Morgan’s Captive Audience: Enclosure and Disclosure in the Old French *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle

*Leona Archer*

*Department of French, Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages*
*University of Cambridge*
*lma33@hermes.cam.ac.uk*

The Old French Arthurian romances have as their setting a diverse landscape of earthly, supernatural and celestial spaces that their characters have to negotiate, with varying levels of success. Meandering quests across wasted plains, dark forests, mysterious castles and wide oceans, all have their place within the many episodes that form the Old French Vulgate Cycle. The organisation and occupation of space in medieval French Arthurian literature is therefore complicated in this work but essential to understanding notions of knowledge, magic, power (how and by whom it is possessed) and the construction and performance of gender roles.

Further complications surface in the multiple plots and events that interlace across the broad sweep of the cycle, connecting stories through space and time and adding to the complexity of the whole.\(^1\) Certain spaces appear time and again, and they are often used for similar purposes, so that it sometimes seems as if events repeat themselves. This could be read as one way of highlighting the cyclical and inevitable nature of the subject matter, given that everything is pre-inscribed, and also as a way to reinforce the unity of the meta-narrative. This paper will explore the theme of enclosure and disclosure when male bodies are held captive in the castle of King Arthur’s half-sister Morgan le Fay.

King Arthur’s half-sister Morgan is largely a marginal figure in the cycle, an outsider despite her links to the royal court. For the king and his knights, she is an unknown entity, neither

---

\(^1\) The challenges of the Vulgate’s multiple tiers of complexity are explored by Douglas Kelly in ‘Interlace and the Cyclic Imagination’, *A companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. by Carol Dover (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 55-64.
friend nor foe, and strongly aligned to the world of the supernatural and of magic. In this, and in
terms of her relation to men and their relationships with her, she functions in a similar way to that
of the Lady of the Lake, another Arthurian enchantress who occupies a space apart from the world
of chivalry yet plays a central role in the story. Less obviously, Morgan is also tied to Guinevere
through the great enmity she bears her, and they are connected through their interactions with
Lancelot, a knight who features prominently in both their lives, though for different reasons. It is
the Arthurian women, so often perceived as lacking or limited in power, who, by exerting their
influence in other ways are able to take control of, and manipulate male figures in the Arthurian
world, most notably King Arthur, Lancelot, and Merlin.

Where we see women exerting the greatest amount of power tends to be within their own
domains, which they – surprisingly perhaps – often hold in their own right. The space that women
occupy is alien territory for the knights, as we shall see, and the foreignness of feminine space is
emphasised within the texts; exotic and unfamiliar, they are places where men may easily be led
astray or enticed into captivity. In Volume 5 of the Lancelot, our eponymous hero finds himself
ensnared on more than one occasion by female adversaries. In the episode discussed here, Morgan,
in an elaborately plotted subversion of the male quest, sends twelve maidens out across the land
seeking Lancelot, and one of them succeeds in finding him. The very damsel Lancelot thinks he is
rescuing, is in fact on a quest of her own, to bring Lancelot to her mistress Morgan. She tricks him
into accompanying her to Morgan’s castle and so to captivity, and thus defeats Lancelot where all
male knights have failed.

At Morgan’s castle, Lancelot is drugged, and, once incapacitated, placed in a secure
bedchamber, where Morgan, fuelled by passionate hatred and lust, intends to keep the knight for the
remainder of his life. Lancelot is aghast to find himself a prisoner. As a coping mechanism to keep

2 Maureen Fries explores some of the similarities and differences between Morgan and the Lady of the Lake in ‘Female
himself sane during his captivity, and to remind himself of his love, Guinevere, he paints frescoes on the walls of his chamber, depicting the story of his life:

Lors se porpense que se la chambre ou il gisoit estoit portraite de ses faiz et de ses diz, moult li plairoit a veoir les beaux contenemenz de sa dame et moult liseroit grant alegement de ses maux. (Lancelot, Vol. V, p.52)

From the window of his prison, Lancelot observes an artist painting a scene from the story of Aeneas. Inspired, Lancelot begs some paint from him and decides to tell his own story. We therefore have Lancelot, during this enforced interlude from adventuring, relating to us his life so far: a story within a story. Morgan is astounded to discover the paintings, and marvels at Lancelot’s talents, which she surmises can only be due to his love for Guinevere, since she believes no other knight could paint as well:

Voirement feroit Amors del plus dur home soutif et angingneux: si le di por cest chevalier qua ja jor de sa vie ne feist si bien ymages, se ne fust destroiz d’amors qui a cel’outmené. (Lancelot, Vol. V, p. 53)

Interestingly then, Lancelot’s love for Guinevere appears to inspire his creative and erotic outpourings as much as it inspires him to achieve feats of arms and increases his martial prowess. Being a knight in this scenario is not enough to save him from going mad or dying in captivity from shame. In order to save himself, Lancelot turns to art, and finds not only solace in his prison, but also an object for his amorous passions to substitute for the absent Guinevere. Lancelot considers his paintings of the queen to be more beautiful than any living woman, save Guinevere herself, and fetishistically he kisses the paintings every morning when he wakes:
(...) si vit l’ymage de sa dame, si l’ancline et la salue et vait prés et l’ambrace et la baise en la bouche, si se delite assez plus qu’il ne feist en nule autre fame fors sa dame. (*Lancelot*, Vol. V, p.54)

Lancelot’s artistic talents lie dormant until he is forcibly enclosed and, as a result, is at liberty at last to indulge them. In painting the frescoes, one could argue that Lancelot is able to claim a form of ownership over his prison, a room that so clearly possesses him on many levels. On the other hand, the compulsion to disclose his relationship with Guinevere could equally be considered just another sign of the room’s possession of him. Cary Howie, in his discussion of clustrophilia, considers artwork to be its own ‘disclosive enclosure’, containing and revealing meaning within the enclosed medium of paint, and this observation would be borne out in Lancelot’s example. Furthermore, Lancelot’s paintings are not only enclosed within the pictorial space but also doubly enclosed within the secondary enclosure of the bedchamber.

When Lancelot is held captive by Morgan, he is at last able to fully express his love and his passions creatively through art, something he could not do in his knightly capacity. This could be taken as one indication that the chivalric system can be as damaging to men as it is to women, since only one particular form of masculinity is socially acceptable. This could also explain the conflicting reactions of male prisoners in nominally ‘feminine’ domains in the Vulgate Cycle. Through his painting, Lancelot seems to be as captivated by the walls that surround him as he is appalled to be held there against his will. Howie’s notion of clustrophilia examines the yearning for enclosure, through which one can find, paradoxically, a form of escape and freedom. His examples explore the eroticisation of enclosure in medieval literature, with particular focus on hagiography, including the lives of saints and hermits who seek out and yearn for self-enclosure.

---

The space in which Lancelot is enclosed is almost doubly erotically charged: firstly as a bedroom where he is drugged and held prisoner, under the watchful gaze of Morgan, and secondly, when the walls are painted to depict the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere such that his own history surrounds him.

Morgan professes to hate Lancelot more than any other man, and this is strongly tied to her loathing of Guinevere. One persuasive explanation that has been forwarded for Morgan’s hatred of the queen is that it stems from jealousy over her relationship with Lancelot. Thus although Morgan claims to despise Lancelot, her hatred is suffused with passion:

…car ele l’amoit tant comme fame pooit plus amer home pour la grand biauté de lui, si est moult dolente qu’il ne la voloit amer, car ele nel tenoit mie em prison por haïne, mes vaintre le cuidoit par anui, si l’an avoir maintes foiz proié… (Lancelot, Vol. V, p. 53)

Their relationship, though they rarely speak to or interact with each other, is highly erotically charged. Morgan attempts to seduce Lancelot, and is repudiated; she therefore satisfies herself with watching him sleep every night; observing, and desiring. Howie argues that:

Enclosed space [is] always something to which one erotically relates, and which is in turn (or simultaneously) permits an erotic relation to something other than enclosure, but something that can become perceptible only through enclosure.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the characters in the Lancelot-Grail Cycle respond to enclosure in similar ways as the holy men and women of Howie’s hagiographical exempla. In the

---


Vulgate Cycle, enclosed spaces are often aligned with female characters, and thus are frequently eroticised as ‘feminine’ spaces that reflect the enclosures and disclosures of the female body. One such example is the *Val Sans Retour*, an earlier episode from the prose Lancelot.\(^7\) As vengeance for having been spurned by a lover, Morgan creates an enchanted valley to capture unwitting knights who have been false lovers. The valley is a seductively appealing idyll, but no knight who has been unfaithful may ever leave it once he has entered. At the centre of the enchantment is a bed, which is symbolically overturned by Lancelot when he breaks the spell, much to Morgan’s displeasure. Carolyne Larrington claims that the *Val sans Retour* is bound up with notions of fear, sexuality and the female body as both ‘desired and dreaded’.\(^8\) Larrington claims that the topography of the *Val sans Retour* itself reflects the female body, and implies a deep-seated mistrust of feminine sexuality, here associated with the equally unpredictable and mysterious geography of the forest valley. The fear of the knights who are captured within stems also from the fact that the valley presents an appealing alternative to the chivalric world that the knights inhabit, and the alternative form of masculinity that is practised within its enclosure:

...is stigmatised partly because it offers real attractions. The treatment of the *Val sans Retour* is partly determined by the realisation that the family environment is a less stressful alternative to the anxieties involved in performance at court and in battle.\(^9\)

Within the feminine spaces of the Vulgate cycle, male characters seem more freely able to express another face of masculinity, one that might elsewhere be considered effeminate. Lancelot is a particularly interesting case with regard to how masculinity is constructed and shaped by its relation to female characters and ‘feminine’ spaces. For a man lauded as a paragon of masculinity, he is a character surrounded by women, and shaped by his relations to these women, notably the

\(^8\) Larrington, *King Arthur’s Enchantresses*, p. 57.
\(^9\) Ibid., p. 57.
Lady of the Lake, and later, Guinevere. The infant Lancelot is taken to the kingdom – or rather the ‘queendom’ – of the Lake, and the law in which he grows up is the Law of the Lady, not of the Father. The Lady of the Lake is the feudal lord of her realm, and the world in which she rules and raises Lancelot, is a decidedly feminine one.

Lancelot is a boy who grows up outside his family, in the supernatural realm of the Lake; the *nom du père* – the symbol of authority and identity – for Lancelot would not have come from his own father, who dies when he is still an infant, but from his adoptive mother, the Lady of the Lake. His entry into the Symbolic Order is also delayed and his position left unclear by his lack of a name or identity conferred upon him by the signifier of authority, the *nom du père*. Lancelot only discovers his identity as the son of King Ban, and his name, Lancelot, much later in his adventures.

In early episodes of the Cycle, Lancelot is instead known by a variety of monikers, such as a valet, or a white knight. The Lady of the Lake raises Lancelot – and later his cousins – to be chivalrous and brave. They are schooled in the arts of combat and courtly manners and equipped with fine raiment, armour and weapons.

When Lancelot grows up, he declares his desire to be a knight and is taken to King Arthur’s court by the Lady of the Lake. The moment he catches sight of Guinevere, he falls in love with her, in such a way that the love he bears towards the Lady of the Lake is transferred immediately onto the young queen. Indeed, at their very first meeting, he compares her beauty to that of the Lady of the Lake, and finds Guinevere the fairer of the two, indeed, the fairest – in Lancelot’s eyes – of all women. Lancelot and Guinevere’s first, fateful encounter is thus described:

La reine regarde le vallet mout doucement et il li, toutes les fois qu’il puet vers li mener ses icex covertement, si se merveille mout don’t si grans biautés puet venir com il voit en lui


Guinevere’s stunning beauty captivates Lancelot completely, and the beauty of the Lady of Lake pales in comparison to the new object of his desiring gaze. Furthermore, the structure of Arthurian courtly society gives Lancelot leave to articulate his desire for the queen by serving her faithfully as a knight, and achieving great deeds in her name.

The Lady of the Lake reappears only at intervals throughout the text, making brief excursions from her own domain in order to help or guide Lancelot. However, she is always selective with the knowledge that she passes onto Lancelot, and even withholds the truth of his real identity. Anne P. Longley compares the Lady’s role to that of Merlin:

The Lady of the Lake, like Merlin to Arthur, conceals and reveals information at a proper time and in a proper place for narrative continuation and thereby prepares the way for other women, and Guenevere in particular, to guide Lancelot on the road to self-discovery, whether it be for his good or for the ultimate demise of Arthur’s kingdom.\(^{13}\)

In a similar way, Morgan directs Arthur and Lancelot to discover information that she has been privy to and has concealed; and she makes such disclosures only when she sees fit and within the boundaries of her own space. Her chance comes much later in the Cycle, when at last, her half-brother the King, wanders lost into her dominions.

