theories on inversion confirm the condemnation of the mother. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Freud writes that all cases of

¹⁷ Freud 89.

¹⁸ Warner 28.

¹⁹ Gallix 115.: White writes to L.J. Potts' wife, Mary, "'Bors was a misogynist like myself..." in a plea to help him create a likable female character in TOAFK.

inversion are likely caused by some early childhood experience.²⁰ Furthermore, he argues that “in all cases we have examined we have established the fact that the future inverts, in the earliest years of their childhood, pass through a phase of very intense but short-lived fixation to a woman.”²¹ And so, White’s description of his mother’s attentions – at one time intense, and another, neglectful – serve to indict her for his own crises of sexuality, because through “wooing” him, she actively attempted to make him fixate on her. Later, in a letter to David Garnett, White spells out her culpability even more bleakly: “You wonder why straight and moral paths are difficult, tortuous and impossible for me. Go see my mother.”²² Thus, Constance becomes culpable, from the 1930s onwards, not just for his difficult relationships with women, but also his moral life in general.

White’s major source of anger towards Constance comes from her rejection of a traditional mother’s role. She was “strong-willed,” she was “selfish,” she was “imaginative,” and she did not give him enough “security.” Uncharacteristic of even our contemporary renderings of the “good mother,” Constance’s desires in life were not eaten up by caring for her child and his needs,²³ and it is perhaps for that, more than anything else, that White despised her. For a great believer in psychoanalysis and its inventor, such neglect of her maternal “task” was a strike against her, because Constance White refused to be possessed by either her husband or her son.²⁴ But while she was certainly not the most dutiful or loving mother, one wonders at the extent to which White demonized her in writing, especially in his most obvious and self-admitted attempt to

²⁰ Freud 6.

²¹ Freud 11.

²² David Garnett, and T.H. White, *The White/Garnett Letters* (New York: Viking, 1968) 85.

²³ Peggy McCracken, “Mothers in the Grail Quest: Desire, Pleasure, and Conception” *Arthuriana* 8.1 (1998): 39.

²⁴ Judith Van Herik, *Freud on Femininity and Faith* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 132.: In summary of the Oedipus complex, the young boy wants to take on, “an active role whereby he wants to take his father’s place and possess his mother.” Freud equates all male-female family relationships, in this way, with possession by the male over the female, a position that Constance White denied.

characterize her: *The Once and Future King*'s demonic mother Morgause. That his personal vendetta against his mother could have such long-lasting implications in contemporary Arthurian fiction demonstrates an unsettling cultural practice to “blame the mother” in the century of the Freudian revolution.

Chapter One: Malory's *Morte Darthur* as Discordant Inspiration

In August of 1938, T.H. White wrote a letter to his friend L.J. Potts discussing a book he had revisited – Malory's *Morte Darthur*. He had, apparently, written a thesis on the text at Cambridge, but claimed that he had “naturally” not read it at the time.²⁵ At thirty-two, however, he became engrossed in the story of Camelot's rise and fall and

²⁵ Gallix 93.

began to compose a preface for the work that would form the first book of *The Once and Future King*.

To White, Malory's epic was a "perfect tragedy," featuring "real characters" with "recognizable reactions" to events.²⁶ He described for Potts the real characters in the tale: "Mordred was hateful, Kay a decent chap with an inferiority complex, Gawaine...a swine with a streak of solid decency...Arthur, Lancelot and even Galahad were really glorious people."²⁷ Interestingly, all of the "real" characters here are male, though Morgan le Fay and especially Guenever play major roles in the book. In fact, his entire preface to Malory, "The Sword in the Stone," which White described as "a kind [of] wish-fulfillment of the kind of things I should like to have happened to me when I was a boy,"²⁸ is almost entirely devoid of female characters. The tale follows young Arthur's tutelage under Merlyn in an idyllic English countryside – a perfect place to grow up, excepting one nagging female servant. Heather Worthington suggests that this absence of women "guarantees" the happiness of Arthur's early life for White,²⁹ perhaps signaling that it is the addition of women that renders Arthur's tale inevitably tragic.

However idealized White imagined Arthur's woman-free youth, his life would not remain carefree for long. To White, Camelot's fate hung on three tragic themes: first, the Cornwall feud, existing since Arthur's father (Uther Pendragon) killed Gawaine's grandfather (Gorlois); next the incestuous union of Arthur and his half sister, Morgause; last, the Guenever-Lancelot romance. But of all these factors, White concluded:

The real reason Arthur came to a bad end was because he had slept with his

²⁶ Gallix 93.

²⁷ Gallix 93.

²⁸ Gallix 94.

²⁹ Heather Worthington, "From Children's Story to Adult Fiction: T.H. White's 'The Once and Future King'" *Arthuriana* 12.2 (2002): 99.

sister...Morgause (the sister) is really more important in the doom than Guenever is, both through being associated with the Cornwall feud and through the incest theme.³⁰

In light of her reviled reception in much of Arthurian literature, White's defense of Guenever is surprising, though he still faults her for her relationship with Lancelot, who White disregards. Nonetheless, this decreased censure, coupled with his emphasis on the mother Morgause's culpability,³¹ becomes his main source of conflict with Malory. Malory's traditionally accepted tragic themes, posited by Charles Moorman, overlook Morgause completely. They are the Lancelot-Guenever romance, the Lot-Pellinore feud, and the grail quest, "each of which defines one of the causes of the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, the failures in love, in loyalty, in religion."³²

In accordance with Moorman's disregard of Morgause, the actual text of *Morte Darthur* allots her scant attention. We first encounter Morgause when Arthur does, after his coronation:

She became richly beseen, with her four sons Gawaine, Gaheris, Agravain, and Gareth, with many other knights and ladies, for she was a passing fair lady. Wherefore the King cast great love onto her, and desired to lie by her.³³

Here, Malory establishes Arthur as the initiator of the sexual union in his use of active verbs. It is Arthur that "cast" the love in Malory; it is he that "desired" the incestuous affair to occur, though, significantly, Malory suspects neither Arthur nor Morgause of knowing about their relationship at the time.³⁴ Morgause does nothing other than appear beautiful, surrounded by her children. Thus, she does not bear the primary blame of the sexual act. After they sleep together, she leaves the court peaceably, though pregnant.

³⁰ Warner 130.

³¹ The conclusion of the Morgause's culpability may be unsurprising because of his relationship with his own mother.

³² Charles Moorman, "Courtly Love in Malory" *ELH* 27.3 (1960): 163.

³³ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 21.

³⁴ Malory 21.

While their child, Mordred, eventually becomes Arthur's greatest enemy, Malory pardons them for their ignorance of their familial relationship.

Many years later, Morgause arrives at court incensed, but all is quickly resolved. Her son with Lot, Gareth, had come to court without revealing his true identity, and so, was set to work in the kitchen. Morgause berates Arthur and her other sons and exclaims, "Alas, where have ye done my own dear son that was my joy and bliss?"³⁵ Gawaine and Arthur repent, calling her "dear mother" and "fair sister" respectively - they will "shape a remedy to find him"³⁶ and make amends. Morgause later faints after encountering Gareth for the first time in fifteen years, overcome with joyful emotion.³⁷

Morgause in *Morte Darthur* is the vision of the devoted mother. She travels all the way to Arthur's court to right a wrong to one of her children. She refers to that child as her "dear son" and her "joy and bliss,"³⁸ and she faints when she sees him again, overwhelmed by motherly affection. Morgause's reaction characterizes her as simply a loving matriarch, and when she accepts Arthur's apology, we see that she is not unduly drawn to angry outbursts, and does not harbor animosity towards her brother and one-time lover.

