Victim or virago: the construction of Guinevere in Laȝamon's Brut

Article

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Victim or Virago:
The Construction of Guinevere in La3amon's *Brut*[1]

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The first we hear of Guinevere in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, a work of historical fiction published c.1138, but wielding immense influence in later medieval centuries, is as a bride for Arthur:

> Finally, when he [Arthur] had restored the whole country to its earlier dignity, he himself married a woman called Guinevere. She was descended from a noble Roman family and had been brought up in the household of Duke Cador. She was the most beautiful woman in the entire island.[2]

Wace's *Roman de Brut*, an Anglo-Norman adaptation of the *Historia* and the main source for La3amon's *Brut*, also introduces Guinevere as the woman whom Arthur marries, but embellishes Geoffrey's account:

> When Arthur had established his realm, and justice throughout it, and restored his whole kingdom to its former dignity, he took Guinevere as his queen, a graceful and noble girl. She was beautiful, courteous and well-born, of a noble Roman family. For a long while Cador had had her brought up in Cornwall in excellent fashion, as befitted his close kinswoman; his mother had been Roman. Her manners were perfect, her behaviour noble, and she talked freely and well. Arthur loved her deeply and held her very dear; but the two of them produced no heir nor could they have any children.[3]

La3amon has Arthur, having re-established law and order in Britain (as in Geoffrey and Wace), meeting a maiden of exceeding beauty on a visit to Cornwall:

> Þenene he for to Cornwale, to Cadores riche;
> he funde þer a mæide vnimete fæier.
> Wes þas mæidenes moder of Romanisce mannen,
> Cadores ma3e, and þat maide him bitahte;

and he heo fæire afeng and softe heo fedde.
Heo wes of he3e cunne of Romanisce monnen;
næs in nane londe maide nan swa hende
of speche and of dede, and of tuhtle swiðe gode;
heo wes ihaten Wenhauer, wifmonne hendest.
Arður heo nom to wife and luuede heo wunder swiðe;
þis maiden he gon wedde and nom heo to his bedde.
Arður wes in Cornwale al þene winter þere,
and al for Wenhæuere lufe, wimmonne him leofuest.

From there [London] he went to Cornwall, to the realm of Cador; there he met with a maiden of exceeding beauty. The mother of the maiden was of Roman stock, a kinswoman of Cador; and she had entrusted the girl to him, and he had received her courteously and nurtured her tenderly. She came of a noble Roman family; in no land was there a maid so gracious in speech and behaviour, and so refined in bearing; the most gracious of women, she was called Guenevere. Arthur took her to wife and loved her very deeply; he wedded this maiden and took her to his bed. Arthur was there in Cornwall all winter long, and all for love of Guenevere, to him the dearest of women.[4]

In chapter 2 of their book, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman argued for the significance of marriage for the stability of political communities in the Middle Ages, and highlighted the importance, as they saw it, of women in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* as gender-defined role-players within and between political communities. According to Finke and Shichtman, in the *Historia*, 'women are gifts, given with other kinds of gifts to men in strategic marriages, pawns in the gender politics of of feudo-dynasticism'. They assert that throughout the *Historia* 'the political marriage is a recurring motif; (...) Women - given in marriage to strangers - are required to smooth over the conflicts between various political communities'.[5] Marriage, they argue, becomes a means by which communities negotiate, not always successfully, their differences with each other. The key phrase here is 'not always successfully'. Wives can often be the cause of dissension and conflict rather than reconciliation and harmony. The first woman named in La3amon's *Brut* is Helen of Troy, wife of the Greek king Menelaus, in revenge for whose abduction Troy is destroyed. She is not mentioned at all in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, and only very briefly in Wace:

> As the book relates, when the Greeks had conquered Troy and laid the whole land waste to take revenge on Paris, who had stolen Helen from Greece, duke Aeneas escaped, with much difficulty, from the great slaughter. (ll.9-15)

La3amon is a little bit more informative:

> Þa Grickes hefden Troye mid teone biwonnen,
> and þat lond iwest and þa leoden ofslawen;
> and for þe wrakedome of Menelaus quene -
> Elene was ihoten, alðeodisc wif
> þa Paris Alixandre mid þret-wrench biwon -
> for hire weoren on ane da3e hund þousand deade!
> Vt of þan fehte, þe was feondlice stor,
> Eneas þe duc mid ermðen atwond. (ll.38-45)

The Greeks had with violence captured Troy, and laid waste the land and slaughtered the inhabitants; and, in the avenging of Menelaus' queen, a foreign woman called Helen whom Paris Alexander had carried off by trickery, one hundred thousand men died there in a single day, all because of her! From the battle, which was furiously fierce, the prince Aeneas escaped with difficulty.

In La3amon's version, the epithet *alþeodisc wif* (foreign/alien woman) is applied to Helen of Troy. She is clearly identified as the Greek queen whose abduction by Paris sets in train the Trojan War, and who is directly responsible for the death of many thousands of men in the subsequent destruction of Troy itself.

