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Landscapes of Identity: How Space Shapes Female Agency in *Le Morte d’Arthur*

Medieval landscapes are integral to the creation of the identities of medieval characters. Nowhere is this truer than in Thomas Malory’s, *Le Morte d’Arthur.* In the text, landscapes offer more than simply a backdrop for tales, rather they are gateways for quests, catalysts for battles, foundations for jousts, witnesses of courtly romance, and perhaps most significantly, benefactors of knightly worship. However, these landscapes are almost exclusively acknowledged for how they contribute to masculine identity and are rarely analyzed for how they are inextricably tangled with feminine identity. Through an analysis of physical spaces such as castles and forests, connections can be made between women, the spaces they occupy, and how they perform female agency. This exploration not only expands the understanding of the purpose of Malory’s landscapes, but also highlights the role these environments have on shaping both women’s individual identities and agency within the text.

Malory’s women generally appear in three forms: damsels, who inhabit open, wild, and untamed spaces. Ladies, who are linked to land, castles, wealth, and resources, and of course, the otherworldly ladies such as Morgan Le Fay and the Lady of the Lake, who are untethered from spatial norms. While Arthurian scholars such as Roberta Davidson,[[1]](#footnote-1) Maureen Fries,[[2]](#footnote-2) and Susan Murray,[[3]](#footnote-3) have impressively examined women’s roles in relation to their marital status, quest facilitation, or symbolic functions, the relationship between women and their paired physical space being indicative of their identities and their power has remained largely unexplored. Not only has this angle been neglected, but damsels in particular have been given little credit for their immense value. Fries for example, has framed damsels as “equally undifferentiated and colorless” (73). This is an understandable misconception since their ambiguous identities and monotonous narratives tend to bleed into one another, but one that overlooks the significance of their special transience*.* Upon a nuanced reading of Malory’s damsels, however, it becomes clear that their transience not only defines their individuality but is also the source of their agency.

The forest of Arroy in the Book of Adventures is the most representative episode of the damsel-nature dynamic. Gawain, Uwayne, and Gawayn wander into “a grete foreste” in a “valley full of stoneys” (127.1) and see three damsels sitting next to a “fayre fountain” (127.7). Here, the damsels are seamlessly woven into the landscape, their presence as integral to the environment as the stones scattered across the valley or the stream winding through it. The text offers no description of how or why they are there beyond simply that they are there. As part of the setting, damsels have the physical space and range to guide the narrative by literally steering the direction of the adventures. Each of them initiates a unique quest with their chosen knight and they become administers of knightly prowess in the process. Without identities tied to nature, they wouldn’t have the agency to traverse the adventures of their own creation. Still, it would be unfair to ignore what the text so clearly presents as the reason for the damsels’ existence. Davidson interprets the damsels as serving a pedagogical role, where they shape the knights the parameters of worship, combat, and love.[[4]](#footnote-4) Her analysis is certainly correct, as the damsels themselves even state, “We be here for this cause: if we may se ony of arraunte knyghtes to teche hem unto straunge adventures.” (127.16-17). Yet her argument does little more than simply paint the damsels as observers of knightly functions, rather than agents of their own identities. Instead, the damsels construct their identities based on their seer-like knowledge of the knight’s characters. For example, when Gawain is wary about aiding a knight in need, Gawain’s damsel states. “methynkes ye have no lyste to help hym” (129.7-8). She recognizes Gawain’s self-serving attitude and notes his lack of worshipful character. Though the text claims Gawain lost his damsel, it's possibly she who intentionally loses him since damsels have the power to not just discern knightly identities, but they have the freedom to move across spatial boundaries, enabling them to ultimately be their own decision-makers.

