Women and Witchcraft in Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur

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Abstract

This article considers how the theme of witchcraft within Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* can be examined alongside real examples of women accused of witchcraft in the late Middle Ages. It argues that Malory was influenced by contemporary events and his work includes references his audience could associate with. These real witchcraft accusations were made by influential men against women in order to indirectly attack their male political enemies. Reading of both Malory's fictional accounts and the records of actual trials enriches our understanding of how accusations of witchcraft came to be politically important in fifteenth-century England.

Keywords: Medieval History, Witchcraft, Late Middle Ages, Fifteenth Century, England

Introduction

In the fifteenth-century the most influential and important chivalric narrative was produced; Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, detailing the chivalric adventures of King Arthur and his knights. This article considers the use of witchcraft accusations within the Later Middle Ages to damage the reputations of prominent male and female figures of the fifteenth-century. Furthermore it examines how texts such as Malory's made comments about contemporary political culture, something which could later be applied to further witchcraft trails after the re-publishing of Malory's works in later centuries. Here it is argued that during the fifteenth-century in particular, prominent male political figures used accusations of witchcraft to attack their male enemies, accusing those close to them (in this case their spouses or female relatives) of using witchcraft to increase that man's power and influence. This occurred as these accusations were the most believable to use for the time; that did not however mean that the women were guilty, simply that they were objects in a man's game for power, as will be shown later. From a modern perspective it is easy to link certain events to stories and characters within *Le Morte*; some of these links could have been understood with Malory's first publication, and others with later publications

First written around the late 1460s whilst Malory was believed to be serving a treason sentence against Edward IV (although the true date of Malory's writing remains unclear), *Le Morte D'Arthur* was designed to be a behavioural guide for Malory's male, and increasingly female audience.[1] Malory's narrative would survive and flourish after its first publication by William Caxton, one of the most prominent and popular publishers of the fifteenth-century, in 1485; influencing various representational genres since.[2] However, its use as a behavioural guide places the greatest value upon the narrative. For Malory's female audience this included messages about religion, piety, marriage and adultery which all aimed to encourage the repenting of sins, showing through characters such as Guenever Arthur's queen, that nobody is above sin and therefore repentance was essential before death. One of the most important themes running throughout Malory's narrative however is witchcraft, a theme designed to place a warning for women certainly, but most importantly also served

[1] Nall, C. (2012). *Reading and War in Fifteenth-Century England: From Lydgate to Malory*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, p. 147.

[2] Field, P.J.C. (2011). Malory, Sir Thomas (1415x18–1471). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17899.

as a warning for men about 'the sense of menace in female sexuality'.[3] Joanna Laynesmith argues that there were two notions of women: 'as weak, passive, nurturing, and conciliatory, contrasted with fear of them as temptresses with a potential for creating chaos and tongues that could do the devil's work.'[4] This is certainly true when considering the fifteenth-century, with witchcraft accusations designed to present women as the latter, whether or not they were guilty of the crimes of which they were accused, something discussed later.

Witchcraft was one of the most prominent and familiar themes which would resonate with Malory's audiences. Although *Le Morte* primarily focusses upon the malevolent use of witchcraft by its women characters, there are a few instances of using witchcraft for good. In these cases they are either to cause enemies of the 'heroes' to sleep to prevent the heroes being killed, or cause the hero to sleep so that they can be healed.[5] In one case their magic is mentioned simply to state, as in the case of the Lady of the Lake Nimue, during a chapter which sees her defending her innocence and revealing the true cause of a knight's death, that she only did goodness to Arthur and his knights through magic.[6] The majority of the narrative however focusses upon the use of magic by women to harm in some way. Most often this harm is not physical but has an effect in some way upon another, most often a female love rival. Malory's use of these stories presents a warning message to his male audience, particularly those in power, to be vigilant around women who may try to bewitch them to assist their own causes. This was particularly important for the fifteenth and subsequent centuries where witchcraft accusations were becoming, as Richard Kieckhefer puts it, 'an earlier obsession' to 'the intensified hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'.[7] Therefore for Malory to make this

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[3] Edwards, E. (1996). The Place of Women in the Morte Darthur. In E. Archibald & A. S. G. Edwards (Eds.) *A Companion to Malory* (pp. 37-54). Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, p. 40.

[4] Laynesmith, J.L. (2004). *The Last Medieval Queens*. Retrieved from https://www-dawsonera-com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/readonline/9780191530036, p. 2.

