THE ONCE AND FUTURE QUEEN – FREE PREVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The name "Guinevere" conjures up evocative images from the pages of literature and the celluloid frames of film. From the long-haired queen weeping in contrition at Arthur's feet while a heartbroken Lancelot looks on, to the ermine-clad Vanessa Redgrave singing a prayer to St. Genevieve while opining the simple joys of maidenhood, she does nothing by halves. Whether a reader first encounters her in the works of Thomas Malory or in a modern movie or TV adaptation, one thing is clear: Queen Guinevere is a woman to be reckoned with. She will not easily be lost within the pages of history, even if her better-known husband threatens to eclipse her and her reputation is lost in favor of tawdry remembrances of her sin.

History has proven Guinevere will not go down without a fight. Over the last thousand years, she has become a symbol of each society for which she is written, taking on its mores, personifying its deepest fears, and providing a warning: take heed lest you too become a victim of sin. In more recent years, as women have come to demand an equal place in society, she has become a symbol of feminism, the queen who owns her sexuality and isn't willing to apologize for taking what she wants from life. To some, she is still a man-eater (as T. H. White famously dubbed her), but to others, she is the model of liberated womanhood they so desperately seek.

While the main subject of this book is the evolution of the character of Guinevere, it will also, by necessity, touch upon the roles of women, feminism, and the subject of religion; each is

tightly interwoven with how Guinevere is portrayed by her authors. Religion, up until the last century or so, was a vital part of society and the everyday life of most people in Europe and the Americas. As such, it unconsciously affected the way they read Guinevere's actions and the consequences she deserved. So when the Catholic Church became involved in crafting Arthurian legend in the twelfth century, Guinevere took on the role of scapegoat for Arthur's downfall, becoming both a victim of her own lust and the willing perpetrator of evil—the Eve for the world of Camelot. It is only when religion becomes less important to an increasingly secular society that Guinevere begins to be redeemed.

Likewise, the role of women in society was a given until women started to enter the workplace during World War I and later, in the 1970s, began to demand equal treatment outside the home. So it is not surprising that Guinevere started out as a peripheral character who was there to do her husband's bidding and, at best, entertain his knights. Throughout the Middle Ages and even into the beginning of the twentieth century, women were treated as second class citizens whose role was to serve their husbands and bear children. While Guinevere excelled at the former, being barren, she failed to fulfill one of the key duties assigned to her as a woman and a queen: to bear a child. As such, she is fundamentally tainted, virtually predisposed to evil and weakness, as though she bore an extra original sin that doomed her to an unsavory fate.

As women began to fight for their rights in the 1970s and 1980s, Guinevere slowly emerged from the shadows, becoming a woman with a full backstory, a childhood, opinions and agendas of her own, and a life after King Arthur's death. With this success as a backdrop, authors of the twenty-first century felt freer to experiment with well-known aspects of the Arthurian story in order to gild their Guinevere with the sex appeal and strength needed to attract an increasingly literature-deficient and mentally-distracted generation.

This is due in no small part to the fact that from the mid-1980s onward, the authors of Guinevere's story began, for the first time in history, to be predominately female. Women writing the female experience brought a whole new perspective to the character, a well-roundedness that male authors could not hope to achieve. As Sara Cooley notes in her thesis, "it is because these male authors, more often than not, *did* write women, and wrote them *terribly*, in ways that are not only frustrating, but also damaging, that we must revisit the canon through a feminist perspective."[1] Elsewhere, she continues, "While we will never know firsthand what it is like to be a queen, or a high priestess, or a knight errant, we will know it better than any man who has ever failed to write us as such"[2] or, as any man wrote us as such through male eyes.