In an article entitled 'La3amon's Four Helens: Female Figurations of Nation in the *Brut*', Elizabeth Bryan noted the description of Helen of Troy as *alþeodisc wif* and argued that by a formulaic repetition of that phrase for some subsequent female characters in the text, 'the reader is taught to recognize *alþeodisc* women and to view them with suspicion, and a set of highly conventional choices'. Are they to be characterised, Bryan asks, as the gender-defined peace-weavers, or, alternatively, as the gender-defined instruments of dissension?[6] The foreign women noted by Bryan who are named in the poem are Helen of Troy, Ignogen (wife to Brutus), Aestrild (married to Locrin, son of Brutus) Delgan (married to Brenne), Genuis (married to Arviragus) Rouwenne (married to Vortigern), and lastly another Helen, Penda's sister, married off to Cadwalan (she is not named in Wace). To quote Bryan again, 'La3amon's text is heavily invested in having the reader choose among women as a way of thinking about the status of the nation'.[7]

The adjective *alþeodisc* itself is actually used only twice in La3amon's narrative, once to describe Helen of Troy, and once to describe Aestrild the foreign German princess, with whom Locrin, the son of Brutus falls in love and

takes as queen, thus initiating a feud with Corineus, ruler of Cornwall, to whose daughter, Guendoleine, Locrin had been betrothed, but whom he repudiates. It all ends in civil war with the death of Locrin, Guendoleine's deliberate drowning of Aestrild and her daughter by Locrin, and Guendoleine, British-born, assuming sovereignty over the realm.

Helen and Aestrild are two foreign/alien women who share the dubious honour of functioning as agents for national disunity and ultimately war, though in the case of Aestrild, La3amon refrains from commenting on her role. It is not unlikely that she is seen more as a victim than Helen, and also less liable to condemnation since, as Bryan herself has noted, the civil war results in the continuation of the British line of succession rather than its disruption.

One foreign bride condemned out of hand is Rouwenne, the heathen Saxon daughter of Hengest. She is painted as black as black can be, a heathen villainess enveigling Vortigern, a willing victim, into a heathen marriage. She actively promotes the Saxon cause in marrying the British king Vortigern, and denies her feminine nature in murdering rather than nurturing her stepson Vortimer in order to prevent the resumption of Christian British rule. She is directly responsible through the poisoning of her stepson for the return of Hengest and the subsequent massacre of some four hundred British nobles at Amesbury. Small wonder, therefore, that she is described by La3amon as 'þa luðere wimman' (that wicked woman), and 'þa swicfulle Rouuenne' (the treacherous Rouwenne). (ll.7446, 7462).[8]

But not all the foreign wives named in the *Brut,* are agents, passive or active, of discord. Genuis, daughter of the Roman emperor Claudius, is an active mediator for peace between the Romans and the Britons. Claudius offers Genuis in marriage to the British king Arviragus as part of a peace package between the two warring kings. When, after Claudius's death, Arviragus refuses to pay tribute to Rome, Genuis mediates between her husband and Claudius's successor Vespasian who is on the warpath in Britain. In Wace we are not told how she reconciles them; Wace points out, however, that Arviragus 'kept the agreement with the Romans all his life ... through affection for the queen who originally belonged to them by birth' (ll.5147-52).

La3amon's account of Genuis's mediation is different, more detailed and dramatic. Genuis addresses her husband 'þe leof hire wes on heorte' (who was dear to her heart) (l.4893) directly, appealing to his qualities of honesty and integrity, and assuring him of the honour and loyalty she owes him. La3amon then has Genuis making reference to her position as kin to both parties, Roman and British, casting her seemingly in the tragic role, familiar from Anglo-Saxon literature, of the woman torn between two warring communities - born into the one and married into the other- and setting aside her own conflicting emotions to plead for reconciliation between them. But the outcome is a happy, and not tragic, one. The queen's counsel prevails: the king and his followers could find no

counsel 'þe heom þuhte al swa god / swa heom þuhte þe soðe quides / of þere quene' (which seemed to them quite as good as the truthful words of their queen.) (ll.4918-19).

Genuis fulfils the gender-defined function of peace-weaver, both by her marriage to Arviragus and by acting as a mediator for peace when hostilities between Britain and Rome are renewed after the death of Claudius, and the stability of the realm is threatened. But she is no cypher. A loving and loyal wife, her good counsel is decisive in maintaining and then restoring Romano-British accord. She is also successful in her role of providing and nurturing an heir: her son, Marius, a man of great prudence and wisdom, was even more powerful than his father. 'A þisse londe he heold grið, / a þisse lond he hulde frið; / her wes blisse, her wes mete, / and alre godene mast.' (He maintained peace and prosperity in this land; here there was happiness, here there was plenty and the greatest prosperity.) (ll.4943-4).