[5] Malory, T. (2013). Vol. II, Ch. IV. In Mike Lough and David Widger (Eds.) *Le Morte D'Arthur in two volumes - volume II.* Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1252/1252-h/1252-h.htm, accessed 26 November 2018. See also Malory, T. (2013). Vol. I, Ch XXIV and X. In Mike Lough and David Widger (Eds.) *Le Morte D'Arthur in two volumes - volume I*. Retrieved from http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1251/1251-h/1251-h.htm, accessed 26 November 2018.

[6] Malory, Vol. II, Ch. VIII.

[7] Kieckhefer, R. (1976). *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500*. Retrieved from https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=3mK_SJSZTooC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Richard+Kiekheffer&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi4tbi-g_fdAhVQ_qQKHSenAjEQ6AEIOzAD#v=onepage&q=Richard%20Kiekheffer&f=false, p. 10.

theme one of the defining characteristics of his narrative, and the one most consistently prominent within modern representations of chivalry, shows the impact trials were having within the era and the spread of knowledge about them.

Although Kieckhefer argues that witch trials between 1300 and 1500 'were few and sporadic' he acknowledges that 'historians have rightly viewed the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as witnessing the initial stages of the European witch craze. [as] It was during this period that prosecution of witches first gained momentum'.[8] Furthermore he states that what he has coined the 'fourth phase' of witchcraft trails (between 1435 and 1500) 'was a time of sensational trials.'[9] Therefore it is of great importance that the theme of witchcraft within the fifteenth-century is considered in more detail. Particularly the 'sensational' trials of key women figures such as Eleanor Cobham, but also Elizabeth and Jacquetta Woodville, whose trials were most likely modelled upon the 'successful' trial of Eleanor, with a desire for similar results. It is Eleanor's trial which is most likely to have resonated with Malory's earliest audiences, as well as with Malory himself. Yet it is the accusations against Elizabeth and her mother which would allow *Le Morte*'s themes to remain popular with later audiences, encouraging the numerous re-printings of *Le Morte* by Caxton's successors. All of the examples of women within this article ultimately serve a purpose of destroying the reputation of either the woman accused or their husbands, usually both. This was particularly the case for women or men who had power or influence in fifteenth-century courts.

Eleanor Cobham

Eleanor Cobham was one such women for whom an accusation of witchcraft destroyed her reputation but also that of her husband Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. Humphrey was Henry VI's 'nearest relative and heir presumptive' at a time when Henry was not only childless but unmarried; greatly fearing his uncle and the possibility that he was contriving his death to become king.[10] Unlike the

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[8] Ibid, p. 10.

[9] Ibid, p. 23.

[10] Griffiths, R.A. (1991). *King and Country: England and Wales in the Fifteenth Century*. Retrieved from https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RmTdAj6MbI4C&oi=fnd&pg=PP5&dq=king+and+country:+England+and+wales+in+the+fifteenth+century&ots=4XfMcp79Wm&sig=rFhuKXqU74TmSQcgxpI0DUKqkT8#v=onepage&q=eleanor%20cobham&f=false, pp. 233-235. See also Wolffe, B.P. (1972). The personal rule of Henry VI. In S. B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross, & R.A. Griffiths (Eds.) *Fifteenth-century England 1399-1509: Studies in politics and society* (pp. 29-48). Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 40.

Woodville family (mentioned later) Eleanor's opportunities within the court would immediately benefit from Henry's death, compared to Elizabeth who had married the current king. Unfortunately for Eleanor she was very unpopular; suffering many witchcraft allegations during her life.[11] This unpopularity arose from the circumstances surrounding Humphrey and Eleanor's marriage. Around 1422 Eleanor was employed as an attendant to Humphrey's first wife Jacqueline d'Hainault whom he married in 1423.[12] After an unsuccessful attempt to assert Jacqueline's claims in Hainault, Humphrey returned to England taking Eleanor for his mistress; eventually marrying Eleanor in 1428.[13] This abandonment of Jacqueline's service and the effective stealing of her husband damaged Eleanor's character from the out-set of her marriage, but as James Sharpe argues Eleanor 'had allegedly used magic to make him [Humphrey] fall in love with her'; therefore her reputation was further diminished.[14] This factor is important when analysing not only Eleanor's trial, but others within the period, such as the ones considered shortly. Yet, Eleanor's trial is significant as this was not the accusation for which she was arrested, she was arrested for treason. Therefore the witchcraft accusation used against Eleanor was merely a way of condemning her.

John Leland argues that if witchcraft was a 'standard medieval smear' it was due to being 'a credible charge.'[15] This is representative of the fifteenth-century as a whole, with the use of witchcraft accusations expressing the plausibility of a woman's guilt, rather than proving she was actually guilty of a crime. No more so than for Eleanor. In 1441 Eleanor was arrested and tried in front of a panel of bishops for treason against Henry VI through consulting 'astrologers to cast the king's horoscope and to predict her personal fortunes.'[16] Although not uncommon for the period with the rise in popularity and respectability of mathematical astrology, Eleanor's trial by her and Humphrey's enemies was an

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[11] Griffiths, *King and Country*, p. 235.

[12] Harriss, G.L. (2004). Eleanor, duchess of Gloucester (*c.*1400–1452). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/5742, accessed 26 November 2018.

[13] Ibid. See also Harriss, G.L. (2011). Humphrey, duke of Gloucester (1390–1447). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14155, accessed 26 November 2018.

[14] Sharpe, J. (1997). *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550 - 1750*. London: Penguin Books, p. 24.

[15] Leland, J. (2004). Witchcraft and the Woodvilles: A Standard Medieval Smear?. In D. L. Biggs, S. D. Michalove, & A. Compton Reeves (Eds.) *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth Century Europe* (pp. 267-288), here: p. 287.

[16] Harriss, *Eleanor*.

attempt to destroy their reputation and ease their king's fear.[17] This accusation was far less innocent than Eleanor's actions, accusing her of inciting, if not securing Henry's death through the use of 'treasonable necromancy'. [18] Eleanor was ultimately guilty of nothing more than foolishness, confessing to five of the eight charges against her, rather than actual sinister intentions.[19] Yet her trial, particularly one in the presence of bishops, shows a strong desire to see her punished. However, one of the admissions made by Eleanor when further examined in October states that she procured potions from a woman called Margery Jourdemayne (also known as 'the Witch of Eye') 'in order to conceive and bear Duke Humphrey's child.'[20] This accusation ultimately sealed Eleanor's fate. She was demonstrating that she had intended to use magic in order to have a child, but most importantly this child would have had wider ramifications against Henry VI; ultimately 'proving' that Eleanor and Humphrey intended to harm Henry. Henry was childless therefore upon his death Humphrey would become king. Therefore a child of his own, preferably male, meant that Humphrey would not be in the same weak position as Henry. In the fifteenth-century this would have been vital to damning Eleanor's character and proving that she was a threat to the monarch; further emphasising the threat of women in general to men.

Although Eleanor was not executed for her 'crimes' against the king, her punishment was extremely rare, one which could be argued had not been seen before to a noblewoman. Eleanor suffered a forced divorce, perpetual imprisonment and a walk to three London churches barefoot and carrying a taper.[21] Her accomplices on the other hand died as a consequence: Margery Jourdemayne was burnt at the stake for being a witch, Thomas Southwell, Eleanor's physician and a canon at St Stephen's in Westminster died whilst in the Tower of London, and Roger Bolingbroke principal of St Andrew's Hall in Oxford was hanged, drawn and quartered.[22] This is beyond proof that witchcraft accusations made by the political enemies of those accused were designed to ultimately destroy the reputations, but most importantly influence, of those deemed a threat to the regime. Eleanor's

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Wolffe, *Personal rule*, p. 40. See also Harriss, *Eleanor*.

[19] Harriss, *Eleanor*.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

punishment was therefore fitting for this humiliation and destruction of her and Humphrey's reputation as Eleanor was publically paraded for all to witness her embarrassment, but also to learn about the charges against her and tell others. Eleanor Cobham's trial due to its scale and notoriety would thus serve as an associable link to *Le Morte*'s audiences towards certain events and characters within the narrative. Such as the tales of Launcelot and the use of magic by the Lady Brisen, which results in the conception of Galahad the greatest of all the knights within the narrative, a story discussed shortly. Malory would therefore use associable stories for his audience to present various messages from the time he was writing.

Through the use of characters such as Morgan and the Lady Brisen, Malory is clearly stating to both his male and female audience that a woman's involvement in witchcraft is sinful, an interesting concept in itself when Merlin's involvement in magic is not sinful. This says a lot about the period in which Malory writes. Kieckhefer has listed the witchcraft trials conducted between the years 1300 and 1499 showing that the majority of such trials clearly stating a man was involved happened within Eastern Europe, with only around twenty trials of men happening within modern day Britain.[23] Within this the greatest charge is invocation, usually the use of prayers or incantations to conjure up spirits.[24] It is clear therefore that it was easier to bring women to trial with 'evidence' of how they used magic to increase another man's power (most often through bewitching and love magic) than it was to directly accuse the man. Malory reflects this through his use of Merlin's magic for good and the use of magic by his female characters for bad, although there are a few exceptional cases. Most importantly the use of witchcraft trials reflect the problematic nature of women's involvement within politics during the Later Middle Ages, with those of greatest influence more open to accusations of involvement within witchcraft, whether or not they are guilty (particularly in the case of Elizabeth and Jacquetta Woodville). Malory is using his narrative to express his views upon women within politics, mainly through the use of Guenever who is present within Arthur's court. Malory is not suggesting through his narrative that women should not be allowed within court, after all Guenever is present at the feasts in which knights return to court to tell Arthur about their quests and where new quests are presented to complete, instead Malory is presenting a message of caution. Through characters such as Launcelot who is just as susceptible to witchcraft as any other knight, Malory is warning his audience to be

[23] Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials*, pp. 108-147.

[24] Ibid, pp. 108-147.

vigilant around women and the threats they could pose to men; showing through Launcelot especially, that no man is immune to sin, even if their sin is unintentional.

Jacquetta Woodville

Eleanor Cobham was far from the only noblewoman to stand accused of witchcraft aiming to damage her reputation, Elizabeth and Jacquetta Woodville also fell foul of these accusations. This further emphasises that *Le Morte*'s themes would resonate throughout the fifteenth-century, explaining why Caxton published Malory's narrative in 1485 and why the narrative survived for so long. Elizabeth Woodville (Edward IV's queen) like Eleanor suffered witchcraft accusations designed to damage her reputation, however unlike Eleanor the first attacks against Elizabeth occurred through accusing her mother Jacquetta, Duchess Rivers, of witchcraft for love. In January 1470, in a period where Edward IV was temporarily dethroned by Henry VI, Jacquetta was brought to trial by Thomas Wake; accused of witchcraft in order 'to enchant Edward…into marriage'.[25] This accusation presented further details which stated that to do this Jacquetta had fashioned three lead images and bound them together.[26] The images constituted of Richard Neville, Sixteenth Earl of Warwick, Edward IV and Jacquetta's daughter Elizabeth. The accusation presented the notion that Jacquetta created the figures to bind together Edward and Elizabeth, and bewitch Edward into choosing a marriage between himself and Elizabeth, over that of a marriage alliance between himself and the Princess Bona of France. The importance of this accusation ultimately arises not with the accusation against Jacquetta, nor indeed the believability of the accusations made against her, but the role of Lord Warwick within this.

Warwick himself was described as one of the images created by Jacquetta, to a modern perspective this would suggest a metaphor for the politically difficult situation Edward found himself in. Edward around the time of his marriage to Elizabeth in May 1464 found himself caught between what is generally regarded amongst historians as a true love marriage to Elizabeth, someone deemed unsuitable as a queen, and his political duty as a king to marry a foreign princess and create an alliance.[27] Warwick was left humiliated by Edward going behind his back to marry Elizabeth, which in

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[25] Diaz Pascual, L. (2004). Luxembourg, Jaquetta de, duchess of Bedford and Countess Rivers (*c.*1416–1472). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/101258, accessed 26 November 2018.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Pollard, A.J. (2008). Neville, Richard, sixteenth earl of Warwick and sixth earl of Salisbury [*called* the Kingmaker] (1428–1471). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19955, accessed 26 November 2018.

turn destroyed any initial plans Warwick would have to marry his daughters into prominent courtly families (something they would later do with their marriages to Edward's brothers George and Richard). It has been implied by Charles Ross that Warwick planned to marry his daughters Isabel and Anne within the high English aristocracy and that Edward's marriage to Elizabeth not only caused anger in Warwick, through his not being consulted as normal practice, but mostly through the marriage of Elizabeth's kinswomen to noble English men.[28] Ross continues that as England's 'premier earl and greatest magnate; his daughters were the wealthiest heiresses in the realm [and after the marriages of Elizabeth's kinswomen pre-empting 'all the likely candidates' for their marriages …] Only the king's brothers […] could now provide fitting consorts for the Nevill[e] girls.'[29] Although the marriages of Isabel and Anne to Edward's brothers did eventually happen, his anger at the marriages of Elizabeth's sisters to noblemen would certainly have fuelled Warwick's desire to destroy Elizabeth's reputation. It has further been suggested by Cora Scofield that Warwick may have had suitable grounds, arguing that it was 'very likely' Elizabeth and Jacquetta had taken advantage of Edward's 'thoughtlessness and youthful passion', which pushed Edward to marry Elizabeth despite his knowledge that the marriage would be 'both very strange and very unwise.'[30] Furthermore she has suggested that Warwick intended not to marry his daughters into the English aristocracy but the French, marrying them to the Princess Bona's brothers; cementing the Neville family's place not only within the English court, but also the French court.