In light of Malory's benign illustration of Morgause, White's notion of her as "more important in the doom" is surprising.³⁹ Though she births Arthur's final enemy in *Morte Darthur*, her role is trivial, and Malory implies no wrongdoing in Mordred's upbringing. In fact, Arthur might be more to blame for Mordred's nature – Arthur did, on Merlyn's advice, attempt to kill Mordred as a child.⁴⁰ Morgause is a dutiful mother, and a

³⁵ Malory 156.

³⁶ Malory 157.

³⁷ Malory 165.

³⁸ Malory 157.

³⁹ Warner 120.

⁴⁰ Malory 31.

respectful sister to Arthur. There is little else to say of importance about her. But Malory is not alone in this portrayal of Morgause. All medieval literature corroborates Malory's view that in the incestuous union, Morgause was unaware, and therefore, without blame.⁴¹

The real she-devil incarnate in *Morte Darthur* is actually Morgause's childless, enchantress sister, Morgan le Fay, whom Arthur formerly considered his "most trusted" companion.⁴² Morgan despises Arthur, and attempts to kill him "because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood" – or, essentially, because she is jealous of his power. She also kidnaps and attempts to force Lancelot into a sexual relationship with her or one of her minions, "or else [he] die in...prison."⁴³ Arthur eventually declares her his "enemy,"⁴⁴ after her repeated attempts to expose Lancelot and Guenever's love affair. But as we will see, Morgan is nothing but a marginal, blundering creature in *The Once and Future King*. The two sisters exchange roles and importance in White's revision of Malory, perhaps suggesting that their basic difference – motherhood – is what really explains their characterizations today.

Though Malory does not deride Guenever's character as much as he does Morgan's, he pays her most attention, positioning her relationship with Lancelot as the major reason for the fall of Camelot. We first hear of her as Arthur proclaims his love. Merlyn disapproves, suggesting that the king seek a better match. Guenever, he tells Arthur, is "not wholesome for him to take to wife"⁴⁵ for she and Lancelot will cuckold him. Despite Merlyn's prophetic protestation, however, Arthur moves forward with the engagement. Though Guenever and Lancelot's sexual relationship is only overtly depicted once in the "Knight in the Cart" section, it is apparent that they have a

⁴¹ Raymond H. Thompson, "Morgause of Orkney Queen of Air and Darkness" *Quondum Et Futurus* 3.1 (1993): 3.

⁴² Malory 58.

⁴³ Malory 98.

⁴⁴ Malory 245.

⁴⁵ Malory 50.

longstanding relationship throughout Malory,⁴⁶ which is at times celebrated, and at times abhorred, shedding light on the important moral and religious crossroads that defines Malory's work.

With Arthurian literature's increasing dissemination of Christian ideologies, *Morte Darthur* exhibits contradictory attitudes towards the morality of Lancelot and Guenever's adulterous affair. For as C.S. Lewis reminds us, the idea of "courtly love," or the celebrated abjection of a lover to his oftentimes married lady-love ("the only [virtue] he dares to claim"),⁴⁷ so central to medieval tradition, is precarious at best in light of Christian doctrine. Roger Sherman Loomis, one of the foremost Arthurian scholars of the last century, suggests that this practice of courtly love intimately resembles goddess worshipping⁴⁸ – a vestige of the supremely matriarchal pagan traditions of the Irish – and Christian Malory seems uncomfortable with this connection.

As Lancelot serves Guenever without question, obliging "his lady's lightest wish, however whimsical,"⁴⁹ he mimics the worship of the fertility goddess, of which Loomis suggests Guenever was an incarnation.⁵⁰ The old pagan Irish tradition honored women above all else.⁵¹ for being "intimately tied to the land itself",⁵² and even encouraged women to bear many children, for Irish law provided extensively for the rights of women "...[in] pregnancy out of wedlock."^{53/54} Though partly committed to depicting the Lancelot-Guenever relationship in such familiar terms, Malory also displays his Christian

⁴⁶ Malory 426.: As noted by Guenever's many jealous outbursts about Lancelot and Elaine (calling him a "traitor knight" after she sees him wearing Elaine's red sleeve) and Lancelot's mental breakdown after her rebuke.

⁴⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) 2.

⁴⁸ Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, (Chicago: Academ Chicago Publishers, 1997), 292. Loomis describes the "land worshipping" practices of ancient Celtic mythology, with goddesses solely connected to the fertility of that land.

⁴⁹ Lewis 2.

⁵⁰ Loomis 292. Loomis suggests that Guenever's counterpart in Celtic lore is Blathnat, the vegetation goddess.

⁵¹ Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 50.

⁵² Condren 59.

⁵³ Condren 63.

⁵⁴ Though, obviously, Guenever becomes the barren Queen in later Arthurian literature – another possible Christian containment of her previous Goddess like stature.

resentments of such lady-worship throughout the rest of the tale. It is perhaps for this, more than anything, that Malory blames the two lovers.

The traces of Malory's Christian convictions increasingly threaten to place judgment on the Lancelot-Guenever relationship, and even their individual characters.

For as Roger Sherman Loomis tells us, though *Morte Darthur* begins as

...A romance of sublimated adultery, it gradually reveals how such a passion may not only close the road to spiritual development but also, violating the bonds of marriage, friendship, and feudal loyalty, bring about the downfall of a kingdom and the wreck of a noble friendship.⁵⁵

Though Malory may highlight their adulterous and chivalric love at times, he also demonstrates the Christian consequences for such actions. He not only blames the Lancelot-Guenever relationship for the downfall of Camelot, but also extends its culpability in the detriment of other relationships, and their unattained spiritual enlightenment.

However, Malory principally focuses on Lancelot's spiritual development, with Guenever's presence only significant insofar as she helps or hinders him in this respect. For the majority of the romance, Malory disparages Guenever for this specific reason. He tells us, "Sir Lancelot began to resort unto Queen Guenivere again, and forgot the promise and the perfection that he made in the [Grail] quest."⁵⁶ That he resorts "unto" her implies Guenever's power over him as his courtly love object. Though he may fight to stay away, she attracts him magnetically, even superseding his spiritual pursuits. Perhaps she is even his goddess! As such, Malory would have us believe she is a false god, and the only impediment to Lancelot's real attainment of spiritual perfection – she even prevents him from fulfilling the Grail quest. Malory writes,

⁵⁵ Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963) 92.

⁵⁶ Malory 403.

Had not Sir Lancelot been in his privy thoughts and in his mind so set inwardly to the Queen as he was in seeming outward to God, there had no knight passed him in the quest of the Sangrail...⁵⁷

In a world without Guenever, Lancelot would have been the Grail knight – the one to surpass all others on their spiritual quests. Though earlier Arthurian tales may have applauded his fidelity to Guenever, Christian Malory derides their courtly love, and reproaches Guenever for her authority in their toxic relationship.