The three damsels of the forest aren’t the only damsels who use spatial relation to conduct their agendas. The damsel Lynet is arguably an even more dynamic and assertive figure. Unlike the three forest damsels, whose transient identities are embedded within the landscape itself, Lynet’s transience is defined by her frequent movement between wilderness to castles and back. In the pages from when Lynet meets Gareth to their reunion with her sister Lyonesse, some variation of the phrase “they rode” or “rode with” appear at least twelve separate times.[[5]](#footnote-5) The frequency of this phrasing is representative of the regularity of her movement and the attention paid to her mobility. This works to not only propel Sir Gareth’s great adventure, but it also suggests that damsels possess a unique oscillative power that gives them a narrative freedom to venture through expansive spaces, which constructs their identities in the process.

Kristin Bovaird-Abbo has a similar reading of Lynet’s control over her identity. Through Lynet’s vocal defiance of King Arthur and Gareth, she demonstrates how Malory's Lynet governs her own identity and reputation.[[6]](#footnote-6) She points to Lynet’s abrupt departure from King Arthur’s court after learning the “kychyn knave” (227.17) better known as, Sir Gareth, will be her sister’s hero. She frames this instance as evidence of her agency. Malory writes, “Than she wexed angry, and anone she toke hir horse and departed.” (227.17-18). Bovaird-Abbo argues this is a sign of her sovereignty because, “she refuses to suggest that he holds any power over her” (137). While it may not have been Bovaird-Abbo’s intention to explicitly tie Lynet’s agency to her mobility, there is an obvious connection. Her reading reinforces the idea that Lynet’s position as a damsel gives her the ability to move fluidly across spaces which ultimately defines her identity and is therefore essentially her agency. Though it may be a stretch to state that damsels’ knowledge and discernment come from their attachment to nature alone, it is not a reach to claim that their power is rooted in their ability to explore their environments and dictating the parameters of worship in the process. While damsels’ identity and agency are shaped by their fluidity, their authority remains constrained by a lack of resources. They possess the power to define the parameters of worship but lack the means to enforce them.

In contrast to the formation of agency and identity of damsels through their transitory power, ladies are distinctly tied to the permanence of castles, where their identities and authority are anchored in the stability of land and the architecture of enclosed spaces. The language of the text is evidence of this connection. For example, La Bealle Isode is sent “untoto her lodgynge into the pryory, there to beholde all the turnemente” at the tournament of Lorenezop (588.3), and Queen Guenevere who is “lodged, in a castell by the se syd” (603.28). These two instances subtly reveal the binary between nature and built structures with ladies since they are generally viewed within a fixed space, surrounded by a larger landscape. Ladies are essentially siloed from, yet at the same time, part of the natural environment.

The lady to castle association is not a new revelation. Contrary to the damsels to nature association, the tie between geographical location and ladies has been widely discussed amongst Arthurian scholars. Still, the examination of how castles situate the identities and employ the agency of ladies remains quite underdeveloped. In her analysis of Malory’s women and castles, Susan Murray argues that there is a notable relationship between ladies and their fixed spaces. She writes, “In Malory's work, castles depart almost entirely from the battlefield and become the realm of queens and proprietresses, female captives, inhabitants, and guests” (18). However, it’s important to note that Murray later associates the same feminized castles as disruptive of the prescribed social order, which is symbolic of societal decay, opting for a negative reading of women’s association with castles.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nevertheless, her assessment of Malory’s castles as both masculine and feminine spaces is a noteworthy bridge to argue that ladies can have an identity that exists beyond the literal boundaries of masculinity. Not residing in a completely masculine space allows them to create identities that function independently of masculine borders.

But to further understand the significance of castles and their entanglement with female figures, it’s also necessary to examine how Malory’s castles can be exhibitors of personal identity. In her article, “Castles and the Architecture of Gender in Malory’s ‘The Knight of the Cart.’” Molly Martin explains, “The castle building influences the characters who tread around and within its walls. As a symbolic and social space, castles inflect the behaviors and identities that they frame” (38). Essentially, she depicts castles as highly gendered spaces that influence the behaviors and identities of confined within. Upon further investigation of the ladies La Beale Isode and Guenevere, it’s evident that the position of *lady* creates an agency that is different from damsels, but no less effective in fulfilling their desires.