Emphasis and Scope

Stephanie Comer very eloquently captures the essence of the idea behind this book: "Guinevere has existed in literature for nearly a millennium, evolving to suit societal values and mores. She has metamorphosed from Arthur's noble queen to Lancelot's jealous lover, from a motherly sovereign to a vindictive adulteress as each author struggled to apply his own literary and societal conventions to a character that is both inherited and created."[3] Building upon this idea, this book chronicles the evolution the character of Guinevere has undergone in the last one thousand years of her existence, showing how she changed with the view of women at the time she was written or rewritten to serve as either a warning or a role model for those hearing her story. As Comer notes, "any beginning fiction writer is told the old adage of 'write what you

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[1] Cooley, Sara Diane, "Re-vision from the Mists: The Development of a Literary Genre of Feminist Arthuriana as an Allegorical Response to Second Wave Feminist Politics" (Senior Capstone Projects, Paper 520, Vassar College, 2015), 11.

[2] Ibid., 12.

[3] Comer, Stephanie, "Behold Thy Doom is Mine: The Evolution of Guinevere in the Works of Chrétien de Troyes, Sir Thomas Malory, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson" Master's, Eastern Michigan University, 2008), iv.

know…' [Each Arthurian writer] retold a basic story in terms that they and their readers would understand and relate to. The knights might have been stuck in the quasi-medieval age in which they had been conceived, but Guinevere had the ability to be formed and reformed according to societal standards. She is a barometer, reflecting attitudes and ideas on how society views love, marriage, the battle of the sexes, and, most importantly, women."[4]

As it would be impractical to cover in a single book every version of the Arthurian legend in a single designation of time, much less within one thousand years, this volume is limited to the most popular and influential works, those that are most accessible to the average reader with a post-secondary education. This study is also limited to works written for adult audiences, although there has been a resurgence of interest in the Arthurian legend, especially of that focusing on Guinevere, for children and young adult readers in recent years.

While this book focuses on British, French, and American Arthurian portrayals of Guinevere, it is worth noting that the Germans and Spanish also had their own strong Arthurian traditions. "Medieval Arthurian works [appear] in at least 29 languages ranging from Aragonese and Breton to Tagalog, Welsh and Yiddish."[5] In fact, Guinevere is consistently much more positively portrayed in the German tradition than any other. The reason for not including these in the book is simply a matter of controlling the scope. Readers will most likely be familiar with the British, French, and American traditions, so this book focuses on those.

The goal is to bring the evolution of Guinevere out of the halls of academia where she has been intensely studied for at least half a century and into the consciousness of everyday readers. There are not many books that attempt to do so. While Andrea Hopkins' *The Book of Guinevere* provides a broad overview of the evolution of certain aspects of the character's

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[4] Comer, "Behold Thy Doom," 75.

[5] Gordon-Wise, Barbara, *The Reclamation of a Queen: Guinevere in Modern Fantasy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

personality, it does not cover works more recent than Tennyson, nor does it provide a possible explanation for the character's change. Therefore, in addition to covering the classic ground of medieval through Victorian Arthuriana, this book will provide a study of the major novels written about Guinevere in the last part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and link her growth to its cultural and societal influences.

Moreover, there is little information on Guinevere outside of scholarly works written for academics, which the lay reader is not likely to seek out. Thus, this book fills a void by presenting a summation of Guinevere's treatment since the legend's inception for a lay audience.

Chapter One will give a broad overview of the character of Guinevere in order to orient or refresh the reader who is not overly familiar with her tradition. Included is a discussion regarding what is known about her from history and literature, the tradition of multiple women named Guinevere in myth, and a summary of what we know of her family, children, lovers, and the end of her life.

In Chapter Two, we examine the earliest extant references to Guinevere to ponder her origins in Welsh poetry, myth, and the enigmatic Celtic Triads. Though these mentions are brief and Guinevere's role minor, they provide the fodder on which a thousand years of tradition is built and the basis of many of Guinevere's less desirable qualities.

