What's in a Name?: Malory's Metamorphosis of Elayne le Blanke in the *Morte Darthur*

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She has been described by critics as overemotional and naïve, a "victim of passion,"[1] a woman who knows her place and keeps it. Her role in Malory's *Morte Darthur* is fleeting; she is one more woman on Launcelot's long list of admirers. She is the "Fayre Maydyn off Astolot,"[2] the devoted virgin lover of Launcelot, dutiful daughter, and aspiring wife. Martin Schichtman defines her role in Malory's *Morte* as, at best, "peripheral" because, he contends, "she has no real story beyond that which can be summed up in two sentences."[3] But Schichtman, like other Malorian critics, has ignored the fair maid's narratological past, the journey from which yields a story far more complex than could be contained in Schichtman's allotted two sentences. True, the maid is, as Sir Bors observes, "a passyng fayre damesell, and well besayne and well taught";[4] however, unlike her ancestors in the English stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* and

1) Larry Benson, *Malory's* Morte Darthur (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1976) 232.
2) Malory 623.22.
3) Martin Schichtman, "Elaine and Guinevere: Gender and Historical Consciousness in the Middle Ages," *New Images of Medieval Women: Essays Toward a Cultural Anthropology,* ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1989) 261.

the French *La Mort le Roi Artus*,[5] Malory's "Fayre Maydyn off Astolot" is autonomous. In liberating the character from the mold prescribed by his predecessors, Malory creates for his maid a strong and often defiant voice with which she responds to both society and to Launcelot, a voice which she uses to determine and control her own destiny.

The Importance of a Name

One of the most significant distinctions between Malory's maid and the maids of both the French *Mort Artu* and the Stanzaic *Morte* is immediately apparent to the reader: Malory gives his fair maid a name. Neither of his sources deem the character worthy of such an honor. The French text introduces her briefly as *"la fille al signor"*[6] ["the vavasour's daughter"],[7] and throughout the story she is referred to as simply "*la damoisele*"[8] ["the girl"].[9] Similarly, in the Stanzaic *Morte* the maid enters the text as the "dere .... doughtir" of "th'erl,"[10] although the character is most often referred to by the pronoun "she." Malory also assigns to the maid the role of daugh-

4) Malory 635.9-10.
5) In order to avoid confusion with the Stanzaic text, the French *La Mort le Roi Artus* will hereafter be referred to by its more common name, *Mort Artu*.
6) *La Mort le Roi Artus*, ed. H. Oskar Sommer, *The Vulgate Version of Arthurian Romances*, vol. 6 (Washington: Carnegie Institute, 1913) 208.21.
7) *The Death of King Arthur*, trans. James Cable (New York: Penguin, 1971) 29.
8) *Mort Artu* 208.36.
9) *Death of King Arthur* 30.
10) *La Morte Arthur*, ed. Larry D. Benson, *King Arthur's Death* (Exeter, Eng.: U of Exeter P, 1986) 8.177.

ter, but within the first six lines of his story, he provides for her an identity that is hers alone: he names his fair maiden Elayne le Blanke.[11]

Schichtman maintains that "prior to Lancelot's arrival at her father's, Elaine's life has been shaped by the rituals she has been taught to perform."[12] However, Schichtman also admits that "Malory speaks little about Elaine's past," which Schichtman reads as Malory "leaving the reader to conclude simply that her character has been shaped by the various medieval institutions governing the behavior of women."[13] Therefore, he conjectures, Elayne's name, le Blanke, personifies her life before Launcelot. "Her life has been a blank," he writes, "a whiteness to be written on, to be inscribed."[14]

But Schichtman has erred in his assumption. Little in Malory's text would lead the careful reader to deduce that Elayne le Blanke is the product of medieval convention; much more evidence is available to prove that Elayne is constantly pushing against convention, Launcelot's influence notwithstanding. If, as Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq explains, "medieval society was one in which men had the initiative and women were passive,"[15] then contrary to Schichtman's assumption, Elayne does not fit the medieval mold. Elayne is not a blank slate upon which Malory writes Launcelot's story; in fact, within

11) Malory 623.26.
12) Schichtman 260-61.
13) Schichtman 261.
14) Schichtman 261.
15) Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq, "The Feudal Order," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Silences of the Middle Ages,* ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, vol. 2 of *A History of Women in the West,* gen. ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap P, 1992) 247.

Malory's story, Elayne becomes an author in her own right and re-writes Launcelot in the process.

Furthermore, the name Malory chooses for Elayne does not connect her to a male character (le Blanke is not her father's surname), nor does it refer to her beauty, an attribute for which she is solely known in the French and Stanzaic texts.[16] Instead, Elayne's name serves to transform her from a direct object into a proper noun. She is not a piece of property; she is a woman, worthy of her own name and its capital letter. In medieval society, a daughter was the property of her father until the father married her off to the highest bidder; she then became the property of her husband. L'Hermite-Leclercq notes that "in contemporary [medieval] texts, women usually figure as direct objects. A father 'marries off' or 'gives away' or 'conventizes' his daughter."[17] Elayne's ancestors are defined only by their positions; as daughters, they do not exist beyond the narrow familial realm. By naming Elayne, Malory has written her into existence. He shifts the focus from Elayne's status as daughter to Elayne's status as person. She is no longer a direct object; she is a proper noun. With a proper name, Elayne becomes as important as her story.

