

The Honors College at the University of Missouri-Kansas City

A “Strange Woman Lying in a Pond”:

The Lady of the Lake’s Authority over the Male Arthurian World in the *Prose Lancelot*

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Abstract:

This study examines the character of the Lady of the Lake in the Old French *Prose Lancelot* and argues that the Lady of the Lake gains power and authority through the use of her knowledge (both traditional learning and the knowledge of enchantments) to exert influence that directly affects the male Arthurian world. Her occupation of a liminal space—the lake outside of Camelot—allows the Lady of the Lake to perceive the challenges and shortcomings of the male chivalric world. Significantly, she establishes herself as an authorial voice; a voice that uses her foreknowledge in order to rewrite social codes to establish a better framework for the men who occupy this martial space. Her dissemination of knowledge and the effective use of her powers not only teach knights proper conduct, but they also encourage knights to rely on her authority. In this liminal position, therefore, the Lady of the Lake exerts considerable influence that benefits others but her efforts are not entirely altruistic, for they benefit the Lady as well giving her status and unquestioned authority. She becomes an archetype of the Wise (Wo)Man, seizing the mantle from Merlin after she figuratively and literally disposes of him at the beginning of the *Prose Lancelot*. Her actions throughout the romance, while at times seemingly immoral, serve a moral purpose of bettering the male-dominated chivalric court system for all involved. Her righting of wrongs and improvement of knights directly stems from her status and placement as “other.”

For Arthurian medievalists, the Old French *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* is considered the magnum opus of the mythos, combining romances and adventures from different cultures and authors into one cyclical, narrative work. The work remains anonymous and it remains unclear whether there was one or more contributors to the work. Within the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, the *Prose Lancelot* takes up the most significant portion of the text. It follows the story from his birth, through his knighting, his adventures and romances, his romantic tryst with Guinevere, up through Arthur's war with the Romans. This tale serves not only as a description of the young life of Lancelot but features one of the most fascinating women in Arthurian myth. The Lady of the Lake, primarily identified as Lancelot's foster mother in the *Prose Lancelot*, wields incredible authority within the male-dominated Arthurian world. As an occupant of liminal space, the Lady, as an "other" or an outsider to the traditional court, is able to comment on the misdeeds of chivalric knights and the problems inherent in the system of the chivalric ethos.

From the first time we meet the Lady of the Lake in the *Prose Lancelot*, she is breaking social norms. The kingdom of King Ban has been destroyed, and Ban himself killed, leaving his queen and infant son, Lancelot, out in the night. The mother weeps for her lost husband and kingdom, and faints. After coming to, she realizes she has left her infant by the water and returns to find him "naked on the lap of a young lady who was holding him clasped to her breast and kissing him repeatedly on the eyes and mouth" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 8). The queen recognizes that the woman is not wrong for loving the child but begs her to let baby Lancelot go. As his mother explains that Lancelot has not only lost his father but also his inheritance, which the queen therefore places on the same level of importance. The queen declares that because he has been rendered fatherless and poor, "his days will be filled with grief and sorrow" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 8-9).

The mysterious woman, still holding Lancelot, does not answer the queen and instead simply turns and dives into the lake behind her with the infant in her arms. The Lady of the Lake, the mysterious woman in the passage, has broken several social norms for her own ends, and, arguably, for Lancelot's. She disrupts traditional maternal norms by quite literally kidnapping Lancelot while his mother watches. This is not the medieval tradition of fostering, but rather a crime in which she steals the queen's child. She is disrupting traditional politeness that is often associated with courtly culture by ignoring the queen's desire for the Lady to leave Lancelot alone. The Lady of the Lake does not attempt to justify to the queen why she is taking the child. Perhaps while his mother ran off, the Lady found an abandoned infant and made an immediate connection with him. Lancelot's mother had abandoned him by the water at the sound of her husband dying, therefore leaving the opportunity for the Lady to come in and establish an intimacy with the infant. It is possible that she found baby Lancelot alone and thought him an orphan and decided that his mother was unfit to rear him after the queen returned.

Her motivations set aside; she has broken conventional mores. It is evident that she has trespassed some unspoken rule, for the queen's pleading and subsequent sorrow demonstrate the consequences of the Lady's breaking of norms. Her decision to steal Lancelot despite knowing she is going against a moral code demonstrates her willingness to break social standards for her own purposes, despite how it would appear to the court.

The Lady attempts to raise Lancelot as a proper young man fit for future knighting, enforcing the social norms that pertain to male, noble children. He was given a wetnurse as a baby, and a tutor once he was older. The tutor was to teach Lancelot "proper behavior," likely that of nobility and chivalry. While he was growing up, he is said to be "so beautiful a child that one more beautiful could not be imagined" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 16). Her foreign idea of

fostering implies that the Lady is enforcing traditional maternal and social norms by providing Lancelot all of the tools he would need in order to become a knight one day. She understands that in order for Lancelot to succeed in his future endeavors, he must be properly taught in traditional ways and learn like other noble children.

However, this tutoring does not last long. After a misadventure in the forest, the tutor beats Lancelot, and his greyhound, at which point Lancelot beats his tutor in reciprocal fashion. Once he and the tutor return to the Lady of the Lake, Lancelot announces that he believes he should be finished with his tutoring:

“My lady,” he said, “I need to guard against such acts as long as I choose to remain under your control and in the charge of a knave. But when I choose to leave, I will go where I wish and seek my fortune where I can. You must understand, before I go, that a man cannot attain great honor if he lives too long under the orders of a tutor or guardian, man or woman, for he is too often forced to cower. As far as I am concerned, I have no further interest in a tutor; of lord or lady I have nothing to say.” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 21-22)

His refusal to cower stems from his unwillingness to submit to another man who is supposedly above him in the chain of command – Lancelot wishes to be on top. He believes that he should be the one to be giving orders instead of taking them. Lancelot, brazen as his speech may have been, is then embraced by the Lady. She declares that he is a good judge of what is “proper behavior for a young man” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 22). She therefore renders the tutor’s word obsolete and allows the young boy to dismiss his own tutor, simply because he believes that he should be able to. The Lady listens to Lancelot’s explanation of what will bring him the most honor and allows him to determine his future for what he believes to be his own good. Her

support of Lancelot demonstrates her view of the chivalric code and how she is taking over control of what it means to have a proper education by allowing Lancelot to be rid of his tutor and insisting that his defiance means he has reached some sort of maturity.

