

“þE GODDESS”: FEMININE POWER IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 14th century produced some of the most important literature in the English language. Many of these works in Middle English were written in the tradition of the Arthurian romance, which consisted of works depicting knights of the round table performing a variety of quests. The immense importance of the genre to the culture of the time is something recognized by historians. In his book, *For Honour and Fame*, Nigel Saul, for example, describes the royal book collection in the Tower of London as consisting “of some 160 volumes, of which no fewer than 59 were romances” (Saul 276). It should come as no wonder then, that three of the romances written in this century are still the subject of intense study. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* contains “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” a romance that follows a knight sent on a quest to find what women desire most, the unknown poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* included the knight, Gawain’s involvement in a beheading game wherein he was also forced into a dance to protect his knightly honor from a lady who would try to seduce him to commit adultery, and Thomas Chestre’s, *Launfal*, a translation of the Norman lai, *Lanval*, follows a knight expelled from his kingdom as he finds love and redemption in the arms of a magical woman. These poems have sparked critical conversation for centuries and continue to be discussed. An aspect that has only begun to receive attention within the last few decades, however, is the role and the power expressed by the women in these poems.

Power in these Middle English poems at first appears varied and the tactics used to gain it cover a wide ground. Upon further inspection, it becomes clear that power manifests at all levels as the ability to control the bodies of others, regardless of the other party’s consent. This control also generally comes by means of a threat, often to one’s body. This is manifested sometimes as the threat to one’s freedom and other times as a threat to one’s life. In any case, however, power

is shown to be coercion, one party controlling the body of another. Class is also a consideration with power and its manifestations. While a character like the Wife of Bath or her husbands, who are not higher class, deal with power and control at the level of the individual, with both physical and emotionally violence occurring directly between two individuals, characters like Guinevere deal with power at the level of society, using social codes and consequences as tools of control. This spectrum of coercion will be explored in the following chapters, but it is important to note that, echoing the society that the poems were written in, men were given considerably more attention and power, and most positions in high society were only made available to men. Women lived, as Saul says in his book, “in a chivalric milieu dominated by male aristocratic values” (Saul 282). The Middle English poems that came from the time contain powerful men, knights and kings, that undergo quests and trials for glory and honor, exemplifying the values that Saul mentions. What many of these stories also contain, however, are female figures that exert power over their male counterparts, often in ways that either subvert or outright ignore the male-dominated social structures in place. In this thesis, I will look at three figures that exert power in their texts, and I will explore the methods that they use to do so. Specifically, I will look at the Wife of Bath’s use of the power of appropriation in her *Prologue*, Lady Bertilak’s leveraging of the social system of chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Guinevere’s sovereignty over the lives of her subjects in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Launfal*. I will explore how each figure exerts their power in the context of their poem, the implications of their exertion of power, and the inherent limitations of these exertions. After looking at each of these figures, I will explore one final figure that is present in all four poems, a figure second to none in terms of exerted feminine power. This final figure is one that I am calling the Magical Lady. She is called by several names throughout the poems and is sometimes never named, but she is interesting in

that in every case she is able to express power over every other character, even the height of male power, King Arthur himself. She can do so through a combination of the power types that the worldly women that I will explore use, as well as through other factors unique to her. When exploring how this Magical Lady can express her power, I will also examine the implications that her very existence brings up in the context of the poems and the society in which they were written.

II. ALISOUN: APPROPRIATION AS POWER

Alisoun of Bath is a figure that seems to exude power. She is first described in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as a finely dressed and well-traveled textile merchant that has been married five times by the start of the pilgrimage. This short description gives the reader a good understanding of her stature and privilege, but her Prologue is where she shows the true depths behind her powerful image. In her Prologue, which is longer than her Tale, she gives her audience a glimpse into her life, which consists of a series of attempts to gain power and sovereignty over her husbands in order to live a life of luxury, pleasure, and freedom.

At the beginning of her prologue, the Wife tells the other pilgrims that "experience, though noon auctoritee/ were in this world, is right ynogh for me/ to speke of wo that is in mariage" (WOB 1-3). In other words, her lived experience as a wife puts her in a position to speak about marriage, because she has been wedded five times. She then delves into a detailed description of these five marriages, going on tangents regularly to illuminate lessons learned and, most importantly to this thesis, to explain how she was able to exert power over her husbands. As she discusses her marriages and husbands in loose chronological order, a pattern emerges for the reader. Alisoun doesn't start out with power, and her powerful and independent image took time to develop. Her first marriage occurred when she was only twelve years old, and was to an older man, a dynamic distinct from her self-portrait as a successful and powerful woman traveling alone. Alisoun starts from this position of powerlessness, yet she describes her efforts to take power from her husbands by any means necessary. Her power doesn't come from some inborn and implicit place within herself, like nobility are often depicted as having, but rather from external things that she takes and retrofits for her own use. As Barbara Gottfried notes:

The Wife of Bath is a survivor. She has survived five husbands, and whether or not she is ‘shopping’ for number six, she is attuned to the opportunities her circumstances suggest, constantly improvising, adjusting and readjusting her vision and desires to meet the needs or demands of the moment. (204)

In what follows, I will explore Alisoun’s practice of shifting and taking on new traits to empower herself, a practice that I will call appropriation. Throughout her prologue (and Tale, which will be explored in a later chapter), Alisoun appropriates three things that patriarchal society would normally use to oppress her--marriage, what I call the Wicked Wife archetype, and the act of glossing. She not only takes these things but also changes them so that they are useful for, rather than used against, her.

Appropriation of Marriage

The first and most prevalent thing that Alisoun appropriates is the institution of marriage. At the start of her Prologue, she tells the audience that she has been married five times and that, should her current marriage end, she would soon marry a sixth time. The first marriage, she says was when she “twelve yeer was of age” (WOB 4). This statement illuminates what I would say is the start of Alisoun’s journey for power. In this instance, we see her at her most powerless. As a child, she has been tethered to an older man who, we can assume, has near total power over her. Alisoun, however, begins to appropriate the institution being used to control her in order to exert her own control.

Alisoun describes her first three husbands as “goode men, and riche, and olde” (WOB 197). These traits allow Alisoun to shift the traditional dynamic of marriage, wherein the wife becomes the property of the husband, and have them turn “hir lond and hir tresoor” (WOB 204) over to her. She uses a multitude of strategies to shift the dynamic, some of which will be

discussed in later sections of this chapter, but the first that she names is her use of physical affection to gain control. She says that her affection in the marriage only lasts until her husbands have given control of their material goods to her. After this has happened, her affection and willingness to please them ceases since, in her words, “what sholde I taken hem for to plese,/ but it were for my profit and myn ese?” (WOB 213-214). In these first three marriages, she appropriates the institution for financial gain. She marries men who are rich and old so she can more easily use her affection to make them relinquish their monetary assets. Their age has the added benefit of ensuring that she outlives them and inherits their land and money to do what she will. Nigel Saul, in his book, *For Honour and Fame*, says that “it was thus in widowhood that a woman can be said to have emerged in her own right” (275). Indeed, Alisoun does seem to have been successful at least by the time of the pilgrimage, judging by the description of her clothing and appearance in the *General Prologue*.

Alisoun’s first three husbands, who could legally use the institution of marriage to make Alisoun their property, end up having this institution used against them in such a way that Alisoun, rather than becoming property, gains their wealth for herself.

After the first three husbands, Alisoun shifts her strategy. While she is still appropriating marriage as an institution for her own ends, these ends are different for husbands number four and five than for one through three. Specifically, Alisoun begins to use marriage more explicitly as a tool to satisfy her sexual needs. Alisoun, through the course of her Prologue, has not shied away from discussions of sex and sexuality, but sexuality is most clearly a driving force for her in her latter two marriages. In fact, while of her first three husbands she reveals that “in bacon hadde I nevere delit” (418), echoing her earlier statement that she had granted sexual favors only

to control her older husbands, when she is describing her selection of her fifth husband, she says that:

...he hadde a paire
of legges and of feet so clene and faire
That al myn herte I yaf unto his hoold.
He was I trowe, twenty wynter oold,
And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth;
But yet I hadde alwey a coltes tooth. (WOB 596-602).

Her method of choosing is indicative of her shift in approach when appropriating marriage.

Whereas before she was in a position of lesser power, being the younger party with less wealth, in her latest marriages she is on much more equal ground with her husbands. Indeed, like her first husbands, Alisoun is now the older, richer partner who is selecting for sexual potential. Her new selection criteria indicate her appropriation of the institution of marriage. She is taking an institution that is designed to strip power from her and reduce her to an extension of her husband and using it to empower herself. For her first husbands, as stated above, she uses marriage to empower herself financially, but with her last two, she is very clear about her goal of sexual satisfaction. Many patristic and medieval religious writers argued for virginity and chastity as virtues, with Jerome even writing a section in his *Adversus Jovinum* titled “Laus Virginium” or “Praise of Virgins.” In this section, Jerome argued “recte: ‘consilium Dei’ sola scribitur virginitas nosse” [rightly so: only virginity is said to know “the will of God”] (Jerome 23). In contrast, in her Prologue Alisoun argues that:

I nyl envye no virginitee.
Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,

And lat us wyves hoten barley-breed;
And yet with barley-breed, Mark telle kan,
Oure Lord Jhesu refreshed many a man. (WOB 142-146)

Alisoun's view of feminine sexuality is vastly different from what is traditional, and this is something that she recognizes. While she is undoubtedly leaning against social norms of sexuality, she cannot outright ignore them. Therefore, in order to pursue her sexuality, she must appropriate the institution of marriage, saying explicitly that "in wyfhod I wol use myn instrument/ as freely as my Makere hath it sent" (149-150). Alisoun wants to be independent and sexually active but recognizes that to do so and to be unmarried is perhaps too taboo. Instead, she uses marriage as a tool for sexual liberation. This liberation extends outside of her marriage as well since Alisoun tells her audience that she uses the freedom attained from marriage to have "many a myrthe" (WOB 399). Alisoun's sexual nature in her marriages brings to mind some of the anti-feminist caricatures common to the time, including some described by her fellow pilgrims like the Merchant. Her likeness to these caricatures is far from accidental and is, in fact, showing the next appropriation used by Alisoun to exert power over those in her life.