The gender-defined nurturing role of queens is foregrounded in the short account of Ignogen, wife of Brutus, the founder of Britain. The Trojans, under Brutus, defeat the Greeks, and as part of their booty Brutus demands Ignogen, the daughter of the defeated Greek king be given him as his wife. The king has no choice but to acquiesce, hoping to avoid further conflict by this action: he agrees to give his daughter to Brutus, 'and swa we sculden bileauen / leoue mæhes, / vre lif læden / and liþen tosumne', (and so we should remain close kinsmen, lead our lives together and be at one) (ll.534-5). But Brutus and his men have decided to continue on their search for a land to settle in and they journey on to Britain. We hear no more of Ignogen in the *Brut* apart from being told later in the narrative, that 'of Ignogen his quene / he hefde þreo sunen scene' (he [Brutus] had by Ignogen his queen three handsome sons)(l.1048). In the very next sentence Brutus is dead and being buried by his three sons in the city of New Troy, a city founded by him and later to have its name changed to London. Ignogen, a foreign-born queen, fulfils the gender-defined function of providing heirs for the ruler. As an interesting sidelight, Geoffrey of Monmouth, usually much more succinct than either Wace or La3amon, paints a dramatic and touchingly realistic scene of the sadness with which Ignogen leaves her homeland, and the comforting of her by Brutus:

> Ignoge stood on the high poop and from time to time fell fainting in the arms of Brutus. She wept and sobbed at being forced to leave her relations and her homeland; and as long as the shore lay there before her eyes, she would not turn her gaze away from it. Brutus soothed and caressed her, putting his arms round her and kissing her

> gently. He did not cease his efforts until, worn out with crying, she fell asleep. (p.64)

This scene is not in Wace's version nor, as we have noted, in La3amon. According to Rosamund Allen, 'La3amon would probably have rejected the passage had he found it in Wace; it is an irrelevant and demeaning episode'.[9] But Allen praises La3amon for his ability to show human feeling; when the British queen-mother, Tonuenne, appeals to her sons, Belin and Brenne, to cease their civil war, Allen states that, unlike Wace, 'La3amon's Tonuenne is an affectionate and believable portrait of a mother'.[10]

The evidence for foreign wives as political bodies in La3amon seems clear, though how this political identity functions may, as we have seen, differ from wife to wife. In Wace, Françoise le Saux argues, Guinevere, too, is to be seen as a political body:

> The stress is inescapably on the dynastic implications of Arthur's marriage: Guinevere's pedigree is clarified (she is Roman on her mother's side and presumably related to Cador through her father); the union was consummated (implied by the statement of Arthur's love for his wife, 9656), but remained sterile (9657-8; a conclusion regularly drawn by Wace when a king is not suceeded by a direct heir). Arthur's marriage is therefore seen in a coldly political light and is altogether less significant than his achievements on the battlefield and as a leader of men.[11]

In La3amon's version Guinevere is Roman on her mother's side, from a noble Roman family; her mother is a kinswoman of Cador. It is possible, though not made clear, that the relationship could be due to Cador's mother, as in Wace, being Roman. As in Wace the noble Roman origin of Guinevere is foregrounded ('she came of a noble Roman family'); so is her kinship to Cador, with the additional information in La3amon that Cador is the ruler of Cornwall. But any political identity as a bride would seem to be negated by Arthur's achievement of firm rule over the British and the long-established loyalty of Cador in aiding his kinsman Arthur in ridding Britain of the Saxon invaders. There seems no need for a politically-motivated marriage alliance at this point, and there is no reference to it, though in the case of other brides in the poem, whether foreign or native-born, where there are political implications, these are usually made clear. Arthur has no need to make alliances to assure the security of the realm, and there is no apparent role for Guinevere as a peace-weaver.

It is notable that the failure of Guinevere's gender-defined, nurturing role is excised from La3amon's narrative, though we are explicitly told that the marriage was consummated ('Arthur took her to wife and loved her very deeply; he wedded

this maiden and took her to his bed'). Note the juxtaposition of 'took to wife' and 'loved her very deeply'. Guinevere's inability to produce an heir, a fact normally fraught with political consequences, is omitted. Instead, the image of Guinevere as reflected through the eyes of Arthur is of a most beautiful and accomplished woman with whom Arthur falls deeply in love, so deeply, that after marriage he remains in Cornwall all winter long, 'and all for love of Guenevere, to him the dearest of women'. Guinevere is described in terms akin to the idealised lady of a romance text, and not as a political body. She is beautiful, courteous and well-born, gracious in her speech and behaviour.

At the time of his marriage Arthur is, as it were, on the up and up, having defeated the Saxons and the Scots and having established firm and peaceful rule in Britain. Now he meets, falls in love with and marries Guinevere, who is given a glowing testimonial. No negative comment, no hint of failure, such as their inability to produce children, (how it is couched in Wace) mars the account of Arthur's love for and marriage to Guinevere. Instead the depth of Arthur's love for Guinevere is expressed in his sojourn with her all winter in Cornwall, though this is not presented by La3amon as a dereliction of duty; once winter has passed 'Arthur hine biþohte / whæt he don mahte / þat his folc gode / aswunden ne læie þere' (considered what he could do so that his splendid army should not lie idle there). (ll.11104-5).

