Spring 2022

Femininity Reclaiming Chivalry in the Harry Potter Series

Ashley M. Watson

FEMININITY RECLAIMING CHIVALRY IN THE *HARRY POTTER* SERIES

by

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(Under the Direction of Carol Jamison)

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the reclaiming of chivalric values by female characters in the *Harry Potter* series by comparing them to Arthurian characters. Scholars have extensively compared the narrative of the knights of the round table to the global phenomenon of the *Harry Potter* series, but in this paper I explore, through a feminist lens, a character comparison of the *Harry Potter* novels and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur.* I will show how female characters in modern literature reclaim chivalry. This is important because it exemplifies a shift in the position of women into a more active role. I will examine secondary, frequently neglected characters of the *Harry Potter* series, such as Hermione, Merope Gaunt (Voldemort's mother), Ginny Weasley, Severus Snape, and Helena Ravenclaw, and I will show how they parallel Malory's characters Ettard, Elayne of Ascolot, The Lady of the Lake, Queen Guinevere, and the broad chivalric hero. I argue that the retelling of these characters' narratives represents a shift in the significance of women in reclaiming and reworking chivalric themes.

INDEX WORDS: Sir Thomas Malory, J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter*, *Le Morte D'Arthur,* Feminism, King Arthur, Medievalism, Adolescent Literature, Modernism

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B.S., Georgia Southern University, 2018

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2022

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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Electronic Version Approved

May 2022

DEDICATION

To my dearest Mom,

I fell in love with the *Harry Potter* series because of you. You have been there for every graduation and supported my dream of using my exponential knowledge of this fandom for academia. I will always cherish our debates on the series and your love for it that rivals my own.

To my Dad (my twin),

Thank you for instilling a love for reading for as long I can remember. Those days of reading *The Emperor's New Clothes* are just as responsible for this accomplishment as anything else.

To my encouraging Husband,

Thank you for allowing me to read you the many drafts of this thesis even though you never soaked up a word. Your continued support to pursue my dreams and finish this project encouraged me to continue even when quitting sounded so sweet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I have received a great deal of support. I am grateful to everyone that supported me through this process, but I do have some honorable mentions that deserve more than just the words I can provide here.

I would first like to thank and acknowledge my Thesis Director, Dr. Carol Jamison. Your passion for medievalism as well as the *Harry Potter* series made this process not only successful, but also pleasurable. I will cherish our debates on Severus Snape's character and your insightful feedback that inspired me to work harder. Words cannot describe the amount of gratitude that I feel for your consistent aid and all of the time you had to put in to help me achieve this step in my education.

I would also like to acknowledge the other professors that made this possible, my thesis committee members Dr. Jane Rago and Dr. Lindsey Chappell. You each provided unique perspectives that guided me to the right direction to successfully complete my thesis. I want to thank you both for all of the work and time that you have dedicated to this project.

Finally, I would like to thank a few of my fellow graduate students. Amber Stickney, Sarah Knowles, and Ashley Campbell. They told us going into this program that we would need shoulders to cry on and a support system that understands what you are going through. Each of you provided that for me. I am grateful for our vent sessions and each of your assistance throughout the program. I would have easily lost my sanity without you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have extensively compared the narrative of the knights of the round table to the global phenomenon of the *Harry Potter Series*, but in this paper, I plan to explore through a feminist lens, a character comparison of the *Harry Potter* novels and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur.* I will show how female characters in modern literature reclaim chivalry. This is important because it exemplifies a shift from medieval to modern, in the position of women into a more active role with their own body autonomy and their own ability to be chivalric.

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is a fifteen-century prose romance first published by William Caxton in 1485. It is the first English-language full compilation of the legends of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. It narrates the adventures of the knights as well as Arthur's legend from his birth to his death. In twenty-one books, *Le Morte D'Arthur* features tales of bravery, tests of loyalty, and the expectation of brotherhood within the knighthood. In *Le Morte D'Arthur* the expectation of chivalry is gendered as male. The popularity of this work cannot be underestimated, as centuries later, authors still borrow and adopt Malory's themes and characters, including J. K. Rowling, in her *Harry Potter* series.

Like Malory's romance, the *Harry Potter* series also features tales of bravery, loyalty, and expectations of brotherhood. Brotherhood in this series references more than a male gendered chivalry but rather a bonding together of houses to form a loyalty to each other as well as the school. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series was born from the novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (also released as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*) in 1997. The series encompasses seven bestselling novels that were eventually adapted into eight films. All the

novels and films follow the life of an orphan wizard named Harry Potter while he comes of age in a magical world.

Because both works encompass so much material, I would like to examine secondary, frequently neglected characters of the *Harry Potter* series such as Merope Gaunt (Voldemort's mother), Helena Ravenclaw, Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, and although he is male, Severus Snape. I plan to use these characters juxtaposed with Malory's characters of Ettard, Elyane of Ascolot, Queen Guinevere, The Lady of the Lake, as well as the broader character type of the chivalric hero. I have chosen these characters for very specific reasons. Merope, Helena, and Ginny are all frequently neglected because they are not main characters in the series. Because Severus Snape is male, I have chosen to use his story as a final point between the gender-bending of the narrative because the Lady of the Lake is female, and Snape is male. He expresses the change of chivalry to include sensitivity as well as bravery and cunning. After reading this paper, Severus Snape will change the way in which we read secondary male characters as chivalric despite their traditionally attributed female attributes.

Though each of these characters will be compared using a close reading through a feminist lens, I will emphasize different subpoints. With my focus on Merope and Helena, I will argue that they represent a retelling of Malory's "Pelleas and Ettard" and "Elayne of Ascolot" narratives. As I will explain later, I found no evidence that this was intentional on the part of the series. Nevertheless, these characters highlight a progressive shift in the significance of women in reclaiming and reworking chivalric themes because of their body autonomy, their influence of choice, and the manipulation that is involved in their deaths.

Scholars such as Julia Pond have noted that contemporary adolescent or young adult literature has always been concerned with identity and finding oneself. In "Treading Water:

Considering Adolescent Characters in Moratorium" Pond writes about the recurring theme of self-discovery in adolescent literature. Pond writes "Adolescent literature often seeks to examine the emotional, psychological, and physical growth of adolescents. Psychologists, sociologists, and childhood studies experts have all claimed the importance of adolescence as a time of identity formation" (Pond 87). Identity formation is not only relevant to adolescent literature but permeates throughout medieval romance as well. Medieval characters, like Lancelot, have also been concerned with their reputation. Lancelot is the most recognizable Arthurian knight and his identity is formed primarily on his involvement in a love affair with Queen Guinevere. Lesley Lawton discusses in "Reconsidering the Use of Gender Stereotypes in Medieval Romance: Figures of Vulnerability and of Power " the importance of identity stereotypes in medieval romance. Lawton writes "Indeed, the stereotypes to be found in medieval romance still speak to a modern audience since romances share with other traditional narratives a tendency to use narrative patterns which, by their recurrence, indicate that they connect with the deep structures of the human imagination and of cultural practice" (Malory 3). As you will see throughout this paper, I argue that the series uses these stereotypes to give female characters autonomy over their narrative.

I would like to explore the range of medievalism within contemporary adolescent literature and how modern adolescent literature puts emphasis on and often reshapes themes and characteristics of medieval literature. The *Harry Potter* series incorporates these common themes of the Middle Ages to an audience in order to introduce nostalgia for this time period. Nostalgia for chivalric values and knighthood is relevant to J.K. Rowling's attempt at femininity reclaiming chivalry because the writers of these characters explore the knightly identity. Those characters are the males (Lancelot, Galahad, Arthur, etc.). These characters have been

represented in *Harry Potter* by both female and male characters, and it is important to emphasize that female perspective because these female characters present important role models for chivalry for young women. Severus Snape will be the exception to this narrative because he is a representation of the gender-bending alternative of The Lady of the Lake and her role in the narrative. Because this is a contemporary piece of literature, I would like to explore the feminine identity through the use of characters for whom readers are nostalgic, Arthurian characters to be more specific, but I argue that the *Harry Potter* series introduces them through a female perspective.

J.K. Rowling has made claims that she never intended for the novels to be representative of either sexism or feminism. In her article "J.K. Rowling's Ambivalence Towards Feminism: House Elves- Women in Disguise- in the 'Harry Potter' Books," Rivka Temima Kellner argues that J.K. Rowling has an opportunity to make feminist arguments but remains ambivalent. Kellner writes "Thus despite the fact that in many ways Rowling creates a world of impressively emancipated and empowered women, still, in the world she creates the nuclear family structure is intensely traditional and patriarchal, and the books, of course, focus on a hero, not heroine" (Kellner 367). I believe both things can be true at once, but I would like to explore the argument that J.K. Rowling has nevertheless created a feminist work of literature. Though there is extensive criticism of *Harry Potter* being a sexist and misogynistic series, I want to argue that her female heroines reclaim male attributes. In reference to feminism, I am using the most basic form of the theory. I will be referencing the attributes and gender norms that are socially constructed but are often attributed to the female characters, such as a lack of agency. Traditionally, the female characters are flat and used as plot devices, but I argue that there are many feminist characters that are responsible for their own self-agency. There are many feminist

characters in the series including but not limited to Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Bellatrix Lestrange, Narcissa Malfoy, Professor McGonagall, Lily Evans, and others. Missing from these interpretations are the secondary characters as I mentioned above like Helena Ravenclaw and Merope Gaunt. I would like to bring them to the forefront of the scholarly conversation because they offer insight into how this modern text interprets medieval chivalry.

Although Rowling did not intend to write a feminist text, we still find feminist values in the work that are worth being explored, and if we consider the work to be a nostalgic representation of the Arthurian legend, we must look at how chivalry impacts these inherently feminist characters. These feminist values are mirrored in the agency that women are given, whether on purpose or not, in Malory. Scholars of medieval literature argue that the role of women in *Le Morte D'Arthur* is one of empowerment, but the female characters only had different character responsibilities than the male characters, and where they were located during the tale was relevant to their importance and autonomy. As Janet Jesmok discusses in her article "Guiding Lights: Feminine Judgment and Wisdom in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," the female characters in *Le Morte D'Arthur* have power in judgements and in using the knights for their will. Jesmok writes "This wise, sometimes prescient, voice of judgment, evident from the first book, resonates thematically and even morally in the text. From secondary figures to the Morte's most important female characters, women assess and judge in matters of social and courtly behavior, chivalry, and morality" (34). By this reading, the women in Malory can be progressive and authoritative by medieval standards, but they are limited to their environments. They could be empowered in the right setting, but not in the courts or as main quest characters.

In reference to the expectation of empowerment in specific settings, the theory that surrounds performativity of gender is relevant to the characters that we will be considering. About gender performativity, Judith Butler writes

> To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the 'appearance' of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power, and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines. (Butler i)

These gendered expectations appear throughout literature with the tropes such as the "damsel in distress" or the chivalric hero. Both of these trope characters come paired with specific gender roles and expectations. The chivalric hero is the male protagonist that saves the day and in the process, saves the damsel (female) from an antagonist or circumstance. Just as Butler discusses, the reproducing of the norm is what establishes these gender roles. I argue that the *Harry Potter* series reframes these gender roles and therefore, through subtle and unexpected ways, allows for growth of characterization for the female characters.

As we discuss the roles of the modern female characters as feminine, as well as feminist, I must first discuss the ways in which I will use these terms throughout this paper to insure complete clarity. My framework is based on the idea that gender and the specific binary of feminine and masculine are socially constructed. The five-hundred-year time difference between these two texts is important to the definitions of these terms because as a society our understanding of gender performativity and expectations has changed. When discussing the

female characters as feminine I am referring to their bodily agency, autonomy, and the fact that the female characters are never masculinized. Sir Thomas Malory's depiction of femininity is very different from the femininity of 1992 (when the first installment of the *Harry Potter* series was released), and the concept of femininity is rapidly changing to this day. This paper focuses specifically on the traditionally patriarchal, socially constructed ideas of what is feminine versus what is masculine. My criteria for considering these characters as feminist and female are that they are unapologetic for their femininity, and they have agency within the narrative that serves as more than just a plot development.

I argue that Rowling's female heroines reclaim male attributes. In "Feminist Characters in Harry Potter," Summaya Banu and A. S. Mohanagiri write, "The characters are strong and complex, bossy and more responsible, proud, conceited and vicious. Rowling's female characters constantly fight against the patriarchal subjugation inherent in both real and in their fictional world taking charge of their own identities and empowerment. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series exemplifies a young adult feminist novel in many ways" (292). Their article concerns Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Narcissa Malfoy. However, they do not emphasize, such as Merope Gaunt and Helena Ravenclaw. I will demonstrate how these often-neglected characters also have responsibility for their own identities and empowerment.

The responsibility these secondary characters possess over their identities is a modernized representation of the nostalgic Arthurian legend, and I will look at how chivalry impacts these inherently feminist characters. These feminist values are mirrored in the agency that women are given, whether on purpose or not, in Malory. The role of women in *Le Morte D'Arthur* might be considered one of empowerment, but female characters had clearly distinct responsibilities and roles than the male characters, and where they were located during the tale

was relevant to their importance and autonomy. Phoebe Linton expresses this view when she writes, "… places governed by what are termed 'matriarchal' authorities including queens, ladies, supernatural women and nuns, where private identity and individual emotions are more readily expressed. Marginal women speak and act in both the court and quest wilderness, but their identities are articulated differently in each" (Linton 28). By this reading the women in Malory can be read as progressive and authoritative but limited to their environments. In contrast, Rowling's characters are mobile, and they are empowered outside of their usual environments. For example, in the film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Ginny Weasley is able to stand back-to-back with Harry and cast curses against the death eaters while outside of her home, The Burrow (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* 01:18:22-01:19:22*)*. Her agency does not disappear outside of the walls of Hogwarts.

The definition of chivalry as a code of behavior is seen through these narratives focusing on those attributes that represent knightly behavior. Maurice Keen writes "Chivalry is an evocative word, conjuring up images in the mind- of the knight fully armed, perhaps with the crusaders' red cross sewn upon his surcoat; of martial adventures in strange lands; of castles with tall towers and of the fair women who dwelt in them…It is a word that was used in the middle ages with different meanings and shades of meaning by different writers and in different contexts" (Keen 1-2). Authors like J.K. Rowling have taken the medieval themes of chivalry that include loyalty, franchise, and prowess, and formed their own world that exemplifies those qualities.

"Femininity Reclaiming Chivalry in the *Harry Potter* Series" is an important facet of scholarship regarding medievalism in the *Harry Potter* series because these female characters have gotten virtually no attention. These characters are important to understanding contemporary

versions of femininity in regard to chivalrous attributes because they represent female chivalric heroines. In order to see these female characters as chivalric we must first look beyond the male hero to see how they exert agency. By allowing the space to discuss female characters juxtaposed with nostalgic characters of the Arthurian legend, I have filled in a gap that allows for future academics to build on the idea of female characters reclaiming agency when compared to characters of five hundred years previously.

In beginning my research, I hoped to argue that by comparing these two works side by side we would see a dramatic change in the female characterization in the modern work compared to the medieval text. This hope, however, did not prove to be true. There was not a dramatic change in female characterization between the two narratives, but there was a change in the female's ability to participate in the quests rather than just provide a plot movement or a reason for the main characters to go on the quests. I argue that we see these feminist characters retell and reclaim chivalric values, which classically were reserved for men, in their control over their careers, deaths, and more broadly, their choices. Severus Snape's character complicates this notion because his attributes represent traditionally female characters. His gender-bending of the female stereotypes support the reclaiming of chivalric values because he is an intricate part of the narrative.

CHAPTER 2

CHIVALRY AND AGENCY

With the term chivalry there are many attributes that come to mind such as being loyal, just, and honest. Both Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series contain their own definition of the term and the expectations that one must follow in order to be considered chivalrous. Merope Gaunt, Helena Ravenclaw, Ginny Weasley, Severus Snape, and Hermione Granger present more than just plot development and vessels that need male characters to act through and for them. All of these characters have their own backstory, their own legacy, and an ability to make decisions that affect more than the life of the main character.

Each of these authors deal with core tropes of chivalric narratives such as prophecy and the expectations of leadership. Both narratives also follow a series of characters that portray the chivalric values expressed by each of the authors. In "Blood Ties, Blood Sacrifice, and the Blood Feud in Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series," Carol Jamison discusses the importance of blood and franchise between the two narratives as well as the similarities between them in reference to chivalric values. She writes "In her Harry Potter novels, Rowling brings to life for young readers a number of themes and motifs that permeate the European medieval romance, a genre that focuses on the adventures of knights and the establishment of chivalric ideals" (Jamison 308). Though these conversations are important, Jamison focuses only on the male characters whereas this paper examines the male characters of Malory juxtaposed with the female characters of *Harry Potter.* This is relevant to the academic conversation because, though the other chivalric tropes are important to the series, the fact that chivalry has been manipulated to include a female perspective is a contributing factor to reading this text.

Malory's explanation of chivalry is found in the Pentecostal Oath. This Oath is the set of rules that Arthur's knights of the Round Table must follow. Malory writes

> Never to do outerage nothir mourthir and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff
>
> mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of their worship and
>
> lordship of Kyng Arthure fore everimoe, and allwayes do ladies, damesels, and
>
> jantilwomen and wydowes [sucour]. (Malory 76)

Malory's retelling of the Pentecostal Oath is debated because Arthur seems to not have challenging rules for his most honorable knights. Critics of Malory's Pentecostal Oath, such as Robert L. Kelly, have pointed out that the Oath is extremely broad and provides low standards and expectations for the knights of the Round Table. In "Royal Policy and Malory's Round Table," Robert Kelly explains that the Oath does not sum up completely what Malory seems to consider the chivalric code. He argues that there are implied characteristics that Arthur expects of his knights, but they are not expressed outright in the Pentecostal Oath. Kelly writes "The Pentecostal Oath says nothing of gentility, courtesy, truthfulness, faithfulness to friends, and self-sacrifice, all of which appear to be integral to Malory's 'conception of chivalry'" (Kelly 56). With that being said, we cannot rely on the Pentecostal Oath to represent the full concept of Malory's chivalry because there are inherent traits of Malory's knights that are considered chivalric that are not outwardly stated in the Pentecostal Oath.

The broad term of chivalry is difficult to define. Maurice Keen defines chivalry when he writes "From a very early stage we find the romantic authors habitually associating together certain qualities which they clearly regarded as the classic virtues of good knighthood: prouusse, loyaute, largesse (generosity), courtoisie, and franchise (the free and frank bearing that is visible

testimony to the combination of good birth with virtue)" (Keen 2). It is on these attributes that

J.K. Rowling's conception of chivalry is born, not through the rules of the Pentecostal Oath.

In juxtaposition to *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the *Harry Potter* series does not explicitly say

what chivalric values are; however, we do know that the most chivalric house of the four is that

of Godric Gryffindor. Carol Jamison writes about J.K. Rowling's branch of chivalry: "Through

her portrayal of her titular hero and his companions, Rowling crafts her own neomedieval brand

of wizard chivalry that connects the significance of blood ties with a code of behavior. Her

wizards share with Malory's knights not only chivalric values such as loyalty, generosity, and

prowess, but also an emphasis on the importance of blood, both as proof of merit, and also as

potential source of conflict" (Jamison 309). During Harry's first year at Hogwarts, the Sorting

Hat must sort all the students into their separate houses based on the attributes that he finds in

their heads. During the song the hat sings before Harry's sorting ceremony, we get to see the

traits that are associated with each house. The Sorting Hat sings

"You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindors apart;" (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*, 118).

The object that is associated with Godric Gryffindor and Gryffindor's house is a sword. This

sword becomes an important symbol of chivalry and honor throughout the series including Harry

rescuing a 'damsel in distress' (Ginny Weasley) during the second novel of the series. Harry

must prove he is meant to be in Gryffindor throughout his magical education.

For this paper specifically, to say that I am looking for the reclaiming of chivalric values

by the female characters of the *Harry Potter* series does not mean none of the female characters

in Malory possess power. In her chapter "Always to Do Ladies, Damosels, and Gentlewomen

succour': Women and the Chivalric Code in Malory's Morte Darthur" Felicia Ackerman

discusses the ways in which the women in Malory possess limited agency. Ackerman writes

"What makes women powerful in Malory's world is not just the knightly understanding of

women as powerless, but this understanding in conjunction with the moral imperative that

knights of the Round Table do ladies, damsels, and gentlewomen succor. Without this

imperative, the knightly understanding of women as powerless could be a basis for overpowering

and taking advantage of women rather than for protecting and serving them" (Ackerman 4-5). It

is through the knight's will that the women of Malory find their agency and power. The Oath

requires them to aid women and it is because of that aid that women are able to have control

throughout the narrative over the quests, rather than doing the quests themselves.

The aid of women is strongly represented in reference to the love story between Queen

Guinevere and Lancelot. Readers can see the slight progression of women in modern literature

represented by comparing Ginny Weasley to Queen Guinevere. Though both characters have

influence and agency, each needs a hero to save them. Both narratives present the idea that the

female heroine cannot save herself, regardless of the chivalric values she possesses. Ginny's real

name is Ginevra, and it is hard not to see the comparison between the two by the names alone.

She is the object of affection for Harry and does not have much of her own body autonomy.

Ginny is given even less of a character in the movies, but in the books, she is the epitome of the

Gryffindor house. She is described as being brave, outspoken, never wants to be protected, etc;

however, we rarely get to see this for ourselves. The only representation in the films of Ginny's

authoritative attributes is when she screams "Shut It" on the quidditch pitch. In the books she is

more authoritative and rebellious. I argue the only similarity between these two is that they are both the object of affection and are merely used as a plot device for the love story.

Even in the books, though Ginny is a much more interesting character here than the movies, she still does not do anything apart from being Harry's future wife just as Queen Guinevere is most remembered for her affair with Lancelot. Both women need rescuing by their respective men. Though Ginny does wind up with Harry in the end, where Guinevere winds up at a nunnery, both women serve little purpose. Ginny is represented as a young girl who dates boys. That is the basis of her character. The progression of women is represented however with Ginny's ending. Yes, she does end up being a wife and mother, but J.K. Rowling also makes it a point to give her a full career. Ginny was an exemplary Quidditch player, chaser and seeker, and later became a professional Quidditch player for the Holyhead Harpies and after she retired to have her family, she returned to the sport to be a correspondent for the newspaper, the *Daily Prophet*. It is important to remember that this was all told to us after the end of the series by J.K. Rowling. I believe that the series, by giving readers more into Ginny's life, is attempting to make the statement that women in literature must first become the wife and mother they are expecting to be, but she is challenging that by giving Ginny a career in sports that is usually reserved for male characters. We must remember that the *Harry Potter* series is still a living series. Because of sites such as *Pottermore, The Fantastic Beasts series*, and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, these characters will continue to evolve.

For both Ginny Weasley and Queen Guinevere, the "damsel in distress" stereotype is used as a plot device. In Malory's tale The Knight of the Cart, Queen Guinevere is kidnapped by Sir Melliagaunce. When she is first kidnapped, all of her knights are overtaken, and she decides to go willingly with Sir Melliagaunce as a way to protect her knights from death. From the

beginning of this tale, Queen Guinevere is unable to protect herself. Her knights fight valiantly and lose and then Lancelot enters and rescues her.

In Ginny Weasley's first year at Hogwarts she pours her heart and soul into a diary. Unfortunately for her, this diary is filled with the memories of Tom Riddle. We learn later that Tom Riddle is the young Voldemort. Ginny is cursed to do Voldemort's bidding and eventually is taken into the Chamber of Secrets to drain her life so that Voldemort can steal her power. Ginny's power makes Voldemort's life possible.

> "If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted… I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of my secrets, to start pouring a little of my soul back into her…" (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, 310).

When Harry makes it down into the chamber, he sees Ginny dying slowly. After his acts of chivalry and bravery, pulling the sword out of the Sorting Hat like Arthur did the stone, proves his worthiness as a Gryffindor. After Harry destroys the diary, subsequently destroying Voldemort's memory, Ginny's life returns to her. So, on one hand, Ginny's power is so substantial that Voldemort uses her as a way to gain life by draining her power, however, on the other hand, Ginny needs to be rescued by Harry.

Therefore, the *Harry Potter* series presents a female that has power enough to be used as a pawn but not powerful enough to save herself. Queen Guinevere has agency within the court and has influence over Lancelot because of their love; however, Ginny is powerful outside of her regular environment of the school and was responsible for having enough power to be a chosen

victim of Voldemort. Though both of these female characters represent a "damsel in distress," Ginny is portrayed as powerful and uninhibited in comparison to Guinevere.

The limitations of feminine chivalry in comparison from Ginny to Queen Guinevere shows that Malory's powerful women are still deeply embedded in reliance on the knights for aid. Ackerman also writes "Sex-role rigidity has obvious disadvantages. Although not inherently degrading, reliance on knightly prowess does not always work well for women in practice. Some knights mistreat women. And knights do not always spring to a lady's assistance, as Guenever discovered in the poisoning episode, where she has to engage in some genuine degrading begging for help" (Ackerman 12). Just as with Queen Guinevere, the women of Malory often must prove themselves in order to receive help, and even sometimes still must beg for it.

Female characters are used as tools to prove the chivalry of knights and is represented throughout the narrative as complications happen to the women that forward the story. Melissa Elmes in "Public Displays of Affliction: Women's Wounds in Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur" describes Malory's female characters as passive figures that enact active direction for the story. Elmes writes "... the role of Malory's women as instrumental rather than agential, but while female characters are passive figures within the narrative, they are also active narrative elements- meaning that the wounds visited upon them influence, alter, or redirect the story" (Elmes 192-193). It is because of these criticisms that I have decided to find chivalric values portrayed through the female characters of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

CHAPTER 3

HARRY AND THE HEARTBREAK AND UNREQUITED LOVE

I maintain that female characters in the *Harry Potter* series specifically reclaim

traditionally male medieval chivalric values through their choices and actions. Both Merope

Gaunt and Helena Ravenclaw represent two minor characters of the *Harry Potter* series that are

neglected in the academic conversation. They are relevant to the conversation of a reclaiming of

chivalric values despite their characters only receiving a chapter each throughout the entire seven

book series. Each of these two frequently neglected characters is able to choose their fate while

subsequently, both their deaths are narrated in the series.

Children's literature reintroduces common themes of the Middle Ages to an audience in

order to introduce the nostalgia for this time period. Maria Cecire discusses the range of

medievalism within contemporary children's literature and how modern children's literature puts

emphasis on themes and characteristics of medieval literature. Cecire writes, "Children's fantasy

literature often contributes to a nationalistic tradition of nostalgia for the Middle Ages, glorifying

and reproducing that period for contemporary readers by including medieval narratives and

'perceived codes of values' as well as the customary medievalised trappings of castles, knights,

magicians etc." (Cecire 395). Nostalgia for medieval characters and themes is relevant to J.K.

Rowling's attempt at femininity reclaiming chivalry because the medieval characters that were

normally given the chance to exemplify knightly virtues and explore identities through

adventures and quests were the males (Lancelot, Galahad, Arthur, etc.). These characters have

been represented in *Harry Potter* by both female and male characters, and it is important to

emphasize that female perspective because Young Adult literature is often consumed by young

women and those young women need chivalric heroes to identify with as well. Through this

contemporary piece of literature, we are able to explore the feminine identity (traits that are traditionally associated with femininity such as empathy, humility, and sensitivity) through the use of characters that readers are nostalgic for, but the series introduces them through a female perspective.

Now that we have established the differences in women's authority between *Le Morte D'Arthur* and the *Harry Potter* series, I will explore a common theme between the two by analyzing the differences between the two works and how they approach the nostalgic theme of heartbreak and unrequited love. The first example I will use for this concept is a memorable story from Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* regarding heartbreak is the tale of Elayne of Ascolot and Lancelot. Though Elayne dies of anguish and lovesickness for Lancelot, she avenges her own death. She does so by making sure that her body would be sent to Lancelot with a letter which allows for Lancelot to know his role in her death. Before her death Elayne requests of her father to place her corpse in a barge with the letter in her hand:

> 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 lette 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 clothes be ledde with me in a charyat unto the next 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.
>
> (Malory 828)

This request to her father ensures that her body would be cast down the water to Lancelot. In the letter that she has clutched in her hand when she arrives at the shore, Elayne says that she had

loved Lancelot but that he did not return her love and that this heartbreak was the cause of her death. Malory writes

> Moste noble knyght, my lorde Sir Lancelot, now hath dethe made us too at debate for youre love. And I was youre lover, that men called the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolate. Therefore unto all ladies I make my mone that for my soule ye pray and bury me at the leste, and offir ye my masse-peny: thys ys my laste request. And a clene maydyn I dyed, I take God to wytnesse. And pray for my soule, Sir Lancelot, as thou arte pereles. (Malory 829)

Here Elayne is blaming her death on Lancelot's betrayal, but she is still giving a final goodbye that she knows will affect Lancelot greatly. In this way, she shows some degree of agency albeit after her death. The story of Elayne is reworked through various works of literature and even in art and music. We see the image of her dead body cast in many Pre-Raphaelite paintings and even a description of her death in music, such as Loreena Mckeenit's song rendition of Lord Tennyson's, "The Lady of Shalott." At first it seems that Elayne is just a narrow-minded girl who fell for the wrong man. She heals him when he is ill in hopes that he will love her back. It is this desperation that appeals to various artists and that the *Harry Potter* series corrected by recasting Elayne of Ascolt as Voldemort's mother, Merope Gaunt.

We do not get a lot of backstory about Elayne and what led her to be so quick to fall in love, but the opposite is true for Merope Gaunt. Scholars have written little to nothing about Voldemort's mother, Merope, because she is not in the movies; but she is an integral part of understanding Voldemort as a character as well as how the series is reframing the narrative of death due to unreciprocated love. Merope is the daughter of a drunken, entitled, and abusive father. Her family consists of the last living descents of Salazar Slytherin therefore their

obsession over blood status, incest, as well as greed, left them poor and bitter. Merope Gaunt was abused by her father and brother for years, to the point where they thought she had no magical powers, and the abuse leads Merope to fall in love with a muggle named Tom Riddle, who is Voldemort's father. This marriage brings disgrace upon the family and taints his matriarchal pureblood line. After her father and brother were imprisoned, she tricked Tom Riddle Sr. (Voldemort/Tom Riddle's Father) into drinking a love potion and when she got pregnant, she stopped giving it to him thinking he would stay for the sake of the child, but she was wrong.[1] Dumbledore retold the story to Harry and explained

> I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed
>
> more romantic to her, and I do not think it would have been very difficult, some
>
> hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water.
>
> In any case, within a few months of the scene we have just witnessed, the village
>
> of Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it
>
> caused when the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter, Merope.
>
> (Rowling, *Half Blood Prince,* 178).

When Riddle Sr. abandoned her, she went to the orphanage, gave birth to Voldemort, then died after she named him. She stayed alive long enough to honor the man she was dying for by naming her one and only son after the father who had abandoned them.

Merope has more control over her fate (death) than Elayne does. Merope is an oppositional character to Harry's mother because she died to save Harry and Merope, according to Harry, "wouldn't even stay alive for her son" (Rowling, *Half Blood Prince,* 180). Though it is never explicitly written that she commits suicide, Harry's perception is that she should have been

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[1] There is also another tale in Malory that features a love potion. The difference is that both lovers are manipulated rather than doing the manipulation. This is the tale of Tristan and Isolde.

able to stay alive for her son but chooses not to. This implies that she had control over dying of her heartbreak because she chose death rather than live for a son that needed her. She stays alive long enough to give birth and name her son. She chooses to die rather than live for a son that needed her. In opposition, Elayne's choice was to send Lancelot her letter blaming him for her death, but she did not choose to die. She chose to write the letter, but she was going to die of lovesickness either way. It is through the protagonist's view that Merope's choice is a failure of chivalric values since she is putting herself above the needs of her son. The key takeaway from this comparison, however, is that Merope is given a choice and it indicates her personal autonomy over death.

Both Merope and Elayne can be argued to have died of a heartbreak, but it is in Harry's perception that we see Merope's power over her death. Though we only get to read Elayne through Malory's perspective we also have the letter she writes. It is one of the only times we get a view of a character's own thoughts, and it is a female character. Merope also gets to tell her story. For both characters, the ability to tell their story demonstrates their agency. As mentioned, Harry believes that Merope dies in spite of a son that needed her and therefore she has the choice to die. Elayne's choice does not rest in her death, as she is going to die regardless, but her power is presented after her death, in her choice to send her body down the river. The *Harry Potter* series has successfully, though unintentionally, mirrored these two characters and given Merope power while she was still alive. In this essence, Merope's repossession of male chivalric values in medieval literature throughout her narrative is her repossession over her death.

Merope and Elayne are very alike in the sense that they both died of a heartbreak, but the *Harry Potter* series challenges the narrative by gender swapping the person in charge of the manipulation of these two characters. Elayne is used by Lancelot when he wears her token in

order to disguise himself. She asked him to wear a favor of hers on his helmet, which meant a great deal during that time and was perceived as a token of affection, and he agreed selfishly because it aided in his disguise. Guinevere suggests that Lancelot compete in the tournament disguised so that he could escape the gossip of the town but also to prove that he is still a worthy knight and not just relying on his reputation. Lancelot was not thinking of Elayne's feelings and what repercussions it would have, but rather how it would benefit him in the end and please Guinevere if he were to fight *incognito*.

In the *Harry Potter* series, Merope is responsible for the complete manipulation of her love interest. Similar to Lancelot's disregard for Elayne's feelings, Merope used her magic to manipulate Tom Riddle Senior without fear of the consequences or his feelings. Tom Riddle Senior was engaged to another woman, and it was quite the scandal when he ran off with the town drunk's daughter. Kabir Chattopadhyay discusses the theme of consent and manipulation when it comes to the use of a love potion. Chattopadhyay writes, "In keeping with the young adult themes prevalent in the later books, the potion crystallizes questions of autonomy with a focus on the ethics of coercion, consent, and subversion of personal freedom in romantic relationships" (75). This idea of consent is a relatively new term, and in Merope's case, Tom Riddle Senior did not give consent. He was manipulated in a more dangerous way. However, Lancelot's manipulation was still just as deadly as was Merope's. It is only when Merope decides to stop fooling Tom into loving her do we see a comparison between Merope and Elayne, as opposed to Merope and Lancelot. Merope feels remorse for what she has done and hoped that her husband would love her for the sake of their child. When he does not, she dies of heartbreak.

Unfortunately for many of the female characters in these two works their unrequited love often leads to an early death. The second example of death and unrequited love is another minor character that has little to nothing written about her. That is the story of Helena Ravenclaw. Perhaps she has little written about her because her character is only mentioned in one chapter of the seven-book series, like Merope Gaunt. However, though she has a minor role in the overall narrative of the series, an examination of her character reveals how she serves to reclaim traditionally masculine medieval chivalry. Helena Ravenclaw is the daughter of one of the founders of Hogwarts, Rowena Ravenclaw.

Helena's backstory is revealed in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and it is one of theft and regret. Her ghost tells Harry the whole dark tale when Harry is searching for the final horcrux. Helena was murdered by the Slytherin house ghost, The Bloody Baron, when she refused to return from Albania with him with her mother's diadem. Helena stole her mother's diadem, tiara, that was said to increase the knowledge of the wearer. When her mother sent the Bloody Baron to bring Helena and the tiara back to her, because he was desperately in love with Helena, he murdered her when she refused him. Both Helena and the Bloody Baron lived the rest of their days as ghosts in the Hogwarts castle. The Bloody Baron remains to have her blood stained on him forever and he wears chains to remind himself of his eternal misery. Rowling writes

> Then my mother fell ill- fatally ill. In spite of my perfidy, she was desperate to see me one more time. She sent a man who had long loved me, though I spurned his advances, to find me. She knew that he would not rest until he had done so."
>
> Harry waited. She drew a deep breath and threw back her head.

"He tracked me to the forest where I was hiding. When I refused to return with him, he

became violent. The Baron was always a hot-tempered man. Furious at my refusal,

jealous of my freedom, he stabbed me."

"The Baron? You mean-?"

"The Blood Baron, yes," said the Gray Lady, and she lifted aside the cloak she wore to

reveal a single dark wound in her white chest. "When he saw what he had done, he was

overcome with remorse. He took the weapon that had claimed my life, and used it to kill

himself. All these centuries later, he wears his chains as an act of penitence… as he

should," she added bitterly. (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 254)

In this comparison, Helena might be seen as a modern representation of Ettard. Ettard's tale is

one of heartbreak, just like Merope Gaunt, but the reason I compare these two is because Ettard

rejects Sir Pelleas' love and sends knights to fight him off, then in the end, Nimune, the Lady of

the Lake, causes her to fall in love with him after she breaks his heart. In this comparison, Sir

Pelleas parallels the Bloody Baron. After Sir Pelleas finds Ettard and Gawain together, he has the

chance to kill them both but decides against it. Rather he places his sword across their throats to

let them know that he was there and did what was just because they were asleep, and it would not

have been a fair fight and would have broken the chivalric code. Malory writes

And whan he saw hem lye so bothe slepynge faste, than unnethe he myght holde hym on

horsebak for sorrow, and seyde thus to hymself: "Thoguh this knyght be never so false, I

woll never sle hym slepynge, for I woll never dystroy the hyghe ordir of knyghthode."

(Malory 134)

Sir Pelleas is so concerned with the order of the knighthood that he is able to walk away without

causing harm to the two that wronged him. This is in contrast with the Bloody Baron who acts

out of anger and then punishes himself for eternity with his moaning and his chains. Though the end of Malory's tale is filled with less murder but no less sadness (for she does fall in love with him at the end and he has nothing but disdain for her, granted that was magic and not true love).

Helena, like Merope, represents a reclaiming of feminine chivalry over her decision to make choices about her fate. As we read above, the Baron was upset about Helena's refusal but also her "freedom." Ettard is not free by the end of her tale. She is not killed for her refusal of Pelleas' love, but she is spellbound to live in misery for her rejection. Ettard is punished for her refusal of love, as is Helena, but as a reader we are meant to side with Helena and feel sympathy where the opposite is true for Ettard. We feel sympathy for Sir Pelleas but for Ettard, we are meant to feel as though justice was served. Both Helena and Merope, though plagued by death, have agency in their ability to choose, whether it be choosing death as did Merope or choosing to not return the love of man as did Helena.

CHAPTER 4

HARRY AND THE OVERLOOKED CHIVALRIC HERO

Heartbreak and death are not the only ways in which these two popular texts compare. In my research I have found that many scholars have already made the comparison between the *Harry Potter* series and Malory's *Quest of the Sangreal*. Many scholars such as Shobha Ramaswamy have identified the "Triwizard Tournament" and the "Deathly Hallows" as grail quests. Ramaswamy writes "In Harry's world, the final task of the Triwizard tournament is also to literally find a Grail, in this case the Triwizard Cup, and to win it for Hogwarts" (Ramaswamy). While there are some overt comparisons to be explored between these two texts, one that seems to yet be explored is that of Hermione's pivotal role in Harry's quests. Hermione is, until the final book, the true representation of the general chivalric hero. Hermione's lack of recognition as a heroine of the series undermines a feminist reading of the text. Though the characters represent a reclaiming of chivalric values with a feminist identity, the work seems to present as anti-feminist because the chivalric female characters fall just short of heroines.

I had hoped that I could bridge the comparison of Hermione to Sir Galahad, the noblest of all Sir Thomas Malory's knights, but the hegemonic discourse of a male chivalric hero prevailed, and Harry became that representation of Galahad. Harry's character flips between a representation of Sir Galahad, or the knight who is successful in the quest for the Holy Grail, and his close relationship to King Arthur. In an article entitled, "Critical Context: The Once and Future Wizard: Arthurian (and Anti-Arthurian) Themes in the Harry Potter Series," Danny Adams presents Harry as a character most like Arthur. Adams writes, "In both cases, then, Harry's opening defeat of Voldemort and Arthur's legacy as the son of an effective Saxon-fighter, along with their similar destinies, place both infants in grave danger" (Adams 87). Both

boys are hidden at a young age because of a perceived threat, and both are unaware of their destiny. If we consider this mindset, it would allow room to explore Hermione as Galahad, if Harry is Arthur. Though *Harry Potter* is not an allegory for Malory the two texts do closely parallel. I must emphasize that this interpretation, Harry as Arthur, is my argument for this paper; however, it is also important to see that J.K. Rowling presents a great deal of fluidity within her Arthurian echoes. Harry can be representative of not only Arthur, but also Galahad and Percival as well.

Though I do firmly believe that Hermione is the true representation of the chivalric hero, Harry is a more Arthur-like figure. I must acknowledge the similarities between Arthur and Harry and that Harry does finish the series as the closest representation in the final book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, as the sacrificial hero. Hermione as the chivalric hero is unsustainable because the series is centered around Harry. The series is framed around a boy who was destined, like Galahad and Arthur, to be great. Prophecy plays a pivotal role in both stories of Galahad and Harry and prophecy influences them from the moment they are born. Galahad is conceived out of trickery when Elayne of Corbin explains to Lancelot that she slept with him because of a prophecy and she conceived, "the moste nobelyste knyght of the worlde" (Malory 469. 39-40). This is similar to the prophecy that was also made before Harry was born about him by his Divination teacher, Professor Trelawny. Professor Trelawny predicts, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches… born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies…" (Rowling, *Phoenix* 649). The similarities do not end here between these two. Galahad's virginity and his lack of interest in worldly glory means that he is more concerned with his mission, so to speak. This is Harry as well. As much as he tries to be a normal teenager, he is more focused on the task at hand. Both Harry and Galahad are willing to

die once their quests are over. Galahad's story represents that true chivalry is not about helping women, but helping the Lord, and Harry's story represents that true chivalry is about defeating evil.

Anyone who is familiar with the books knows that Hermione is the brains of the trio. Through every book Hermione is the only one who is able to solve the issues presented to the protagonist. Her abilities are highlighted most strongly in the first two books, but it is mirrored throughout the entirety of the series, until the final book. Hermione defeats the final task of the logic quest in the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. She solves the riddle that allows Harry to proceed through the flames and only because of her is he able to face Voldemort the first time, setting in motion the storyline that unfolds after Harry defeats Voldemort for the second time. A knight's knowledge is innate as well as learned, and though we can consider her loyalty to represent Gawain or even Lancelot, the argument I am presenting is that she seems to have innate knowledge that is imperative to the quest set before the trio and without it, they would not have been successful. This can be directly compared to some Arthurian women as well who are helpful in quests, such as Percival's sister in the Holy Grail tale. The important distinction, however, is that Hermione is accompanying Harry on the quest and is accredited for being a part of it. Many other women aid the knights in the quests but many offer complications on them rather than assisting them to the end. For example, Lynet in the Tale of Gareth is a haughty lady who is rather cruel and absolutely complicates the quest. Without Hermione, Harry and Ron arguably would never make it to the end of the quests so rather than being a source for complication, Hermione is the reason for their success.

Aside from the fact that Hermione is responsible for many of the triumphs, another comparison between the chivalric hero and Hermione is the fact that both of them seem to

inherently understand things that the other characters do not. Hermione works exceptionally hard in her studies to achieve the knowledge that other students who come from wizarding families, like Ron Weasley, know already. However, she is the "brightest witch of her age" even though she comes from muggle parentage. She was the intellect behind the other protagonists and was able to discern things that should have been far beyond her age. J.K Rowling continues to go back to the idea that Hermione is just "bookish" and she has, "read about it in a book somewhere" (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone,* 142). It is a recurring theme throughout the series that Hermione is the one who holds all the answers that we as readers do not even need to see her learning the information to trust that her information is good. For example, in the second book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Hermione is petrified (she is basically turned into a living stone) and yet she still manages to provide them with the information needed to help save the school. Harry finds a piece of paper clutched in her hand explaining what the creature that lived in the chamber was and also how it was getting around. Only because of this paper the boys are able to rescue Ginny. Overall, Hermione solves the quests, but she is still not the main character but rather a reason that the main character is able to achieve his ends.

Hermione's quiet heroism is outwardly recognized by Dumbledore as well when he addresses Hermione directly in reference to saving Sirius and Buckbeak's lives in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*,

What we need," said Dumbledore slowly, and his light blue eyes moved from

Harry to Hermione, "is more time."

"But-" Hermione began. And then her eyes became very round. "OH!"

"Now, pay attention," said Dumbledore, speaking very low, and very clearly.

'Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth

window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you will be able to

save more than one innocent life tonight. Bu remember this, both of you: You

must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law- you know what is at stake…

You- must- not- be- seen.'

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on. (Rowling, *Azkaban*, 158)

It is joked that the entire series could be summed up with that last line. Harry indeed spent much

of the series in the dark about the things he was doing and was only successful because of his

reliance on Hermione.

However, despite Hermione's obvious chivalric heroism, Harry is the "chosen one," and

therefore we must also acknowledge that Harry ultimately represents Sir Galahad in the final

story, but without Hermione, he never would have been successful and that is what makes her the

ultimate, if unrecognized, chivalric hero. She is responsible for Harry's success, and she also

possesses many traits of chivalry including wisdom, loyalty, and bravery. It is because of her

qualities, and the fact that she is not the ultimate hero, that Hermione is closely related to the

Arthurian sidekick. She is confined by her inability to be the main character and yet, the main

character would not have been successful without her. Harry ultimately defeats Voldemort in the

final book only because he was able to greet death as an old friend, though we do know that he

does not actually die. Harry sacrifices himself in order to finish his quest, just as Galahad dies so

quickly after finishing the quest for the Holy Grail because he had served his purpose. I think by

making Hermione a feminist representation of a chivalric hero, only to be replaced by Harry in

the final book as a sacrificial knight, J.K. Rowling is challenging the patriarchal superstructure

only to the point that it can stand. Harry is most similar to Galahad since he is the "chosen one"

but J.K. Rowling is making it a point for the readers to understand who actually did the leg work of the quest and who benefited from the feminist outlook.

I have given Hermione the title of the chivalric hero because she is the heroic character that ultimately does not receive the title of heroine. She was a hopeful figure for the future, but the series remains as a focus on Harry as the ultimate chivalric character, giving him the credit while Hermione was a chivalric hero that became a sidekick. I would argue that she is the unrecognized hero of the story because without her, Harry would never have been able to pass Severus Snapes' potion task in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, which as you know leads Harry to fight Voldemort for the first time since his parents' deaths. Rowling writes

Hermione let out a great sign and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing.

"*Brilliant*," said Hermione. "This isn't magic- it's logic- a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever."

"But so will we, won't we?"

"Of course not," said Hermione. "Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely though the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But how do we know which to drink?"

"Give me a minute."

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

"Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire- toward the stone." (Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone* 207)

Hermione is the one that solves the riddle but because of the size of the bottle, she is told to go back and get help for Ron while Harry continues on the quest. Here is where I ultimately can consider that the series as a whole could be considered to be an anti-feminist work. Hermione has all the attributes of a heroine and yet she is relegated to a bookish sidekick. The lack of credit awarded to Hermione at the end of the series seems regressive to the stage set up in the first two books.

CHAPTER 5

HARRY AND THE TALE OF GENDER-BENDING

One of the most overt comparisons between the *Harry Potter* series and the Arthurian

legend is the presence of an important sword. Excalibur and the Sword of Gryffindor are both

given to Arthur and Harry by someone else, and each represents a fulfillment of destiny. Both

swords were also associated with a pool of water. In Arthur's case, Excalibur was given to him

by The Lady of the Lake. I argue that The Lady of the Lake is an exception to the way women

were portrayed. She was able to act in her own interests. She is deceptive. She only agrees to

help Arthur if he agrees to give her what she wants in return, Balin's head. Amy Kaufman argues

"She has been identified as deceptive and anti-patriarchal equally as often as she has been cast as

a benevolent aid to Arthur's court, or even the literary descendent of protective goddesses. She is

past the marginal feminine wilderness, and I argue that she is a chivalric figure, a heroine who

acts like a knight and instrumental in changing the definition of chivalry so that women can

participate in chivalry as agents instead of objects" (Kaufman 56). The Lady of the Lake is a

chivalric character who pushed the boundaries of her gender. She is the reason that Arthur is able

to gain possession of Excalibur. If a female character in Malory can reclaim her own character

and be a chivalric figure, then a male contemporary character can reclaim the features of women

in romance. Here, I am referring to the highly debated character of Severus Snape.

In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Severus Snape's true identity is revealed, and it

is debated throughout all of the *Harry Potter* Universe. Snape was in love with Harry's mother

Lily for almost his entire life. He was the one who told Voldemort the prophecy that led him to

murder Harry's family. When he realized how Voldemort interpreted the prophecy, he regretted

it instantly and dedicated himself to Dumbledore's service (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, Ch. 33).

After Dumbledore died, Snape was responsible for helping Harry understand and fulfill his destiny. In the wizarding world, an accomplished wizard is able to produce the Patronus Charm. Introduced in the third installment of the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the Patronus Charm is a defensive spell that produces a silver guardian that is used to protect the witch or wizard against dementors (soul-sucking creatures). Snape's Patronus is a doe, the same guardian form as the late Lily Evans. Snape's doe patronus guides Harry to a frozen lake located in the Forest of Dean in which Snape submerged the sword (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, Ch. 19). This is important to this idea of femininity reclaiming chivalry because Severus Snape's good nature is revealed with one specific characteristic that is usually associated with females, his complete and unwavering devotion to unrequited love. Though it can be argued that this is not a stereotype of the female, because Lancelot had unwavering love for Guinevere, I argue that Severus Snape's entire personality was based around his love because his love was not reciprocated and was unrequited. Lancelot was more than just in love with Guinevere; he was an Arthurian knight, and he was (however we view this personally) Arthur's best knight. Snape was only in love with Lily. His loyalty to Albus Dumbledore came to be because of his love and loyalty to Lily. He was perfectly content working as a Death Eater against Dumbledore until the prophecy caused Voldemort to kill Lily. He was comfortable with the murder of James Potter and their son Harry but plead for the life of Lily. A tense conversation between Dumbledore and Snape results in Snape revealing his true motives. In the following quote, Snape is meeting with Dumbledore to ask for protection for Lily from Voldemort. Rowling writes

"What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The - the prophecy… the prediction… Trelawney…"

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything- everything I heard!" said Snape. "That is why- it is for that reason-
he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore. "It spoke of a boy
born at the end of July-"

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her
down- kill them all-"

"If she means so much to you," said Dumbledore, "surely Lord Voldemort will
spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?"

"I have- I have asked him-"

"You disgust me," said Dumbledore, and Harry had never heard so much
contempt in his voice. Snape seemed to shrink a little. "You do not care, then,
about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have
what you want?" (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 279-280)

Every choice he made, every situation he was put in, was due to love. Before her death, I argue
that his personality was not all consumed by her. He was a Death Eater; he was a separate entity
than her. However, after her death, he was broken by grief and devoted his life to her love.

Like the Lady of the Lake with Arthur, Snape is responsible for giving Harry the Sword
of Gryffindor. The Lady of the Lake gives Arthur Excalibur in exchange for a boon. She was
working for her own best interests, or so she thought. In describing the scene in which The Lady
of the Lake gives Arthur the sword, Malory writes

So Kynge Arthure and Merlion alight and tyed their horses unto too treys, and so
they wente into the barge. And whan they com to the swerde that the honde hylde,
than Kygne Arthure toke hit up by the hondils and bare hit with hym, and the

arme and the honde wente undir the watir. And so he com unto the londe and rode

forthe. (Malory 44)

After being gifted the sword, Arthur can't grant her the boon, which was his fellow knight

Balin's head. Balin is his guest, and it would be considered dishonorable to behead a guest. And

just as Severus Snape dies during the battle of Hogwarts, The Lady of the Lake is beheaded by

Balin after ensuring that Arthur receives Excalibur.

Compared to the way in which The Lady of the Lake gifted the sword, Snape made

getting the sword irrationally difficult for Harry, and he put it at the bottom of a frozen lake for

him to retrieve. Rowling writes

How was this possible? How could it have come to be lying in a forest pool, this

close to the place where they were camping? Had some unknown magic drawn

Hermione to this spot, or was the doe, which he had taken to be a Patronus, some

kind of guardian of the pool? Or had the sword been put into the pool after they

had arrived, precisely because they were here? In which case, where was the

person who had wanted to pass it to Harry? Again he directed the wand at the

surrounding trees and bushes, searching for a human outline, for the glint of an

eye, but he could not see anyone there. All the same, a little more fear leavened

his exhilaration as he returned his attention to the sword reposing upon the bottom

of the frozen pool. (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows,* 151)

Though he can easily be compared to Lancelot for his unwavering love and loyalty to Lily, I

argue that he is most like The Lady of the Lake because, not only is he responsible for Harry's

access to the Sword of Gryffindor, but he is also doing all of these things out of a promise he

made to Dumbledore after Dumbledore promised him something in return. Snape's version of a

"rash boon" was Dumbledore's willingness to protect Lily. In discussing the "rash boon," Felicia Ackerman writes "Malory scholars often take it to include adherence to the so-called 'rash boon' tradition, where a lady asks for a 'gift,' and a knight is expected to grant her request before even knowing what the gift will turn out to be" (Ackerman 6). The "rash boon" is arguably the only reason Snape becomes a spy for Dumbledore.

Severus Snape is a male contemporary character of adolescent literature that causes debate. Is he a villain? Is he a good guy with a troubled past? We can all agree that he has attributes that are often attributed to female chivalric characters such as an aid in a quest, the scorned lover, and the pawn. Snape reclaims the female values of chivalric romance through a male perspective.

The importance of these two characters centers around the fact that gender completely breaks down between them. The Lady of the Lake is a contradiction to Malory's feminine characters because her actions and decisions challenge the limitations of his female characters. She has taken on an active role in the narrative to provide space for her agency. In contrast, Severus Snape has taken a passive role in his responsibility in the narrative. In this instance, Severus Snape is not reclaiming chivalric values of male characters but rather he is repossessing traditionally associated female attributes to represent a female chivalric character in a contemporary text.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Literature has the power to span across centuries and still rework those themes for modern audiences. The global phenomenon that is J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series represents female characters' growth from medieval literature to modern literature. By comparing and contrasting Malory's and Rowling's female characters, I have shown how Rowling's characters reclaim chivalry. Merope Gaunt reclaims chivalry by her ability to have power over her death. Hermione Granger reclaims chivalry by having all the attributes of a hero and being the reason the trio is successful. Severus Snape reclaims chivalry because he is the male contemporary character that reclaims the features of women in chivalric romance. Helena Ravenclaw reclaims chivalry because she is not punished, but rather presented as sympathetic, for her refusal of love. And finally, Ginny Weasley, though still a damsel in distress, reclaims chivalry because she is powerful and does not lose her character agency when she becomes a wife. As a code of behavior, chivalry in reference to this work focuses on the attributes that are relative throughout time including loyalty, honor, and courage. This reclaiming of chivalry is important because it exemplifies the shift in the position of women into a more active role because they have power, are unapologetically female, body autonomy, and personal agency.

The theme of chivalry has permeated throughout literature because of its association with nostalgia as well as its thematic appeal. Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* has been a lasting piece of literature for centuries because of its daring tales of quests and knighthood. The *Harry Potter* series has taken these themes and reworks them for modern audiences and in that process, she inadvertently has created a feminist portrayal of her characters. Merope Gaunt represents bodily autonomy and a reclaiming of a lovesick death, Helena represents the free woman who pays for

her freedom with her life, and Ginny represents the powerful female that can still fall victim to the "damsel in distress" stereotype.

Though J.K. Rowling is an extensively controversial author for her political and cultural opinions, it is apparent that her work has had a lasting impact on an entire generation. From the books themselves, to movies, to even theme parks, the *Harry Potter* series is an immersive world that has permeated modern culture. With feminist role models such as Hermione and Ginny, little girls including myself looked up to these characters growing up. Hermione taught young girls that studying and being book smart was a powerful tool at our disposal. Ginny taught us that a woman can be strong and independent and still be a love interest. These novels do a wonderful job in showing that to be feminine and chivalrous can have many different attributes and outcomes. It can look different through a multitude of different characters. Ginny's version of feminism is not the same as Hermione's and neither one is presented as superior to the other.

Though scholars such as Carol Jamison and Danny Adams discuss modernism juxtaposed with medievalism, the scholarship neglects the female characters in the context of chivalric themes. These characters are especially forgotten because there are many other comparisons between these two works that go outside of the feminist perspective. It is important to emphasize these characters, as I mentioned previously, because the primary audience of adolescent literature is young girls. These young girls deserve to see representation of themselves portrayed as chivalric heroes.

Apart from the cultural importance of this work, this scholarship is important to academia because as I mentioned previously, it fills the gap of a female perspective when comparing these two works. Scholars such as Jamison, Becker, and Berberich compare medieval chivalry to the *Harry Potter* series through aspects such as The Triwizard Tournament or prophecy, or other

chivalric themes. With this paper, there is now scholarship that can be referenced for people who would like to find comparisons between female modern characters and chivalric characters of the Arthurian legend. I desired to bring a female perspective to build on the existing scholarship to allow for a space for a feminist reading of a text that, as a whole, may not be a feminist text.

When I began this process, I desired to show this text as a feminist text because as a young reader, I viewed these female characters as feminists. Adolescent literature now most often features a teenage female heroine that has some extraordinary ability to upset the superstructure. I learned while writing this paper that the *Harry Potter* series as a whole does not appear to be an explicitly feminist work. The female characters I have discussed today show agency in the series but by the end they die, lose agency, or just become marginalized. However, it is still important to point out the attributes of how female agency has changed in the last five hundred years and how these female characters have agency in comparison with *Le Morte D'Arthur*. It is still possible to see and reference these feminine attributes portrayed throughout the text even if the whole work itself is not proven or intended to be a feminist work.

Throughout this process we have seen slight developments in the characterization of female characters such as power over death with Merope, independence as with Ginny, and intelligence with Hermione, and it is with those attributes that I conclude that the retelling of these characters' narratives represents a shift in the significance of women in reclaiming and reworking chivalric themes.

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