Appropriation of Wicked Wives

After entering into marriages, whether for monetary or sexual freedom, Alisoun appropriates something else that could be used against her. In the time of Chaucer's writing, there were a multitude of writings that warned of the "wicked wives" and the many things that they would do to make their husbands' lives hell. These books were most assuredly known by Chaucer, and, more directly, a book of wicked wife tales is used by Alisoun's fifth husband in order to torment her, as I will explore later. But Alisoun herself makes use of the contents of these books as well.

In all of her marriages, Alisoun makes use of a multitude of strategies to keep her husbands under her thumb. These strategies are often ripped straight from the pages of one or more “wicked wives” writings, collections of antifeminist literature disseminated during Chaucer’s time. As she did with marriage, Alisoun takes something designed to be used against her and uses it as a tool to empower herself. In her first three marriages, as stated previously, Alisoun uses physical affection to win over her husbands, which she withholds once they relinquish their wealth to her. After this point, she shifts strategies to maintain her control. In particular, she tells her audience that she “bare(s) hem wrong on honde” (WOB 226-227). She accuses her husbands of various types of mistreatments, from treating her worse than the neighbors treat their wives all the way to adultery. These accusations are taken almost word for word from Latin sources depicting wicked wives. In his *Adversus Jovinianum*, Jerome repeats the words of Theophrastus’ *Liber de Nuptiis* wherein he discusses the downsides of marriage, including a nagging wife, saying:

Dein per totas noctes garrule conquestiones: “Illa ornatior procedit in publicum; hec honoratur ab omnibus; ego in convent seminarum misella despicor. Cur aspitiebas vicinam? Quid cum ancilla loquebaris? De foro Veniens quid attulisti?” Non amicum habere possumus, non sodalem.

[Then, all night long, the nagging complaints: “That woman looks so much prettier when she goes out; this one is honored by everyone; when women get together, they despise me as a wretch. Why were you staring at the women next door? What were your talking about with the maid? What did you bring home from the forum?” We cannot even have a friend or a companion.] (Theophrastus Ln. 11-16)

What is extremely interesting, however, is that when one compares her accusations to the books of wicked wives that she is using as a source it can be seen that she is appropriating both the feminine and masculine sides of the Latin source. In Alisoun's speech about her accusing her husbands, she begins her speech with "'sire old kaynard, is this thyn array? / Why is my neighebores wyf so gay," (WOB 235-236) but soon after she says "if I have a gossib or a freend,/ withouten gilt, thou chidest as a feend" (WOB 243-244). In these quotes, she appropriates the nagging wife figure from the beginning of the Latin quote, but also appropriates the figure of the nagged partner when she complains about her husbands not allowing her to go out and talk to her friends. Her taking both sides of the original source is the perfect example of Alisoun's tactics. She is taking on all aspects of what would be used against her, not only the feminine but also the masculine.

Alisoun appropriates the wicked wife figures in her first marriages men so that she can maintain her own freedom despite her marriage to them. She has attained financial freedom at this point through her use of affection, and now she uses these wicked wife strategies to give herself independence as well. She tells her audience that she earns freedom to roam the town at night by telling her husbands that she is doing so in order to "espye wenches that he dighte." She adds that "under that colour hadde I many a myrthe" (WOB 398-399). Alisoun's use of these strategies has been examined by many critics, and with many possible reasonings. writing about Alisoun For example, Barbara Gottfried notes that:

Not only does she remember that they accused her of all the foibles of womankind disseminated in misogynist literature, from shrewishness and deceit to vanity and wantonness (accusations perhaps not entirely unwarranted, just as her abuse of them is not entirely undeserved), but she remembers that they withheld the keys to their 'chestes,'

spied on her, complained if she walked out with her friends, curtailed her freedom, and constrained her natural inclination. (214)

This view paints Alisoun's appropriations as retaliatory, explaining her actions as in reply to her husbands' attempts to control her. While Alisoun's actions are often considered to connect back to the early victimhood she endured in her first marriage, the specific abusive acts that Gottfried attributes to Alisoun's husbands (withholding their keys, spying on her, etc.) cannot be proven to have actually been done to her. The lines that Gottfried references in the above quote occur in a speech Alisoun that extends from lines 235 to 378 in the Riverside edition. In this speech, Alisoun begins by telling her audience that her strategy to control her husbands is to "bere hem wrong/ on honed" (WOB 226-227) by accusing them of a multitude of wrongdoings. The rest of her speech is composed of examples of accusations that she might level at her husbands, presumably drawing on strategies that she used in the past, consistent with her insistence on experience as a point of authority. After her initial explanation of falsely accusing her husbands, she begins the passage that doesn't end until line 378, showing that anything she accuses her husbands of doing in this section is included in the false accusations that she is discussing. It is important to note that Alisoun is, above all, proactive in her strategies to gain and maintain control. She is almost never in a reactive position when given an option. In fact, it is only with her first, fourth, and final husbands that Alisoun seems to struggle at all with control.

Alisoun's fourth husband and her treatment of him are both enigmatic, second only to her first husband, who is barely mentioned at all. He is the first husband that is younger than she and is therefore the first chosen when Alisoun is appropriating marriage for sexual reasons rather than financial. Furthermore, he is the first one that is given any depth or that is described as successfully resisting Alisoun in any way. One of the first things she tells us about her fourth

husband is that he “was a revelour -- this is to seyn, he hadde a paramour” (453-454), which Alisoun objects to since she “hadde in herte greet despit / that he of any oother had delit” (WOB 481-482). Her response is to begin a campaign to make “hym of the same wode a croce” (WOB 484). In response, she appropriates another wicked wife figure more in line with the caricatures of unfaithful wives that appeared in books of wicked wives and even some of her fellow pilgrim’s tales. She flaunts her own infidelity and gossips about him to other people in the town, leading to his extreme duress. This relationship falls in line with Gottfried’s view of the Wife’s strategies as an attempt to requite her husbands since she expressly tells her audience that her actions were in response to his. Indeed, another critic, Robin Bott, argues that this marriage is the closest to being equal in terms of the power dynamic between Alisoun and her husband. Bott argues that the vagueness with which Alisoun describes this fourth husband is very telling in that the Wife is “unable to use age or wealth as a lever” (157) and that the fourth husband, likely as financially well off as Alisoun, expects to have “the same freedom to be ‘at large’ as his wife” (159). The Wife, according to Bott, really wants “independence for herself and thralldom for her husband” (159), referring to the Wife’s early boast, “An housbonde I wol have -- I wol nat lette - -/ which shal be bothe my detour and my thral” (WOB 154-155). Bott’s reading explains why Alisoun goes to such great lengths to torment the man. Eventually, the husband passes away, something that Alisoun is shockingly vague about considering this marriage was described in the most detail thus far. Bott argues that the Wife had no role in her husband’s death since “had she broken him, she would have said so” (160), a view that ties into Alisoun’s spiteful treatment of this husband. An alternative reading to Bott’s is that of Gottfried, who comments that Alisoun’s “self-conscious awareness of the audience to whom she is speaking” makes her move “further away... from the truth of her experience” (206). According to Gottfried, Alisoun was at fault in

her husband's death, but, being aware of her audience, she realized that telling of her full involvement would do more harm than good to her overall argument. If Alisoun is attempting to say that her way of living and loving is indeed the correct one, admitting that she had used her strategies to drive a husband to his death wouldn't help much. Had Alisoun wanted to hide an unbeaten opponent from her audience, however, she would have lumped him in with her first three husbands, men that the audience are told almost nothing about. Instead, the fourth husband is talked about in an amount of detail that is second only to Alisoun's fifth and final husband, who she describes more than any of the others and who sheds the most doubt onto her view of her methods as empowering.

Alisoun's fifth husband, Jankyn, is the most important figure in the Prologue when it comes to understanding Alisoun's character and her exertion of power through appropriation because it is through him that the reader can put a name to a lot of what Alisoun is appropriating, namely the books of wicked wives. Furthermore, Jankyn is the only husband that is directly shown by Alisoun to be abusive towards her, both mentally and physically, showing the holes in her image of a powerful and unflappable figure. Alisoun tells her audience more about Jankyn than any other husband, which is how readers know his name and that he is a young clerk. What is most interesting about Jankyn, however, is that he attempts to become the dominant figure early in their marriage. In part, he does so by reading aloud from a book every evening. This book is said by Alisoun to contain writings from Valerius, Theophrastus, Tertullian, and more. She says that the book is full of stories of shrewish and horrible wives and that Jankyn reads aloud from it every night to keep her in place. Alisoun struggles to resist this, let alone to exert control over Jankyn as she has with her previous husbands. She cannot use her usual strategies to control Jankyn because he already knows the origins of the caricatures that she appropriates and

in fact uses them against her, including making her sign over all of her wealth to him. Alisoun portrays herself to her audience directly as struggling for the first time, a far cry from her descriptions of her other marriages. It appears she has met her match with this clerk. It comes to a head one evening, however, and Alisoun interrupts Jankyn's reading. She takes his book and begins ripping pages out of it. Jankyn flies into a rage and strikes Alisoun on the ear, hard enough to partially deafen her. Alisoun is knocked unconscious and, when she rouses, makes Jankyn believe that he has killed her. She lets Jankyn bemoan his fate for a time before revealing that she is alive, but only after he promises to always give control of himself, his land, and his money to her. She cements this transfer of control by making Jankyn throw his book and the pages she ripped out into the fireplace, destroying them. This act of burning the book frees Alisoun from the control that Jankyn attempted to exert upon her since she has destroyed the tool the clerk had used to exert his patriarchal power over her and her life. Instead of oppressing Alisoun with the book, Jankyn simply gave her more ammunition that she could use to exert her power over him and others.

