

WOMEN WITH EXCITING UNDERWEAR:

Dawn Lairamore

Writer's comment: When Professor Osborn offered her English 46A class (Masterpieces of English Literature) an opportunity to write an essay comparing an original text with a modern movie version of the same, I thought I'd have some fun and compare Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* to the cult classic *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. I had a lot of fun writing this essay, but it also turned out to be a great learning experience for me. Studying Malory made me aware of the extent and intelligence of Monty Python's satire in *The Holy Grail*. I walked away from this assignment with a better sense of medieval literary conventions and new appreciation for the comedy of the Flying Circus.

— *Dawn Lairamore*

Instructor's comment: In my courses we often discuss what the adjective “deep” means when applied to literature. The class comes to different conclusions every time, always agreeing that it is “more than appears on the surface of the work,” but applying it specifically or most emphatically in different ways. In her essay, Dawn uses a feminist approach to shift our value judgment of two works in a surprisingly thought-provoking way. After showing how female seduction in Malory's story of King Arthur is crucial to the story as a whole, Dawn follows with an equally serious analysis of Monty Python's parody of the female seduction motif in what may be the most memorable and hilarious episode of the film. While offering us prize nuggets of their humor, she leads us to encounter “depth” where one might least expect to find it. Rather than spell out wherein that depth lies, I invite the reader to consider what the word refers to when applied to her analysis.

— *Marijane Osborn, English Department*

Much of the humor in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* derives from the pure absurdity of its characters and situations. King Arthur roams the British countryside on an imaginary horse, evil enemies can only be appeased with offerings of shrubbery, and the knights of the Round Table battle a bloodthirsty killer bunny, to cite just a few examples. The movie contains a great deal of such explicit comedy, but much of its humor works on a more subtle level, plot and dialogue shrewdly satirizing the unjustness of such Arthurian conventions as autocracy, severe social class distinctions, and vainglorious codes of chivalry. The movie also pokes fun at the rather demeaning view of women in traditional Arthurian legend. In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* women primarily serve as figures of sexual temptation who bring great danger and suffering to the men that interact with them. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, on the other hand, satirizes the idea of the destructive temptress and presents women characters in a manner that undercuts this negative Arthurian stereotype.

In Malory's famous account of the King Arthur legend, the most notable example of woman as destructive sexual temptation is, of course, Queen Guinevere. Sir Lancelot's affair with Guinevere results in an immense amount of physical and emotional suffering for the knight, who repeatedly risks bodily harm to protect the queen and also bears the brunt of her frequent angry tirades. For example, when Sir Mellyagaunce kidnaps the queen, Lancelot undergoes much physical hardship to rescue her, including confronting archers, crossing rough terrain, and escaping imprisonment. Another time, when Sir Mador de la Porte accuses Queen Guinevere of treason, Lancelot enters into trial by combat in the queen's defense. Mador gravely injures him in the battle: "Sir Mador...smote [Lancelot] through the thick of the thighs, that the blood brast out fiercely. And...[Lancelot] felt himself so wounded and saw his blood." (124-125) In addition to such physical pain, the queen often causes Lancelot great emotional distress. Once, for instance, Guinevere devastates Lancelot when she wrongly accuses him of being unfaithful to her and angrily banishes him from her court: "Right so Sir Lancelot departed [Camelot] with great heaviness that unneth him might sustain himself for great dole-making" (115).

Not only does Lancelot's affair with Guinevere cause him a great deal of suffering, it wreaks havoc on the lives of many other men as well. For instance, their affair brings tragedy to Sir Gawain and his family. Lancelot kills Gawain's innocent brothers, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth, while rescuing the queen from being executed for adultery. Sir Gawain consequently instigates a blood feud against Lancelot that will eventually lead to his own death. King Arthur and his followers also suffer as a result of Lancelot's sexual relationship with Guinevere. When Arthur learns of Lancelot's affair with his wife, he wages war against the knight. Once a unified whole, the Round Table divides into two opposing factions, one that supports Lancelot and one that supports Arthur. The king laments such division in these words:

Alas, that ever I bore crown upon my head! For now have I lost the fairest fellowship of noble knights that ever held Christian king together....[N]ow I may never hold them together with my worship. Now, alas, that ever this war began! (173)

The war between Lancelot and Arthur rages for months, resulting in much death and injury, and ultimately leading to the death of King Arthur and the permanent dissolution of the Round Table. As a sexual temptress, then, Guinevere instigates the intense suffering and/or death of many a man-Lancelot, Arthur, Gawain, Gaheris, Gareth, the knights of the Round Table, and the multitude of soldiers that fight in Lancelot's and Arthur's armies.