Shortly after the tutor mishap, the Lady learns of Lancelot's cousins, Lionel and Bors, and how they were imprisoned by their wicked uncle after he took the throne from their father. She makes the decision to kidnap those boys as well and bring them to her court to continue raising them there, much like Lancelot. In her mind, she is resolute in her plan "to rescue them from Claudas's hands" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 25). However, instead of leaving her hidden castle on the lake, she sends one of her maidens to do the deed for her.

The ensuing chapters detail the maiden, Saraïde, and her plot to rescue the two children from the king who had imprisoned them. She approaches him during a festival and declares that though the Lady "heard" greatness of his character, Saraïde has nothing but criticism, noting that he lacks "three of the finest qualities that can be found in a knight ... no intelligence, no kindness, no courtesy" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 26). By revealing that the Lady is really finding fault in Claudas's behavior, she is breaching the norm of hospitality by reproaching the king's character in his own court. As Saraïde is acting as an ambassador of the Lady's court, an extension of the Lady, Saraïde's breaking of norms reflects the Lady's desire to break these norms as well.

After an extensive battle within the court, Saraïde manages to escape with the two boys by making it appear that they are two greyhounds she takes with her. She promises Lionel and Bors that she will have their tutors brought to court in order to make them happy. This idea is reinforced later when, after they arrive, the two boys refuse to eat and are in deep sorrow for how much they miss their tutors. The Lady then sends for the tutors, knowing that they are an

essential part to a young man's upbringing. While she allowed for Lancelot to determine when he was done with his tutor, she likewise gives the boys the choice to keep theirs.

Years pass in relative peace, and the Lady watches the three princes grow up under her education and guardianship. But, at last, she knows it is time to take Lancelot to Arthur's court to be knighted. It is no question that it must be Arthur's court, since it is held up higher than the rest in the temporal world. As she brings him there, Arthur happens to meet them outside. After a pleasant greeting, the Lady asks Arthur a favor, which "cannot injure or shame or hurt you and will not cost you a thing" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 63). She asks that Lancelot be knighted in the clothes and arms that he currently has, which bears the house of the Lady, not of Arthur. Arthur rejects this request, as he claims that knighting anyone in clothes other than ones he provides would bring him shame, despite the fact that the Lady said that her request would not shame the king. The Lady responds with what could be perceived as a threat:

"My lord," she said, "it may well be that it is your habit to confer knighthood only with your own things; no one, perhaps, has ever asked you for anything else. But if you are asked and you comply, there is no shame for you in it, it seems to me. The fact is that this young man cannot and must not become a knight with any arms or robes other than the ones right here. If you wish, you will make him a knight; and if you do not wish to do so, I will seek someone else. I will even make him a knight myself if need be." (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 63)

The Lady's request to clothe Lancelot when he is knighted demonstrates a breaking of chivalric norms. It is implied that the lord or king who is doing the knighting typically clothes the man as part of the ceremony. However, the Lady denies Arthur, the most esteemed king, this norm,

insisting Lancelot bears her arms. This insistence on the part of the Lady represents a lack of consideration for Arthur and breaks from the norm of deference to the king, especially as she is a Lady and therefore of a lesser standing. She has now broken this norm twice and will continue to do so, demonstrating her rejection of traditional power structures.

The implication of her persistence indicates that Lancelot would become her knight instead of Arthur's. After all, the clothing is one of the first things that can be noticed by the eye and if a passerby sees Lancelot, they will associate him with the Lady and not with Arthur, based solely on his clothing. Therefore, the honor gained from all of his great deeds would be associated with the Lady of the Lake and not Arthur, though he was knighted by Arthur and would eventually reside at Arthur's court.

It appears that the Lady's willingness to knight Lancelot herself is perceived as some sort of threat to get Arthur to capitulate. It could be read as her giving him a warning that she is giving Arthur an opportunity to knight an amazing boy who will become an amazing knight, and if he does not agree to her terms, Arthur will lose the chance to have Lancelot be one of his knights altogether. The threat works as Arthur eventually relents, allowing Lancelot to be knighted in the Lady's clothes.

With that, the Lady takes off, rejecting all propositions to enter and stay at Arthur's court, as it is a space in which she does not have any power. In fact, the Lady of the Lake rejects all such requests throughout the *Prose Lancelot*, only entering once to Guinevere's chambers in order to heal Lancelot from his madness. She is rejecting common social and behavioral norms by rejecting the hospitality of others. She is expected to accept and attend other people's courts, but she hardly ever leaves her own court, and when she does, she mostly occupies liminal spaces, places that are outside of male domination. Guinevere's chambers are an exception, as they are a

woman's domain, and therefore the Lady is able to enter them while still retaining her power that she has cultivated. Howell and Murrieta-Flores define the liminal space as having the "uncanny capacity to invoke radically alternative values, which can threaten and subvert authority" (Howell & Murrieta-Flores 33). The mystical lake that she governs is outside of the realm of male control and there she establishes her own values, albeit some that coincide with those of the Arthurian court.. Her threat to Arthur's authority comes from her ability to see the benefits and flaws of the chivalric order and from the outside, she can then subvert Arthur's authority and the values that his court holds.

The Lady of the Lake is likewise willing to break social norms in order to support the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere. She does not pass judgement upon them, and in fact supports their affair. At one point, the Lady sends one of her maidens to give Guinevere a broken shield: "On one of the parts of the shield there was a knight, as richly armed as the artist's skill could make him, except for his head; on the other half was the most beautiful lady ever portrayed. At the top they were so close that he had his arms around her neck, and they would have been kissing..." (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 168). Even without the maiden's implication that the shield represents Lancelot and Guinevere, it is easy to see just from the artistry on the shield itself. Guinevere and Lancelot are often described as being the "most" or the "best", and the shield's depiction of a knight and a lady of similar virtue easily symbolizes their relationship. The Lady has sent the broken shield to Guinevere in hopes that it will get her to consummate her love with Lancelot, as that is when it will be fixed. Only through sexual congress will the shield, and Guinevere and Lancelot by proxy, become whole. Her rejection of the sanctity of marriage and the norms of knightly behavior suggest that she is willing to forego what is traditional in

favor of what suits her and Lancelot in order for them to emerge on top of the courtly game she appears to be playing.