Alisoun's tactics in her other marriages were most likely very familiar to Jankyn. He even has a book with authors that, as noted above, Alisoun has all but quoted as part of her strategies to control her husbands. This knowledge of Alisoun's sources puts him in an interesting position, as she would not be able to use these strategies to gain and maintain control. Since he knows Alisoun's strategies and their origins, he is able to make her out to be one of these wicked wives herself. Judging by her actions in her first marriages, Alisoun seems to prove these books correct at first, but it is important to note that her actions are very strategic. She does not appear to be driven by a desire to torment her husbands but rather to further her own ends and to secure a position of independence, which in the Middle Ages she could only do through

marriage, since women could only own property as widows. She tells her audience of pilgrims that she is more than capable of being a perfect wife, as shown when she uses physical affection at the beginning of her marriages to gain her husbands' wealth, but if it is more advantageous for her to be a wicked wife then she will most assuredly appropriate these caricatures from the books of wicked wives and become one. Why then, if her appropriation is only a tool that she uses, would Alisoun be so offended by Jankyn's reading this book aloud? Alisoun's attack on Jankyn's book is not risk-free. In fact, Alisoun is permanently damaged by her husband's attack, showing that her life was in very real danger from this act. One reading of this scene, given by Warren Smith, is that Alisoun views the book as "distorted scripture" and that the writers of the book have "become the heretics" (142). I would posit, however, is that Alisoun fears the book's ability to take away her ability to use appropriation to empower herself and control her husband. Her husband owning what amounts to a manual of her strategies for control weakens her power over him and makes it nigh impossible for her to use her appropriating strategies to control him. The idea of losing her power and independence, the one thing that Alisoun seems to value more than anything else, is something that Alisoun would not be able to stand. She rips pages from the book and makes her husband destroy it not because it is an assault on her femininity, but because it is a threat to her sovereignty, even if it is only nominal. By destroying the book, she has eliminated that which empowers her husband to resist her and allows her to continue appropriating the caricatures described by the book. Warren Smith states that Jerome's argument of the wicked wife hinges on viewing the woman as "all-powerful," which causes men to "cringe and submit helplessly to the commands of their cruel and greedy wives" (141). This view of women is what Alisoun is appropriating and Jankyn's use of the book attempts to strip this from her, leading her to desperately seek its destruction.

Alisoun's marriage to the clerk, Jankyn, continues into the time of the pilgrimage, and may have even supplied Alisoun with a new strategy to appropriate, that of the clerky gloss.

Appropriation of Glossing

The Wife's first words in her prologue, "experience, though noon auctoritee/ were in this world, is right ynogh for me/ to speke of wo that is in mariage" (WOB 1-3), tell the reader much about her intent and her own personal power in telling her story. This statement is an interesting one to make and puts her immediately at odds with her clerk husband, Jankyn. While her fifth husband regularly uses his clerky power of glossing to torment the Wife by reading aloud from the book of wicked wives, the Wife observes that this is not something that she can do since only "men may devyse and glosen, up and doun" (WOB 26). Very quickly after her opening statement, however, she appropriates the power of glossing for her own ends, referencing biblical figures like Solomon and Abraham. At the same time, however, she does something interesting. She references her own body and experience as a body of text. In this way, she is still glossing, an explicitly masculine action, but doing so by referencing her experience as a woman, thereby creating a new kind of glossing that keeps her independence and allows her to stand on her own separate but equal ground with the male storytellers and her clerk husband. The Wife is not the first to use her own body as a kind of authority in order to make a point, but her prologue is explicitly connecting her argument to her own female body and lived experience. The female body as text is a well-known understanding of how text and femininity work together and something that the Wife of Bath uses within her prologue. A textual body of work is oftentimes compared to a woman's body, as famously discussed in Carolyn Dinshaw's "Glos/ bele chose" when she points out that "the Wife of Bath herself is an embodiment of the letter of the text as Jerome has imaged it in his paradigm of proper reading" (114). If this "body" is naked when it is

in its original form and unaltered, any and all glosses and/or writings on the text itself are “dressing” the body of the text. Dressing the female form, and therefore the text, is a strategy that is most assuredly employed by Chaucer in his description of the Wife as far back as the General Prologue. The Wife’s clothes are described in great detail by the narrator in the prologue and they have two effects. First, they mark her status and, specifically, her desire for status. Although the Wife is not a member of the nobility, she wears clothing of fine material with many intense colors, something that was generally not allowed for people of non-noble status. Her clothes’ detailed description works to show the reader her thirst for power and her appropriation of signifiers of power to express her status to the other people in the party of pilgrims. Her clothes also work as a metaphor in conjunction with her statement in her prologue. Instead of relying on a text, the metaphorical female body that is then dressed by male clerks with glosses, she will instead be using her literal self as a text, a text that, according to Dinshaw, “has signifying value and leads to the spirit of the text without its necessarily being devalued or destroyed in the process” (114).

These textual views, I argue, are completely intentional and work to show another appropriation, that of clerkly tactics. The Wife uses her husband’s glossing abilities -- abilities that seemed to overpower her previous appropriation of wicked wife tactics – for her own ends. Her use of glossing is seen both at the surface level when she uses biblical verses to support her various arguments and when she glosses herself and her own experiences to make her overarching argument about marriage before beginning her tale. These are not methods of thinking that would be born *ex nihilo*; instead, they are skills that she would learn explicitly or implicitly from her latest marriage to the clerk, Jankyn. One can almost see the Wife sitting in her house as her husband reads and glosses aloud from his book of wicked wives, as she loses

her appropriated power as a wicked wife. All the while the Wife of Bath, master of appropriation and, as noted by Gottfried, “a survivor” (204) is noticing and taking for her own use the very textual and rhetorical strategies being used to try and control her. This taking of strategies is exactly how the Wife of Bath gains her power, by twisting what would be used against her to work for her. She doesn’t simply mimic traditional femininity in order to make it by in a world stacked against her: she appropriates her oppressors’ societal constructs, negative depictions, and textual strategies and makes them her own in order to put her in the position of power and carve her own place of power to reside in.

Magical Woman and Conclusion

After her Prologue, Alisoun begins her Tale. I will defer discussion on this work until a later chapter on the Magical Woman that appears prevalently in her tale. What is important to note now, however, is that much of Alisoun is present in her Tale. Martin Puhvel argues that her Tale “largely mirrors” her prologue, and indeed I think that it is no coincidence that her Tale begins with the rape of a young woman. This echoes Alisoun’s own life story as she tells it, beginning with her being married as a child to a much older man. Critics therefore view aspects of the Tale as being a kind of fantasy for Alisoun, a world where there is an all-powerful womanly figure who can come in and deliver retribution for a grievously wronged woman while exerting power over the guilty man. This view also affects the reading of her *Prologue* and forces the reader to question how much of her depiction of her life is just as much of a fantasy as her *Tale*. How much of her projected image of a powerful and sovereign woman is simply a thin veneer that hides the reality of abuse that she herself admits is present in her marriages? Her view of sovereignty in marriage can very easily be seen as purely nominal and something that can only be claimed with permission from a man. This will be elaborated on in the chapter on the

magical woman, where I will explore Alisoun and her appropriation tactics and how they connect to the magical woman in her Tale. Alisoun's appropriations are not the only way that feminine power is expressed in poems of the day.

III. LADY BERTILAK: THE DANCE

In the Middle English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the titular knight rides from Arthur's court on a quest to complete a game involving an exchange of blows. While on his journey, he comes to stay at the home of Lord Bertilak, a nobleman who offers Gawain a place only a day's journey from his end goal of The Green Chapel. While staying in Bertilak's home, Gawain is invited to play a game of exchanges with his host. The rules are simple: every morning Bertilak will go hunting. When he returns, he will give Gawain whatever he killed that day. In return, Gawain will give Bertilak whatever he receives throughout the day while staying in the house. This game at first seems pointless, as Gawain would have nothing that he could possibly trade for the spoils of the hunt.

But our impression changes when Gawain is set upon by Bertilak's wife. On the morning of the first day of the game, Lady Bertilak requests that they lie together and hide doing so from her husband. Her request is the first step in a verbal dance that allows her to exert power over the knight. Gawain, out of chivalry, does not want to outright refuse the lady, as doing so would be considered an insult. He does his best to talk her out of her request but is ultimately unable to completely dissuade her due to her exploitation of the chivalric code by which he is bound to leverage him into an impossible situation. This verbal dance culminates in her and Gawain exchanging an increasing number of kisses over his three-day stay. On each day, Gawain and Lady Bertilak engage in the dance wherein Gawain attempts to defend himself from the lady's advances while she attempts to sway him to be with her in what critics like Joseph E. Gallagher calls "a joking reversal of sexual roles" (366). Indeed, their dance does have an interesting power dynamic. Rather than what one might expect, a masculine knight chasing after a lady, the dynamic is inverted, and the lady attempts to seduce the knight while his own oath prevents him

from fully rebuffing her. Further adding to the complicated dance, Gawain is forced by the same system he is bound by to transfer the kisses he receives to his male host. The manipulation of Gawain's oath, or troth, is how Lady Bertilak exerts her power in the poem. Unlike Alisoun, who appropriates social systems and caricatures of femininity to express power over the men in her life, Lady Bertilak makes herself a solid constant in the context of the social code that Gawain adheres to. By doing so, she forces Gawain to move around her, so to speak. She is placed in a dominant position in their interactions simply by her existence as a lady in their shared social structure. By fully embodying her role in the chivalric system, she is able to force Gawain into a passive role in their dance.