Another example of a dangerous sexual temptress is the princess Elaine of Le Pont Corbin. She twice seduces Lancelot by magically disguising herself as Guinevere, both times causing Lancelot great anguish. The first time, Lancelot experiences extreme disgrace when he learns that he has, in fact, been unfaithful to Guinevere: "Alas!" Lancelot says, "that I have lived so long, for now am I shamed" (75). Angry and

humiliated, he momentarily considers slaying Elaine for her deception. The second seduction has even more disastrous results when Guinevere catches Lancelot with Elaine and angrily banishes him from Camelot: "Ah, thou false traitor-knight! Look thou never abide in my court, and lightly that thou avoid my chamber! And not so hardy, thou false traitor-knight, that evermore thou come in my sight!" (84) Shamed beyond bearing, Lancelot loses his mind and wanders the countryside as a madman:

And therewith he took such as hearty sorrow at [Guinevere's] words that he fell down to the floor in a swoon....And when Sir Lancelot awoke out of his swough he leapt out at a bay-window into a garden, and there with thorns he was all to-scratched of his visage and his body; and so he ran forth he knew not whither, and was as wild-wood as ever was man. And so he ran two year, and never man had grace to know him. (84)

In these incidents involving Elaine and Lancelot, male characters explicitly blame women for Lancelot's suffering. After Lancelot goes mad, Sir Bors chastises both Elaine and Guinevere for causing his insanity: "Now, alas," says Sir Bors, "betwixt you both ye have destroyed a good knight" (85). Such open condemnation of the temptress further proliferates the negative concept of women within the text, as Malory portrays Lancelot as the male victim of female wrongdoings.

Women, then, have a rather degraded role in Malory's Arthurian epic, and they fare no better in the world of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The movie has no major female characters. Guinevere is noticeably absent, as are many other women who play important roles in the King Arthur legend, such as Elaine, Morgan le Fay, and the Lady of the Lake. The latter at least garners a mention in the film, but a male character immediately scoffs at the idea of "strange women lying in ponds distributing swords." The female characters who do make any noteworthy appearance in the movie conform to typical negative Arthurian stereotypes. However, although it lacks any positive female roles, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* presents female characters in such a ludicrous manner that it ultimately undercuts Arthurian beliefs about women.

Above all, the movie mocks the idea of women as sexual temptations. In the film, the women of Castle Anthrax are ridiculously blatant sources of temptation for the chaste Sir Galahad. Galahad, searching for the Holy Grail during a thunderstorm, enters Castle Anthrax after seeing a vision of the Grail above the castle's ramparts, only to discover that the castle is inhabited by a host of buxom young maidens with sexpot names such as Zoot, Dingo, and Piglet. Zoot immediately offers Galahad rest and shelter from the storm, casually remarking, "The beds here are warm and soft. And very, very big."...

Oh, I'm afraid our life must seem very dull and quiet compared to yours. We are but eight score young blondes and brunettes, all between sixteen and nineteen-and-a-half, cut off in this castle with no one to protect us. Oh, it is a lonely life. Bathing, dressing, undressing, knitting exciting underwear. We are just not used to handsome knights!

The women's attempts at seduction grow even more ludicrous, as they slyly convince Galahad to participate in overtly sexual antics. Dingo tells Galahad that his vision of the Grail was nothing more than Zoot shining a grail-shaped beacon above the castle in an effort to lure him in. She informs him that "Here in Castle Anthrax we have only one punishment for setting alight the grail-shaped beacon: you must tie [Zoot] down on a bed and *spank* her." And while he's at it, Dingo says, Galahad might as well spank all the women of Castle Anthrax. "And then, the oral sex!" she adds enthusiastically.