Arthur's love for Guinevere is a constant throughout the Arthurian section; following his marriage Arthur embarks on further foreign conquests, but expresses his desire to return home to see Guinevere:

> And seoððen he heolde runen wið sele his þeinen,
> and seide þat he wolde a3æin to þisse londe
> and iseon Wenhaiuer, þe wuneliche quene.
> ...
> up heo comen at Grimesbi.
> Þat iherden sone þa hæhste of þissen londe
> and to þære quene com tidende of Arðure þan kinge,
> þat he wes isund icumen and his folc on selen. (ll.11317-27).

And then he held counsel with his noble thanes, and said that he would return again to this country and see once more the fair Queen Guenevere (...) they came ashore at Grimsby. The greatest men in this land soon learnt of that and news of King Arthur was brought to the queen, that he had returned safe and sound and with his army in good heart. Then there was in Britain great rejoicing.

This contrasts with Wace's brief statement that Arthur comes back to England and is welcomed with great joy. (ll.9729-30).

When Lucius, Emperor of Rome, challenges Arthur's sovereignty, reigniting the old enmity between Britain and Rome, Arthur assembles his army to attack Rome, and entrusts to Mordred 'lond and his leoden / and leofen his quene' (his land and people and his beloved queen) (ll.12735-6).

Even when, in an episode unique to La3amon, Arthur is alarmed by an ominous dream in which Mordred with a battleaxe hews at the supports of a hall and Guinevere, with her hands, pulls down the roof causing Arthur to fall to the ground, Arthur retains his faith in Guinevere. Although clearly shaken by the dream and self-aware enough to declare 'ich what to iwisse / agan is al mi blisse' (I know with certainty that all my happiness is ended)(l.14019), Arthur refuses to believe what the dream portends and bitterly regrets that Guinevere is not with him. 'Wale þat ich nabbe here/ Wenhauer mine quene!' (Alas that Guenevere my queen is not here with me!) (l.14021). Even when the messenger tentatively suggests the possibility of betrayal on the part of both Mordred and Guenevere, Arthur won't accept the truth of it:

> Longe bið æuere þat no wene ich nauere,
> þat æuere Moddred mi mæi
> wolde me biswiken for alle mine richen,
> no Wenhauer mi quene wakien on þonke;
> nulleð hit biginne, for nane weorld-monne. (ll.14036-40).

As long as time shall last, I will never believe that, that my kinsman Modred would ever betray me, not for all of my kingdom, or that Guenevere my queen would weaken in resolve; never would she do so, not for any man on earth.

However, on being assured of Guenevere's betrayal by the messenger, who offers his head as forfeit if he has not told the truth, Arthur is forced to face facts. Allen, in the note to lines 14022-51 in her translation of the *Brut* comments perceptively on La3amon's brilliant handling of this scene:

> The ingenious reply of the terrified messenger, Arthur's incredulity and the switch from the tentatively suggestive subjunctive mood to the inescapable facts of the perfect and present indicatives are superbly paced with mounting dramatic tension, matched by the ensuing silence and Arthur's reassertion of control, in exactly the words he used after the riot which occasioned the need for the Round Table and again after Lucius's letter was read.[12]

It is Arthur in his political role as protector of his country, and not the loving husband who declares his intention to deal with Mordred and Guinevere: 'Nu, tomær3e, þenne hit dæi bið / and Drihten hine sende, / forð ich wulle bu3e / in toward Bruttaine; / and Moddred ich wulle slan / and þa quen forberne, / and alle ich wulle fordon / þa biluueden þen swikedom' (Now tomorrow, when it is day and Lord has made it light, I will set out towards Britain; and I will slay Mordred and burn the queen, and I will destroy all who approved that treachery). (ll.14063-6). This is the last time Arthur mentions Guinevere; note the formal and detached 'the queen', no longer 'my beloved queen'. And Arthur is adhering to the law as it existed in La3amon's day: burning at the stake was a punishment for treason intended specifically for women.[13]

For treason is what Guinevere has committed in allying herself with Mordred. To quote Allen again: 'both have committed treason and endangered the country'.[14] Arthur's response to Guinevere's treachery is in fact, more reasoned than Gawain's; Gawain threatens to hang Mordred like a common criminal and have the queen torn apart by horses, the latter the traditional male punishment for traitors.[15] Gawain is, therefore, more vengeful than Arthur in demanding the male form of punishment for the wife of his maternal uncle. Maureen Fries in 'Women, Power, and Order in Lawman's *Brut*,' speculates on Gawain's threat to dismember Guinevere, a male punishment, and suggests that in Arthur's dream (and in reality) Guinevere, by pulling down the roof of the hall, has behaved 'like a virago in the literal sense of the word: she has acted the mān'.[16] To quote Fries further, 'he [Arthur] has found that, in spite of all the sanctions on womanly conduct, females -even queens -may nevertheless evade their gender limitations'.[17]