Codes and Troth

Gawain, as a knight, is beholden to codes of chivalry and courtesy. These codes form the crux of many medieval romances, but most especially those revolving around King Arthur and his knights. The code of chivalry had many tenets that knights, and nobility had to maintain with their actions. One matter of particular import was how knights were expected to treat ladies. In his book on the subject of chivalry in England, *For Honour and Fame*, Nigel Saul claims that

Chivalry was a novelty in medieval aristocratic culture in that it provided a structuring framework for relations between the sexes. While principally an ethic conceptualizing the values of knighthood, it also established new sexual mores. It laid emphasis on *eros* (love) in place of the platonic and intellectual *agape* of old. (262)

In Arthurian romances like *Gawain*, the knight shows an unerring deference to the lady. This deferential relationship is the subject of many poems written in this time period, especially those revolving around Arthur and his court. In fact, a major aspect of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, which

will be explored in a later chapter, is the breaking of the chivalric code by a knight when he rapes a woman, leading to him being sentenced to death.

Knights were sworn to protect and keep ladies from harm of any kind, so many poems about Arthur's knights involve their interactions with ladies. Often this deference to the lady is depicted as romantic and results in “an inversion of the normal gender relationship, [wherein she] is shown in a superior position, empowered to grant her favours or to withhold them as she sees fit” (Saul 263). Gawain is no stranger to romance himself, as revealed when some of Bertilak's men discuss the reputation of the knight as a prolific lover, saying:

Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez
And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble,
Wich spedē is in speche vnspurd may we lerne,
Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.
God hatz geuen vus his grace godly for soþe,
Þat such a gest as Gawan grauntez vus to haue,
When burnez blyþe of his burþe schal sitte
and synge.
In menyng of manerez mere
Pis burne now schal vus bryng,
I hope þat may hym here
Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.

[‘Now shall we, as is fitting, see modes and manners and noble talking without a blemish, and what is fair in speech unsought we shall learn, since we have here this fine father of nurture. God has given us His goodly grace forsooth, in that He granteth us to have so

goodly a guest as Sir Gawain, when merry men of his breeding shall sing. Good manners now, I trow, this knight shall be bringing; Who heareth him enow shall learn of love talking.] (Gawain 916-927)

It is plain to see here that Gawain is known, at least by reputation, to be somewhat of a ladies' man. He may be depicted in the poem as a knight not swayed by physical temptation, but Bertilak's men know him as a knight that can make any lady swoon with his words and chivalric actions. His skill in love-talking, in particular, is something that will be put to the test in the rest of the poem.

In addition to verbal dexterity, the previously mentioned troth is central to the dance that involves Gawain and Lady Bertilak. Troth is the honor that knights protect with their chivalric actions and adherence to oaths. Often knights in poems will swear by their troth and be bound by it, showing the importance of oaths and loyalty. In fact, this concept is seen in almost every poem explored in this thesis. The prevalence of troth in these writings is no accident, since according to Barbara Tuchman writing on the 14th century, “loyalty, meaning the pledged word, was chivalry’s fulcrum” (67). In chivalric romances like *Gawain*, loyalty is depicted as being directed to one’s king, one’s word, and to God. The reader sees Gawain’s loyalty to the king briefly in the beginning of the poem when he steps in to take Arthur’s place in the beheading game, but far more of the poem explores his loyalty to his word and his God. These two loyalties are, in fact, what almost the entirety of this poem hinges on. What spurs Gawain on in his verbal dance with Lady Bertilak is the oath to the Green Knight that he would meet him in a year and a day. If Gawain had chosen to ignore the summons, he would have betrayed an oath and broken the code, something that seems simple, but holds a lot of weight. Tuchman writes that “a knight who broke his oath was charged with ‘treason’ for betraying the order of knighthood” (67). It is

imperative to understand the gravity inherent in Gawain's oath later in the poem when he is in Lord Bertilak's home and his oath is used to pull him by Lady Bertilak to pull him into the dance.

The Game of Exchanges

The game between Gawain and Lord Bertilak is the setup for the dance that Gawain becomes involved in, one of honor and power that this chapter explores. On the first day of the game between Gawain and Lord Bertilak, she almost immediately attempts to seduce the knight. While Gawain is sleeping, she approaches his bedside and sits on the bed. After Gawain awakens, he pretends to sleep until she speaks to him. Immediately upon "waking" from his faux slumber, he does his knightly duty and tells her that "me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me wel lykez,/ For I ȝelde me ȝederly, and ȝeȝe after grace,/ And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhouez nede" [it will be well pleasing to me to be at thy service, and I yield myself thereto, and desire thy favour as must needs be] (Gawain 1214-16). This proclamation aligns with the chivalric code's call to give deference to ladies that he encounters. Lady Bertilak quickly takes advantage of his deference and begins taking an active role, the first step in their dance. Sir Gawain passively asks if he can rise from bed, telling her "I wolde boȝe of þis bed, and busk me better," [I would fain rise from this bed and put on my robes, Gawain 1220] to make her more comfortable in their conversation. She immediately replies, "Nay for soþe, beau sir/...ȝe schal not rise of your bedde, I rych yow better,/ I schal happe yow here þat oper half als,/ And syþen karp wyth my knyȝt þat I kaȝt haue" [Nay, for sooth, good sir,' said that sweet one.' Thou shalt not rise from thy bed. I will give thee better counsel. I will cover thee up in thy bed and hold converse with my knight, whom I have taken prisoner] (Gawain 1222-25), forcing him to remain

in a state of undress and vulnerability. This first foot forward in their dance quickly gives her the upper hand in their conversation. Her conquest of the conversation continues, and she begins to proposition him. She lays out the situation quite plainly, saying:

My lorde and his ledez ar on lenþe faren,
Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,
Þe dor drawen and dit with a derf haspe;
And syþen I haue in þis hous hym þat al lykez,
I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez,
with tale.

[My lord and his people are gone far away, and the other men are in bed asleep, and also my maids. The door is fast closed and secured by a strong bolt. So, since I have in this castle the man whom all love, no time will I be losing while it doth last, in address.]
(Gawain 1231-36)

Her words mark the true beginning of the dance that Lady Bertilak and Sir Gawain become embroiled in. In the following lines, Lady Bertilak heaps praise onto Gawain and tells him that she would have him as a lover. He dutifully rebuffs her advances as he must, out of courtesy to his host, but he is also unable to directly turn her down, as that would go against his promise to be at her beck and call. This dilemma is where we can see her exertion of power. By fully embodying her status as a lady, Gawain is forced to defer to her. He can use his wit to downplay her advances, but he can't fully escape them. At the end of their first encounter, Lady Bertilak says:

So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,

Couth not lyȝtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye,
Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende.

[Since Gawain is fitly held to be so gallant and courteous, he could not so long have lingered lightly with a lady without craving a kiss for courtesy's sake and some little trifle at the end of his dalliance.] (Gawain 1297-1301)

This is the first instance wherein Gawain is made to give in to physical affection from the lady.

Interestingly, she is less direct here than when she forces him to remain indecent and directly relies on his deference to deny him the action of getting out of bed to better arrange himself. In this case, she instead relies on gentle pressure that draws on the system of chivalric courtesy. By implying that it is improper for him to have spent so much time with her and not desire a kiss, the Lady forces him into action to relieve this threat to his honor. Her leaning on his honor is what spurs him into amorous action, and it hinges entirely on her use of her status as lady in the system of chivalry. Lady Bertilak functions as a middle ground in the spectrum of power and coercion as laid out in the introduction of this thesis. She is exerting power at the individual level by working as one person and exerting her will on the body of another, but she is using societal structures to do so.

Their interaction on the second day occurs in a strikingly similar fashion. Lady Bertilak comes in very strong, using a similar strategy to force physical affection. Immediately upon greeting Gawain, she begins to question his honor due to his lack of physical affection towards her, saying,

Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen, wonder me þynkez,
Wyȝe þat is so wel wrast alway to god,

And connez not of compaynye þe costez vndertake,

And if mon kenes yow hom to knowe, ȝe kest hom of your mynde;

Þou hatz forȝeten ȝederly þat ȝisterday I taȝtte

Bi alder-truest token of talk þat I cowþe.

[Sir, if thou art Sir Gawain, it is, I think, passing strange that a knight who is so well disposed to gallantry should not be well versed in the customs of good company, for even if thou dost know them, thou dost cast them forth from thy mind and hast right soon forgotten what I taught thee by my talking yesterday.] (Gawain 1481-86)

When Gawain questions her statement, she replies:

ȝet I kende yow of kissing...

Quere-so countenaunce is couþe quikly to clayme;

þat bicumes vche a knyȝt þat cortaysy vses.

[Why, truly. I taught thee of kissing, and that when the face of a lady is known, thou shouldst quickly claim thy meed, and that this is becoming in a knight who uses courtesy.] (Gawain 1489-91)

Once again, we see the lady using her position to place gentle pressure on Gawain regarding his “cortaysy,” or his chivalric duty to give deference to her. This pressure is what spurs Gawain into action, resulting in his giving her a second kiss immediately thereafter. The strategy has proven incredibly effective thus far and has secured two kisses for Lady Bertilak. By using her status and implying that to deny her would be discourteous, Lady Bertilak has not only been successful in her goal of receiving physical affection from the knight but has also engineered it so that Gawain is the one seeming to choose to engage said affection. As mentioned earlier, Lady Bertilak is able to simply request actions and have his compliance, as shown when she refused

his attempt to dress himself earlier. Leaning on his code and forcing him to act, however, results in Gawain appearing to be the one acting. Despite appearances, this dance is being led firmly by Lady Bertilak.

Lady Bertilak continues her strategy in their second encounter, and she begins to compliment Gawain on his wit and skill with words, asking him to teach her some of his ways. She questions and speaks with him for a long time, as the text says, to continue in her attempts to woo him. Her actions show a continuation of her strategy. She is using her position as a lady to put Gawain in a position wherein he is not only forced to give affection, but also to be the one doing the wooing. Although she is not successful in lying with the knight, her strategy does earn her yet another kiss, showing her continued dominant position in their dance.

On the final day, while Lord Bertilak is hunting a fox, Lady Bertilak once more comes into Gawain's chamber, this time dressed in extremely fine clothing that gives even Gawain pause when he sees her. The two continue their verbal dance, but without physical affection as the goal. On this morning, Lady Bertilak attempts to give Gawain a valuable ring made of red gold and encrusted with jewels as a gift. Gawain, however, claims that this gift is too extravagant and that he cannot accept it from her. This is most likely sincere reasoning, but it is not the only reason Gawain has. As Jessica Cooke points out, "Lady Bertilak's offer of the ring implicitly casts Gawain and herself as lovers, fitting well with her earlier attempts at seduction" (5). Gawain's rejection of the ring is treated in a very similar fashion to his rejection of Lady Bertilak's affection, and she scolds him for it but then tells him that if he insists on denying this gift then he must accept a lesser one. This lesser gift is the green girdle that later Gawain will famously use as a symbol of his imperfection. While Lady Bertilak is not attempting to obtain physical affection from Gawain as seriously as she had previously, she is still using the same

strategies to keep Gawain's actions under her control. Lady Bertilak's strategy of using her status to gain what she wishes from the knight, Gawain, is effective. What exactly is Lady Bertilak's strategy, however? What specific societal factors and roles does she lean on to force the knight into a passive role in their dance?

The view of Lady Bertilak's actions as exerting her own power is not held universally. First, there is debate over whether the Lady is working from her own agency, that of her husband, or whether she is working at the behest of Morgan la Fay, another of the magical women. In his article, "The Lady, the Goddess, and the Text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Lawrence Warner observes "that some critics have gone so far as to identify [Morgan] as the puppet-master of the whole plot" (346), but a reading that Morgan is behind the lady's actions would ignore Lord Bertilak's claim that "þe wowyng of my wyf: I wroȝt hit myseluen" (Gawain 2361). Paul Battles instead asks, "why not simply accept the explanation given by the text? The beheading game was Morgan's idea; the exchange of winnings, Sir Bertilak's" (Battles 335). Lady Bertilak may well be working as an agent along with or even *for* her husband, but her working on another's behalf does not necessarily diminish her exertions of power over the knight.

There is also intense critical conversation over whether Lady Bertilak is truly exerting power superior to the knight's or whether it is a more equal affair. Joseph Gallagher, in his article "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-Talkyng'" explores Gawain and Lady Bertilak's exchanges in relation to Gawain's oath as symbolized by the pentangle on his shield, stating that "Gawain's words are as suggestive as [Lady Bertilak's]" (365) in their first encounter. Gallagher's argument rests on the reading that, during the first morning's dance with Lady Bertilak, Gawain is "no longer 'schamed' but 'blyþe,' and if her words suggest masculine desire, his suggest feminine

willingness to comply” (365). But the poem’s narrator describes Gawain as being shamed, a feeling that is raw and real, before the Lady has even seen him. He is described as “Gawain þe blyþe” (Gawain 1213) only when talking to and therefore involved in the dance with Lady Bertilak. He has taken on the role of the suave knight based on the context of the passage, not because of some willingness to flirt with Lady Bertilak. No matter one’s view of Gawain’s willingness to reciprocate the Lady’s feelings, however, it is plain that Lady Bertilak is using strategies in their dance to gain and maintain control over Gawain while he stays in her home. Her use of these strategies and her dance with Gawain makes Lady Bertilak a part of what Geraldine Heng calls a “feminine text, whose key players are curiously elusive, enigmatic women” (501), a text that deserves study equal to that of the beheading game, with Lord Bertilak, an agent of Morgan la Fay, who is herself another elusive woman.

Leveraging vs Appropriation

While similar to the Wife of Bath in involving manipulation of societal expectations, what Lady Bertilak is doing is different in a crucial way. While the Wife of Bath twists things that would be used against her to strengthen her, Lady Bertilak uses her position as a lady in society as a point of leverage to control the situation with Gawain for her benefit. As discussed above, she uses her position as a lady and Gawain’s chivalric code to position herself as the leader in their dance of seduction. Lady Bertilak uses social constructs to ensnare Gawain and place herself in a more powerful position. In her and Gawain’s dance, she expresses her own sexual freedom in a way reminiscent of the Wife of Bath, but with an interesting end result that is exemplified with the ring and green girdle. While Lady Bertilak is unsuccessful in her goals of achieving sex, the same way that she is unsuccessful in giving Gawain the ring, she is never *fully* unsuccessful because she still receives the kisses from Gawain, much like she is still able to give

Gawain a different gift than the ring. By leveraging the knight's chivalric code and engaging him in a verbal dance, Lady Bertilak has created a system wherein she can't lose, even if she's not fully successful. This inability to completely fail is an interesting effect of her leveraging power. Lady Bertilak, a character who is not even afforded a proper name in the poem, is able to exert power over the titular character, one of Arthur's knights and kinsmen and send him on a quest that he can't refuse, by simply using his own systems and her place in them against him. She becomes the dominant one in their interactions. Unlike Alisoun, who takes on aspects of the figures she appropriates, Lady Bertilak does not change anything about herself. In addition, while Alisoun is an affluent woman and seems to live a privileged and powerful life, she is not a noblewoman like Lady Bertilak and would therefore be excluded from exerting power in the way Lady Bertilak does.

Class and Leveraging

Names and titles are very important when discussing Lady Bertilak's strategy of exerting power. I have thus far used the name Lady Bertilak when referring to Lord Bertilak's wife for the sake of clarity, but she is never explicitly named as such in the poem. This fact has interested critics, like Harvey De Roo, who notes that the Lady hinges part of her and Gawain's exchange around his having been named the "French Gawain," giving him a set of expectations, such as his penchant for love talking, that comes with the name. De Roo goes on to write that "while it is appropriate for Gawain to be tested on/by a woman, since his courtesy as a knight is so bound up with women, we must admit that the lady is never allowed to move beyond this role: she is permitted only to tempt Gawain and is defined only through the classification 'lady'" (243). I would recontextualize the reading slightly, as it assumes that the identification of the woman as a lady is a forced one, but there is no evidence that Lady Bertilak is forced into her role as a

nameless lady. Although Lord Bertilak reveals that he had bidden his wife to test Gawain's troth with seduction, he doesn't specify that he informed her how to go about this. It is just as reasonable to read the woman as intentionally and voluntarily remaining nameless and being known by just her title in order to make her leveraging strategy effective. Indeed, Lady Bertilak's strategy depends *entirely* on her status in Gawain's system. The chivalric code that she uses to influence the knight is one reserved for nobility and it is therefore more important for Lady Bertilak that she embody the classification of "lady" than that she is named. In order to control the dance, a name is not needed but status is. In this way, although Lady Bertilak is expressing power in an unorthodox way, being a woman in a dominant position over a man, she is still a part of the social structures that are at their most basic level designed for men. For this reason, it is interesting that Lady Bertilak can use these structures in order to turn the tables and place Gawain in the position he is in. Her power is one that is completely reliant on Gawain's own social code as a knight. If he was not beholden to it, he would be free to outright refuse her, assuming of course that he still abided by his moral opposition to adultery. This would render her powerless in regard to her pursuit of his affection.

IV. GUINEVERE: THE QUEEN

All of the works discussed thus far have a character in common, one that regularly appears in Arthurian romances. She is a figure who is almost as prolific in the stories as Arthur himself, which is fitting as she is also the only character that comes close to him in terms of power. Queen Guinevere, King Arthur's wife, being a member of royalty, already outranks almost all characters short of her husband in any given poem. While she makes a brief appearance at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, her character is much more central and has a greater impact in *Launfal*, a Middle English translation of Marie de France's *Lanval*, and in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Arthurian episode that Alisoun tells the other pilgrims. In both poems, Guinevere displays a power that is reserved only for a woman in her position. Specifically, she demonstrates that she can control whether her subjects live or die in a legal setting. She exerts this power in both poems, once saving a knight and once condemning one. Here I will explore each of these instances and the significance of her life-and-death decisions.

Wife of Bath's Guinevere (Life)

In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, an unnamed knight commits a terrible crime, raping a woman who is also not named. He is brought before the king and queen for his crime and is set to be put to death. Before the sentence is carried out, however, Guinevere intercedes on his behalf and “so longe preyden the kyng of grace/ til he his lyf hym granted in the place/ and yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille” (WOB 895-97). She expresses her authority quickly and stays his execution, under the condition that he, kanst tellen me/ what thyng is it that women moost desiren” (WOB 904-5). She gives him the compromise that, if the knight doesn't have an answer at the moment, she will give him “a twelf-month and a day” (WOB 909) to find an answer that is

sufficient to the queen. In this way, the queen has shown her power over the knight. For him to keep his life, he must prove himself by undergoing a quest to find an answer to the queen's question. The knight spends almost all the allotted time asking any woman he can find what they desire, but he receives a different answer each time. Eventually, he does find an answer by consulting the magical woman of the text, who trades him the answer for a promise that he will marry her, an interaction that will be explored later in the magical woman chapter. After receiving this answer, he returns to Guinevere and informs her of it: women desire "to have sovereynetee/ as wel over hir husband as hir love" (WOB 1038-39). With this answer the knight is saved from his execution.

At first glance, it is extremely easy to overlook the significance of Guinevere's part of the story as simply the setup for a romance quest. Guinevere is present only in a handful of lines and doesn't speak more than a few sentences, after all. She seems to be simply a quest-giving character without deeper significance. With deeper exploration, however, the implications of her power become more apparent and meaningful. The knight's death was called for by the king and the laws of the land. Rape was an extremely grave crime that was punishable by the death penalty, even if the perpetrator was of noble birth, like the knight of this poem. Accordingly, the poem states that "dampned was this knyght for to be deed, / by cours of lawe, and shoulde han lost his heed" (WOB 891-92). Guinevere, though, with her word and a given quest, is able to subvert the laws of the land and allows the knight to live, despite his crime. Specifically, the knight's crime involves the breaking of his troth, the severity of which was explored in Lady Bertilak's chapter. This ability to supersede the law seemingly puts her in a position equal to or even higher than Arthur, since she is able to overthrow his ruling and therefore the law of the land. Furthermore, since Guinevere is able to show that she knows the answer to her question by

judging the knight's answer as correct, there is the implication that she already has sovereignty in her own marriage. George Coffman compares Guinevere in *The Tale* to figures that sat as judges in the Court of Love. Indeed, Guinevere does seem to fit this role well, and she, by giving the knight his quest, and her ladies, by assisting Guinevere in her judgement, place themselves in a position of power and knowledge to judge the knight. Whether the crime violates the laws of the land or the laws of the literary Court of Love that Coffman discusses, Guinevere expresses her power as queen over the life of her subject by taking on the role of judge in the knight's trial. She is able to overrule the will of her husband, the king, who has sentenced one of her subjects to die for a horrible crime he had committed, and give the man a quest that, if completed, would free him from his punishment. Furthermore, the knight's success or failure in the quest is also at her discretion, as she is the judge of his answer. In *The Tale*, Guinevere demonstrates her power as queen in such a way that she allows a man who by law should die to live, but this is only one side of the queen's power over her subjects.

Launfal's Guinevere (Death)

In Tomas Chestre's *Launfal*, a Middle English translation of Marie De France's *Lanval*, Guinevere assumes a much more central narrative role. In Chestre's version of the poem, after the queen is introduced, she almost immediately shames the titular knight, Launfal. After her and Arthur's wedding, Guinevere "yaf yftes for the nones,/ gold and seler and precyous stonyys/ her curtasye to kythe" (*Launfal* 67-69), but to Launfal "sche yaf nothyng--/ that grevede hym many a sythe" (71-72). Her snubbing of him leads Launfal to go into exile out of shame, leaving Arthur's court for years and leading him to meet the poem's magical woman, Tryamour. After she turns his fortune around, something that will be explored further in the magical woman chapter, Launfal returns to Arthur's court. Upon his return, he gets the attention of the queen

who originally forced him into exile. This time, however, instead of snubbing Launfal, she attempts to seduce him, although he rebuffs her advances because he is already spoken for by the mystical Tryamour. She takes offence, especially because Launfal says,

“I have loved a fayryr woman
Than thou ever leydest thyn ey upon
Thys seven yer and more!
“Hyr lothlokest mayde, wythoute wene,
Myght bet be a Quene
Than thou, yn all thy lyve!” (Launfal 694-699)

She leaves the knight angrily and retreats to her room. Once there, she tells her husband, the king, that “I spak to Launfal yn my game,/ and he besofte me of schame -/ my leman for to be” (Launfal 715-717) and requests that he be put to death. Launfal is immediately arrested and given a time limit, “twelfe moneth and fourtenyght” (Launfal 818), to produce evidence contrary to the accusations leveled against him. If unable to do so, he is to be “hongede as a thef” (Launfal 803). Guinevere is not believed by the peers of Launfal, since they know her reputation: “sche hadde lemannys under her lord,/ so fele ther nas noon ende” (Launfal 47-48). But her word still holds so much weight that his life is completely in her hands in regard to his trial and punishment. Launfal is held at the castle to be put to death unless he can produce proof that his love is more beautiful than the queen, something that is impossible for him without breaking his oath to Tryamour to keep her existence a secret. He is unable to do this and her reveals her existence in the heat of an argument with Guinevere, which also lands him in prison. Later though, when there are signs that Tryamour may indeed arrive to save Launfal, Guinevere attempts to speed up the execution process by appealing to her husband, saying,

“Syre, curtays yf thou were,
Or yf thou lovedst thyn honour,
I schuld be awreke of that traitor
That doth me changy chere.
To Launfal thou schuldest not spare,
Thy barouns dryveth the to bysmare-
He ys hem lef and dere!” (Launfal 918-24)

She tries to appeal to Arthur's sense of honor to goad him into speeding up the execution, in the same way that she goaded him into calling for the execution in the first place by saying that Launfal had besmirched her -- and therefore his -- honor with his words. Guinevere makes an appeal such that sparing Launfal's life would be a stain on Arthur's honor, since she claims that Launfal had called his honor into question when he claimed that he was the lover of a more beautiful woman and had tried to proposition Guinevere,. We don't find out if her words have any effect on the king, as Tryamour, the magical lady, arrives immediately thereafter, but there seems a very real chance that Guinevere could have swayed her husband into action, as she has shown she could before. Tryamour's arrival may be seen as a *deus ex machina* and the only thing that stops Guinevere from exerting her power over the life of her subject, Launfal.

The Queen's Power

In *Launfal* we see the opposite side of the power that Guinevere showed in the *Tale*. In her depiction in the Wife's *Tale*, she was shown to be able to spare the life of a guilty man by appealing to her husband until he deferred to her, but in *Launfal* she is shown to be able to use the same means to condemn an innocent man to death. Together these depictions show the power that Guinevere holds as sovereign queen. By holding sway over her husband in both narratives,

she holds power over the lives of her subjects, for better or worse. The sway that she holds over her husband comes from strategies that echo the other women in the poems. She uses the social system of honor and chivalry, like Lady Bertilak, and appropriates literary characters like those of the Court of Love discussed by Coffman to empower herself to be a judge of affairs of love, much as the Wife of Bath appropriates negative literary figures to empower herself in her marriages. She does all of this in addition to holding the power that naturally comes with her class as royalty. She has demonstrated in these poems the ability to use the strategies seen in other women characters discussed above as well as her own power as queen to hold sway over the very lives of her subjects.

We see in Guinevere a blend of the strategies that were used by both the wife of Bath and Lady Bertilak. She retains sovereignty like the Guinevere in the Wife of Bath's *Tale*, gaining power over the knight from her husband through her words in a manner similar to Alisoun's gaining power over her husbands' money and land. Furthermore, she expresses sexual desire in *Launfal*, albeit in a form that is vilified by Chestre. The way that she expresses her sexuality is tied closely to the appropriation that Alisoun uses in her prologue. She is able to appropriate the image of the perfect and pure queen, being described as "a lady bright" (*Launfal* 41) by Arthur when he sends Merlin to fetch her. Guinevere is brought to Arthur by Merlin but is immediately disliked by the knights due to her previously mentioned reputation of infidelity. She quickly turns the situation to her benefit, though, by using her newfound power as queen to exert her will over her subjects. In these ways, she exemplifies methods of gaining and exerting power that harken back to those discussed in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

In both narratives Guinevere leverages power against the two knights and her husband using established societal norms, specifically their troth and honor, taking a page from Lady

Bertilak's book. In the *Tale*, despite the knight's original breach of his troth in committing his original crime, Guinevere uses the knight's code of honor to bind him to the agreement that he return after his quest to find what women want more than anything and then again to bind him to marriage with the Loathly Lady, this poem's magical woman. Guinevere uses the knight's troth in conjunction with her own power to intercede on his behalf to send him on the quest to discover what women desire. In *Launfal*, the connections to leveraging as power are much more prevalent. Guinevere uses her standing as the knights' queen to get what she wants throughout the poem. She, like Lady Bertilak, plays on the knights' ideas of troth and especially of honor, at one point saying "thou lovyst no woman, ne no woman the" (*Launfal* 689), something which pricks Launfal's honor, making him feel "sore ashamed" (*Launfal* 691). She spurs Launfal to speak out to defend both his and Tryamour's honor and thereby sets up the rest of the poem, with Launfal in prison awaiting execution. As discussed previously in this paper, in the early sections of Chestre's poem, Guinevere causes Launfal to exile himself from Arthur's kingdom simply by not giving him a gift, an act which sheds doubt on his honor as a knight. By using the system of honor and courtesy against him, she uses leverage that is similar to Lady Bertilak. Afterward, she accuses Launfal of insulting her honor when "of a leman hys yelp he made" (*Launfal* 718). Furthermore, she tells her husband that he should quickly execute Launfal, "yf thou lovedest thy honour" (*Launfal* 919). In these examples, she uses leverage like Lady Bertilak, becoming the controlling figure in her respective stories by leaning into existing norms and producing outcomes that she wishes, independent of other influences. Like Lady Bertilak, too, her ability to use the leveraging strategy to gain what she wants is tied intrinsically to her status in the society that she is a part of. What sets her apart from Lady Bertilak in this regard, however, is that she holds a much higher status. While Lady Bertilak is a noblewoman and therefore given noticeable

deference from the knight that she courts, Guinevere as the queen of the kingdom controls knights who are duty-bound to serve her just as they would serve their king. Even though the other knights in *Launfal* explicitly do not trust Guinevere and believe that Launfal is telling the truth, they are still honor-bound to arrest, try, and eventually execute Launfal unless he can provide proof of his claims and disprove Guinevere's.

Guinevere also holds another kind of power, one that only she and the magical woman are capable of. Guinevere, in both of her appearances, is a quest-giver. In both poems wherein she appears, she holds the power to send knights on quests in order to further a goal of some sort. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, this quest is stereotypical and involves the knight traveling to find an answer to Guinevere's question. Carole Koepke Brown, when exploring the narrative structure of *The Tale*, discusses the queen's giving of the quest:

the queen's task [for the knight] is a brilliant assignment for one who has objectified and violated a *mayde*. The year-long task of sorting out the women's various responses gives him the opportunity to broaden his perspective and experience the world through female eyes. (Brown 24)

The outcome of the quest is either his life if he's successful, or his death if he's not. What is also achieved, in Brown's reading, is a reforming of the criminal through both his quest and the consequences of the success in his quest, marriage to the Loathly Lady, although this requires that the reader assume the knight genuinely learned his lesson and is not simply parroting it back to the person who told it to him. In *Launfal*, there are two quests, one direct and one indirect. The first comes from Guinevere's snubbing of Launfal at the wedding dinner. As noted by Peter J. Lucas in his article, Guinevere starts Launfal on the journey that ends with his meeting Tryamour. Lucas points out that "without her initial hostility Launfal would not have left court

and met Tryamour, and without her proposal of love Launfal would not have been required to be rescued by Tryamour” (292). The second quest doesn’t require that Launfal, like the unnamed knight in *The Tale*, must seek something, but rather that he prove his boast or “yelp” (Launfal 718) about Tryamour. Once again, the outcome of his quest will either be life or death. The quest-giver identity is an interesting tie between the two depictions of the queen, as it creates a textual power that is tied to a female figure.