The movie also parodies the idea of sexual temptation as a danger to men. The absurd name Castle Anthrax hints at the hazards of sexually transmitted disease—the word "anthrax" being derived from the Middle English word "antrax," meaning "malignant boil." Furthermore, the exaggerated actions of male characters in the Castle Anthrax scene make it clear that they consider these young women a deadly source of peril. Just as Galahad begins to succumb to the wiles of his hostesses, Lancelot and a group of knights burst into the castle with their swords drawn, intent on saving him. They laughably hold the horde of

amorous maidens at bay with their weapons, rush a reluctant Galahad out of Castle Anthrax, and immediately flee the area. Lancelot emphasizes the danger of the situation:

LANCELOT: We were in the nick of time. You were in grave peril.

GALAHAD: I don't think I was.

LANCELOT: Yes, you were-you were in terrible peril.

GALAHAD: Look, let me go back in there and face the peril!

LANCELOT: No, it's too perilous.

GALAHAD: Look, my duty as a knight is to have as much peril as I can.

LANCELOT: No, we gotta find the Holy Grail. Come on.

GALAHAD: Oh, let me have just a little bit of peril.

LANCELOT: No, it's unhealthy.

The scene then ends with a solemn voiceover noting that Sir Lancelot has saved Sir Galahad from "almost certain temptation."

By presenting excessively lustful medieval women who knit erotic underwear and lure knights to their castle with a grail-shaped beacon, as well as knights who must resort to using battle gear to escape such women, the Castle Anthrax scene mocks the idea of women as dangerous seductresses. Monty Python clearly makes fun of the negative views of women and sexuality that appear in the Arthur legend, this highly exaggerated scene exposing how ludicrous and unrealistic these views seem to modern audiences.

As noblewomen, Guinevere and Elaine enjoy the luxuries of royal surroundings and never lack companionship or affection. Their courts brim with admiring subjects, loyal knights, and would-be lovers, ready to provide for these women's every physical and emotional need. As they already receive a great deal of attention and love, their relations with Lancelot seem almost gratuitous. In contrast, the women of Castle Anthrax have an extremely lonely life. Living alone in an isolated castle, these women lack any type of reliable protection or regular male companionship. Thus, a handsome knight is a great comfort to them and a rare outlet for their sexual desires. From this point of view, their attempts to seduce Galahad appear more understandable and excusable. Further, unlike the aloof Guinevere, who does not hesitate to chastise her lover, the women of Castle Anthrax never behave in anything but a warm and caring manner toward Galahad. With well-meaning-albeit misplaced-intentions, they kindly offer him shelter, medical care, and affection, expressing a desire to "attend to [his] every, every need." Their kindness and their unfortunate isolation make these women much more human and sympathetic than the lofty temptresses of Malory's story.

Monty Python also uses sexual temptation to depict male and female characters in a very different manner than Malory does. Malory wants the knights of his story to appear heroic; therefore, he must provide a plethora of physical and emotional challenges for them to overcome, including lovers who elicit danger and pain in their lives - facing temptation and its consequences enhances the heroism of Malory's knights. Monty Python's aim, however, is to emphasize the *lack* of heroism in the knights of their movie. Hence, the laughable temptation of Sir Galahad does not display his heroism, but actually undercuts it. Galahad easily, and very ungallantly, reneges on his oath of chastity by giving in to the seductive maidens of Castle Anthrax. Whereas in Malory the act of temptation belittles the woman seductress and creates sympathy for her hapless male victim, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* the opposite is true: the women seductresses seem the more sympathetic party while the male seductee suffers overt character damage.

More than mere low-budget slapstick, then, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* challenges many of the Arthurian conventions that modern audiences consider outmoded and unjust. With their clever exploitation of the role of Arthurian women, Monty Python rebukes the idea of women as manipulative seductresses and effectively exposes the shallowness of this Arthurian stereotype. And on top of all this cultural enlightenment, they still manage to give their audience a good laugh along the way.

Works Cited

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