The Lady of the Lake acts as both enforcer and resistor of social norms. She demonstrates to others the proper way of engaging in social contracts and codes of behavior by giving them advice and admonition when they go astray. However, her knowledge of these norms allows her the ability to break these norms for herself and for Lancelot whenever she deems fit. Her breaking of these chivalric mores are best demonstrated when she is outside of the court, for that is where those norms do not have any authority and she holds the power.

The Lady of the Lake takes special care with how she presents herself, knowing that it can be both a source and an expression of power. She is always dressed impeccably and takes the care to dress up her entourage similarly. The Lady of the Lake understands that how others perceive one's outward appearance can directly affect how they are responded to. As she traveled to deliver Lancelot to Arthur, she took care to present her court "in high style" with everyone "dressed in white and mounted on pure white horses" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 61). The importance of the color white demonstrates that the Lady of the Lake is attempting to create an image of purity in both intent and character. For approaching in all white would give off the impression that they are coming with peace in mind, not in an attempt to attack. The Lady of the Lake takes precise care to demonstrate herself and her court this way, making sure that she is always presented as such. Again, when she saves Lancelot by entering Guinevere's chambers, she is "dressed as white as snow" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 231). As she is approaching with the intent of helping Lancelot, she and her entourage should appear as non-threatening as possible – though it is an impressive spectacle. This demonstrates her prowess and knowledge of courtly

behavior and what is expected by the chivalric and noble classes, even if it is unspoken. Her presentation directly impacts how others perceive her, and how they will respond to her.

Though the Lady of the Lake makes sure that she demonstrates a non-aggressive demeanor when approaching court, her and her entourage make sure that they are armed for church:

They awoke very early and, having heard Mass, set out on horseback. The Lady of the Lake took along the two children and Lancelot, who was glad to go, as well as her lover and two other knights, all fully armed; besides, there were as many as thirty squires and men-at-arms. Lancelot rode constantly alongside his guardian, followed by a young man bearing his bows and arrows. (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 45)

Though they are leaving Mass, it is implied that the knights are fully armed for the service as well. This kind of arming demonstrates a kind of military power that the Lady's court has, and that they are willing to defend the church, rather than attack it. The religious form of chivalry, an idea that appears frequently in the *Prose Lancelot*, recognizes the importance of knights in order to defend the church. Even the Lady at one point demonstrates her adherence to this code, as she tells Lancelot "knighthood was established to defend the Holy Church, for the Church cannot take up arms to avenge herself or return harm for harm" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 59). Ewoldt recognizes the Lady of the Lake's connection to religious chivalry and reinforces that the Lady's beliefs equate to "all chivalric knights should serve and protect helpless women and the Church. The Lady characterizes the Church as both" (Ewoldt 9). Therefore, their arming themselves while attending Mass demonstrates their capability to defend the church, positioning themselves as a court that takes the Holy Church seriously and gives it the utmost importance that it deserves in medieval culture (Keen 11).

Additionally, this passage reveals an important note about the power that the Lady has in her court. It is the Lady who is given the importance here, and also suggested that she is riding in front with Lancelot. This significant notion tells the audience that the Lady of the Lake has immense power and should be regarded as the most powerful, in terms of class, of her entourage as she is leading them on. She places Lancelot beside her, but it is crucial to note that she is mentioned first and most often in this passage, therefore demonstrating that her position is more important than Lancelot's in this case.

Each time she is entering a scene outside of her own court with an entourage, she is placed in this position. She takes precedence even above her knightly lover, "who was a valiant and handsome man" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 61). The Lady of the Lake is placed above all knights in her retinue, but it is especially interesting that she is placed above her lover as well. Even after they are married later in the tale, she still rides at the head of her entourage, sometimes even alone, as it is suggested in *Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 309. She is the untethered matriarch of her court, unlike any other court that is represented in the text, therefore signifying that she is a unique case in this Arthurian world and further her defiance of traditional chivalric norms.

Yet, the Lady of the Lake's significant entourage presence signifies that the Lady has a court that is worthy of following. At times she is accompanied by five hundred knights (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 61) and even when she simply entering Guinevere's chambers, she is still followed by "other ladies, three knights, and some ten squires" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. 11: 231). These instances demonstrate that the Lady has a large following, for if that is simply how many people are accompanying her, how many more must be left back at the court to defend it and to keep it running while the Lady is away?

Not only does the Lady have a large following, it is showcased that the Lady has a worthy following, and her court is full of courtly men and women who exemplify the traditional norms that the Lady herself breaks. At one point, Guinevere sends a messenger to the Lady, and while describing how to get to the Lady, she notes that at her court, “you’ll find a multitude of beautiful houses and fine rooms and courteous, intelligent people” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 143). The classification of the people in her court as “courteous” and “intelligent” demonstrates not only the character of the people in her court, but also the Lady as well. For, courteous and intelligent people are not going to be willfully following a court of someone who does not exemplify those traits as well. The Lady is therefore courteous and intelligent by default, with nothing to say of the numerous passages that characterize her as such. Her large and worthy entourage therefore awards her authority and power, which she utilizes at each turn. Her clothing, armaments, and her entourage all work together to provide the Lady of the Lake with a spectacle that radiates power and prowess. She utilizes these tools for her benefit in order to showcase her power and authority, and to create an air of sophistication and influence.