Guinevere is not the only figure that has power related to the giving of quests, however. Guinevere can send these knights on life-or-death quests – quests which, one might argue, the knights are not meant to triumph in, but in each of these narratives, one figure is able to assist the knights and help them succeed. This figure is the magical lady, Tryamour in *Launfal* and the unnamed shapeshifting woman in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. In both tales she is the force that saves the lives of the two knights. In *Launfal*, Tryamour’s appearance is what proves that Launfal’s boasts were true, freeing him from his death sentence and blinding Guinevere, who had claimed that, “yyf he bryngeth a fayrer thynge,/ put out my eeyn gray” (*Launfal* 809-810). In *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the shapeshifting woman is the one who gives the knight the answer to the question of what it is that women desire more than anything in the world. In *Gawain*, the magical lady, Morgan le Fay, indirectly sends Gawain on his quest, using the Green Knight as a proxy. She does this, however, “For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe” [in order to vex and pain Guinevere and to cause her death] (*Gawain* 2460), showing that she still works as an oppositional force to Guinevere. This opposing figure gives the lady an interesting power dynamic. If Guinevere is the most powerful feminine figure thus far, blending the techniques of the previous figures and holding power over the very lives of her subjects, we must acknowledge that someone who is able to subvert this power and nullify would be even more powerful.

Indeed, as we will explore in the next chapter, due to her ability to subvert the power of the hitherto most powerful feminine character and more, this magical lady appears to be the most powerful female character in all these poems.

V. THE MAGICAL LADY: THE IDEAL

The final figure, and indeed the most notable, is one that is present in every poem that has been considered. She is almost always a central part of the story, even if only mentioned in passing. She is, of course, the magical lady. She is not always named, and, when she is, she is often given different names, but the details remain the same. In *Gawain*, she is the sorceress, Morgan la Fay; in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, she is the nameless shape-shifting woman; and in *Launfal*, she is the fairy woman, Tryamour. Each of these figures, while different, read as an idealized version of womanly power described in their respective poems.

Morgan La Fay

In *Gawain*, Morgan la Fay works as the ultimate puppet master. At the end of the poem, the reader is informed that all the events have come to pass not through random chance or because of the Green Knight, but rather “Purȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye” (*Gawain* 2446). Bertilak tells Gawain that “Morgne þe goddes” (*Gawain* 2452) had sent him to Arthur’s court to frighten Guinevere to death with the beheading game. When this is unsuccessful, she shifts to testing Arthur’s kinsman, having the Green Knight test Gawain’s troth in both the exchanging of blows and the exchanging of gifts in the castle. Her strategy closely mirrors that of Lady Bertilak. Although she may be unsuccessful in her primary goal of frightening Guinevere to death, she uses the chivalric code and the knights’ system of honor to force the knight into a life-or-death game wherein he is bound solely by his inability to refuse due to his honor. Her strategy closely mirrors what Lady Bertilak, the other prominent woman in the poem, does in the events of the poem to cement her own power over Gawain in their dance. As discussed in her chapter, Lady Bertilak’s leveraging strategy pulled Gawain into a dance wherein she was the dominant figure. By doing this, she was able to ensure that, although she might not be ultimately successful in

getting sex from the knight, she could not fully lose since the knight may not refuse her. Morgan's game works in the same way, but on a larger scale, allowing her to manipulate even the king and his knights in such a way that she will win no matter the outcome.

The connection between Lady Bertilak and Morgan has been noted in scholarship. Geraldine Heng refers to the two as "nonidentical doubles" noting that "every woman in the poem may be said to refigure another" (503). An important difference between the two women and what makes Morgan more powerful than her human counterpart, however, is that Morgan la Fay exists *outside* of the social systems that Lady Bertilak uses as a leveraging point. Lawrence Warner cites Michael W. Twomey, whose etymological analysis identified "Morgan" as meaning "empress of the wilderness" (Warner 347). This meaning shows that Morgan's existence is separate from society and therefore from society's imposed roles, being a noblewoman of the wild rather than of society, like Lady Bertilak. She is employing similar strategies as Lady Bertilak, but since she exists outside of the social system, she can employ them on a grander scale, as shown when she nearly ropes Arthur himself into her scheme before Gawain steps up to take his place. Morgan is using Lady Bertilak's strategies, but without the limitations that being part of a patriarchal society has baked into it and is therefore able to surpass her worldly counterpart.

The Shapeshifter

The magical lady in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is given no name, but mimics Morgan la Fay in many ways. For one, she establishes herself as an idealized version of the power that is exerted by the worldly woman in her poem, the Wife of Bath. The shapeshifting lady, like her creator, is an appropriator. Alisoun appropriates by making herself more like the caricatures of women found in the book of wicked wives, creating an image of an independent woman with

sovereignty in her marriages. Despite all of this, however, she is still human, something that she dreads in her prologue when she says “age, allas, that al wol envenyme, / hath me biraft my beautee and my pith” (WOB 474-75). Several times in the prologue, she wonders about her diminishing value as she ages, speculating that it will be harder and harder to continue her appropriations due to the loss of her beauty to age.

Her magical woman, however, doesn’t have this issue as she is a true shapeshifter and can choose which form best suits her, appropriating either beauty or wretchedness to suit the needs of the moment. Susanne Thomas puts it well, saying “as shapeshifter, the *wyf* represents the ultimate fantasy of power over one’s own body” (95). The magical woman in *The Tale* exhibits full control over her own body, as Alisoun wishes she could, in addition to having full control in her marriage to the nameless knight, showing that, although out of all the marginal ladies she is the least overtly magical, she still functions as an unworldly ideal in regard to female power. Alisoun’s magical woman is the most powerful character in the *Tale* because she is able to appropriate perfectly. As a shapeshifter she can quite literally become anything to gain more power and functions as the ultimate ideal of Alisoun’s appropriation strategy. Many critics similarly conclude that the shapeshifting woman is actually the wife inserting an idealized version of herself into the story. Martin Puhvel states that “the Wife’s tale largely mirrors and in some ways amplifies the portrait she paints of herself through the lengthy self-revelation in her prologue” (298). Using this mirroring of the *Prologue* and *Tale*, the shapeshifting lady would be parallel to Alisoun’s ideal version of herself that she hasn’t been able to achieve in her marriages maintaining a husband who has given sovereignty to her and the ability to change her appearance at will to suit her needs. The fluidity of age and class of the shapeshifting woman ties her to

Morgan la Fay, the magical lady who becomes more powerful because she exists outside of normal social structures.

Unlike Alisoun, who is forced to make use of negative depictions of women written by men to gain power, the shapeshifting lady can become any depiction she wishes, being both loathly and lovely in the *Tale*. Her potential is shown most clearly in her final ultimatum to the knight, who is made to choose,

Oon of thise thynges tweye:
To han me foul and old til I deye,
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
And nevere yow dispiese in al my lyf,
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shal be to your hous by cause of me,
Or in som other place, may wel be. (WOB 1219-26)

She gives the knight the option of two different negative depictions, the unfaithful beauty or the faithful crone, but the knight defers to her and asks her to choose, remembering the lesson about what women desire. This prompts her to reveal a third option that was not offered, and she becomes a wife that is “bothe fair and good” (WOB 1241). Her actions in this final section of the poem exemplify her shapeshifting as the ideal appropriation. The shapeshifting woman is not forced to only appropriate the caricatures that others have created, like Alisoun. Instead, she can choose to take those forms or a positive one depending on what she is seeking. Her shapeshifting being the ideal version of Alisoun’s strategy echoes the relationship between Lady Bertilak and Morgan la Fay. She uses the same strategies as her worldly counterpart, but due to her magical

nature and her existence outside of the social structures that Alisoun is a part of she can surpass her counterpart in terms of power. This depiction is once again showing the magical lady as an idea of feminine power. Susan Carter, when discussing the shapeshifter, says that she is “sovereignty itself represented by the many shaped female body” (338), echoing the idea of the magical woman as an ideal.

Tryamour

In *Launfal*, the magical woman is given more depth than her counterpart in Chaucer’s tale. First, she is given a name, Tryamour. She is also given background information, being described as a lady of the fairy court, specifically “the kynges daughter of Olyroun” (*Launfal* 278). She comes across the knight, Launfal, when he is at his lowest point. He is poor and without a home since he chose to leave the court of his king and his new queen, Guinevere. Tryamour takes in the errant knight and pledges her love to him, giving him various riches that he may use to good effect in his life. Afterward, she takes her leave, but promises that “well privvyly I woll come to the/ (no man alyve ne schall me se)/ as styll as any ston” (*Launfal* 355-57), but she also warns him thereafter:

That thou make no boat of me
For no kenes mede!