In *La Mort le Roi Artu*, Arthur and his retinue have departed from the castle of Tauroc, and the Queen has ridden ahead to Camelot. Arthur and a group of knights come to a forest in which lies the castle of Morgan wherein, the narrator reminds us, Lancelot was kept prisoner for almost


two years. Interestingly, the King feels unwell as they enter the forest, as if he feels some sense of foreboding. The company soon realise that they are lost in this unfamiliar space, but they encounter Morgan’s porter, who leads the group to her castle. On learning that a lady holds the keep and not a man, an immediate sense of unease descends upon the group.

The castle is beautiful and richly furnished. Morgan has a retinue with her of at least one hundred finely attired lords and ladies, highlighting her power as chatelaine of a grand keep and feudal overlord of these wealthy courtiers. After a sumptuous feast, Arthur is put to bed in the same room that Lancelot occupied during his captivity. The next day, Morgan goes to her brother and they converse. Morgan reveals some of what has happened in her life, but the narrator informs us that she keeps a part concealed from her brother; the reader may only guess at what she refuses to disclose. The fact that she is able to so closely guard her own secrets yet disclose those belonging to others, places her in an enviable position of power over her enemies in this instance. Though she cannot fight on a battlefield, she can nonetheless defeat the greatest warriors in the land when they do not have the option of defending themselves in martial combat.

Arthur finally notices the paintings on the walls as sunlight streams into the room from outside: ‘…li rois commença a regarder entor lui et vit les paintures et les ymages que Lancelos avoit portretes tandis comme il demora leanz en prison.’(Mort, p. 61 ll.10). Arthur also reads the text that accompanies the images, and he sees all the deeds that Lancelot has accomplished in his illustrious career. Soon, Arthur comes to the point in Lancelot’s story where he and Guinevere share their first kiss, and the King is stunned:

‘Par foi, fet il, se la senefiance de ces letres est veraie, donque m’a Lancelos honni de la reïne, car ge voit tout en a pert que ils’en a cointiez; et se il est veritez einsi com ceste escriture le tesmoigne, ce est la chose qui me metra au greigneur duel que onques eüsse, que plus ne me pooit Lancelos avillier que de moi honnor de ma fame.’(Mort, p. 61 ll.6-13)
Morgan is well versed in ‘masculine’ political rhetoric and the workings of chivalric society. She appeals to Arthur’s sense of shame, saying that it will bring great dishonour upon him if he does not take revenge against Lancelot and Guinevere for betraying him and so extracts his promise to protect her and punish the guilty lovers. She wants Arthur to take vengeance upon the traitors, which he promises to do once he catches them in the act of betraying him. In order to condemn the lovers, the action has to move from the bedroom occupied by the paintings of Lancelot and Guinevere, to the bedroom in which they are caught in flagrante delicto. Indeed, this intrusion into private space in order to reveal previously concealed information often occurs in the bedchamber, one of the only truly private spaces in the text (and even then, many bedrooms in medieval households, even of the aristocracy, were not private spaces but were shared by other people, family or visitors).¹⁴

Carolyne Larrington suggests that Morgan’s plot ultimately fails because of her gender. She argues that women can only gain success vicariously, through the deeds of their lover-knights; where Morgan fails, the male traitor Mordred can finally succeed in toppling the Arthurian world.¹⁵ However, if it were really Arthur’s destruction that Morgan seeks, I would contend that she could have achieved it when she had her brother at her mercy in her castle. Instead, she chooses to target Lancelot and Guinevere, in a scheme that takes years to come to fruition. Due to the enclosed structure that surrounds the paintings, time is on Morgan’s side. As she remarks gleefully upon seeing Lancelot’s paintings for the first time, the explosive information they reveal is at her disposal to either conceal or to disclose at a time of her choosing:

¹⁵ Larrington, p. 38
Or ne lairoie je, fait ele, en nule maniere que je le painter ne tenisse tant que toute ceste chambre fust painte: car je sai bien qu’il i paindra touz ses fez et tous ses diz et toutes les ouvres de lui et de la roine. (*Lancelot*, Vol. 5, p.53)

Within Morgan’s own domain, her husband Urien is noticeable only by his absence; she alone has the power to ensure that the frescoes will never be painted over. There is no chance that anyone else will stumble upon the paintings, and Morgan can afford to wait patiently to complete her quest, a luxury not afforded the knights as they do battle in their own *aventures* in the outside world. Secure in her keep, the bedchamber guards its secret for years, until the time comes when Morgan chooses to introduce Arthur to the room that had held Lancelot captive; a room, which in turn, both captivates and repels Arthur as he gazes upon its revealing walls.

**Bibliography**

**Primary Texts**


**Secondary Literature**