The Lady of the Lake is revealed early as a woman who is incredibly learned and literate in both reading and writing. In the beginning chapters, the audience is given a backstory in which she is a maiden, Ninianne, who Merlin attempts to seduce. He agrees to teach her magic if only she would sleep with him. As he teaches her spells, it is explicitly stated that she is a literate woman: “she put them down on parchment, since she knew quite well how to read and write” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 12). In a period in which female literacy was limited to the most elite or those within monastic communities (Orme 129), this simple sentence can tell us a lot about the Lady of the Lake’s class and her upbringing. It tells us that she is a noble woman who has been educated to a significant point in which she can read and write.

It is important to note that she uses this magic that she learned from Merlin to keep him from engaging in sexual congress with her and tricked him into thinking that he was sleeping with her. The author(s) note that “she was able to deceive him like that because he was half mortal” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 12). The fact that he is half mortal is less significant here to the argument than it is that the Lady of the Lake is intelligent enough and cunning enough to be able to deceive the man who, by this point, is considered the Wise Man of Arthurian mythos (De Rose 344-345). Her being able to deceive him, and, ultimately, trap the most powerful and intelligent man in the Arthurian world demonstrates an incredible mind. The narrative purpose of disposing of him is to grant the Lady of the Lake a similar role to him, in which she occupies a somewhat inhuman identity that acts as an ally and supporter of Arthur’s world and his court. While Merlin is described as a “half mortal” due to his father being the devil (Goodrich 96), the Lady of the Lake takes on the mantle of a fay:

Now, according to the story, the damsel who carried Lancelot off into the Lake was a fairy. At that time, the word “fairy” was used for all women who practiced magic, and at that time there were many more of them in Great Britain than in other lands. According to the story in the Breton Chronicles, they knew the power of words and stones and herbs, which allowed them to retain youth and beauty and enjoy whatever wealth they wished. (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 11)

The suggestion that fairy does not necessarily mean someone who is born as an inhuman creature is a fascinating one, one that is not typically explored in relation to the authority granted to the Lady of the Lake. The instance of the *Prose Lancelot* in which her fay status comes from her mind, both in her teachings from her formal noble education and her magical lessons from Merlin, show that a distinct level of power and reverence is granted to women who are

intelligent. Women who know “the power of words and stones and herbs,” as the Lady of the Lake does, ascend beyond their human limits because of the power of their mind and thus transcend into an extraordinary role of “fairy”. As Anne Berthelot explains, both the *Prose Lancelot* and the *Prose Merlin* go into the fact that “fairies are just the name poor naïve people give to women who know more than most” (Berthelot 61). However, there is nothing in the text to suggest that it is only “poor, naïve” people who believe that the Lady holds the title of fairy due to her incredible knowledge. The remarkable nature of the Lady of the Lake, as the woman who learned magic directly from the sorcerer Merlin, was cunning enough to trap Merlin, and identify as a fairy showcase the importance of the authority and power she will wield for and over the Arthurian realm.

The Lady of the Lake uses her knowledge of magic, including visions and future sight, to influence Lancelot’s actions and behaviors. She does this for his honor, and by extension, her own, as he is her ward and her knight. By guiding him in the right direction through the use of magic, she is able to at least set him on the path to greatness and honor. It is mentioned that when it is time for Lancelot to be knighted, “she had often cast lots to see what the future would bring, and she knew very well that great honor was in store for him” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 58). Her foresight into Lancelot’s future knightly career and the honor that was waiting for him after he is knighted will eventually highlight how powerful she is. Once Lancelot garners this honor through his actions and deeds, with the benefit of hindsight, he can recognize the Lady’s power and thus rely on her for the dissemination of that power for his benefit.

She utilizes her powers for Lancelot’s benefit again. After a brief respite in which he stays with her at her court, she instructs him that he must return to Camelot and leave soon, for the queen will be abducted and that if he is there he will be able to “rescue her from the place

from which no one has ever been rescued” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 3). This of course, as the *Prose Lancelot* tells us, is the beginning of Chrétien’s *Le Chevalier de la Charette*. Other than the narrative fact that the Lancelot must be present in Camelot for the *Charette* to begin, this brief passage shows us that once again the Lady of the Lake is not only willing to break social norms in order to support Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship, but she has used her magical powers to assist him in rescuing her and securing her love. She claims that if Lancelot does not appear before Ascension Day, when Guinevere is taken, he will “love your death more than life” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 3). The indication here is that the Lady of the Lake is therefore attempting to save Lancelot from a doom in which he would no longer be willing to participate in the chivalric sphere, which has so far encompassed his life. The saving of the queen will not only garner Lancelot honor in the court for being willing to venture to a dangerous kingdom in order to rescue her, but also garner him honor with Guinevere herself. Additionally, without going, he would not gain this honor and cease to increase his honor, which would be detrimental to the Lady of the Lake herself. Therefore, it is to her advantage as well that Lancelot should go out and embark on the journey that the *Charette* tells and the *Prose Lancelot* recounts.

The Lady of the Lake not only uses her magic to guide Lancelot, but also to heal him and restore him on the path to honor when he falters. At one point, Lancelot goes mad in a Saxon prison and is released to Guinevere. Somehow, the Lady of the Lake knows where Lancelot is, likely through her powers, and arrives in Guinevere’s chambers. In fact, as mentioned previously, this is the only time the Lady of the Lake herself enters the court. The status of Guinevere’s chambers as an inherently female space allows her to occupy the room and use her powers on Lancelot in order to restore his mind: “the lady took him by the hand and spoke to him, using the name she had used when she raised him in the lake, for this was she who had

raised him in the lake, and she called him “Fair Foundling.” As soon as she had spoken this name, he stopped and was deeply ashamed” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 231).

The fact that there is nothing in this passage that directly links the Lady of the Lake to the use of magic to cure Lancelot is a fascinating one. However, the mere fact that he is called a “Fair Foundling” directly correlates to her own status as a fay which implies the use of some sort of magic. Indeed, the miraculous and nearly instantaneous nature of his healing suggests that there is something unnatural about the way in which she healed him. Once more, though nothing is explicitly stated to create the idea of an inhuman fay woman, her actions and depiction say otherwise. The idea of a foundling is directly tied into the myth of fairies, and by using that name to magically cure Lancelot, the Lady of the Lake showcases her incredible powers that have given her the identity of fay in the first place. Ewoldt identifies that the Lady’s identity as a fairy in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* makes her action of stealing Lancelot “more acceptable” (Ewoldt 24).