Finally, Elayne's name, le Blanke, defines the burden from which she would most like to relieve herself-her virginity. Truly, for a woman whose very name means "the white" and who connotes purity

16) In the French text, the maid is "very beautiful" (*Death* 29). The Stanzaic *Morte* describes her more poetically, but the author's characterization of the girl is equally limited to a description of her beauty: "Her rode was red as blossom on brere / Or flowr that springeth in the feld" (8.179-80).

17) L'Hermite-Leclercq 247.

and innocence, Elayne is remarkably aware of herself as a sexual being. In the line following her naming, Malory reveals that Elayne is "hote in love" with Launcelot.[18] In fact, Elayne's passion, the quality for which Benson pities her,[19] often serves as a catalyst for her dynamism. Her passion, not exclusively her feelings for Launcelot, but also her efficacious and forthright approach to every critical circumstance in her story, is what sets her apart from her more conventional ancestors. Take, for example, Elayne's reaction to Gawayne's news that "'one knyght with the rede slyve smote downe fourty knyghtes of the Rounde Table.'"[20] Elayne zealously exclaims, "'Now blyssed be God . . . that one knygt sped so welle! For he ys the man in the world that I firste loved, and truly he shall be the laste that ever I shall love.'"[21] She is neither ashamed nor afraid of her passion. Although this episode does not appear in the Stanzaic *Morte*, in the French *Mort Artu* the maid hides her happiness at the same report:

> *Qvant la damoisele entent ceste parole si en a moult grant ioie mais samblant nen volt faire por ceaus qui deuant lui estoient.*[22]
> [When the girl heard what he said, she was very happy, but she did not dare show it because of the people she was with] .[23]

The French maid is aware of and obedient to her prescribed place in the social order; Malory's Elayne ignores it. Schichtman concludes

18) Malory 623.27.
19) Benson 232.
20) Malory 630.18-19.
21) Malory 630.21-23.
22) *Mort Artu* 215.36-37.
23) *Death of Arthur* 40.

that "despite an outpouring of feeling, Elaine keeps to her well-defined place."[24] But time and again Malory's Elayne steps beyond the place prescribed to her by her medieval world. With a forthright and honest voice, Elayne asserts herself as an individual in a patriarchal society and retaliates against a Launcelot who is blind to her personhood.

Elayne's response to society

Perhaps what is most interesting about Elayne's autonomy is that it seems to be fostered at home, a home she shares with her "olde barown"[25] father and two brothers. Malory's text does not recognize the presence of a baroness, and the absence of a mother may have proved to be to Elayne's advantage; L'Hermite-Leclercq confirms that

> the vast majority of women probably saw nothing unusual in [their subjugated station] . They were taught to obey, and in turn they taught their children to obey .... The hierarchy was thus perpetuated in the first instance by women themselves, and rebellion must have been infrequent.[26]

Without a wife to model the traditional role for his daughter, the old baron treats Elayne as equal to (and oftentimes greater than) her brothers. Although Malory mentions that "there was never chylde nother wyff more mekar tyll fadir and husbande than was thys Fayre Maydyn of Astolat,"[27] Elayne's role within the family unit is

24) Schichtman 262.
25) Malory 635.28-29.
26) L'Hermite-Leclercq 247.
27) Malory 635.28-29.

not the deferential one of substitute housekeeper; rather, Elayne is the powerful center of an otherwise male household. Using the language that her foremothers could not access, Elayne asserts her opinion in every family matter from her traveling plans to her brother's treatment of Launcelot. And when she speaks, her family listens.

The first time Elayne moves against the norms of medieval society comes in a conversation with her father concerning her feelings for Launcelot. Like her brothers, who wish to use Launcelot as a vehicle for gaining entry to the Round Table, Elayne has her own plans for the handsome (if evasive) cavalier. She loves Launcelot and wishes to be his paramour, and she will not let her status as a medieval woman (and virgin) obstruct the path to her objective. When Gawayne reports that Launcelot has been injured in the tournament, Elayne politely but firmly informs her father that she will go to Launcelot's aid: "'Now, fayre fadir,' seyde than Elayne, 'I requyre you gyff me leve to ryde and seke hym, othir ellis I wote well I shall go oute of my mynde. For I shall never stynte tyll that I fynde hym.'"[28] She has envisioned a quest, one which she fearlessly accepts. She requests her father's permission to depart on her quest, and in case he had any intention of denying that appeal, she supports it with a threat: if she cannot search for Launcelot, she will go insane.[29] With this adventuresome resolve, Elayne joins the realm of the female literary elite. She becomes what Maureen Fries defines as a "world-changer." World-changers, according to Fries, are

28) Malory 631.37-39.