Despite Guenever's hindering Lancelot's Grail success, Malory cannot entirely vilify her - she was, after all, a "true lover" to Lancelot.⁵⁸ But this is not enough for many members of the court. In fact, a number of Lancelot's comrades in Camelot refer to her as a "destroyer of good knights."⁵⁹ Partially in reference to Lancelot, they clearly blame her for the affair. She has actively ruined their best knight, Lancelot, even in his spiritual endeavors. There are also rumors that she has put a spell on Lancelot, as one damsel tells him, "It is noised that ye love Queen Guenivere, and that she hath ordained by enchantment that ye shall never love no other but her."⁶⁰ Lancelot refuses to respond to the claim, but the nature of the suspicion demonstrates Guenever's reputation as the impetus for the love affair, as she "enchanted" Lancelot. Perhaps this enunciation of her seductive, magical powers is an homage to her former, powerful embodiment as a fertility goddess in earlier Celtic lore.⁶¹ In this context, it illustrates the progressively demonized perception of powerful and magical females – a pagan remnant – within the patriarchal Christian tradition.

⁵⁷ Malory 403.

⁵⁸ Malory 444.

⁵⁹ Malory 409.

⁶⁰ Malory 108.

⁶¹ John Bugge, "Fertility Myth and Female Sovereignty in 'The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell'" *The Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 198.

At the end of *Morte Darthur*, Guenever herself blames their relationship for Camelot's downfall. In the nunnery, she tells Lancelot,

Through this man [Lancelot] and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noble knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord [Arthur] slain.⁶²

Later, she reiterates, "For through thee and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed."⁶³ These statements are definitive. She knows that their love destroyed not only Lancelot's hope for spiritual attainment, but also King Arthur, the Round Table, and all of his lofty ideals in Camelot. Her conviction conforms to the knights' previous conception of her as the "destroyer of knights," and, such an end to Malory's book highlights his own opinion of their overwhelming culpability, thereby influencing who we ourselves blame. Though Guenever saves Lancelot's soul in a sense,⁶⁴ by refusing to kiss him at the nunnery and proposing that that he, too, join a religious community, her repentance comes too late. Guenever's recommendation that he put the Christian religion above his courtly love suggests that she has found the light of the true God, and suitably finds any remnant of goddess worship fraudulent and futile. For the medieval Christian Malory, though the courtly love of Lancelot and Guenever was true, their adultery was an evil, and they needed to be punished for its part in the destruction of the Round Table.⁶⁵

With Malory's textual assertions, White's diminishment of Lancelot and Guenever's blame, and his converse enlargement of Morgause's, are glaring departures, and most ripe for analysis. Though the two male authors disparage different women altogether, perhaps their differences can both be traced back to one fear – that of the powerful woman. For the medieval Christian male author, Guenever defines the female

⁶² Malory 520.

⁶³ Malory 520.

⁶⁴ Beverly Kennedy, "Adultery in Malory's 'Le Morte D'Arthur'" *Arthuriana* 7.4 (1997): 42.

⁶⁵ Moorman 165.

threat of the times. As a goddess-like figure, Malory criticizes her because she threatens the stability of the Christian hierarchy of male authority. By White's time, with Christian patriarchal ideals stably implanted in Western society, popular psychology had named a new female threat – the “neglectful” mother. As we will see, White's vilification of Morgause in this respect merely reveals a new spin of the familiar attempt to subdue autonomous women.

Chapter Two: Re-envisioning Motherhood in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*

Though Malory may have been White's inspiration, their respective narrative portrayals of Guenever and Morgause diverge significantly. Morgause remains fairly inconsequential throughout *Morte Darthur*, but in *The Once and Future King*, she emerges as Guenever's peer in importance, and the two women bear many similarities. Both are queens, adulteresses, and wildly capricious at times. Their physical description is even more expositive, because White gives both of the beauties blue eyes and black hair. Guenever's hair is “so black it was startling.”⁶⁶ But what is actually startling in this seemingly coincidental account is the calculated action on White's part, as medieval Arthurian authors almost unanimously depict Guenever as blond.⁶⁷ This conscious decision to match the two queens' superficial characteristics allows the reader to easily scrutinize their essential differences. It is useful to analyze exactly what these differences

⁶⁶T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: Ace, 1987) 331.

⁶⁷Kurth Sprague, “The Troubled Heart of T.H. White: Women and ‘The Once and Future King’” *Arthuriana* 16.3 (2006): 113.

are, because White would make one the villain of his book, and salute the other in homage.

The conflation of their physical similarities is suggestive of the wicked stepmother fantasy, explored at length by fairytale critics. Scholars associate this phenomenon with a stage of childhood development, where children find it difficult to appreciate conflicting character traits within one person. While, hopefully, adults can grasp the possibility that a person may be both maternal *and* jealous or uncaring, fairytale critic Bruno Bettelheim proposes that the child can most easily understand the disparate aspects of that person through the creation of two “separate entities – the loving and the threatening.”⁶⁸ The wicked stepmother is merely a distinct facet of the original mother’s being, isolated so that the child may understand the character more clearly in an entirely congruous and evil way. Contrastingly, the child sees the original mother in an exaggerated positive light, as the child has exorcised the negative aspects of her in the stepmother character.⁶⁹

Though White was not a child when writing *The Once and Future King*, he was still sorting through many childhood issues during the time of its composition, as noted by his undergoing daily psychoanalysis and his bitter reminiscences about his relationship with his mother. And for a number of critics of his work, the melding of the queens’ physical characteristics serves to illustrate them as different aspects of the same individual. But who is this person that all of White’s female characters stem from? He admitted himself that he could only write about one woman, and that was Constance White, his mother.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1977) 67.

⁶⁹Bettelheim 70.

⁷⁰Sprague 113.

Morgause noticeably receives the brunt of his anger towards Constance. In fact, in a letter to L.J. Potts, White writes, “I hate Morgause so much that I can’t write about her.”⁷¹ With Guenever, however, he realized that he could not portray her as would have liked to, because he already had one “unattractive woman in the epic.”⁷² So, he forced himself to imagine positive traits for Guenever, and eventually discovered that he might even like her. He writes to Potts,

Have you found what a remarkable person Guenever was? She is an Anna Karenina, but her trouble is that she has no children. Arthur had 2 illegitimate ones, and Lancelot had Galahad....Guenever is one of the realest *women* in literature....I treat her with the greatest respect, like somebody handling a cobra. But I like and admire cobras. I hold her tightly by the head and unfold the coils with respectful wonder.⁷³

White describes Guenever as one of the realest “women” in literature while likening her to a dangerous animal, one that might bite her male handler at any time. To White, even the most “remarkable” women are dangerous and detrimental to the men in their lives. Guenever’s redeeming quality in his eyes, though White claims that it was her “trouble,” is actually her childlessness. For White, it was fortunate that later Arthurian authors envisioned her as barren.⁷⁴ Kurth Sprague suggests that it would have been impossible for him to see a *mother* in such a fully formed way because of his own relationship with Constance.⁷⁵ Because Guenever was sterile in Malory, White could picture her in better light than the bitch Morgause, and even to exaggerate some of her positive qualities in comparison with the demonized mother figure.

⁷¹Gallix 120.

⁷²Warner 150.

⁷³Gallix 115.

⁷⁴ While in earlier lore, like the Welsh *Mabinogion*, we find her fertile.

⁷⁵ Sprague 127. Sprague suggests that her barrenness was integral to his depiction of Guenever as a person, and luckily, White is able to follow Malory on this note (while works more connected with the Celtic goddess tradition, like the Welsh *Mabinogion*, depict her as fertile).

This inability to consider the multiple facets of a mother's character is White's greatest failure in *The Once and Future King*, because Morgause emerges just as unreal and one-dimensional as all evil stepmothers do. The incapacity to figure the mother as a "real" woman like Guenever – with both positive and negative traits – leaves his conception of Morgause lacking the depth of character he allots to all his major male characters. But though Morgause may not be as fully realized as Guenever, she still plays a central role in the novel.