The Lady of the Lake showcases her knowledge not just of magic, but of the courtly world several times over and utilizes it for Lancelot. After Lancelot has grown up under the guardianship of the Lady of the Lake, he aspires to become a knight. But he is not allowed to leave for Camelot as he wishes before he is lectured by the Lady about what it means to be a knight and the burden that accompanies such a status. He asks her to name the traits, both of the body and the heart, that knights must possess. While she claims that she will not cite all of them, “because I don’t have the understanding to describe them all” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 59), she goes to great lengths to describe several traits. Firstly, she establishes the essential qualities of a knight such as:

... that he be courteous and not base, gracious and not a scoundrel, compassionate toward the afflicted, generous and helpful to the needy, ready and able to foil thieves and murderers, an upright judge unswayed by love or hatred—love that might weigh against the right or hatred that might plead in favor of the wrong. A knight must not, out of fear of death, do anything that might bring him dishonor or even a hint of it, but must fear a shameful act more than death. Above all, knighthood was established to defend the Holy Church, for the Church cannot take up arms to avenge herself or return harm for harm; and this is why knights were created: to protect the one who turns the other cheek when the first has been hit. (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 59)

All of these qualities are expanded upon by ascribing each piece of armor to a symbolic message about a knight's duty to protect people and the Holy Church. For example, she explains that the shield "signifies that, just as it protects him from blows, the knight must protect the Holy Church from all evildoers, whether thieves or unbelievers" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 59). She does this for each piece of armament that a knight carries. Through these, the Lady creates complex analogies in order to materialize the virtues, thus allowing Lancelot (and by proxy the audience) to better understand and memorize what is required of knights. She creates a way for the knight's armor to be an outward, physical expression of the morals that are required of him, that way he will not forget them. It emphasizes the relationship between the knight and the Church, and the importance of honoring God. By having these examples of items that are a physical manifestation of this code, it will serve as a reminder to the knight what he needs to value and fight for.

Above all, she proclaims, the knight must protect the Roman Catholic Church, and even goes so far as to say that it is the primary reason why knights were created. More so than the virtues of the heart and the body, a knight must be true to the Church, and that is what will set him apart. Here, the Lady of the Lake stresses the concept of religious chivalry, as briefly explained above in the Lady's attendance of Mass. The concept of religious chivalry, as defined by Ewoldt, is primarily the expectation of knights "to place the Church and its directives above all other loyalties, including the knight's lords and commanders" (Ewoldt 7). The Lady's establishing that knights are sworn to protect the Church by the Church's directive shows that the Lady adheres to this kind of chivalry and is pushing Lancelot to become a knight that operates under this code.

The other trait that the Lady emphasizes is honor. She implies that even the thought of bringing shame to a knight's name, and thereby the Church, is worse than death. The idea that knights should never commit any shameful acts "out of fear of death" suggests that dishonor could even be the cause of death. Honor and shame are themes that frequently appear in relation to the Lady of the Lake, as she is the enforcer of knightly behavior, and thus must demonstrate what these ideas mean. Honor, for its part, is about the knight's relationship to God and the steps he takes in order to protect the Roman Catholic Church. Ninianne explains to Lancelot that a knight's word to God is one of the most important bonds, as if it is broken "he rightly loses all the honor he was looking forward to in heaven" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 60). Therefore, all honor that a knight should strive for is the one found in heaven, and not the honor that can be obtained here on earth. Likewise, shame and dishonor is found by breaking the religious chivalric code and brought upon the knight for offenses against God. She tells Lancelot that if a man becomes a knight and then breaks his oath, or in her words "stray from the right path", "he is shamed first of

all in the eyes of the world and then in the eyes of God” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 60). Therefore, these abstract concepts of honor and shame/dishonor are inherently tied to the religious laws set forth by the culture of the Roman Catholic Church, and the dominance they maintained in medieval Western Europe, where the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* was written and set.

As it is seen throughout the *Prose Lancelot*, Lancelot is established as the best and greatest knight in Arthur’s court. He goes on to exemplify these qualities that the Lady of the Lake has laid before him. Therefore, this passage continues to establish her ethos as an enforcer of chivalric and courtly values. By giving him good advice, she gains the ability to be the authority on these systems of behavior. It is only when he ignores these lessons she teaches does he fail as a knight. Lancelot finds himself in his most dire straits when he ignores the rules set before him before he even becomes a knight. Specifically, the Lady of the Lake tells him that a knight must be “an upright judge unswayed by love or hatred”, and yet, Lancelot struggles the most with this idea as he falls in love with Guinevere.

The Lady’s vast knowledge of the chivalric code and the characteristics that must be shown by knights further demonstrates her ethos and attests that what she says should be taken heed. She recognizes her own authority and confidently exclaims: “ ‘and who is better to explain it all,’ added the Lady, ‘than I am’ ” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 60). She shows certainty in explaining a masculine idea and a system that is inherently patriarchal, and she occupies a prominent space within it. Her knowledge is not questioned by Lancelot, but rather embraced. Indeed, no man doubts the Lady’s authority on chivalry and knighthood, even as she is an outsider to the system. She is active in shaping the way Lancelot perceives knighthood and, by proxy, masculinity, through her knowledge of what is proper conduct.

The Lady of the Lake uses the powers that she has garnered in order to establish herself as an authority on the chivalric code, as shown above. She uses this power in order to rewrite chivalric norms and transform the code into what benefits her and Lancelot. During the *Charette* story arc, after Lancelot has ridden off in the cart and the court of Camelot has shamed him for it, she rides up to Arthur's court in a cart with the same dwarf that drove Lancelot driving her. As she approaches the court, she calls out to Arthur, reprimanding him for his behavior: "...they used to say that no man or woman who had been wronged would come into your court and not find support. But now that seems to be a lie, because the good knight has left without finding anyone who would ride the cart for his sake. Now you have earned more shame than honor..." (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 28). The Lady of the Lake's speech here to Arthur demonstrates her idea of courtly behavior and how she goes out of her way to criticize those whose actions do not fit into that ideal. She says that Arthur does not support those who have been wronged, as a courtly king ought to do. Without finding anyone who would ride the cart for Lancelot's sake in Camelot, it has therefore shamed him and his court in the eyes of the Lady of the Lake, who has already established herself as a courtly, intelligent, and powerful woman. With this remonstrance of his character and his court, she proclaims that he has "earned more shame than honor," which is a grave offense in the eyes of the Lady, as honor is her prized possession.