29) Elayne's caveat may sound extreme, but her passion is no greater than Launcelot's for Gwenyver; Launcelot himself has gone "clene oute of hys mynde" because he is spurned by the queen (Malory 489.1-2).

women who, like

> Antigone, ... Alice in Wonderland, and Jane Eyre,.... assume the usual male role of exploring the unknown beyond their assigned place in society; and they reject to various degrees the usual female role of preserving order (principally by forgoing adventure to stay at home).[30]

Elayne, like Antigone, Alice, and Jane, takes an active role in determining her own fate.

Elayne is not the only forward-looking member of the baron's household. Like his bold daughter, the baron himself discards his traditional role. Considering the strength and bravado of Elayne's outburst, his reply to her is calm and generous. According to Georges Duby, the typical medieval father would not permit his daughter's outburst, nor would he readily permit her to leave his household. Duby reports,

> For fear of dishonor women were kept shut away and closely watched, cloistered when possible, and allowed out only with an escort when required for public ceremonies or religious duties. When a woman traveled, a part of the household "conducted" her to her destination in order to make certain she could not be seduced.[31]

But Elayne's father does not act the tyrant. Knowing fully the level

30) Maureen Fries, "Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition," *Popular Arthurian Traditions,* ed. Sally K. Slocum (Bowling Green: Popular, 1992) 6.

31) Georges Duby, "The Aristocratic Households of Feudal France: Communal Living," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *Revelations of the Medieval World,* ed. Georges Duby, vol.2 of *A History of Private Life,* gen. eds. Phillipe Ariès and Georges Duby (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap P, 1988) 82.

of Elayne's passion, knowing that she leaves to seek her beloved, knowing, too, that her leaving endangers the only valuable commodity a medieval woman can possess, he answers her thus: "'Do ye as hit lykith you.'"[32] His answer implies that her heart (and her virginity) are not his to control. They are Elayne's, and the baron tells her to do what gives her pleasure; she is to take her fate into her own hands.

With her father's blessing, Elayne again shuns tradition by traveling alone. As Barbara W. Tuchman illustrates in *A Distant Mirror*, her treatise on the fourteenth century,

> a lady of rank .... would travel in a four-wheeled covered wagon, with cushioned seats, accompanied by her furniture, bed linen, vessels and plate, cooking pots, wine, and with servants going on ahead to prepare lodgings and hang tapestries and bed curtains.[33]

Elayne does not require her father to provide her with an entourage, a traveling companion, or even a horse. She handles all of her travel arrangements herself: "Ryght so the mayde made hyr redy and departed before sir Gawayne makynge grete dole."[34] Since she departs before Gawayne (who, the next line reports, goes back to the court "on the morne"),[35] she has had little time to prepare for her journey and chances are she has not brought her household along.

Even if she does bow to that convention, however, Malory still makes clear that she handled the logistics of her preparation and departure herself. Her father does not send a protector, for Elayne

32) Malory 631.41.
33) Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine, 1978) 220.
34) Malory 631.43-44.
35) Malory 631.44.

is prepared to go where adventure may take her, an undertaking for which she has the necessary mental and physical abilities.

By contrast, it takes the French maid "plus dun mois"[36] ["more than a month"][37] to come to Lancelot's aid, and she does not seek him, but merely "happens" to be passing by his temporary infirmary when she hears of his misfortune.[38] The French maid is passive; Malory's Elayne is not only active but also empowered. Elayne's desire for Launcelot is not an idle desire whispered wistfully to a girlfriend or thought of furtively as she says her evening prayers. Elayne's desire is real, physical; it is a desire she proudly proclaims; it is a desire which moves her beyond her prescribed social position of near non-existence into the realm of personhood.

Elayne's ability to assert herself is not limited to a minor rebellion within the confines of the family home. Her capabilities are just as viable in the real world, as she proves to Sir Bors and her brother, Lavayne. Unlike most of the knights of the Round Table, Elayne fulfills her quest. She finds Launcelot and sets about the business of healing him. But Lancelot has business of his own to attend to, and before his wound is fully healed he decides he must test his strength. With the help of Sir Bors and Elayne's brother, Lavayne, Launcelot arms himself and mounts his horse. Much to Launcelot's chagrin, he finds his horse "passyng lusty and frycke because he was not laboured of a moneth before."[39] Launcelot gives his horse a nudge with his spear in order to make him behave and the horse revolts, reopening Launcelot's wound and rendering him

36) *Mort Artu* 225.27.
37) *Death of King Arthur* 54.
38) *Death of King Arthur* 54.
39) Malory 635.38-40.

unable to keep his mount. As Launcelot lays on the ground unconscious, Bors and Lavayne cry out, procuring Elayne's attention-and her wrath:

> And so by fortune thys mayden, Elayne, harde their mournynge, and than she cam, and whan she founde sir Launcelot there armed in that place she cryed and wepte as she had bene wood. And than she kyssed him and ded what she myght to awake hym, and than she rebuked her brothir and sir Bors, and called hem false traytours, and seyde,
> "Why wolde <ye> take hym oute of hys bed? For and he dye, I woll appele you of hys deth!"[40]

Elayne's reaction here is powerful and far beyond the social and political reach of most medieval women. Granted, when she sees Launcelot she "cryed and wepte as she had been wood." However, her reaction is not unlike Sir Bors' and Lavayne's, both of whom she hears "sorow-making oute of measure."[41] Elayne quickly gains her composure and works to revive Launcelot, while Bors and Lavayne stand paralyzed by the calamity. In almost the same breath, Elayne uses her voice to rail at her brother and Bors. In her short but powerful speech, Elayne not only accuses two societal superiors of treason, but promises to bring the two men to justice if Launcelot does die. P. J. C. Field has established that "in fifteenth century England, the appeal was one among several possible kinds of legal accusation."[42] With this knowledge, Field deduces about Elayne that

40) Malory 636.10-17.

41) Malory 636.9-10.

42) P. J. C. Field, "Time and Elaine of Astolat," *Studies in Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute P, 1985) 233. See Field 233-34 for a thorough exegesis of "appele."

> In a moment of acute distress, she is saying much more than that if Lancelot were to die she would tell the world that Bors and her brother were morally responsible for his death. She is saying that she would start the proceedings against them for murder, proceedings that the law would only have allowed her to initiate if Lancelot had been her husband.[43]

Once again, Elayne usurps the socially assigned order.

This type of response, passionate, aggressive, courageous, is not the typical behavior of a woman who bows to convention. John Michael Walsh commends Elayne in this episode for showing a "spirit well beyond the range of both her prototypes,"[44] but confining Elayne's action to a mere display of spirit limits the range of Elayne's action to reaction: in essence, Walsh says that only when Launcelot needs her can Elayne flicker into action. While Walsh's view of Elayne is certainly more complimentary than Schichtman's, it is no more empowering.

Elayne's most powerful statement on the strictures of medieval society is also her last. In an emotional speech on her deathbed, Elayne rails against the forces that castigate her self-expression. Her speech, unique to Malory's text, is in direct response to her "gostly fadir,"[45] a priest who instructs her to leave all thoughts of Launcelot; but it is also an apologetic for her own brand of theology:

> Than she seyde, "Why sholde I leve such thoughtes? Am I nat an erthely woman? And all the whyle the brethe is in my body I may complyne me, for my belyve ys that I do none offence, thou [gh] I

43) Field 234-35.

44) John Michael Walsh, "Malory's Characterization of Elayne of Astolat," *Philological Quarterly* 59.2 (1980): 141.

45) Malory 639.30.

love an erthely man, unto God, for He fourmed me thereto, and all maner of good love comyth of God."[46]

Although Elayne dies a virgin, she wants the priest to know that she is no saint. She is an "erthely woman," as human and as entitled to her feelings as any "erthely man." Furthermore, she is a creation of God, uniquely formed by Him to live the life she has lived, to love the man she has loved. In other words, she has a God-given right to assert herself, for, as she explains, "all maner of good love comyth of God."

Thus far in Malory's story, Elayne has asserted herself to her father, her brother, Sir Bors, and to the clergy. The true test of her mettle, however, comes in a confrontation with Launcelot. After all, her ability to intimidate her father and even to accuse Sir Bors and Lavayne of treason could be written off as merely episodes of teen-age defiance. Buoyed by her success with her father, Elayne may have found the might to chastise her brother and Sir Bors. But if Elayne does not have the determination to face Launcelot, the man for whom she "keste such a love . . . that she cowde never withdraw hir loove,"[47] then she is no better off than her predecessors.

Elayne's response to Launcelot

Admittedly, when Elayne is with Launcelot (and when he is conscious), she seems an apparition of her former assertive self. Her demeanor in his presence is servile and subdued, hardly the Elayne we have seen with her father, her brother, and Sir Bors. With Launcelot, she is more like her narrative mothers than at any other

46) Malory 639.31-35.
47) Malory 623.24-25.

time in Malory's story. During the month she spends nursing Launcelot after his fall from the horse, "ever thys maydyn Elayne ded ever hir dyligence and labour both nyght and day unto sir Launcelot, that there was never chylde nother wyff more mekar tyll fadir and husbande than was thys Fayre Maydyn of Astolat."[48] Even Sir Bors, who has felt the full wrath of Elayne's passion, is impressed by her new attitude.[49]

Elayne devolves into the realm of her prototypes. Perhaps she feels that Launcelot seeks a more traditional bride; perhaps, aware of societal expectations, she works to mold herself into a more typical medieval woman. Whatever the case, her pose does not last long. Frustrated by Launcelot's lack of response to her diligence (he seems more annoyed than thankful), she approaches him with her intentions.