Chapter Three covers the beginning of the Middle Ages, with *The Life of Gildas* and Geoffrey of Monmouth as the early determiners of her character. This section begins with a discussion of how women were treated during this period and how prevailing thoughts and attitudes might have influenced Guinevere. There follows a discussion of how Guinevere's kidnapping by Melwas, which Gildas introduced, could be connected to the story of the rape of the Flower Bride in Celtic myth. Next, we see how Geoffrey of Monmouth establishes the

passive Guinevere, beginning a centuries-long tradition of her being regarded as little more than a royal beauty whose lust was Camelot's undoing.

Chapter Four takes us deeper into the Middle Ages where Wace and Layamon rewrite Geoffrey to give us more of the story we recognize today. We'll uncover the origins of Guinevere's personality, including her much-touted feelings of guilt over her affair, and see how Layamon's changes take her from a conflicted woman to a villainous whore, a reputation she will struggle to overcome.

Chapter Five focuses on the momentous contributions of the French to Arthurian legend, especially Chrétien de Troyes' many unique introductions to the story and Marie de France's odd representation of a truly evil Guinevere. This chapter also features a discussion of courtly love and how it may have influenced how Chrétien approached the legend and its characters.

Chapter Six delves into the role of the Cistercian monks in changing the course of the legend in the Vulgate Cycle, including through the stories of the True and False Guinevere and by adding a distinctly religious element to Guinevere's sin, forever linking her to Biblical figures such as Eve and Mary Magdalene.

Chapter Seven marks the high point of the Middle Ages and the part of the legend that is the most well-known today. But before turning to what is familiar, we explore the lesser-known *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (1400), which depicts a very negative Guinevere. We then turn to Thomas Malory with his "Poisoned Apple" and the famous *Morte d'Arthur* (1485). By examining the contradictions inherent in Malory's Guinevere, we see the polarities of the character in sharp relief and experience her becoming the guardian of morality, a role she'll continue to hold for the next four centuries.

Chapter Eight provides a brief overview of the disinterest in the Arthurian legend from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. It also briefly explores how changing morals and the shift of religious sentiment from Catholic to Protestant resulted in a dearth of Arthurian material for approximately two hundred years.

In Chapter Nine, we visit the Victorian Era and the resurgence of interest in the Arthurian legend. Here we'll look at how Victorian morality influenced Tennyson's famous *Idylls of the King* (1869) and how Guinevere reflected this society's simultaneous abhorrence of and fascination with the figure of the fallen woman.

Chapter Ten looks at William Morris' controversial poem "In Defence of Guenevere," which, despite its title, may not be any defense at all. Or conversely, it may be a cry for independence from a woman written for a highly constrained Victorian audience—we'll examine both viewpoints.

Chapter Eleven moves us into the twentieth century with a discussion of society's unrelenting fascination with Arthurian legend, which is reflected in the sheer number of Arthurian novels and short stories published during this century. Following is a discussion of T. H. White's famous *The Once and Future King* (1958) and how he appears to have transferred his issues with women onto the female characters he wrote, including poor Guinevere, who took on many of his mother's negative qualities.

Chapter Twelve begins with a look at how the changes in women's rights, including the rise of feminism and women's studies programs in colleges, affected the way Arthurian legend was viewed from the period of 1960-1980. Next is a discussion of two rather un-feminist portrayals of Guinevere in Rosemary Sutcliffe and Mary Stewart's famous Arthurian books.

In Chapter Thirteen, we look at one of the most famous modern Arthurian novels, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983). Core to this chapter is a discussion of how, for all of the novel's feministic triumphs with Morgaine and other female characters, Guinevere is still a weak woman, very much at the mercy of the men in her world. In answering this question, we must examine the motivations Bradley gives Guinevere and statements she is trying to make about the patriarchy.

Chapter Fourteen brings us to two authors who bridge the gap between the patriarchal versions of Guinevere to date and the ultra-feministic ones to come. This chapter examines how in the early-to-mid-1980s, Parke Godwin gave us the first Guinevere who showed agency, intelligence, and a willingness to be Arthur's equal. We also explore the Guinevere of Gillian Bradshaw's *In Winter's Shadow* (1982), another highly active and independent woman, but in ways markedly different from the one Godwin created.