And yf thou doost, I warny the before,
All my love thou hast forlore! (*Launfal* 362-65)

Launfal agrees to her terms and goes on his way. After many adventures, he returns to Arthur’s court but runs afoul of Guinevere, who, as noted in the preceding chapter, attempts to seduce him. He rebuffs her advances due to his obligation to Tryamour. All seems lost for Launfal as Tryamour will no longer respond to his calls due to his revelation of her existence. While

imprisoned, he bemoans that “all my joye I have forelore,/ and the-- that me ys worst fore--/ thou blysfull berde yn bour” (*Launfal* 748-50). As for Guinevere, the power that is expressed in this poem and the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* is the power over life. The magical woman in both poems has power over the lives of the men even more than Guinevere does since they are able to undo what Guinevere does. She can undo the queen’s power by undercutting Guinevere’s power. In both works discussed above, Guinevere controls men’s lives through her authority as queen and by manipulating social structures from her position. As explained by Lesley Lawton, however, Tryamour has created her own position, “a role that, according to the *amour courtois* pattern, invests women with a certain degree of power since it is modelled on the feudal relationship between a knight and his liege lord” (Lawton 12). In this position, she has made herself higher than Guinevere and therefore able to subvert her will, nullifying Guinevere’s control of the lives of the knight and gaining her own. The reason that Tryamour can be so successful in subverting Guinevere rests on the two women’s respective positions in society. Guinevere’s power over the lives of her subjects rests on her status as queen. All her control stems from the fact that she is in the ruling class. She is given leave to make decisions that affect the lives of her subjects either directly or through her husband, the king, because of her existence in this class, but if she were to lose her station she would lose the power that she holds over her subjects. The magical woman, however, is able to exert her power whether she seems a peasant, as in *The Tale*, or whether she is higher than nobility, as in *Launfal*. In either case she can subvert Guinevere’s power and place the knight under her. In this way, she holds the supreme form of feminine power, as her power can be exerted independent of status and is explicitly shown in both poems as able to undermine that of the queen. A factor that ties the magical women together is their common link to the wild. As stated previously, Morgan le Fay is most explicitly called the empress of the wilderness, but

all three magical women are either first encountered or commonly found outside of society, in rural or wild areas. The magical women are disconnected from the main society, revealing that the overall power of the magical woman is linked to her existence outside the social structures that the other characters in the poems must inhabit. Leslie Lawson explains the separation of social norms from magical women, specifically Tryamour's rather accelerated courting of Launfal, saying, “as a fairy being, she is not subject to mortal codes of sexual restraint and morality. Her spontaneous offering of herself to Launfal does not elicit any narratorial disapprobation” (12). This lack of narrative consequence to Tryamour's actions cements that she exists separate to other characters, whose actions have judgement passed on them by the narrator.

The Magical Woman and Society

The fairy woman shows the potential for an empowered woman that is not bound by the chains of the patriarchal society around her. An all-powerful, supernatural woman is not new to these writers. As far back as the Old English epic poems, there had been an explicitly feminine figure that presides over all things: *wyrd*. *Wyrd* is both a force of nature and a female figure. In *Beowulf*, one line that refers to her is “gæð a wyrd swa hio scel” (*Beowulf* 455), this usage linked to a greater theme in the poem that refers to the constant pull of a higher power on the lives of even the most heroic of figures. B. J. Timmer notes in his article about *Wyrd* that “the majority of scholars hold that *wyrd*, even when used in otherwise Christian texts, still has some more or less remote associations with the heathen belief in Fate” (Timmer 25). Specifically, connections have been made between *Wyrd* and the Norse deity Urd, one of the three Norns that control the fates of all men on Earth, with the understanding that they are cognate beings, something also discussed by Timmer. It is not a huge leap to consider the feminine figure of fate, *Wyrd*, who controls the lives of the worldly, to be represented in magical women, even if the link might

seem tenuous at first glance. Where it becomes most visible, however, is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. During the dance between Lady Bertilak and Gawain, the knight continuously worries about his quest at the Green Chapel. In one such instance, the poem's narrator says that Gawain dreamed “How þat destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde/ At þe grene chapel, when he þe gome metes” (Gawain 1752-53). This, at first, seems to be a case of the author simply using the word of this pre-Christian force colloquially in the place of “destiny,” possibly to avoid repetition. Surely there is precedent for this phenomenon: we unthinkingly use the names of the Germanic gods in the English days of the week. But there may be more here than meets the eye. We must remember that, in the context of the poem, the fate, or *wyrd*, that Gawain is going to face is, in fact, the contrivance of this poem’s magical woman, Morgan la Fay. In this way, the *wyrd* that the author discusses is the plan that Morgan la Fay has created. Here the reader is literally shown that Morgan, an otherworldly and yet definitively feminine figure, is responsible for the *wyrd* of the masculine knight. This is the most concrete link between these magical women and the feminine figure of *wyrd*, but it is far from the only one. The other two magical ladies that were discussed, Tryamour and the shapeshifter of the Wife of Bath’s Tale, also have a connection. Both of these magical women work to supersede Guinevere’s power over the lives of her subjects. In both poems, therefore, the respective magical lady is effectively controlling the fate of the two knights in the poems: they are fully at her mercy. One critic ties the figure of Morgan le Fay to prominent Celtic deities, especially to the Morrígan, a figure who “is at times Cúchulainn’s watchful protectress” (Loomis 197), a description that echoes the magical ladies in *The Tale* and *Launfal*’s saving of the doomed knights. Here we see that the figure of the magical woman, in addition to being an idealized form of feminine power, carries with it an old tradition of all-powerful feminine figures. As Britain grew more and more

Christian, these old deities shifted into the fairy forms that appear in these poems, something that gives them immense narrative power, but at a cost.

All three magical women share a similar existence as fairy women that are free from societal shackles that limit the other female characters. This freedom, combined with a magical nature, does indeed make the magical woman an ideal of feminine power as defined by the poem she appears in, though one that is *unreal* in terms of the world of the reader. She is a figure that cannot exist, since she relies on an existence outside of the social structure even though the social structure is inescapable. This paradox of being the ultimate power but also being fundamentally impossible is what the ultimate conceit to the magical woman's power and ability to exert power is. She is, indeed, represented as an idealized version of each method of exerting power that is portrayed by the worldly women yet is able to exceed each, sometimes even at their expense, by exerting power outside of the realm of their work's fictions. Writing about the relationship between Guinevere and Tryamour, Peter Lucas states that "only supernatural power can prevail against this evil human initiative" (Lucas 293), a power that I call ideal. The magical woman, by exemplifying supernaturally perfect power, can never exist in the world in the same way that other female figures, while still fictional, do. The magical woman overrules the power of men and women, peasant and king alike. Her powers are only possible, however, if she exists outside of the social structures that the stories containing her are based in. This double existence seems to show both a strength and a weakness for the magical lady and her methods of exerting power. On the one hand, the magical lady in each of these poems is successful and reveals an idealized version of the power that her worldly counterpart uses. On the other hand, her methods are impossible to duplicate. Someone might use the Wife of Bath's power of appropriation or even Lady Bertilak's leveraging power realistically, within a fictional world. It is impossible for

someone to be able to achieve what the three magical ladies achieve within their poems, which is, I would argue, what the authors want the reader to take from their depictions, but not necessarily what they've wrought.

VI. CONCLUSION

The forms of feminine power explored in this thesis have found their peak in the figure of the magical woman. What is important to consider, however, is whether she is intended to be an empowering figure for women or a disenfranchising one. One must always remember when discussing these poems that the men writing them are a part of the very system that oppresses these characters. Often the worldly women characters that express power by twisting these societal structures, although often read in our modern age as being empowering, were originally written in order to undermine their real-world counterparts. Indeed, it could be argued that every figure that I have covered thus far was originally written to be the butt of the joke and a warning to men about women's wiles. The Wife of Bath is chided during her Prologue by male pilgrims, Lady Bertilak is subjected to Gawain's oft-discussed speech wherein she is compared to the likes of Eve and Delilah, and Guinevere in *Launfal* is blinded by what the poem views as justice. This view sometimes extends even into modern criticism. Daryl Lane refers to "the evil that clashes with this goodness" (Lane 285) that is, supposedly, Launfal's. All of these women, though, are still under the control and influence of their society and cannot fully express their power. The magical woman, the figure that represents the perfect, but unrealistic, version of these powers and *cannot* be controlled, is representative of the greatest masculine anxiety of the authors, a woman who, due to her existence outside of the social structures that should allow men power over her, cannot be controlled. Reasons for this anxiety are plentiful, with some stemming from the historical context of the time due to the rising gentry class and what it might mean for long standing balances of power and some stemming from the sexism of long-dead writers, as seen in the Wife of Bath's book of wicked wives. Whatever the cause, though, the anxiety is potent, and it has been noted by critics. Susan Carter claims that Chaucer's magical lady "is constructed

from ambiguous ideas of feminine flesh. She is counter to most canonical representations of women in English literature” (340). These anxious male writers have included the figure of the powerful magical woman for a purpose that is not immediately apparent, perhaps even to themselves. By tying these female powers to these magical women, they are expressing how unrealistic these powers are. They are saying, implicitly, that it is impossible for anyone to achieve these levels of power. A woman holding such sway is not any more realistic than a fairy woman whisking a knight away to another world to live with her forever. This is the implicit message that I would argue the writers of these characters are making with their works.

Why, then, if these depictions are supposed to serve misogynistic ends, do we see the continuation of the figure? The fairy queen is a character that has lasted for nearly a millennium, continually showing up in a plethora of media. Like many long-lived characters, including some of her worldly counterparts that have been examined here, she has changed over time. A figure that was, at one time, created to show that women’s power is inherently a fantasy has shifted to become a figure of empowerment. Later writers, would often cast the fairy queen as a figure representative of powerful and respected women, like Edmund Spenser modelling his Faerie Queen after Elizabeth I. Indeed, even the worldly women characters in these poems continue to inspire feminist readings of these poems and their characters, shifting them from derisive caricatures to figures of empowerment in a time where such figures were lacking.

Whether the authors of these poems meant to or not, they have created in worldly women and in magical women literary blueprints for powerful and transgressive women who use the system that would chain them in order to empower themselves, or to bypass the system entirely and ensure that no one can exert power over them through the patriarchal society of their day. These figures have captivated the minds of readers and critics alike, as I have shown here,

and provide insight into the frequently downplayed power wielded by women in the male-oriented world of Middle English Arthurian romances.

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