Both the maids of the *Mort Artu* and *Le Morte Arthur* wish for Lancelot's favors, but neither is as direct about her desires as Malory's Elayne. The French girl treats her courtship as a game. She coyly approaches the French Lancelot

> *apareille al plus bel & al miex quele pot & sans faille ele estoit de trop grant beaute plaine.*[50]
> [dressed and adorned in the most beautiful manner possible, wearing the most splendid dress she could find, and indeed full of the greatest earthly beauty] .[51]

48) Malory 635.26-29.
49) Malory 635.30.
50) *Mort Artu* 226.9-11.
51) *Death of King Arthur* 55.

She works hard to display what will be most attractive to Lancelot-her youthful beauty. In her conversation with him, she never mentions the word marriage, nor does she admit that the knight in her scenario is Lancelot. Her question to Lancelot appeals not to his sense of duty, but to his code of chivalry:

> *"Sire" [fait ele] "& ne seroit li cheualiers moult vilains qui ie requerroie damors sil sen escondissoit [?]* "[52]
> ["My lord,"] she says, ["would not any knight be unchivalrous if I begged for his love and he rejected me?"] .[53]

The French damsel leaves Lancelot to deduce her meaning, which he does. He cleverly (and kindly) explains that she certainly is worthy of love, although if it is his love she seeks she will have to look elsewhere, for his heart belongs to another. The girl expresses her disappointment (she is "very sad"),[54] but it seems that she understands.

A page and a half later, however, she is not so magnanimous. Walsh describes her "weepy and thoroughly conventionalized"[55] response to Lancelot's news that he must return to the court:

> In the French when Lancelot is about to return to court, the damsel comes to him and says that she will die if he does not help her. Lancelot asks what he can do and she bursts into tears and says that she loves him and that it has been spoiling her appetite and her sleep and making her miserable in all the usual ways. Lancelot reminds her that he had warned her that his heart was not his own. She replies that if that is all he has to say then she can do nothing but die, but it's

52) Mort Artu 226.12-13.
53) *Death of Arthur* 55.
54) *Death of Arthur* 55.
55) Walsh 143.

a poor return for the friendship her brother has shown him ever since he came into the country.[56]

The French maid's outburst is conventional in both its level of emotion and in her final appeal to Lancelot's code of chivalry. She reminds Lancelot that he owes her brother a favor, and suggests that loving her might be a way to return that favor. As medieval society dictates, the French maid views herself as a piece of property, a commodity capable only of evening the score between two friends.

In Malory, Elayne's approach to Lancelot is even more controlled and calculating than her speeches to her father, her brother, and Sir Bors. She sheds her shrinking violet persona and again becomes Elayne le Blanke, an efficacious and forthright human being. She does not beg, nor does she weep. With her father and brothers standing by her side, Elayne calmly confronts Launcelot and asks for the position she feels she deserves:

"My lorde, sir Launcelot, now I se ye woll departe frome me. Now, fayre knyght and curtayse knyght," seyde she, "have mercy uppon me, and suffir me nat to dye for youre love."[57]

Launcelot seems surprised:

"Why, what wolde you that I dud?" seyde sir Launcelot.
"Sir, I wolde have you to my husbande," seyde Elayne.[58]

Perhaps Launcelot expected something like this request, for his reply is polite:

56) Walsh 143.
57) Malory 638.14-16.
58) Malory 638.17-18.

"Fayre damesell, I thanke you hartely," seyde sir Launcelot, "but truly," seyde he, "I caste me never to be wedded man."[59]

Elayne does not hesitate:

"Than, fayre knyght," seyde she, "woll ye be my paramour?"[60]

Launcelot is shocked:

"Jesu defende me!" seyde sir Launcelot. "For than I rewarded youre fadir and youre brothir full evyll for their grete goodnesse."[61]

Elayne's reply, however, is matter-of-fact.

"Alas! Than," seyde she, "I must dye for youre love."[62]

Elayne's response to Launcelot is not a threat; it is a statement of fact. If she cannot have what she chooses (Launcelot's love), then she chooses death. Her statement echoes one which she once made to her father: "I requyre you gyff me leve to . . . seke hym, othir ellis . . . I shall go oute of my mynde."[63] Elayne's father responds by reaffirming Elayne's personhood; he reminds her to follow her heart, for it is her own. Given the same situation, Launcelot makes a tragic error: instead of treating Elayne as an equal, he reduces her to a piece of property.