As I have tried to show through other examples in the *Brut*, Guinevere does, in fact, conform to a gender-defined category of queens, queens who are political bodies actively involved in the political process of the realm, either to its benefit or detriment. Where Guinevere differs from these is that her first appearance is not conditioned by the political process, and she is not seen as a political body, but rather as a courtly lady, an idealised woman who might have stepped straight from the pages of a romance text. But her potential as a gender-defined force for the disruption of the political status quo is clearly signalled at that point in the narrative when Arthur departs to engage Lucius, the Emperor of Rome, in war. He entrusts Guinevere to the care of Mordred, who will rule jointly with her while Arthur is abroad. Wace tells us:

> To Modret, one of his nephews, a great and valiant knight, and to Guinevere, his wife, Arthur committed the charge of his kingdom. Modret was of noble birth, but disloyal. He was in love with the queen, but this was not suspected. He kept it very quiet; and who

> would have believed he could love his uncle's wife, especially the wife of such a lord whose kin all held him in honour? Modret loved his uncle's wife shamefully and was dishonourable. To Mordret and to the queen -alas! how unfortunate that he gave them possession! - Arthur entrusted everything but the crown. (ll.11173-89)

La3amon expands upon this, both describing and judging the actions of Mordred and Guinevere:

> Þis lond he bitahte ane selcuðe cnihte -
> he wes Walwaines broðer; næs þer nan oðer.
> Moddred wes ihaten -forcuðest monnen;
> treouðe nefde he nane to nauer nane monne!
> He was Arðures mæi, of aðelen his cunne,
> ah cniht he wes wunder god and he hafde swiðe muchel mod.
> Arðures suster sune, to þere quene wes his iwune.
> Þat wæs ufele idon -his æme he dude swikedom!
> Ah al hit wes stille in hirede and in halle,
> for na man hit ne wende þat hit sculde iwurðe,
> ah men to soðe iwenden for Walwain wes his broðer,
> þe alre treoweste gume þe tuhte to þan hirede.
> Þurh Walwain wes Modræd monnen þa leouere,
> and Arður þe kene ful wel him iquemede.
> He nom al his kinelond and sette hit Moddræd an hond
> and Wenhauer his quene, wurðlukest wiuen
> þa þe in þissere leode wunede an londe.
> Arður bitahte al þat he ahte
> Moddrade and þere quene -þat heom was iqueme!
> Þat was ufele idon þat heo iboren weoren!
> Þis lond heo forradden mid ræuðen uniuo3en;
> and a þan ænden heomseoluen þe Wurse gon iscenden
> þat heo þer forleoseden lif and heore saulen,
> and æuer seoðde laðen in auerælche londe,
> þat nauer na man nalde sel bede beoden for heore saule
> For þan swikedome þat he dude Arðure his æme. (ll.12709-34)

He entrusted this land to one who was no ordinary knight - he was Gawain's brother; he had no other. His name was Mordred - the basest of men; he never kept faith with any man! He was Arthur's kinsman, of royal lineage, an extremely bold knight, and he had a very proud spirit. The son of Arthur's sister, he paid court to the queen. That was an evil deed - he committed treason against his uncle! But all was peace in court and hall, for no one imagined that it could be so,

taking it upon trust because Gawain was his brother, the most loyal man who ever came to court. Because of Gawain, Modred was the more esteemed by men, and the valiant Arthur favoured him greatly. He gave his whole kingdom into the keeping of Modred and of Guenevere his queen, the most excellent woman of all who lived here in this land. Arthur entrusted all that he possessed to Modred and to the queen - that was pleasing to them - ! It was a great misfortune that they were ever born! By countless wrongs they brought this land to ruin; and in the end the Devil brought destruction upon them whereby they lost their lives and damned their souls, and were hated ever after in every land, so that no one would offer prayers for the good of their souls because of the treason he had committed against his uncle.

It is Mordred's treachery and the ruination of the realm which La3amon focuses on here, the consequence of Guinevere's adultery, rather than the adultery itself. And it is the threat to Arthur's rightful authority over the realm which is symbolised in the ominous dream he has when he is at the height of his powers, when the walls of Rome are about to fall before him, a dream not in Wace.[18] In this second dream the king's hall (a symbol in Old English poetry of legitimate royal authority and power) is pulled down by Guinevere and Mordred, whose perfidy La3amon has already prepared the audience for, though Arthur himself has no inkling of it. At the beginning of his dream Arthur is seated high upon a hall, looking over all the land he possesses; at the end the hall has collapsed throwing him to the ground. He has struck off Mordred's head and hacked the queen all to pieces, but all his subjects have taken to flight, and he is left abandoned and isolated, wet and weary, sick with sorrow (ll.13982-14014).