The great Arthur, the worthiest of kings and the most courtly, being objected to in his court by the Lady of the Lake would definitely cause him to think about his previous actions in regards to Lancelot's riding of the cart and how he behaved during the *Charette* arc. Knowing that the Lady is there to reprimand Arthur because of Lancelot, though not knowing the Lady's identity, shows how she is willing to rewrite the well-known code of chivalry for Lancelot's benefit and honor. Her description of Lancelot as "the good knight" reveals her attempt at

reframing Lancelot's riding of the cart and what the action symbolizes in order to bring honor to his name instead of shame.

Gawain's response, "I'll get in the cart for the sake of the Good Knight who rode there" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 28) demonstrates the Lady's authority and power. Gawain, Arthur's nephew and one of the most well-known and established knights at the court, realizing the soundness and truth in the Lady's words, acknowledges that they were wrong for shaming Lancelot. The Lady's words had already done so much to change the reputation of those who would ride a cart that Gawain is willing to do it as well, not worried about any shame that it would bring him, because it no longer would. His response demonstrates how men are responsive to her critiques and are willing to change their chivalric code to what she believes to be accurate, because she has established herself as the authority on the matter. Their willingness to act on her suggested changes show that she is unique in the fact that not just anyone can change the way in which the chivalric classes operate. Yet, here is a woman who rides up on a cart and proclaims that not riding after Lancelot was the shameful action instead of his riding the cart and the knights and the king listen to her and bend their code to fit her criticisms.

Once again, the Lady refuses to enter and stay at Camelot, but her departing words echo her previous statements and calls for direct action from those within the chivalric circles to enact change in their behaviors: "you should not have failed the knight, but you should have jumped into the cart instead... he did what you didn't dare undertake for the sake of the woman who is your wife. In honor of Lancelot, all cart riders should be praised forever more" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 28). Not only does she completely reverse what has been known to be acceptable for knights in terms of cart-riding, but she also directly condemns Arthur for not riding the cart in Guinevere's honor. She claims that he did not "dare undertake" the riding of the cart, which

implies that Arthur prized his own honor over saving his wife, which the Lady of the Lake finds fault with. Arthur not only fails his wife, but Lancelot as well since he did not follow Lancelot into the cart. Arthur is the one that has caused the shame that fell upon Lancelot for riding in the cart, not Lancelot for performing the action. Her framing of Lancelot's riding as an honorable action reshapes the way in which courtly norms are interacted with and will furthermore change the way in which others interact with the idea of the cart. It is because of her distinctive authority and power that she is able to call for this change and have it enacted by the people in power within the court. Lancelot does not receive shame for having ridden the cart upon the finale of the *Charette*, but honor for having rescued Guinevere and defeated Maleagant which in turn, frees those that were trapped in the kingdom of Gorre. The idea of cart-riding is not revisited, which implies that the Lady of the Lake successfully changed the way in which Arthur's court interacts with the idea of the cart and its significance. It no longer has the implications of shame and cowardice, but now has an association with Lancelot, the best knight of Camelot.

The presentation of the Lady of the Lake as a fairy with incredible knowledge gives her authority over men as it allows her to access their world and establish a mode of communication between them. Her knowledge of their systems of behavior allows her to imbed herself into that culture and enforce her own input as she sees fit. It is because of her mystical identity that she is allowed to hold this sort of seemingly unnatural ability as a woman to hold some influence over the male dominated Arthurian world.

The Lady of the Lake uses the power and authority she has in order to dispense knowledge and truth. The meticulous and calculated way in which she reveals these to others further elevates her power as it creates a reliance on her for their source of information. She becomes a kind of "Wise (Wo)Man" archetype in which she holds all of the knowledge but

chooses when, where, and to whom she reveals it. Her power is elevated through the reliance of others as they recognize her as a source of knowledge and a fount of truth that can assist courtly men and women in their adventures if they listen to her and get into her good graces.

It is not until Lancelot and the Lady of the Lake arrive at Camelot that she reveals to him that she is not his mother. She does not explicitly state who his real parents are though:

I want you to know that you are not my son but were born to one of the finest knights and most honorable men in the world and to one of the best and most beautiful ladies ever to have lived. You can't know any more about either father or mother right now, but soon you will know the whole truth (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 63).

She tells him that Lionel and Bors are his blood cousins and that they will join him as knights when they are grown; and yet she does not reveal his own parentage. Lancelot's reaction is to thank her for her distribution of the knowledge, but not to question why she kept it hidden from him or why she will not tell him more. His acknowledgement of her power comes from his willingness to accept the information she gives him and not to ask for more. It is important that the Lady of the Lake establishes a parentage for Lancelot because lineage is an incredibly critical and delicate matter in the chivalric world. Having beautiful and honorable parents allows for Lancelot to become a knight himself and garners him his own beauty and honor through their reputation, though he is unaware of their identities. The Lady of the Lake's conference of these adjectives on Lancelot's parents indicates a possible reason for why she took Lancelot: because he was born with great honor and great potential to become a magnificent knight due to his heritage. But with his kingdom in ruin shortly after his birth, he would not have the opportunity

to be raised in a household that would allot him the education and upbringing that a knight deserves.

The Lady of the Lake herself does not tell Lancelot of his parentage but sends one of her maidens to assist him and to dispense this knowledge. Lancelot had no knowledge that this maiden would be arriving to help him in his journey or to give him the truth about his parents. However, with her assistance, he learns about his mother and father, and the downfall of his kingdom. The sending of the messenger allows the Lady of the Lake to assume an air of surprise which she is able to use to her advantage. By unknowingly sending her maidens as messengers, she further creates this system of reliance on her. Lancelot does not know when more knowledge from the Lady will come, nor who it will come from, thus creating a necessity for courtly behavior around her and her maidens. He is required to bring honor to her and to treat her as the holder of wisdom in order for him to reap the benefits of this knowledge.