The first clue to Launcelot's perception of Elayne is his response to her offer to become his paramour. Instead of directing his refus-

59) Malory 638.19-20.
60) Malory 638.21.
61) Malory 638.22-23.
62) Malory 638.24.
63) Malory 631.37-38.

al to Elayne (perhaps something like, "I would not wish to mar the name of such a worthy woman as yourself"), he is completely concerned with how such an arrangement would affect her father and brothers. He fails to mention the months that Elayne spent nursing his wounds, catering to his every need. He worries about a debt to a man who lent him a suit of armor for one tournament and the temporary use of his son. (Recall that Elayne provided the scarf which truly kept Launcelot's identity a secret). If Launcelot fulfills Elayne's desire (to whom he clearly owes the largest debt), he fears that he will alienate her father (to whom he owes nothing; after all, Launcelot is taking Lavayne back to Arthur's court where he will become a knight of the Round Table). Schichtman excuses Launcelot's behavior, arguing that "Lancelot naturally sees Elaine as an extension of the principles set forth by the men in her life; her actions up until this moment have given him no reason to believe otherwise."[64] But Elayne is not an extension of her male relatives; that she stands before Launcelot with her family at her side and proposes her own marriage should inform Launcelot of her status within her family. Sir Bernarde does not attempt to arrange Elayne's future; as he has told her before, she is to do what gives her pleasure, not what is most economically advantageous for him. He does not make Elayne's decisions; he does stand with her to support them. In a momentous blunder, Launcelot fails to recognize that by placing her father's and brothers' interests over her own, it is Elayne, not her father and brothers, that he rewards "full evyll for [her] grete goodnesse."

Then Launcelot does Elayne one worse: when Elayne states

64) Schichtman 263-64.

that she will die without his love, Launcelot offers her a bribe. His offer denies Elayne any last shred of self-worth. First, he orders her not to die, as if her will were his to control: "'Ye shall nat do so,' seyde sir Launcelot."[65] Then he offers a lame excuse for his refusal to marry, saying only that "'I myght have been maryed an I had wolde, but I never applyed me yett to be maryed.'"[66] He does not even deign to explain to her the true reason behind his refusal (Gwenyver); in this respect, the French Lancelot is more kind than Malory's version of the hero. Finally, Launcelot attempts to buy her assurance that she will not die:

> "But bycause, fayre damesell, that ye love me as ye sey ye do, I woll for youre good wylle and kyndnes shew to you som goodnesse. That ys thys, that wheresomever ye woll besette youre herte uppon som good knygt that woll wedde you, I shall gyff you togydirs a thousand pounde yerly, to you and to youre ayris. This muche woll I gyff you, fayre mayden, for youre kyndnesse, and allweyes whyle I lyve to be youre owne knyght."[67]

Certainly, Launcelot's offer is enticing. He offers a large sum of money not only to Elayne, but to her offspring as well.

However, Launcelot adds a stipulation to his bribe which further insults Elayne's status and intelligence. Launcelot's offer assumes that Elayne's affections are mutable; in order to receive any money, Elayne must marry someone else. Launcelot has no grasp of the depth of Elayne's passion; he sees her as a child that can be distracted from her fixation by a shiny new penny and a peppermint. Then Launcelot offers the final blow. He promises to be Elayne's "owne

65) Malory 638.25.
66) Malory 638.26-27.
67) Malory 638.27-33.

knyght," a promise as empty and conceited as any that Launcelot has made. Elayne does not want a champion; she wants a lover. If Launcelot cannot give her his heart, then he is another woman's knight. She refuses him outright: "'Sir, of all thys,' seyde the maydyn, 'I woll none, for but yff ye woll wedde me, othir to be my paramour at the leste, wyte you well, sir Launcelot, my good dayes ar done.'"[68]

Schichtman again excuses Launcelot's half-hearted attempt to appease Elayne:

> Lancelot has business to attend to, he has his own narrative to get on with, and he expects, upon his departure, that Elaine will fade back into her life of repetitions, eternal returns, that she will again be a good daughter, a good sister, and ultimately some appropriate man will come along so she can become a good wife. Her assertiveness is recognized as an aberration which can be gotten over.[69]

But Elayne before Launcelot was in control of her life, and Elayne after Launcelot cannot "fade back into her life of repetitions," for it never existed. Launcelot obviously knows little about Elayne. Her assertiveness is not an aberration; it is a character trait developed from the moment she enters the narrative. What Launcelot has failed to realize is that Elayne is the author of her own fate. In her last act, Elayne will write a conclusion to her part in the narrative. To Launcelot's dismay, Elayne's conclusion will add a chapter to Launcelot's own story, a chapter which will redefine his status as the most chivalrous knight.

Elayne's end does not seem appropriate to a woman who has

68) Malory 638.34-36.
69) Schichtman 264.

overcome every other cultural obstacle presented to her. Nevertheless, she executes her promise to Launcelot; without his love, she dies. Walsh comments that "she accepts the fate put upon her by her sudden contact with a sadly tarnished adult world without a word of reproach for her preoccupied middle-aged paladin."[70] But Elayne's death is not an act of acceptance, as Walsh has asserted, nor is her final act "her final submission."[71] Elayne dies because Launcelot has wronged her, and she plans her funeral as a final means of retaliation against Launcelot.