When Sir Tristam returns to Ireland, seeking help after being injured in a battle with Sir Marhault, Malory makes a point to write “he aryved up un Irelonde evyn faste by a castell where the king and quene was” (301.25). It’s easy to gloss over the significance of the word *quene* here. Yet its inclusion highlights a narrative recognition of the physical castle as not only a hypermasculine space—but a woman’s realm as well. The castle grows in its femininization when King Anguish offers his help to Tristam by way of his daughter, La Beale Isode. The narrator states, “Than the king for grete favour made Tramtryste to be put in his doughtyrs awarde and kepyng, because she was a noble surgeon. And whan she had searched hym she founde in the bottom of hys wounde that therein was poison, and so she healed hym in a whle” (302.6-9). This is not just any ward; it is Isode’s domain. Drawing on Martin’s concept of castles as identity-shaping spaces, this scene demonstrates how Isode’s healing power is inextricably linked to the castle’s spatial context. Her ownership of her healing space is laced with her identity and vice versa. While damsels enact agency through motion, Lady Isode’s spatial stability shapes her identity as a healer long before a wounded Tristam limped up to her castle’s walls.

Moreover, Isode’s mere presence, whether near or within a castle, emanates a mysterious power. Two episodes illustrate this effect. The first occurs with her lover, Tristam. After being healed by Isode, Tristam fights in a tournament where inevitably faces Palomedes, who is not only described as “a noble knight and a mighty man” (302.18) but is also in love with her. It’s only with Isode’s assistance that Tristam can hope to be victorious. The text says, “Than had La Beale Isode ordained and well arayde Sir Tramtryste with a wyght horse and whyght armys, and right so she lette put hym oute at a prevy postren, and he cam so into the felde as hit had bene a bryght angell” (304.17-19). With the armor, the horse, and secret door Isode provides, she essentially uses her castle’s resources to bestow an otherworldly-esque power onto Tristam, momentarily transforming him into a semi-divine figure. In fact, there is not even a great battle between himself and Palomedes, instead he straightforwardly smites him to the earth (304.23). While an argument could be made that Isode’s agency only exists under patriarchal parameters which are in service to men, her relationship to the castle and resources she has access to enable her to make the decision to aid Tristam. It is her consensual service to him that ultimately distinguishes this as an act of her agency.

Later in the text a similar instance occurs. This time, however, Isode *unknowingly* becomes a well for power for none other than Palomedes. At the Tournament of Lonezep, Isode is isolated in a castle, participating as an onlooker of the jousting with the text stating:

And ryght so thes foure knyghtes cam into the fylde endlynge and thorow, and so they lad La Beall Isode thidir as she sholde stande and beholde all the justes in a bay-wyndow; but always she was wympled, that no man might se her vysage. (576.7-10)

Again, there is an obvious connection between the castle and Isode. But while the connection may appear to limit her power because of the confines of the enclosed space, she does have a window that offers viewership beyond the boundaries of the walls. This inherently includes her in the action of the tournament. Moreover, the veil covering her face creates an additional one-sided panoptic view of the action. Her veiling is not a sign of passive submission, but a decidedly asymmetrical power where she has both the authority of observation and control of her gaze. In many ways, this echoes Davidson’s argument that female characters participate in the text through their observation which results in the construction of the text.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, in the case of Isode, Davidson writes, “Her power lies largely in the impact of her beauty upon men, and it is seldom intentional” (24). Yet this claim bypasses the role that Isode’s consent is an intentional impact on the text. Her power over men in the form of her beauty only operates as a positive force when Isode allows it to happen—and there are serious implications that occur when her consent is ignored.