The mother Morgause is the focal point of White's second book within *The Once and Future King* – originally entitled "The Witch in the Wood." In its present form, it is over one hundred pages, but the original draft was twice as long.⁷⁶ White rewrote it a number of times in its entirety, asking L.J. Potts and his wife, Mary, for help throughout the process. He admitted that he had "put too much of his mother into the character of Morgause," and he and the Pottses realized that he had to correct this for the book to succeed.⁷⁷ At one point, L.J. Potts even suggested that White remove Morgause completely.⁷⁸ However, White believed her place in the tragedy was too important to eliminate. Though he trimmed her down in later publications, and renamed the chapter "The Queen of Air and Darkness", White's distaste for Morgause still contaminates his novel.

In congruence with his conception of his own mother's faults, White portrays Morgause as fundamentally manipulative towards others, especially her children. However, they cannot help but be mesmerized by her. The narrator tells us, "Indeed they did love her. Perhaps we all give the best of our hearts uncritically – to those who deserve

⁷⁶Worthington 98.

⁷⁷Gallix 101.

⁷⁸Gallix 123.

it the least.”⁷⁹ White’s bitter presence in this depiction is hard to miss. In fact, in the sections on Morgause, introduced as “least deserving” of love, White’s ironic narrative voice becomes markedly evident. His use of “we all” introduces a personal tone denoting White’s own dark feelings towards the woman he feels undeserving of *his* love, his mother Constance.

Perhaps because of this, Morgause’s relationship with her sons serves as the main basis for White’s critique. After the visiting King Pellinore and his comrades ignore her - “she had spent an unsuccessful day with the English knights”⁸⁰ - we learn that, “She covered [Gareth] with kisses, glancing in the mirror. He escaped from the embrace and dried his tears – partly uncomfortable, partly in rapture.”⁸¹ For Morgause, her boys are a direct substitute for her target of seduction. When King Pellinore pays her no particular attention, she turns to the next man that will, giving him exactly the same kind of intimate affection. She covers Gareth with kisses, watching herself as she compels him to love her. Though her narcissistic glance in the mirror establishes her insincerity, her actions cause Gareth to awkwardly extract himself from her embrace. He reacts in a way that recognizes the implications of the scene. White describes him as partly “uncomfortable” because of her behavior. He is equally intrigued and repulsed by his feelings for his mother and her affections, and we shouldn’t ignore the sexual connotation of the word “rapture” in discussions of this mother-son relationship. However, Morgause’s expressions of “love” for her sons are fickle; she uses them when she needs affection, and drops them when she finds another to replace them.

⁷⁹White 219.

⁸⁰White 263.

⁸¹White 272.

Morgause's subsequent relationships with men hardly endear her to the reader, particularly in Arthur's case. White describes Arthur before they meet as "happy," and says, "Like the man in Eden before the fall, he was enjoying his innocence and fortune."⁸² White's specification of "the man" in Eden conspicuously leaves out Eve. Implicit in this depiction is the notion that the woman is completely to blame for the Fall, for alone, the man was "happy" and "innocent." This is especially poignant in Arthur's tale, because the first book of *The Once and Future King* illustrates an earthly paradise, notably free of women.⁸³ In fact, Arthur's succeeding interaction with Morgause serves as his first real exchange with a woman. Morgause, therefore, is Arthur's Eve, treacherously tempting him with the forbidden fruit that will lead to his ultimate downfall.

When Arthur and Morgause meet, White reiterates her blame, breaking with medieval tradition by establishing her as the instigator of their sexual union, and even suggesting that she uses black magic to seduce him. Before the coronation, Morgause reflects on Arthur, holding a Spacnel, a ribbon of skin she has cut from a dead soldier. An invention of White's, he explains its purpose as this:

You had to find the man you loved while he was asleep. Then you had to throw [the Spacnel] over his head without waking him, and tie it in a bow. If he woke while you were doing this, he would be dead within the year. If he did not wake until the operation was over, he would be bound to love you.⁸⁴

But why would Morgause even contemplate using the Spacnel on Arthur? We know that she does not love him. After the description of the Spacnel, we learn that she has taught her children about the "Cornwall feud," which started when Arthur's father killed Morgause's father, due, in part, to his lust for Morgause's mother. Because Morgause teaches her children about the grudge, she obviously feels antagonistic towards Arthur

⁸²White 226.

⁸³Worthington 99. Worthington suggests that the absence of women in Wart's early life "guarantees" his happiness.

⁸⁴White 306.

himself. Thus, she must have malicious motivation for using the Spacnel – Arthur must eventually find loving her injurious. Though perhaps she only hopes to disgrace him for sleeping with a married woman, she may also indicate her knowledge of their actual relationship as half-brother and sister. Such an incestuous union spells tragedy in this Christian rendering of the Arthurian legend.

Immediately before Arthur meets Morgause, we learn, “He fell asleep.”⁸⁵ White’s simple depiction of Arthur’s unconscious state adds an eerie and foreboding quality to the section, as it likely relates to the necessary sleep phase of the Spacnel procedure. Though White never explicitly describes the use of the Spacnel, he hints at it here. White tells us that Morgause had “chosen her moment with the utmost care,”⁸⁶ in appearing to Arthur. And at their introduction, she is irresistible to him, likely because of the Spacnel, but also because he “had never known a mother of his own, so that the role of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water.”⁸⁷

Morgause’s scheme is not dependent on magic alone; the malevolent witch has a back up plan. She positions herself surrounded by her children so that she fully exploits Arthur’s yearning for a mother.⁸⁸ Once again, she uses her children in a sexual game, not caring for them but only for their ability to get her what she wants. They are merely her pawns. And though we learn that Arthur did not know she was his sister, White remains mum about Morgause’s awareness. He seems to suggest that she may have known, because of her manipulation of the situation, her intent pursuit, and her wish to injure Arthur because of the Cornwall feud. And she certainly succeeds in harming him, for it is

⁸⁵White 311.

⁸⁶White 311

⁸⁷White 311

⁸⁸Florence F Sandler, “Family Romance in ‘The Once and Future King’” *Quondum Et Futurus* 2.2 (1992): 76. Florence Sandler suggests that Morgause positioned herself as the “quintessential” mother to Arthur carefully – surrounded by her sons, twice his age.

this union, White tells us, that ultimately leads to Arthur's fall and that of Camelot as well.⁸⁹

However, Morgause's role as a villainous seductress hardly ends after her triumph with Arthur. When she returns home, she continues in her indiscriminately promiscuous ways, seducing family members and outsiders alike. "She made [her children] love her too much, but she only loved herself."⁹⁰ Defined by her temptations and infidelity, she is the woman who takes, and gives nothing in return. Though married, her husband, Lot, is absent in the tale,⁹¹ as was White's own father, and Morgause has no qualms about extra-marital pursuits. She "sets her cap at" Pellinore,⁹² seduces her brother, and even her children. As she ages, she becomes even more of a sexual threat to the men around her, as she is, "dead set at Pellinore's son, Lamorak...although she [is] a grandmother."⁹³ She finally "seduces"⁹⁴ the young knight Lamorak, one of the three best knights in the world,⁹⁵ who is less than half her age at the time of the affair. Apparently, her quest for male attention knows no bounds, either of age or even familial relationship.