Elayne's elaborate scheme is born not of spite but of a need for revenge. Just as Arthur will retaliate against Launcelot for holding his loyalty to Gwenyver higher than his loyalty to Arthur, Elayne rightfully seeks revenge for the sins Launcelot has committed against her. In his dialogue with Elayne, Launcelot has broken almost every oath he made as a knight of the Round Table:

> never to do outerage nothir mourthir, and alwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordeship of kynge Arthur for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe.[72]

Elayne has asked Launcelot for mercy; he has refused. Elayne requests that he help her to correctly observe one of the rites of the church by marrying her ("strengthe hem in hir ryghtes"); he has refused. The only promise Launcelot has kept is his pledge that he

70) Walsh 148.
71) Schichtman 259.
72) Malory 75.38-43.

will not force himself upon women. However, he keeps this vow with Elayne so earnestly that he removes himself from her, thereby breaking the last of his promises: by refusing to love Elayne, he, in effect, murders her. By breaking his oath to the Round Table, he has committed treason.[73]

Elayne has, once before, usurped her socially assigned order by accusing two superiors of treason; with Launcelot, she takes her accusation one step further. Elayne not only "appeles" Launcelot of her death, she serves as jury and judge at his trial and decides both his guilt and the means of his punishment. Only in the administration of Launcelot's punishment does Elayne's physical status as a medieval woman hinder her in the narrative. Had she been a man wronged by Launcelot, she could have easily challenged him to a joust; however, she is not a man, and like Igrayne before her, she must invent her own method of retribution. The penalty Elayne creates for Launcelot is far greater than any physical injury he might obtain in a joust; furthermore, unlike any knight of the Round Table, Elayne bests Launcelot at his own chivalric game.

Elayne relies on her father and brothers to carry out her plan, but she is its sole author. While both of the maids of the French *Mort Artu* and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur* die extra-textually, Malory's Elayne continues to act posthumously, a fact that reveals her trust in the power she holds over her family and a testimony to her mental and emotional strength. In order for her stratagem to be effective, her kinsmen must follow her orders to the letter-and they

73) Barbara Tuchman confirms that "loyalty, meaning the pledged word, was chivalry's fulcrum .... A knight who broke his oath was charged with 'treason' for betraying the order of knighthood" (64).

do. As Elayne prepares to die, she gathers her family around her and calmly begins to delegate tasks to each member. The same character that Schichtman chides for being emotional, the same Elayne who Benson says "the force of love is greater than,"[74] becomes in her final moments greater than emotion, stronger than the force of love. Her instructions are not the final ravings of a love-crazed teen; she has devised her plan carefully, and she wishes for it to be carried out the same way:

> And than she called hir fadir, sir Bernarde, and hir brothir, sir Tirry, and hartely she prayd hir fadir that hir brothir myght wryght a lettir lyke as she ded endite, and so ir fadir graunted her. And whan the lettir was wryten, worde by worde lyke as she devised hit, than she prayde hir fadir that she myght be wacched untylle she were [dede] . "And whyle my body ys hote lat thys lettir be put in my ryght honde, and my honde bounde faste to the letter untyll that I be colde. And lete me be put in a fayre bed with all the rychyste clothys that I have aboute me, and so lat my bed and all my rychyst clothis be ledde with m [e] in a charyat unto the nexte place where the Temmys ys; and there lette me be put within a barget, and but one man with me, such as ye truste, to stirre me thidir; and that my barget be coverde with blacke samyte over and over. And thus, fadir, I beseche you, lat hit be done."[75]

As in all aspects of her life, in death Elayne maintains control. Walsh interprets Elayne's plans as an attempt to return to the innocence of her childhood (i.e., her life before Launcelot); he accuses her of comforting "herself with making of her funeral a pretty pageant, as if for the death of a doll."[76] But unlike her ancestors whose funeral biers unmanned save for their dead bodies drift down the

75) Malory 640.3-16.

76) Walsh 148.

Thames in the hope that someone from Arthur's court will spy them,[77] Malory's Elayne is not a doll dependent on the currents of fate to transfer her to yet another owner. Every facet of her plan has a deliberate purpose. Her "fayre bed" and "rychyste clothys" assure that whoever finds her body will immediately know she is nobility. She gives specific instructions about which river shall carry her barge, for the Thames is the only one that flows past Arthur's court. And she does not rely on the current of the water, but rather employs the aid of an oarsman to "stirre" her to her destination. Most importantly, she asks that her letter be placed in her hand where it will easily be found by anyone who examines her body. Elayne's plan is rational, even shrewd. Her head is not cotton-stuffed.

Although they probably do not grasp the magnitude of Elayne's plan, her father and brother do not brush it aside as the final fancy of a deluded woman. Elayne's plan comes to fruition. Sir Bernarde's final tribute to his strong-willed daughter fulfills her final desire. Malory reports that "hir fadir graunte her faythfully all thynge sholde be done lyke as she had devised. Than hir fadir and hir

77) The poet of the Stanzaic *Morte* relies on the current to carry the bier:

"A fair river under the towr yode,
And soon there-in gonne they see
A little bote of shape full good
To them-ward with the streme gan te ....." (30.962-965)

The author of the French text relies on chance: *"Alendemain que cis apiaus fu fais auint endroit eure de miedi que vne nachele couerte dun moult riche drap de soie arriua desous la tor le roi"* (*Mort Artu* 256.11-13). ["it happened about noon that a boat decked in very rich silk cloth arrived beneath the tower at Camelot" (*Death* 92)].

brothir made grete doe for he<r>. And whan thys was done anone she dyed."[78] When she is dead, Sir Tirry and Sir Bernarde follow Elayne's instructions precisely. In their family, Elayne is not merely a sister or daughter. She is a woman of consequence. Elayne has her own name, her own identity, and her own unique desires. That her family fulfills those desires even after her death is a high compliment indeed.