During this meeting with the maiden messenger, she tells Lancelot that the Lady has another message for him, saying: “you should give your heart to a love that will turn you not into an idle knight but a finer one, for a heart that becomes idle through love loses its daring and therefore cannot attain high things” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 80). This statement directly foreshadows Lancelot’s love for Guinevere and his desire to pursue her during the *Charette* arc, as he pursues higher things and pursues honor even as he is fighting for his love. The *Charette* helps cement Lancelot’s place as Camelot’s best knight, with assistance from the Lady, as previously stated. The Lady of the Lake’s message here not only demonstrates her power of foresight, but the dispersing of knowledge that will directly bring Lancelot honor in his future. By providing him with this lesson, she is relaying how he can achieve greatness, or “high

things”, and further suggests that she will continue to provide him with such guidance if he follows as she instructs.

Messengers who deliver her knowledge reoccur throughout the *Prose Lancelot*. In fact, her maidens are seen more frequently than she is. Her presence is felt everywhere in the story, but within the confines of the court, she hardly shows her face but sends her maidens in her stead. When Guinevere is presented with the broken shield, it is one of the Lady’s maidens who delivers it to her and tells her of its significance: “Then you will be freed from the greatest sorrow that ever befell you, and you will experience the greatest joy you have ever known. But this will not happen until the best knight outside King Arthur’s court has joined his household. And if I said he was the best both outside and inside, I wouldn’t be lying” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 168). Beyond the Lady’s blatant rejection of common marital norms and social codes, the Lady is giving Guinevere the same benefit of knowledge that has been bestowed upon Lancelot. She is informing Guinevere of what will come to pass for the benefit of her and Lancelot, both, telling Guinevere that she will be released from her greatest sorrow and bestowed with the greatest joy.

Providing Guinevere with this knowledge signifies the Lady of the Lake’s ownership of Guinevere, through their mutual love and connection to Lancelot. Guinevere will now come to rely on the Lady of the Lake for her knowledge and source of truth as well. After Lancelot has gone mad in the Saxon prison and is brought to Guinevere’s chambers where the Lady of the Lake herself appears, she broaches the subject of the shield and gives Guinevere more knowledge about it and its purpose: “...I’ll say that I came to free King Arthur from prison; he *will* be freed within a week, and I can tell you that this is the one who will free him. But see that [Lancelot] carries no other shield than this one, for you’ll find in it everything my maiden told you...” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 232). The Lady of the Lake is giving authority to her maidens as

distributaries of her wellspring of knowledge. With this statement, the Lady of the Lake is solidifying her stamp of approval upon her maidens as her ambassadors and spokeswomen while she is at her court in the lake. She confirms that the maiden messengers do speak for her and are operating under her control, thus becoming streams of knowledge and truth. Additionally, she is further showcasing her powers, telling Guinevere that Arthur will be rescued, and that Lancelot will be the one to save him. This act wraps her magical abilities with her dissemination of knowledge into a package deal, showcasing her power and the necessary role she provides to the court without occupying a space within it.

A maiden appears again in assistance of the Lady of the Lake's knights, only this time, it is to Lancelot's cousin, Bors. The maiden instructs him "to be at the edge of the forest of Roevent near Lanvenic one week from Sunday at the hour of noon" in order to begin his next chivalric adventure. His response tells the audience everything that we need to know about the Lady of the Lake's reputation and her authority, "...no prison could detain me, since my lady wants me to be there" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 46). His submission to the will of the Lady and her maidens showcases how willing knights are to listen and rely on her knowledge for their honor. Bors will eventually slip during his quest, as this is where he fathers Elyan the White. However, his quick determination to embark on this journey, foregoing any previous engagements he might have had, provide the audience with a picture of how deeply these knights have come to rely on and trust the Lady's knowledge and her powers.

The Lady of the Lake's dispensation of knowledge goes far beyond the individual honor code and works to increase the honor of all of Arthur's court. In her final appearance in the *Prose Lancelot* proper, the Lady of the Lake approaches the Arthurian war tents as they are currently at battle against the Romans. While she was in search of Lancelot, she decided to stay

momentarily for Bors and Lionel who were present. She rides alone through the night and comes upon Roman soldiers that were planning on a surprise attack, gathering reinforcements. The author(s) proclaim that “they might well have been dishonored as a result of being surprised by their enemies had it not been for the Lady of the Lake” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 309). This explicit characterization of the Lady of the Lake as a woman who operates in favor of Arthur’s court cannot be disputed here. However, what is more significant is that she symbolizes honor by being directly juxtaposed to the dishonor the knights would have received had she not been there. Therefore, her knowledge of the Romans’ oncoming attack grants her and the knights honor, as well as spreading her area of influence onto all knights who were present at the war camp. They owe their honor and their lives to her knowledge and to her finding of the Romans.

Gawain echoes this sentiment, as once he is informed he exclaims: “God has truly saved us, in that we found out before they took us by surprise, for they could easily have disgraced us and done us much harm” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. III: 309). Gawain, even knowing that it was the Lady of the Lake who found the Romans, gives praise to God that the soldiers were found. Rather than displacing the Lady of the Lake as an authoritative figure that dispenses knowledge, Gawain is instead implying that the Roman Catholic God is working through the Lady of the Lake. He gives credence to the religious chivalry that the Lady has followed throughout the text. He exemplifies her connection to the Catholic religion, dispelling any antiquated (or modern) notion of anti-Catholic, “witchy” sentiments attributed to the Lady due to her magical powers and fae identity. Additionally, the connection indicates to the Catholic court of Camelot that the Lady of the Lake works for God and therefore, if it had not already been established, that she should be trusted and listened to as a source of knowledge, truth, and foresight. With the Lady’s sighting of the Romans, the Knights of the Round Table are able to save themselves from

dishonor and bring honor to their court through battle. It is *only* through the Lady's assistance and dispensing of truth that they can be prepared to fight their enemies.