On all these occasions, Morgause is the instigator, intently pursuing her unwitting prey, and showing little compunction about the consequences. But her games eventually incite murder. Her children develop such strong, sexualized feelings for her that when they "found her sleeping with a [Lamorak],"⁹⁶ they kill him. In killing him, the boys exhibit their sexual jealousy, as it seems that they could no longer take the competition for her attention. But they do not just kill her suitor; they kill her in bed as well, suggesting they fear she might find another man. This is an amazing testimony to

⁸⁹White 312.

⁹⁰White 450.

⁹¹Lot is absent likely to place all the blame in her children's upbringing on their mother.

⁹²White 250.

⁹³White 427.

⁹⁴White 429.

⁹⁵The other two being Lancelot and Tristram

⁹⁶White 429.

Morgause's powers of seduction, because she is a grandmother at the time. Her children know that all men are interchangeable to her, including themselves. But though she simply uses them as playthings in this respect, her role in their lives is decisive in the demise of Camelot.

Conversing with Gawain, before he even knows of Mordred's final coup, Arthur speculates on Mordred's hatred for him. He concludes, "all his warmth was for his mother."⁹⁷ Arthur's statement denotes Mordred's sexualized "warmth" for his mother, who encouraged his frigidity towards the rest of the world. But Arthur's earlier reflection details White's vision of the woman most clearly: "The real matter with the [Orkney boys] is Morgause, their mother."⁹⁸ Arthur concisely states Morgause's influence in her children's shortcomings here, but White reiterates Morgause's culpability over and over in the book, in case any careless reader might miss the point.

Perhaps the most striking (and even hilarious) example of such a refrain is in another depiction of Mordred after Morgause's death. While White concedes that Mordred had a part in the downfall of Camelot, he reminds us that we should not forget his mother, saying,

It is the mother's not the lover's lust that rots the mind.... Mordred [was] robbed of himself – his soul stolen, overlaid, wizened, while the mother-character lives in triumph, superfluously, and with stifling love endowed on him, seemingly innocent of ill-intention.... He had become [Morgause's] grave. She existed in him like a vampire...⁹⁹

White's own feelings about mothers' (and specifically his mother's) evil influence could not be more apparent than in this passage, nor could his misogyny. Though he discusses the "rotting" of a gender-neutral mind, he only agonizes over the male psyche. In the

⁹⁷White 618.

⁹⁸White 332.

⁹⁹White 611-612.

preceding paragraph, he tells us, “It is Gertrude, not the silly Ophelia, who sends Hamlet to his madness.”¹⁰⁰ He then exclaims that in all history and literature, any deficiency in a man’s condition is always the mother’s fault and not the lover’s. But he gives mothers no credit for the heroes in literature! All his literary and historical models neglect any mention of a man ruining another man’s life. He sees women in general as the sole plausible cause of man’s madness and violent tendencies.

White’s persistent condemnation of mothers is almost laughable in its exaggerated imagery. In the quotation above, he essentially negates all of Mordred’s blame in Camelot’s demise. He was actually “robbed” of himself, and his soul, by his criminal mother. Morgause is tricky, and because she may be “seemingly innocent of ill-intention,” White feels the need to articulate for his readers exactly what they should think of her. Mordred is the unwitting host to Morgause’s succubus; she feeds off and lives on through him. As her “grave,” we should not blame Mordred, because through Morgause’s evil design, he is simply a phantom of his real self. She provokes his depraved schemes and malicious actions directly, as she pollutes his mind even after her death.

Through this determination, Morgause is responsible for two-thirds of the fall. While the Lancelot-Guenever romance is a part, White proffers the Orkney feud and the incestuous union that produced Mordred as the other two.¹⁰¹ And since the “Orkney feud” refers to the continuation of rivalry between Morgause’s children (Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris, Gareth, and Mordred) and Arthur’s line, Morgause is really to blame for that as well, because she deviously perpetuated that grudge by relaying it to her children. In

¹⁰⁰White 611.

¹⁰¹Warner 130. White writes in his diary, “The three tragic themes are the Cornwall feud, existing ever since Arthur’s father killed Gawaine’s grandfather; the Nemesis of Incest, which I have found frightfully difficult to introduce without gloom or nastiness; and the Guenever-Lancelot romance.

sum, White paints her as culpable for Camelot's demise solely because of her position as a mother, because he at one time criticizes her for being neglectful and at another, for her smothering attentions. Morgause cannot win with White, as she receives the brunt of his attempts at exorcising Constance.

This vilification of Morgause, specifically because of her motherhood, is particularly obvious in light of the changes that White makes to Morgan le Fay in *The Once and Future King*. Medieval tradition – from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* to the late Vulgate cycle - depicts Morgan as a more powerful sorceress than Morgause, making her ripe for vilification as an independent, formidable woman. In *Morte Darthur*, Arthur “bethought him again how [Morgan] was his enemy.”¹⁰² However, White pays little attention to her at all, and paints her as a bumbling witch, with Lancelot continuously thwarting her enchantments, as when she attempts to bed him and he runs away and when she boils Elaine and he saves her. In fact, White entirely exchanges the importance of Morgan and Morgause, with Morgan inhabiting the periphery in *The Once and Future King* that Morgause held in Malory. Such conversion of the two sisters serves to highlight White's condemnation of Morgause specifically because of her motherhood. Because Morgan did not have children, White trivializes her role in the fall, for to White, women are only important so far as they affect the men in their lives.

But Morgan is not the sole childless woman White pardons, as he chooses to elevate Arthur's barren queen as well. Guenever emerges in an exaggerated and positive light, as Morgause possesses all his issues with the feminine. Her relationship with

¹⁰²Malory 245.

Lancelot is the central topic of the third book, “The Ill-Made Knight,” wherein White envisions a more nuanced Guenever than perhaps any medieval author before him.

Though White acknowledges Guenever and Lancelot’s role in the fall, his affirmation of Morgause’s perfidy allows him to depict them more benignly. In fact, throughout the story - but especially at the beginning – White uses Guenever to primarily promote homosocial bonding between Arthur and Lancelot. When we first meet Lancelot, we learn immediately that he “had been thinking of King Arthur with all his might. He was in love with him.”¹⁰³ Lancelot desires to become the best knight, anticipating that Arthur will come to love him in return. He hero-worships Arthur, and struggles with homosexual yearnings for his king. He did not just love Arthur; he was “in love” with him.

At first, Guenever simply hinders Lancelot in his quest for the king’s love. The narrator tells us that to Lancelot “it was hardest of all to have broken his body for the older man’s ideal, only to find this mincing wife stepping in at the end of it to snatch away his love at no cost at all. Lancelot was jealous of Guenever.”¹⁰⁴ Guenever is the impediment preventing him from enjoying all of Arthur’s affection. Lancelot spent his life in preparation to impress the King, while a woman is able to “snatch” Arthur’s love without any considerable sacrifice. Lancelot’s conception of Guenever, here, is analogous to Morgause’s portrayal in its entirety. Both women are perceived as taking love without giving anything in return.

But Lancelot’s feelings towards Guenever transform quickly from jealousy to love when he makes her cry. Lancelot discovers that “She was not a minx, not deceitful,

¹⁰³White 316.

¹⁰⁴White 328.

not designing and heartless. She was pretty Jenny, who could think and feel.”¹⁰⁵ Her ability to “feel” seems particularly surprising to Lancelot, who only has only ever thought of one man. Guenever and Morgause suddenly and sharply diverge, as Morgause easily fits descriptions of “minx,” “deceitful,” “designing,” and “heartless.” Lancelot’s quick transition into love may also stem from his replacing an unattainable homosexual desire for Arthur with a more conventional one. For Lancelot, being with Guenever is as close as it gets to being with Arthur himself. She is their shared space, through which they may become more intimate without actually crossing the line into the homoerotic. It seems to be enough for Lancelot, and her role between the two men (eventually sexual with Lancelot, sexless with Arthur) even satisfies Guenever.