Guinevere's role in the dream is in aiding and abetting the traitor Mordred in bringing Arthur's realm to ruin; as a woman she does not have a weapon to wield in destroying the hall - Mordred hews though the posts of the hall with a stout battleaxe - but she literally uses her own body, pulling down the whole roof of the great hall with her hands. This is an apt image in that it is literally with her body that she has betrayed Arthur, yielding it to the traitor Mordred. She is fully implicated in the political act, a willing ally of Mordred in his unlawful seizure of the throne, as is made clear by her reaction when a treacherous soldier in Arthur's army alerts her to Arthur's course of action: 'Þa quene com to Modred, / þat wæs hire leofuest monnes, / and talde him tidende / of Arðure þan kinge, / hu he wolde taken an / and al hu he wolde don' (The queen went to Modred, who was the dearest of men to her and told him the news of King Arthur, how he was going to act and everything he intended to do)(ll.14101-3).

This is the first time in the narrative that we are told of Guinevere's attitude to events. And it seems clear here that Guinevere is committed to Mordred, not

Arthur. I would suggest that the description of Mordred as the 'dearest of men to her' is used here in ironic and tragic contrast to earlier references to Guinevere as 'the dearest of women' to Arthur. For while previously we were made aware that Guinevere was the dearest of women to Arthur, his beloved queen, we have been told nothing of Guinevere's feelings for Arthur. In this, however, La3amon is following Wace. But why? La3amon does not hesitate to give other women a voice where they are silent in his source, so should one assume a reason for his reticence here.

Allen's view is that 'La3amon can only make Wenhaver's betrayal plausible by remaining silent about her feelings for Arthur'.[19] Presumably by keeping silent La3amon keeps open the possibility of a less than whole-hearted commitment to Arthur on Guinevere's part, which might account for her turning to Mordred. But plausibility of characterisation is not, I would argue, the issue here. Guinevere is characterised only through her role as queen, rather than in terms of her individuality. Her identity is a fluid one, related to the roles she plays in relation to Arthur's rise and fall in the poem.

Initially, at the time of her marriage, she functions as a courtly lady, the most excellent of women and a fitting consort for that most splendid of men, Arthur. In courtly literature the brave and noble knight wins the hand of the ideal courtly lady. The beautiful lady, the best in the land, enhances the stature of the knight and is an incentive to heroic action. Arthur is the best of kings and Guinevere his queen is, as to be expected, the best of women. As queen she fulfils this role with aplomb, described in all her finery at the crown-wearing ceremony in Caerleon. The ceremonial processions of Arthur and Guinevere, and the festivities which follow serve to highlight the magnificence of Arthur's court, and show Arthur at the pinnacle of his powers.

But it is also at this point in the narrative that the seeds of destruction for king and realm are sown. Responding to the challenge of Lucius, the Emperor of Rome, Arthur assembles a vast army and sets out to conquer Rome, leaving his country and his queen under the guardianship of his nephew Mordred. Whereas at this point in the narrative Wace, as we have seen, confines himself to berating Mordred for acting shamefully in loving his uncle's wife, La3amon goes much further in forewarning his audience of the consequences of this shameful love, implicating Guinevere in Mordred's treachery, explaining why Arthur was not aware of the situation, predicting the tragic outcome for king and country and judging Mordred and Guinevere as damned for their dastardly deeds.

At the height of Arthur's power, with his most excellent queen alongside him, La3amon alerts the audience to the tragic turn which fortune's wheel is to take, notifying us of the tragic irony that Arthur's nearest and dearest are to be the agents of his downfall. As with many other kings in La3amon's roll-call of early British rulers, a recurring pattern throughout the narrative, Arthur is defeated not by external foes but by internal treachery. By allying herself with Mordred,

Guinevere embodies the gender-defined role of a queen as the instrument of dissension and discord, but also serves, along with Mordred, to illustrate the theme of domestic treachery as the root cause of national disaster. La3amon is not concerned to explain why Guinevere turned traitor; rather he puts the emphasis on the ruination of the kingdom brought about by Guinevere, the willing ally of Mordred, and the destruction in turn brought upon them.

In the face of Mordred's flight from Arthur's forces Guinevere takes flight herself to Caerleon where she takes the veil. Wace tells us:

> The queen knew and heard that Modret had so many times been put to flight; he could neither defend himself against Arthur nor dared await him in the field. She was staying in York, melancholy and distressed. She remembered the wickedness she had done in tarnishing her honour for Modret's sake, shaming the good king and desiring his nephew. He had married her illicitly and she was badly degraded by it. She wished she were dead rather than alive. Filled with misery and dejection, she fled to Caerleon and there entered an abbey. There she took the veil and was concealed; she was neither heard nor seen, neither known nor found, because of the shame of her misdeed and the sin she committed. (ll.13201-22)

La3amon's version follows Wace, but, as usual, not slavishly:

> Þa quene læi inne Eouwerwic -næs heo næuere swa sarlic;
> þat wes Wenhauer þa quene, sær3est winmonne.
> Heo iherde suggen soðdere worden
> hu ofte Modred flah and hu Arður hine bibah;
> wa wes hire þere while þat heo wes on life!
> Ut of Eouerwike bi nihte heo iwende
> and touward Karliun tuhte swa swiðe swa heo mahte;
> þider heo brohten bi nihte of hire cnihten twei3e.
> And me hire hafd biwefde mid ane hali rifte,
> And heo wes þer munechene, karefullest wife.
> Þa nusten men of þere quene war heo bicumen weore,
> no feole here seoðde nuste hit mon to soðe
> whaðer heo weore on deðe . . .
> þa heo hireseolf weore isunken in þe watere. (ll.14203-16)

The queen lay at York -never had she been so sorrowful; that was Queen Guenevere, the saddest of women. She was informed by truthful reports how

Modred fled repeatedly and how Arthur pursued him; she was sorry then to be alive! She left York by night and made her way as quickly as she could towards Caerleon; two of her knights conducted her there by night. And her head was covered with a holy veil, and she, the most wretched of women, was a nun there. It was not then known what had become of the queen, nor for many years thereafter was it known for certain whether she was dead (... when she was herself submerged in the water/disappeared without trace.)

The damaged text of the Otho manuscript, roughly contemporary with the Caligula manuscript of the poem, though often changed in wording and an abridgment of the Caligula, has, however a line here, which is not in Caligula:

> And toward .....droh So swiþe so ... mihte
> For heo nolde Ar..(u)r more ise for al þan ..worle-riche
> To Cayrl... ...com bi niht(e) mid twey. .ire cnihtes (14209/9a-10)

The most noticeable difference between Wace and La3amon is the absence in La3amon of any recognition on Guinevere's part of her wrongdoing, how she has dishonoured herself and shamed Arthur. The emphasis is on the abject state to which she has been reduced; she is the saddest of women, sorry to be alive, the most wretched of women. What do we make of La3amon's reticence here? According to Le Saux:

> Even as great a criminal as she [Guinevere] is treated with some amount of sympathy, inasmuch as her actions during the campaign opposing Arthur and Modred are presented as signs of her love for Modred, rather than as the expression of a perverted nature. She is called 'most unhappy' and 'most troubled of women' and one may note that she is allowed a peaceful (if obscure) end in a convent.[20]

According to Fiona Tolhurst, however, La3amon shows no sympathy for Guinevere:

> ... getting Guinevere sent to Hell by her husband in his dream and her ending her life bemoaning her cowardice make her more evil than her counterpart in Wace. Whereas Wace focuses on the queen's regret for her crimes when she flees to the nunnery, La3amon focuses on her despair that Modred has fled from battle and that Arthur has pursued him.[21]

Like Tolhurst, Eithne O'Sharkey views La3amon as unsympathetic towards Guinevere. According to her, the queen's retirement to a convent 'seems,

however, to be inspired rather by her fear of Arthur's vengeance than by any sincere regret for her conduct; and both she and Modred fail to arouse the readers' sympathy for their fate'.[22]

Guinevere's silence regarding her own blameworthiness is consistent with La3amon's reticent treatment of her earlier in the poem. He does not seem interested in her feelings of remorse, just as, unlike Wace, he is not interested to portray Mordred's feelings of guilt on hearing of Arthur's return to Britain ('He [Mordred] thought he could await Arthur with confidence, believing he could defend all the ports against him. He did not want to hand over his rights to him, nor seek peace, nor repent, and he knew himself to be so guilty that to seek peace would be ridiculous' [ll.13071-76]). Mordred and Guinevere's reasons for betraying Arthur and their remorse or lack of it are of less importance than the unforgivable acts of bringing the land to ruination and Arthur to his death through their actions. That Arthur, the greatest of kings, was betrayed by his own kith and kin, and the realm brought to disaster by internal treachery is what concerns La3amon most. Given the personal and political repercussions of Guinevere's adultery it is not surprising that, rather than expressing sympathy for Guinevere's sorry state, La3amon wishes to highlight the wretched state to which her actions have brought her, a vivid contrast to her former beauty and exalted role as Arthur's queen. 'How are the mighty fallen', would seem an appropriate statement by the author in his dual role as historian and priest.