From her vantage point, Isode has the observatory power to watch the men joust, but her gaze is consumed by Tristam. The phrase “La Bealle Isode aspyed him” and “saw him” occur three times within 15 lines (580.15-30). While damsels have physical transience that is represented by language indicating their constant motion, Lady Isode is stationary yet moves with her observation just as rapidly. But Palomedes takes her from observer to the observed. The narrator says, “lowghe and made good chere. And as it happened, Sir Palomydes loked up toward her where she lay in the wyndow, and Sir Palomydes aspyed how she lawghed” (580.32-34). While Isode is watching Tristam, Palomedes is watching her without her knowledge and therefore without her consent. Palomedes’ compulsory voyeurism “doubles his strengthe” (581.8) and makes him “fare lyke a lyon” (581.11), giving him an otherworldy power that ultimately leads him to that day’s victory. In contrast to Isode’s consensual use of her resources and gaze to empower Tristam, Palomedes’ forced observation transforms the power he gains into something destructive. When he later kills Sir Lancelot’s horse, the same power becomes the source of his “unknyghtly dedis” (582.23). The juxtaposition between these two episodes—one where Isode’s agency is exercised willingly and another where her power is appropriated, accentuates the intrinsic duality of Isode’s power and the decisions she makes within the castle’s environment. The tension between power and consent thus operates as a central concern to Isode’s identity. When her desires are respected, they lead to worship and when it is ignored, it leads to disempowerment, cementing her agency through the spatiality of the castle.

A more overt illustration of the castle’s role in shaping female identity and authority can be seen through Queen Guinevere. While her actions throughout the text offer numerous instances where she leverages her resources to assert control and pursue her own agenda, this analysis will focus on one particular episode: her fight with Lancelot and hosting of a dinner thereafter. It is uncommon to see women angry with knights, and even rarer for them to take decisive action. Even Lynet, despite her clear contempt for Gareth demonstrated through her countless verbal assaults, never attempts to separate herself from his protection. This is most likely due to her reliance on him to not only help her sister, but also her lack of resources to remove herself from the situation. Guinevere, by contrast, is bold in her indignation. Malory writes, “Wherefore the quene waxed wrothe with Sir Lancelot. So on a day she called hym to hir chambir and seyd thus: Launcelot, Ise and fele dayly that youre love begynnyth to slake, for ye have no joy to be in my presence, but ever ye ar oute of thys courte” (791.1-5). In other words, Queen Guinevere not only summons Lancelot to scold him for neglecting her, but she also takes control of the situation, commanding his presence and attention. Her actions defy the social order by attempting to subvert Lancelot’s Pentecostal Oath, which binds him to his knightly duties. Lancelot ultimately refuses to appease Guinevere’s jealousy resulting in an even angrier Guinevere. She says, “Here I discharge thys courte that thou never com within hit, and I forfende the my felyship, and upon payne of thy hede that thou se me nevermore!” (792.2-5). Lancelot’s obedience to her command demonstrates the power Guinevere ultimately possesses as Queen of her castle and her court. Moreover, her ability to send him away highlights the contrast between her stable, sovereign authority and the fleeting power of damsels like Lynet, further emphasizing the different levels of agency available to women based on their spatial association.

Kenneth Hodges provides an excellent analysis of Guinevere’s actions as representative of her identity through her influence and decision-making within Arthur’s court. He claims that her independence is noteworthy because it operates of Arthur’s influence.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is illustrated when Guinevere decides to host a dinner for the knights after her quarrel with Lancelot. Hodges notes that her VIP guest list consisting of Sir Gareth, Sir Kay, and Sir Gawain, to name a few, actually serves a political purpose rather than one aimed at covering up her adulterous affair or to make Lancelot jealous.[[10]](#footnote-10) This reading is significant because it asserts that Guinevere is able to push her temper aside to participate in a political game that attempts to unify her realm. Her power is not solely derived from her royal status but also from her physical connection to the castle, a space that, as Martin previously demonstrated, is deeply tied to shaping identity and social influence. Although the dinner comes to an unpleasant end, no thanks to a poisoned apple and the death of Sir Patryse, it does not diminish the castle’s role. It remains a space where ladies like Isode and Guinevere can assert their desires and draw power, underlining their association with immobile structures as both a physical and symbolic foundation for ladies’ agency.

The last characterization of woman in *Le Morte d’Arthur* is that of the otherworldly. Or simply put, a woman defies and transcend the spatial boundaries that damsels and ladies must adhere to in the text. While both Morgan Le Fay and the Lady of the Lake can be placed in this category, this essay will be focused on a reading of the Lady of the Lake alone. Her otherworldliness is defined by her connection to both untamed landscapes and the structured world of castles and estates. The first clue to this duality lies in her title, *Lady of the Lake*. Unlike the traditional title of a lady of a castle, her designation ties her to the lake, a landscape that exists outside physical ownership. This fluidity allows her to move freely like a damsel, while simultaneously shaping the narrative through her mystical authority and resources. It is this that allows her to move like a damsel, yet actively shape the narrative through her resources and mystical authority. Amy Kaufman agrees that she slips out of every category she is placed. This enables her to be cordial and at times, even helpful to Arthur’s knights, but she is ultimately, “Equally liable to act in her own interest” (56). While there are far too many instances of Nyneve appearing in both wild and constructed spaces, her appearance in the first book of Sir Tristam demonstrates how her duality effectively creates her agency.

Under the enchantments of Aunwore, King Arthur is susceptible to her deceit, leading him to require saving—and The Lady of the Lake is happy to organize his rescue. She “cam into that foreyste to seke aftir Sir Launcelot du Lake other ellis Sir Trystramys for to helpe King Arthure” (385.1-2). In this scene, by way of her active participation, it is she who initiates and adventure of her own that is to find a way to liberate King Arthur. Once she acquires Sir Tristam, they ride together until they reach a castle, where Aunowore is ready to kill Arthur. Nyneve cries, “Lat nat that false lady escape!” (385.32) and Arthur, suddenly free to break out of her metaphorical grip, beheads her. It is only with Nyneve’s command that Arthur recognizes his ability to free himself. This is exactly what Nyneve wanted as the text states, “And the Lady of the Lake toke up hir hede and hynge hit at hir sadill-bowe by the heyre.” (385.34-35). Nyneve essentially wears Aunwore’s head like a prize she won, having convinced Arthur to execute her will, both literally and figuratively. Kaufman argues that this is evidence of Nyneve as a woman who uses her influence and power to support men’s interests only when it’s beneficial for her, further depicting her as a lady who has the freedom to “be the law and to break it” (67). It is Nyneve’s ability to traverse open landscapes as a damsel does, coupled with her lady-like ability to assume an authoritative voice within and around the physical space of a castle, that identifies her as not just a well-rounded character, but a woman who has both the freedom and resources to carry out her agency.

The relationships between physical landscapes and the female characters in the text are far from incidental, they actively shape the identities and agencies of both damsels and ladies. The wandering of damsels through untamed spaces seething with adventure, speaks to a fleeting, yet potent, form of agency, where they use their judgement to create the guidelines of worship. In contrast, ladies such as Isode and Guinevere acquire and exercise various forms of power within the fortified spaces. Yet This tension between the freedom of the natural world and the authority of the domestic sphere not only illuminates the varying expressions of female agency but also complicates the traditional notion of women as mere passive figures within the text. The otherworldly women highlight how when these two landscapes which are integral to the identities of women merge, they produce a woman fully capable of controlling her narrative. In this way, the complex interaction between gender, identity, and space in *Le Morte d'Arthur* challenges reductive readings of femininity, underscoring the narrative significance of space in the construction of identity, power, and agency of Malory’s women.

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1. Davidson, Roberta, “Reading Like a Woman in Malory's ‘Morte Darthur’”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fries, Maureen, “Gender and the Grail”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Murray, Susan, "Women and Castles in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Davidson, pp. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These instances occur during Gareth and Lynet’s journey together, spanning pages 228-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kristin Bovaird-Abbo, “Tough Talk or Tough Love: Lynet and the Construction of Feminine Identity in Thomas Malory's 'Tale of Sir Gareth'”. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Murray, pp. 18 for her explanation on the symbolic function of castles as feminine spaces being indicative of societal decay. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Davidson, pp. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hodges, Kenneth, Guinevere's Politics in Malory's "Morte Darthur", pp. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hodges, pp. 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)