Though it is easy to condemn Guenever’s simultaneous relationship with Lancelot and Arthur, White attempts to justify it: “It is impossible to explain Guenever, unless it is possible to love two people at the same time. Probably it is not possible to love two people in the same way, but there are different kinds of love. Women love their husbands and their children at the same time.”¹⁰⁶ White’s suggestion that Guenever was able to love both Arthur and Lancelot is an affirmation of her central goodness. She is not heartless; she does not enter a relationship with Lancelot lightly, and she does not intend to hurt Arthur. Indeed, Guenever clearly expresses her love and respect for Arthur throughout the book, and when Lancelot asks her to run away with him, she refuses, explaining, “the least I can do is go on giving [Arthur] a home.”¹⁰⁷ White’s development of Guenever

¹⁰⁵White 334.

¹⁰⁶White 263.

¹⁰⁷White 543.

follows his evolving attempts to understand a complex woman, who was not a specimen of some “angel/whore” complex¹⁰⁸ of his Victorian upbringing.

Although Guenever may have been an adulteress, like Morgause, White does not label her a whore:

She was not promiscuous. There was never anybody in her life except Lancelot and Arthur. She never ate anybody except these. And even these she did not eat in the full sense of the word. People who have been digested by a man-eating lioncelle tend to become non-entities – to live no life except within the vitals of the devourer. Yet both Arthur and Lancelot, the people whom she apparently devoured, lived full lives, and accomplished things of their own.¹⁰⁹

White’s comparison of Guenever with another “man-eating lioncelle” (or lioness) is a likely abuse of Morgause again, though, perhaps his misogyny knew no bounds, and this refers to all women. That he emphasizes Guenever’s fidelity in comparison to Morgause’s tells us that he may find this to be her most redeeming quality. For to White, it is a woman’s sole job to inspire the men in her life to greatness. Arthur and Lancelot were not just Guenever’s loves; there was never “anybody” else she cared about. She lived and breathed for the two of them - as she ought to! Conversely, this suggests that Morgause’s promiscuity was the factor that devoured her sons, making them live within her “vitals” along with the rest of the men in her life. Because Guenever gave her time and attention to two men faithfully, White paints her in a flattering light, opposed to “some women.”

In fact, all three members of the triangle appear knowing and content in their roles. White even suggests that kind-hearted Arthur knew about the relationship between Guenever and Lancelot, and permitted it as long as no one publicly acknowledged it.¹¹⁰ In

¹⁰⁸Gallix 128.

¹⁰⁹White 471.

¹¹⁰White 543.

White's scenario, the tragic triangle becomes a family romance, with each playing a part.

He tells us,

Guenever's central tragedy was that she was childless. Arthur had two illegitimate children, and Lancelot had Galahad. But Guenever – and she was the one of the three who most ought to have children, and who would have been best with children, and whom God seemingly made for breeding lovely children – she was the one left an empty vessel, a shore without a sea. . . . Perhaps she loved Arthur as a father, and Lancelot because of the son she could not have.¹¹¹

White condones Guenever's adulterous actions because she fills the place of her childlessness with the two men in her life. She is nothing without an occupation as a mother, a mere "empty vessel," for Guenever was destined for motherhood. White's suggestion that she loved Arthur as a father and Lancelot as a son reiterates the Oedipal nature of White's conception, and places Guenever within her proper position in White's eyes: in the family.

And if, as White suggests, Lancelot was like a son to her, there could be no better mother than Guenever. Aside from the obvious incestuous implications of White's notion, their relationship serves as his model of a perfect mother-son bond. He tells us, "For [Guenever], unless she felt like a little spinning or embroidery, there was no occupation – except Lancelot."¹¹² In light of his previous suggestion that Guenever would have been the best with children, this statement illuminates White's perception of motherhood. Women must be mothers, or else be tragic "empty vessels." As mothers, they should be solely devoted to their children. Guenever is important insofar as she affects the men in her life. And White treads lightly around Malory's conception of Guenever's faults, because she understands her role in her odd Oedipal family and remains faithful to it. Her position in this makeshift union is her saving grace, for White

¹¹¹White 472.

¹¹²White 473.

has a difficult time defining independent, non-traditional women as anything but villainous.¹¹³

In this regard, White demonizes Morgause, because though she has a natural family, she does not adhere to White's definition of ideal motherhood. Her children are not her occupation; her real occupation is devouring men. The Orkney sons captivate her only when others ignore her. And when she pays attention to her children, her main goal is not to better their lives, but to serve her own selfish purposes through manipulation. Because of this, she is the villain of White's book, so full of her own agendas that she continues to live on through her sons even after her death. Her rampant infidelity, in both her attentions and sexual life, serves as White's main reason to indict her, as she ignores cultural conceptions of a mother's duty in the century of the Freudian revolution.

While White's imagining of Morgause as the greatest villain in Camelot may be novel, his affirmation of the chaste and attentive mother is certainly not. Indeed, a number of medieval scholars have identified traditional positions for women during the Grail Quest literature, and they corroborate White's stance on the mother's essential role in the family. Lorraine Stock suggests that for women, and especially queens in medieval times, cuckoldry is dangerous because it threatens to sully patriarchal dynastic bloodlines and rightful inheritance.¹¹⁴ But more than this, promiscuity on a mother's part threatens her sons' honor – the main currency in King Arthur's court. Beverly Kennedy tells us that for medieval mothers, any sexual dishonor on a mother's part dishonors her sons, because she values that sexual union more than she values her family.¹¹⁵ Particularly for the

¹¹³Maureen Fries, "From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan Le Fay in Medieval Romance, *Arthuriana* 4.1 (1994): 8. This follows the trend from the post-vulgate cycle, suggested by Maureen Fries, that men can increasingly only handle less powerful, more complacent women.

¹¹⁴Lorraine K Stock, "The Importance of Being Gender 'Stable': Masculinity and Feminine Empowerment in 'Le Roman De Silence'" *Arthuriana* 7.2 (1997): 19.

¹¹⁵McCracken 39.

Orkney boys, who represent the feudal ideal of heroic knighthood,¹¹⁶ Morgause's promiscuity was always an issue. Indeed, White did not dream up her death in the mid-twentieth century: her sons' slaying her in bed with Lamorak was an aspect of *Morte Darthur* itself.

In these medieval conceptions of a mother role, she is only important as a body. Women's bodies are vessels, and the bodies themselves dishonor their families when physically adulterated.¹¹⁷ The Orkneys fight to preserve Morgause's motherly body, but they have little use for her in White's newfangled, psychological sense of good motherhood. In medieval literature, she does not possess the ability to alter her sons' personalities or command their lives. So while the importance placed on maternal chastity may have been important throughout medieval Grail literature, White introduces a new level of magnitude to it, infused with twentieth century concepts and cultural insecurities.

To White, Morgause and Guenever not only threaten to dishonor their families, but also endanger the emotional welfare of the men in their lives. Through White's interrogation of these two female characters, we see women, and particularly mothers, as solely responsible for the happiness of their male family members. And though he forces himself to make Guenever likable because he already had one "unattractive" woman in the book, Morgause eerily lives on even without her body, because through her manipulations as a mother, Mordred has become her "grave."¹¹⁸

Such reshaping of the story's chief female characters defines and distinguishes White's work from the medieval tradition, particularly Malory. Though this story was

¹¹⁶Kennedy 63.