What happens to Guinevere once she has taken the veil is shrouded in textual mystery, made more so by the missing half-line in the Caligula manuscript, which creates difficulties of translation. In *The Arthurian section of La3amon's 'Brut'*, first published in 1989, and republished in 2001, my co-editor Ray Barron and I attempted to make as much sense as possible of the lines and translated them literally as 'It was not then known what had become of the queen, nor for many years thereafter was it truly known whether she was dead ... when she was herself submerged in the water'. This translation was partly based on the fact that in recounting the story of a much earlier British queen, Judon, who killed her son, La3amon relates that she was put to death by drowning (l.2012), a detail he has added to the account in Geoffrey and Wace. However in the 1995 edition of the complete poem we rethought the line and translated 'nor for many years thereafter was it known for certain whether she was dead when she disappeared without trace'. This was based on Allen's view that in the line 'þa heo hireseolf weore isunken in þe watere' the allusion to water appears to be a metaphor for 'disappeared without trace', a view Allen based on a similar comment in the poem where La3amon has a character express a lack of concern for someone in the words 'no more than if he had never been born or had been lost at sea'.[23]

However in the course of writing this paper I considered once more these lines concerning Guinevere's end, and incline now towards our former translation. Reading through the *Brut* once again, I noticed that death by drowning as a punishment for women happens twice, once with Æstrild and her daughter, and once with Judon. And La3amon has already told us that due to Mordred and Guinevere's actions 'the Devil brought destruction upon them whereby they lost their lives and damned their souls', suggesting, thus, knowledge of a retributive death of some sort for Guinevere.

There is also the possibility of suicide by drowning. La3amon does state that Guinevere was 'sorry then to be alive', following Wace who says of Guinevere that 'she wished she were dead rather than alive'. There is a contemporary historical example of attempted suicide, mentioned in the chronicle of Jordan Fantosme which dates from 1173. It is related in this chronicle that the Earl of Leicester, a rebel against Henry II, suffers defeat in battle: the chronicler tells us:

> The earl's wife wanted to drown herself, when Simon of Odell saw to pulling her out; "My lady, come away from this place, and abandon your design! War is all a question of losing and winning".[24]

I am inclined, therefore, towards a more literal translation of the line *þa heo hireseolf weore isunken in þe watere*, reverting to the translation of the line in the 1989 edition of the Arthurian section of the poem.

Notes

[1] This is the revised version of a paper originally given at the British Branch Meeting of the International Arthurian Society held at Newcastle University, September 2006.

[2] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, tr. L. Thorpe, London, Penguin Books, 1966, p. 221. All references to Geoffrey of Monmouth are from this text.

[3] J. Weiss, *Wace's 'Roman de Brut': A History of the British, Text and Translation*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1999, ll. 9641-58. All references to Wace are from this text. For the date of composition of the *Roman de Brut*, see F. H. M. Le Saux, *A Companion to Wace*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2005, p.7.

[4] *La3amon 'Brut' or Hystoria Brutonum*, ed. and tr. W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg, Harlow, Longman, 1995, ll. 11090-102. All quotations are from this text. The dating of the text is uncertain, possible dates ranging from c.1189 to c.1230. See *La3amon 'Brut'*, intro., p.ix.

[5] L. A. Finke and M. B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*, Gainesville, Fla., University Press of Florida, 2004, p.56.

[6] E. J. Bryan, 'La3amon's four Helens: female figurations of nation in the *Brut*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 26 (1995), 63-78 (65).

[7] Ibid., p.75.

[8] For an interesting discussion of La3amon's treatment of Rowenne, see F. Le Saux, 'Paradigms of Evil: Gender and Crime in La3amon's *Brut*', in *The Text and Tradition of Layamon's 'Brut'*, ed. F. Le Saux, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994, pp. 193-206 (202-5).
[9] R. Allen, 'Female perspectives in romance and history', in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. M. Mills, J. Fellows and C. Meale, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1991, pp. 133-48 (141).
[10] Allen, p.137.
[11] *A Companion to Wace*, p.127.
[12] *Lawman: Brut*, tr. R. Allen, London, J.M. Dent, 1992, p.460.
[13] Baron and Weinberg, *La3amon 'Brut'*, p.887.
[14] Allen, *Lawman: Brut*, note to line 140651, p.460.
[15] Of interest in the light of the discussion of Guinevere as a romance lady later in this paper is Allen's comment in her note to line14065 that the punishment of being torn apart by horses was often applied to romance traitors.
[16] M. Fries, 'Women, Power and (the Undermining of) Order in Lawman's *Brut*', *Arthuriana* 8 (1998), 23-32 (30).
[17] Fries, p.31.
[18] This second dream in La3amon balances, ironically, the dream Arthur has prior to fighting the giant of Mont-Saint-Michel, a dream which foreshadows Arthur's victory over the giant and his impending victory over Lucius, Emperor of Rome. The second dream Arthur has foreshadows his downfall at the hands of Mordred. The pinnacle of prowess Arthur will reach is prefigured in a dream; likewise its loss is signified by one.
[19] Allen, 'Female perspectives', p.145.
[20] Le Saux, 'Paradigms of Evil', p.199.
[21] 'F. Tolhurst, 'The Once and Future Queen: The Development of Guenevere from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Malory', *BBIAS* 50 (1988), 272-308 (281).
[22] E. O'Sharkey, 'King's Arthur's prophetic dreams and the role of Modred in Layamon's *Brut* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*', *Romania* 99 (1978), 347-62 (303).
[23] *Lawman: Brut*, p.461.
[24] *Jordan Fantosme's Chronicle*, ed. and tr. R.C. Johnston, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, p.79.