Chapter Fifteen opens with an examination of how the second wave of feminism—and its attendant stressors on women to be simultaneously perfect wives, perfect mothers, and perfect career women—pushed women into the (sometimes mistaken) belief that they could do it all. This is followed by an analysis of Sharan Newman's Guinevere trilogy, which shaped the future of the legend by being the first to explore Guinevere's early life.

Chapter Sixteen is devoted to the writings of Persia Woolley, who takes Guinevere back to her pagan Celtic roots and purposefully shows her as Arthur's equal. As the chapter will show, the changes she makes to the legend appear to correspond with events and concerns of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Similarly, Chapter Seventeen looks at two additional female writers focused on Guinevere with two very different takes on the famous queen. A discussion of Nancy

McKenzie's works shows us a bratty, immature queen who is cowed by her cousin, Elaine, while Rosalind Miles' Guinevere is decisive and bold—just don't call her a feminist construction.

Chapter Eighteen begins with an analysis of why fictional portrayals of Guinevere seemed to drop off the radar of traditional publishing after the year 2000 and how independent authors took up Guinevere's cause in their novels. What follows is an analysis of the Guineverian writings of one such indie author: Lavinia Collins. Utilizing reader reviews left on Amazon and Goodreads, we see a Guinevere who is very much written for the new millennium, a strong woman who is not afraid to own her sexuality or take what she wants.

Finally, Chapter Nineteen is where I explain my own Guinevere novels in the context of their time and society. They are too new to know what their cultural impact will be through the eyes of critics, so included is an explanation of why my Guinevere is written as she is and what I hoped to achieve by telling my specific version of her story.

A Note on Names

Guinevere's name has changed with the location of the author and the time period in which her story is written. *The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles* lists twenty-one variations of her name.[6] Some of these include: Gwehywfar (Welsh), Guanhumara/Guenhumara (Geoffrey of Monmouth in Latin),[7] Wenneuereia (Gerad of Wales), Gwynnever (Middle English), Guinevere (French), Guenever (T. H. White), Ginevra/Givevara/Ginover (German),

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[6] Fletcher, Robert Huntington, "The Arthurian Material in the Chronicles Especially Those of Great Britain and France," in *Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, Vol. X (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1906), 298.
[7] Bromwich, Rachel, "Celtic Elements in Arthurian Romance: A General Survey," in *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages: Studies presented to A.H. Diverres by Colleagues, Pupils, and Friends*, ed. P. B. Grout et al. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer; Torowa N.J., U.S.A.: Biblio Distribution Services, 1983), 42.
Bromwich notes that Geoffrey must have "derived [this name] from a written source in Old Welsh."

Wehaver/Wenhaver (Layamon), Winlogee (Breton),[8] Gaynore/Waynor (*The Alliterative Morte Arthure)*, and Gwinfreda (a Saxon in John Gloag's 1976 novel *Artorius Rex)*.

The meaning of Guinevere's name is variously translated as "the white phantom or fairy,"[9] "the white or fair enchantress,"[10] "the white fay or ghost," or the "white shoulders." Her name's etymology derives from "white, fair, or holy" and "magical being,"[11] which is both interesting and unexpected because in most traditional Arthurian legend, it is Morgan who is associated with magic and the Otherworld rather than Guinevere.

For ease of reading, in this book the name of Arthur's queen will be spelled Guinevere unless another spelling is used in a direct quote, as this spelling is the one most commonly known by modern readers. Likewise, I will use these spellings for the other main Arthurian characters: Arthur, Lancelot, Morgan, and Merlin.

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[8] Matthews, John and Caitlin, *The Complete King Arthur: Many Faces, One Hero* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2017), 175. The name comes from an image in the Modena Cathedral in Italy.
[9] Ibid., 175.
[10] Bromwich, Rachel, "Celtic Elements in Arthurian Romance," 42.
[11] "Guinevere," Wikipedia, accessed January 23, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinevere