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How Clothing Symbolizes the Feminization and Diminishing of Lancelot and his Knighthood:
Examining the Gendered Power Structures Within 1981's *Excalibur* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le*

Morte d'Arthur

Within Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and John Boorman's *Excalibur*, there is an intriguing dynamic between Lancelot, his knighthood, and his sexuality. In Malory's text, Lancelot is beloved by Guinevere, and their relationship is a well-known secret in all of the court, aside from Arthur. Though he is going against his King by maintaining relationships with the Queen, Lancelot's position as the best knight helps maintain his status within Arthur's court, and his betrayal against Arthur is what eventually kills Camelot. This is similar to Boorman's 1981 *Excalibur*, although the film strips Lancelot of his knighthood and masculine role and feminizes him with Guinevere. Lancelot's physical nudity shown in the film represents a vulnerability that is supposed to be absent in a patriarchal knight and undermines the power structure needed to keep knights above all but King Arthur.

1981's *Excalibur* portrays the power dynamics between each character in how they are dressed during sexual scenes. Out of the three sex scenes in the film, only one has both parties fully naked for the audience to see. The first scene is the rape of Igraine by Uther, in which he is wearing a full suit of armor as she is taken advantage of in front of her daughter while she is fully nude. The third sex scene in the film is also a rape scene, in which Arthur is hexed by his half-sister Morgana. Morgana is not just forcing herself upon him, but he is also entirely nude for

the eyes of the audience while she is fully clothed. This is juxtaposed with Lancelot and Guinevere's love scene. Not only are they both consenting to be with each other, but they both are completely nude with each other in the forest. Unlike the two rape scenes, Lancelot and Guinevere are equally vulnerable and are not on display for the audience to examine.

Igraine's rape is the traditional power dynamic for a patriarchal society. Her entire on-screen presence revolves around her status as the best woman, and she is seen as a prize to Uther, who considers himself the best man and craves to be King. King Arthur's rape mimics his mothers in disturbing and striking ways; Morgana conceals herself as Guinevere, much like Uther concealed himself as Cornwall. This feminizes Arthur. He has been stripped down for the audience, and he is used for his body without his consent. This is why Lancelot and Guinevere's knowing and willful consent is a more significant betrayal and sin. Not only is Lancelot being feminized like Arthur, but because they are both naked, the power imbalance is nonexistent. Lancelot and Guinevere have been accused of adultery and treason against the King. Lancelot wins and, therefore, absolves them of their crime, but they still cannot stay away from each other. Although it is clear that Lancelot is trying to maintain his composure and push Guinevere away when they meet in the forest, their love for each other is too great. Lancelot holds out his sword to Guinevere, seemingly to stop her from approaching, yet she grabs hold of it, accepts the temptation, and pulls herself into Lancelot's hesitant arms. This ultimately dooms them and the kingdom as Arthur finds them together fully nude and abandons Excalibur in between them, effectively taking away Lancelot's knighthood.

Malory's version differs in the descriptions of Lancelot and Guinevere's physical relationship, but their betrayal and the sin of sleeping together are still the same. Within book six of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Malory describes Lancelot's failed attempt to find the Grail. The lady tells

him that though he is the most "marvelous" and most "adventurous" man in the world, he is too earthly of a knight (349). He is too earthly because he continues to have an adulterous relationship with Queen Guinevere, and because of this relationship, he will never be able to find the Grail. Much of the other sex depicted throughout the book is violent or inconsequential to the tale. But with Lancelot and Guinevere, their sex is the ultimate crime because it is more than lust. Lancelot is betraying the patriarchal power structure that he is supposed to be upholding. In Book 8, after many knights orchestrate a plan to catch Lancelot with Guinevere, Malory writes, "Now Jesu defend me from shame," said Sir Lancelot, "and keep and save my lady the Queen from villainy and shameful death, and that she never be destroyed in my default!" (476). Rather than attempting to blame Guinevere for their acts, to claim that she seduced him wrongfully, he admits to their love and only wishes for her to be saved. Much like how he saves her from physical peril, he still attempts to save her from the shame of betraying King Arthur and the kingdom of Camelot.

In both the film and the text, Arthur must determine the validity of the rumors of Guinevere and Lancelot's relationship. Though some of the knights wish for Arthur to fight for his Queen's honor, he must remain impartial for the sanctity of Camelot and asks for Lancelot to fight, considering he must also absolve himself from the allegations. Lancelot is triumphant in both the text and the film, but he is badly wounded, signaling the genuine guilt behind the allegations. Though he is a brilliant fighter and saves himself from death, he is not strong enough to remain unharmed, like he would have been had the allegations been false. Lancelot is guilty and ashamed for failing to uphold his duty to Camelot and, more importantly, his commitment to Arthur. In *Excalibur*, Arthur finds Lancelot and Guinevere naked in the forest together after the tournament. Instead of killing them for their betrayal, he plants his sword, Excalibur, between

them. By doing this, he relinquishes his role as King of the land and forces the system to fall apart. In both the novel and the film, Lancelot tries to atone for his crimes by devoting his life entirely to the Lord and becomes a priest. Although Arthur eventually forgives them both, Lancelot will never be able to regain his place at the top of the masculine pyramid and will never be a knight again. In the film, Arthur talks to Kay while planning to fight Mordred and declares, "I've lived through others far too long. Lancelot carried my honor, and Guinevere, my guilt. Mordred bore my sins. My Knights have fought my causes. Now my brother, I shall be... King!" (Boorman). Arthur is planting himself firmly at the top of the pyramid, has become the best man again, and has pushed Guinevere and Lancelot out of his way.

Malory and Boorman's Lancelot are characterized very similarly and are both stripped of their knighthood because of their relationship with Queen Guinevere. Lancelot has been feminized in the film and the book and can no longer uphold the strict patriarchal structures that knighthood requires. Lancelot is shown vulnerable without armor, without clothes, and without weapons; therefore, he is too attached to Guinevere to be able to devote his life to the King and the toxic masculine standards prevalent in Camelot.