¹¹⁷Kennedy 70.

¹¹⁸White 612.

influenced by his private feelings towards his mother, the tale would not remain merely personal. His misogynistic transformation of Morgause radically affects the entirety of contemporary Arthurian literature, demonstrating that these views are not solely those of one chauvinistic man. They have become characteristic of our society as a whole in the latest attempt to contain autonomous women: our limited and dangerous definition of “good motherhood.”

**Chapter Three: Modern Arthurian Reincarnations and the Pervasive
“Good Mother” Ideal**

There is no doubt that T.H. White's reinvention of the Arthurian legend brims with resentment towards his mother Constance. Though he realized that she inhabited the Morgause character to *The Once and Future King's* detriment, he could not bring himself to remove this figure, and she remains the greatest enemy of Camelot throughout his many revisions.¹¹⁹ White's individual story did not remain private, however, as his novel's transformation of Morgause has gone on to influence the majority of her characterizations in the modern Arthurian revival that we are still experiencing. These continuous affirmations of Morgause's culpability shed light not only on contemporary Arthurian trends, but also on our unreasonable cultural conceptions of what it means to be a good mother today.

Since World War II, the Arthurian legend has undergone vast and varied incarnations, from poetry and comic books to films, radio, operas, and even national monuments. It is hard to conceive of a medium that has not been utilized in its spread.¹²⁰ The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester documented an estimated 80 films based on the legend from 1940 to 1997,¹²¹ recounting such classic and diverse titles as Disney's *The Sword and the Stone*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. And in the last two years alone, two Arthurian television shows have premiered – *Merlin*, now in its fourth season, and *Camelot*. Such widespread and long-lasting presence of Arthurian lore in pop culture is undoubtedly a testament to its ability to morph and respond to issues of any generation, especially in its most prevalent form, the novel.

¹¹⁹ Gallix 101.

¹²⁰ Debra N Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival: Essays on Form, Tradition, and Transformation* (New York: Garland Pub., 1992) xi.

¹²¹ Kevin J Harty, "Arthurian Film," *The Camelot Project*, July 1997, 01 Nov. 2011.

White's Arthurian epic was incredibly popular both in units sold and critical acclaim, and it marked the dawn of a new resurgence in the Arthurian field. In the majority of the countless novels that followed its publication, is difficult to ignore the comparable patterns of the evil mother Morgause, which, as we have noted, is a characterization primarily attributable to White.¹²² Morgause and Morgan are often interchangeable as Mordred's mother in contemporary editions, but the portrayal of the mother as evil remains the same, with a few popular examples quickly examined here.

In Sharon Newman's Guenever Trilogy, Morgan unknowingly sleeps with her half-brother Arthur and births Mordred. As soon as she discovers their familial relationship, however, she uses Mordred as a tool against his father, who she thinks intentionally dishonored her. Morgana, in Parke Godwin's *Firelord*, loves Arthur so much that she ignores their child, Mordred, causing him to kill Arthur in a fit of jealousy. And in Mary Stewart's Arthurian series, the Merlin trilogy, Morgause sleeps with Arthur, knowing that he is her brother, "deliberately to gather more power to herself."¹²³ She proceeds to poison Mordred against him, leading to the eventual demise of Camelot.¹²⁴

Even in *The Mists of Avalon*, the most allegedly feminist reproduction of the modern Arthurian revival, Marion Zimmer Bradley still demonizes Morgause specifically for her position as a mother. Bradley actually mimics White's misogyny in Morgause's depictions, and perhaps even surpasses it in reference to her bumbling, baby-like reduction of Guenever. While Morgan is actually Mordred's mother in the novel, Morgause raises him, and admits to manipulating him so that "he should not love any but

¹²² Thompson 5. Thompson notes that Morgause was never counted among Arthur's enemies in medieval literature – this is rather an invention of White's.

¹²³ Mary Stewart, *The Hollow Hills* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973) 430.

¹²⁴ Mancoff 232.

me.”¹²⁵ Bradley’s Morgause attempts to control her sons in an effort to improve her own position of power, as she felt that she was cheated out of the position of High Queen first by Igraine, and then through Arthur’s unconventional ascension to the throne. She even admits to slipping Guenever infertility drugs so as to make sure that Mordred, her foster-son plaything, would be Arthur’s rightful heir. For Mordred, she realizes, “Will make me Queen. I am the only woman living to whose word he will listen.”¹²⁶ Just as White’s Morgause used her powerful position as mother to manipulate and use her sons for her own benefit, Bradley’s supposedly feminist reimagining follows the same trend.

Morgause realizes that “[Mordred’s] life was hers,”¹²⁷ in *Mists*, just as Mordred served as Morgause’s grave even after her death in *The Once and Future King*. And once again, in regards to Arthur’s enemy Mordred, everyone places the blame on his upbringing. Gwenhwyfar thinks, “No wonder [Mordred] is cruel and ruthless, with the Queen of Lothian to foster him!”¹²⁸ Such a statement on Guenever’s part denotes the distinct blame of the mother in her children’s lives, because though Mordred’s foster-father Lot was notoriously calculating (and even wanted to murder Mordred as a child), and his real father, Arthur, felt shamed by his existence, Guenever still holds Morgause culpable for his personality defects.

In the end, Mordred turns on his mother as well. He tells her,

It was you and your spite against Arthur always urging me on, as if I cared what bed the Queen slept in – as if Gwenhwyfar were any worse than you, when from the time I was ten years old you had this one or that one in your bed.¹²⁹

As for White’s Morgause, her promiscuity is one of the major factors that allots her fault in the raising of her children. Furthermore, Mordred emphasizes his own ambivalence

¹²⁵ Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Ballantine, 1982) 647.

¹²⁶ Bradley 817.

¹²⁷ Bradley 853.

¹²⁸ Bradley 856.

¹²⁹ Bradley 858.

towards the plan to usurp Arthur's throne and claims it was all his mother's doing. He wouldn't even "care" if it weren't for her evil influence. Her power of manipulation, stemming solely from her position as a mother, serves, once again, as the final straw in the downfall of Arthur and his Camelot.

These modern incarnations of the Arthurian legend obviously reference White's work in very integral ways, for in the vast majority, Guenever receives more respect than her medieval counterparts, and Morgause emerges conversely vilified. And for the most part, this stems from White's conception of a mother's blame in her children's upbringing. But the fact that so many Arthurian reimaginings enunciate this same point demonstrates that perhaps White's notion of motherhood is not only personal, but is actually mirrored in Western cultural views of the "good mother" since the mid 20th century.

Though it is easy to label White a misogynist, as a man of this last century, he was obviously influenced by the cultural ideologies and practices of the time. Steven Swann Jones remarks on the state of all storytellers, saying,

Storytellers are not completely autonomous and insulated individuals; they are the product of the communities and cultures in which they live. Similarly, audiences generally have a cultural orientation that also contributes not only to what stories are asked for and enjoyed, but also to the way they are told.¹³⁰

And this certainly sheds meaning on our own conceptions of White's faults as a writer. Though many critics of White's major work have pointed out his chauvinistic tendencies, with particular regard to his personal issues with his mother, they have not understood that his personal failure to overcome his misogyny is actually the story of a larger failure in society. While White clearly had rampant, individualized issues with his mother, his

¹³⁰ Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 28.