The Lady of the Lake is very meticulous in the way she reveals truth to characters throughout the *Prose Lancelot*. Her dispensation of knowledge and wisdom in this careful manner creates a reliance of others on her for their source of information. As a wellspring of information and foresight, the Lady of the Lake establishes herself as the narrative replacement to Merlin as the Wise Woman. She is the one to whom all knights should seek out for critical knowledge about the future, the past, and the present codes the court operates under.

The Lady of the Lake is a unique Arthurian character due to her indeterminate moral standing. The eventual outcome is always perceived as good for the chivalric order, even if the individual actions she takes require the breaking of those social norms inside the order in order to create a better moral framework. All of her actions could be viewed through a lens of altruism or self-servitude, and both are valid arguments to be made based on the ambiguity of the source material.

For example, her entrapment of Merlin is not out of a deep-rooted malice born from evil, but rather to preserve her virginity. She sought to gain power but wanted to maintain her purity, and thus trapped Merlin from “deflowering her and having relations with her” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 12). This idea of purity aligns with her religious chivalric belief system and the idea of not engaging in sexual congress before marriage. She reiterates this point later when she tells Guinevere of why she raised Lancelot not as her son, but a “nephew”, “rather I concealed his identity because of a knight whom I loved more than any man alive, fearing that, if he found out, he would get the wrong idea” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 232). The footnote on the page indicates that this “knight whom I loved more than any man alive” is her knight-lover, and coincidentally “not

mentioned in Chapters 3 or 6” but that “he was mentioned in Chapter 15” and “in Chapter 175...it is said that she had married this knight” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 232n3). However, what is important is not the man’s identity, but rather the indication that the Lady prized abstinence until marriage. Because she feared that he would “get the wrong idea” this implies that the Lady was not engaging in sexual congress with the knight at the time, else he would think Lancelot was his own child, perhaps. She was worried that the knight would think that she had birthed a child outside of wedlock with another man, thus violating their courtship. The Lady’s entrapment of Merlin was not due to some wild desire for sole power, but to preserve her chastity.

When the Lady of the Lake steals the boys from their homes in order to foster them at her court, it is likewise not for evil intent. Though motivation is never explicitly given to her, she does mention to Guinevere that she raised Lancelot “in his great poverty, when he had lost his father and his mother” (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 231). This could be perceived as altruism, as she is giving Lancelot the rearing and education that he would have lost due to the destruction of King Ban’s kingdom. She could be doing this out of the kindness of her heart, not desiring for a potential knight to be lost in his infancy. Likewise, with Lancelot’s cousins, they were imprisoned by King Claudas in their childhood and unable to be properly trained as knights. Therefore, the Lady of the Lake has rescued Lionel and Bors from potential dishonor and has raised them to the position of great knights within Camelot. Additionally, Ewoldt points out the mythological significance of this, as she states that fairies “occasionally took children they deemed neglected in order to protect them from harm” (Ewoldt 24). By connecting fairies to this type of kidnapping, it makes a lot of sense that the Lady of the Lake would kidnap the boys in order to save them, as it was in her nature.

The Lady takes care to mention several times throughout the *Prose Lancelot* that she is the one who educated and raised Lionel, Bors, and Lancelot. It is difficult to read her motivations as altruistic when it becomes suggested through her speech that she gains pride from their rearing. Through the maternal nature of her relationship with the three knights, she has elevated her honor and her prestige along with theirs. Whatever honor they gain directly reflects back on the person who raised them and educated them to behave as they did. Her constant reminder to other characters that she took care of them and loved them as a mother could be read as her direct attempt to call attention to her good works and her good character, as well as her knowledge and authority.

The Lady of the Lake threads a needle as she navigates her goals and actions within the confines of the moral guidelines set before her within the courtly space. She is consistently graying the black-and-white terrain of the Arthurian court by justifying actions which would be deemed immoral and reshaping them to grant her honor and authority within the sphere, therefore sewing together an improved social order that she designed. The example where she directly shames Arthur for having let Lancelot ride the cart alone showcases how she is transforming the chivalric value system and remodeling it in her favor. Lancelot's dishonor would have reflected back on her, so in justifying Lancelot's actions through his motivation, she actively impacts and forms the Arthurian world.

However, her direct shift in the code could also be read as her publicly shaming Arthur and gaining a little bit of pleasure from it. She does confront Arthur in a very public space in a very spectacular manner. Is this the only way Arthur would take action to reconfigure the way his court viewed the riding of the criminal cart? Or does she gain satisfaction from demonstrating before the court that she does not belong to that their value system is fractured? Unfortunately,

the text does not give us an answer as to what is going on in her head, and the audience is left to infer from her actions, her reactions, and her interactions.

Her indeterminate moral code shades her actions into gray, creating a more complicated reading than just “good or evil.” The Lady of the Lake uses her power for what will be beneficial, for her and to the social order of the Arthurian court. Though her motives may be self-serving or selfless, the end result still creates a better world and a better system for the Arthurian world, shaping the chivalric code into a new form that grants her and Lancelot honor, while potentially paving the way for future knights to do the same.

An investigation of women’s authority in Arthurian literature is not a new idea, but the focus on how liminal space offers women authority over men requires more consideration. The Lady of the Lake is part of a long line of powerful women in the Arthurian genre, and her powerful characterization has its foundations in the *Prose Lancelot*. Through a careful examination of her character and her interactions within the text, it is clear to see that she is a very rich figure that has much to offer to the Arthurian discourse.

The power granted to her through her occupation and use of a liminal space gives her the authority to define, enforce, and defy chivalric codes of behavior. Her deep understanding of these social norms allows her to subvert expectations. Additionally, she possesses chivalric traits of her own that are displayed through her armaments and through the worthy court she keeps. Her control and authority over information is another indication of her power. As the wellspring of knowledge, the Lady of the Lake demonstrates her wisdom in the information she chooses to share and when. Her influence over the Arthurian world can be summed up as a magical, intellectual, and social prowess which allows her to entertain domain over male-occupied spaces as she subverts traditions and expectations.

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