Sir Bernarde and Sir Tirry have put Elayne's final plan into action; she acts posthumously, as she floats down the Thames in order to exact her revenge on Launcelot. The letter clutched in her cold hand, the letter she authored, is addressed to Launcelot and reads thus:

> "Moste noble knyght, my lorde sir Launcelot, now hath dethe made us two at debate for youre love. And I was youre lover, that men called the Fayre Maydyn of Astolate. Therefore unto all ladyes I make my mone, yet for my soule ye pray and bury me at the leste, and offir ye my masse-peny: thys is my laste requeste. And a clene maydyn I dyed, I take God to wytnesse. And pray for my soule, sir Launcelot, as thou arte pereles."[79]

Her words are eloquent and heart-rending. Her apparent benevolence to Launcelot exceeds that of her predecessors in Malory's sources, both of whom are disparaging to Launcelot. They address their complaints to King Arthur and his knights, not to Launcelot.

The French maid calls Lancelot "Mes ce est li plus vilain cheualier que iou onques trouai"[80] ["the wickedest .... man in the

78) Malory 640.17-19.
79) Malory 641.11-17.
80) Mort Artu 257.25-26.

world"] ,[81] explaining that

> *"Car onques ne li soi tant proier o larmes ne o plors quil volsist de moi auoir merci si men a tant este au cuer que iou en siu a ma fin venue por li amer loialment."*[82]
> ["however much I begged him with tears and weeping he refused to have mercy on me, and I took it so much to heart that as a result I died from loving faithfully"] .[83]

The maid of the Stanzaic Morte is even more antagonistic:

> Of fo ne frend, the sooth to say,
> So unhende of thewes[84] is there none;
> His gentilness was all away,
> All churlish manners he had in wone;[85]
> For no thing that I coude pray,
> Kneeling ne weeping with rewful mone,[86]
> To be my leman he said ever nay,
> And said shortly he wolde have none.[87]

In the intensity of their anger, the words of Elayne's predecessors seem to have more force. When read by the court, the words will surely arouse hostility toward Lancelot, and in that way, the two maids will cause Launcelot some amount of discomfort. But Elayne's words, although seemingly sweet, are double-edged and carry a more lingering punishment for Launcelot.

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81) *Death of Arthur* 94.
82) *Mort Artu* 257.27-29.
83) *Death of Arthur* 94.
84) "discourteous of manners," trans. Larry Benson, *King Arthur's Death* 33.
85) "(his) possession," trans. Benson, *King Arthur's Death* 33.
86) "pitiful moaning," trans. Benson, *King Arthur's Death* 33.
87) *Le Morte* 33.1080-87.

In the letter, Elayne has authored for herself a favorable conclusion; Launcelot excepted, whoever reads the letter will remember her kindly. Indeed, the text reports that "whan it was rad the kynge, the quene and all the knyghtes wepte for pitê of the dolefull complayntes."[88] Even Gwenyver, who had formerly been jealous of Elayne, upbraids Launcelot for causing the death of such a worthy maiden: "'Sir,' seyde the quene, 'ye myght have shewed hir som bowntê and jantilnes whych myght have preserved hir lyff.'"[89]

Elayne's words facilitate kind remembrances, but they serve a dual purpose: in her final request, Elayne defeats Launcelot at the game in which he had been the sole champion. With his words, Launcelot reduced Elayne to a possession; with her words, Elayne turns Launcelot into possessor. In her final act, she has publicly given him charge of her dead body. By arranging her funeral bier in a way that is sure to bring her the attention of Arthur's court, Elayne also assures that Launcelot's breach of knightly ethics will be dealt with. Certainly, Launcelot must fulfill her request; to refuse would be to break once again the oath to which he is bound; furthermore, to break it before his king and those with whom he has sworn to uphold the oath would be self-destructive folly. Not only must Launcelot now bury Elayne's body and prepare a mass in her honor; he must also pray daily for the salvation of her soul. With this request, which by the code of chivalry to which he adheres so fervently Launcelot must grant, Elayne adds a chapter to Launcelot's narrative and guarantees her place in it.

What's in a name? For Malory's Elayne, a name brings an iden-

88) Malory 641.18-20.

89) Malory 641.29-30.

tity separate from her family, a sense of personhood which raises her beyond her status as medieval woman, and an autonomy denied her predecessors which allows her the freedom to author her own destiny.