“blame the mother” ideology did not just spontaneously sprout in his mind. Rather, this mistreatment and indictment of the mother figure has become an increasingly visible aspect of our 20th and 21st century cultural norms.

In her book *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, Shari L. Thurer explores the worsening characterization of mothers from the Victorian period onwards. Specifically, she notes a decline from the exaltation of the mother in the 18th and 19th century to the psychologically damning position she begins to inhabit as Freud’s theories become more dispersed and accepted in American society. But for Thurer, it was not Freud himself who extrapolated the idea of mother’s blame; rather, it was his confused followers who misinterpreted his theories so much so that “By the end of the [1950s], mother was held to be the cause of her children’s miseries, and indeed, of the ills that beset humankind.”¹³¹ And this was likely aided by the focus of psychoanalysis, which had become almost entirely child-centered in the 1950s, concentrating on the child’s reimagining of his early experiences in place of the mother’s view of her maternal experience.¹³²

But such interpretations of a mother’s all-important role were not confined to the realm of psychological academia and therapy. They quickly and continuously radiated into the mainstream of American culture and media. When mothers turned on the TV in the 1950s, they would typically find one of two stereotypes. One, the June Cleaver type, whose never-ending sweetness and attention represented an impossible goal for all mothers. The other, like Joan Crawford in “Mildred Pierce,” whose ambition and quest for something outside motherhood “inadvertently sacrificed her daughters in the

¹³¹ Shari Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994) 247.

¹³² Thurer 279.

process.”¹³³ These two categories could encourage nothing but anxiety for the 1950s mother, as she could never perfectly emulate the good mother, and could become the bad mother through the slightest ambition outside of motherhood. While we may have more varied representations of mother figures today, Thurer argues that these dangerous trends of motherly representations have generally continued, to such an extent that the mother has become “a universal punching bag – the butt of every joke, the villain in every film, the destructive imago in every child’s psyche.”¹³⁴

Such culturally accepted views of a mother’s blame strongly relate to misinterpretations of “attachment theory” – the psychological conjecture that concludes a child must form an early relationship with a principal caregiver to emotionally mature. And this theory has possessed a particularly strong hold on Western definitions of exactly what it means to be a good mother. While the theory does not actually call for the mother to become solely devoted to her child’s needs, mainstream understanding of it has evolved to show children as victims when their mothers seek self-fulfillment.¹³⁵ Thurer explains that mid-century ideology instructed mothers to ignore their own “ends in life,” and instead, focus all attention on making sure her child was “well-adjusted.”¹³⁶ A mother should indeed feel guilty if this lot in life were not enough for her. Its continuous interpretation in such a skewed light perhaps represents our cultural preferences as a whole. As Judith Warner argues,

Social science doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It doesn’t spring from an absolute universe of ‘pure’ inquiry and observation. Instead, it tends to hew closely to social anxieties....And these nodes of worry determine not only what social scientists study but, often enough, what results they find (because of the way their

¹³³ Thurer 257.

¹³⁴ Thurer 253.

¹³⁵ Judith Warner, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Riverhead, 2005) 91.

¹³⁶ Thurer 255.

research is focused), and also, afterward, which of their findings are picked up by the media, and which ideas take hold and become popular with the public.¹³⁷

The fact that attachment theory, and its misinterpretations, has taken such a hold in our society likely stems from general anxieties that we possessed already. That such theories have held greater influence since World War II, therefore, may not be such a coincidence, for during and after the war, increasing numbers of women worked outside the home. Theories, like attachment theory, that insist on more traditional women's roles are likely reactionary to the vast changes that have occurred since the middle of the 20th century.

However, though these theories may represent the anxieties of cultural changes, they remain no less problematic. Psychologists have started to release the mother from all blame in psychopathology,¹³⁸ but cultural trends still define the good mother as one with no needs of her own, for her child's pleasure is her pleasure.¹³⁹ Thus, if a mother has ambitions outside of motherhood, she is labeled neglectful, and must deal with the guilt, as well as bear the fault for all her children's subsequent shortcomings.

Because of these trends in American popular culture and thought, we may see White's interpretation of the mother Morgause, and its subsequent influence on contemporary Arthurian literature, not as an isolated incident, but actually an indicator of modern views on a mother's role in our society. His primary message, that Morgause should have solely focused on the betterment of her children and not her own desires, follows the popular theories on motherhood of the time that he was writing. Thus, though his book obviously promulgated this larger societal issue into the sphere of Arthurian literature, where the mother figure was never a villain before, he cannot be solely responsible for these trends in later Arthurian fiction. It seems likely, in fact, that some

¹³⁷ Warner 106.

¹³⁸ Thurer 298.

¹³⁹ Thurer 256.

blame of Morgause would have crept into 20th century Arthurian revisions even without White, because his conception of the good mother in *The Once and Future King* is not totally personal, but actually reflects mainstream Western culture.

Though we may condemn White for his apparent misogyny, then, and for starting the villainous trajectory of Morgause, it would be wiser to interrogate that larger societal issue as hand and why even contemporary, supposedly feminist revisions, neglect to come to terms with their own part in the reaffirmation of traditional and outdated women's roles. For though it may be an ideal, the notion that a mother must be solely devoted to her children or labeled "bad" must be dismissed from Arthurian fiction and mainstream popular culture as a whole.

Conclusion

T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* has remained the hallmark piece of our modern Arthurian revival. Its many incarnations continue to delight children and adults alike. Though this thesis focuses on White's failure in depicting a fully formed mother figure, the enchanting aspects of his novel have maintained an avid readership over some fifty-odd years. White weaves a unique sense of childhood magic throughout his tale, not

only in Arthur's boyhood paradise, but also at court, when Arthur's chivalric ideals briefly come to fruition.

As the later chapters of White's book come together, it increasingly evolves into a treatise against war, and an affirmation of the underlying noble nature of humanity, even throughout its conflicts. White's novel highlights the beauty and adaptability of the Arthurian legend, for through the centuries, different authors have revised it for different purposes, responding to new crises of humanity. But all through its evolutions, the legend imparts the central image of a king and his court, trying their best to create a more perfect world, and a more perfect version of human interactions.

White's failure was not that he did not capture this Arthurian ideal. Rather, it was his difficulty allotting the female members of the court any value beyond their exchanges with their male family members. For he only applauds Guenever, his sole nuanced female character, for her devoted interactions with the men in her pseudo-family. Obviously White's haunting relationship with his own mother vastly influenced such a characterization of Arthurian women, particularly in reference to the vilified Morgause. But this personal story went on to shape even the most modern feminist incarnations, where we see the evil mother Morgause portrayed over and over again.

White's Morgause has become more than a just a symbol of his own misogyny and personal conflicts with his mother. It defines a cancer in our modern mindset: we give mothers unrealistic goals to attain, or otherwise, label them neglectful and responsible for the ills of our culture's children, and thereby our society in general. For through popular social science misinterpretations, each one of us has free range to blame all our difficulties and transgressions on the way we were raised – primarily, on our mothers.

Certainly, White's Morgause is not a likable character, but her ambition outside motherhood should not justify her sons' wrongdoings. Not only in Arthurian literature, but in all literature and pop culture, we need more images of mothers who are not a part of this good mother/bad mother dichotomy, or the brunt of every joke. Modern Arthurian authors need to reacquaint themselves with Morgause before White, and interrogate exactly what part they are playing in the perpetuation of the damning good mother ideal today.

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