In letters to the French, Warwick's anger towards Edward is expressed (something Scofield suggests partly results from a fear that some French noblemen would see the marriage as Edward making a fool out of Warwick); here Warwick tells Louis that he would be sending one of his secretaries with pleasing news in the upcoming days, something Louis interpreted as Warwick intending to seize the throne from Edward.[31] However, despite Louis' interpretation it is most likely that Warwick did not intend to seize the throne, rather he intended to change Edward's mind about his marriage to Elizabeth in order to marry the Princess Bona, through most likely declaring the marriage

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[28] Ross, C. (1974). *Edward IV*. London: Eyre Methuen, pp. 90-94.

[29] Ibid, p. 94.

[30] Scofield, C.L. (1967). *The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth: King of England and of France and Lord of Ireland. In Two Volumes, Volume I.* (2nd ed.). London: Frank Cass & Co., pp. 304-5.

[31] Mandrot, Dépêches, II as referenced in Scofield, C.L. (1967). *The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth: King of England and of France and Lord of Ireland. In Two Volumes, Volume I.* (2nd ed.). London: Frank Cass & Co., p. 305.

was not properly conducted as it did not have official witnesses (something Edward had been accused previously for doing). Here Warwick's pleasing news would be the renewal of the original marriage plans of Edward and Bona, and certainly for Warwick the pleasing news that his daughters' own betrothals may yet come about. Edward's continuation of his marriage announcement to Elizabeth completely destroyed Warwick's chance of this and therefore attacking the Woodville family can be seen as Warwick's revenge upon Elizabeth. Not only was Elizabeth not Warwick's choice for Edward's wife but she did not match the typical suitability for a queen. Elizabeth was not only a widow, but worse a Lancastrian widow whose first husband Sir John Grey had fought against Edward before his death, furthermore Elizabeth had born John two sons.[32] Therefore Warwick would naturally have disapproved of such a marriage, especially after Edward decided to marry Elizabeth in a secret ceremony at Grafton.[33] Therefore the lead images mentioned previously represent the trapping of Edward between Warwick's desires (and to an extent Edward's duty as a king to marry a foreign princess) and his love for Elizabeth, which the accusations suggested only resulted from Jacquetta's witchcraft binding Edward and Elizabeth together and presenting Edward with a notion of love.

Warwick was ultimately behind the accusations against Jacquetta, betrayed by Edward who not only ignored Warwick's marriage advice but deliberately hid his marriage from him, only having a handful of witnesses at the ceremony; most importantly amongst these Jacquetta Woodville herself.[34] Thomas Wake, the man accusing Jacquetta of her crime was a known esquire of Warwick's and therefore it is almost certain that he was rewarded by Warwick in some way for his accusation.[35] It is most important here to emphasise Warwick's wider context behind the accusation in explaining Jacquetta's targeting. At this point Warwick alongside Edward's brother George Duke of Clarence, had turned their political allegiance to Henry VI, further cementing his loyalty through the marriage of his youngest daughter Anne to Henry's son Prince Edward.[36] Warwick's outward agenda (arguably very different from his personal one) was to cement the country's loyalty to Henry; emphasising that Edward and Elizabeth's marriage was invalid, brought about unlawfully by the use of magic and

[32] Hicks, M. (2011). Elizabeth (c.1437–1492). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8634, accessed 26 November 2018.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Diaz Pascual, *Luxembourg*

[35] Ibid.

[36] Pollard, *Neville, Richard*.

therefore their children were bastards, something Richard III would also later return to. Jacquetta's targeting was the easiest way of convincing an audience of this, rather than directly targeting the former queen Elizabeth. What is more this accusation was more believable as it emphasised the feminine use of magic as opposed to Richard III's attempted accusations to which I will return shortly. It was this believability which was the most salient to any accusation during the Later Middle Ages, but particularly witchcraft accusations. Through using feminine magic Warwick could convince his audience that women posed a threat to men, and could, if they wanted, control men for their own gains. This too would be echoed throughout Malory's *Le Morte*.

Le Morte uses many women characters who pose a threat to Arthur's kingdom and the relationships between Arthur and his knights. Morgan Le Fay, Arthur's half-sister and witch, is a prominent example of the use of female characters (as well as male characters) to spread Malory's behavioural warnings and messages to his audience. Morgan emphasises the use of both feminine magic, as discussed above, and a more masculine use as discussed shortly. But Morgan embodies the threat women can pose to men more than most within *Le Morte*. At the time of writing *Le Morte* Jacquetta's trial was yet to happen, however Malory certainly would have been aware of Eleanor Cobham's trial, especially because Malory's own status arguably gave him more prominence at court than most knights. Therefore it is likely that Eleanor's trial would have influenced the stories within Malory's narrative. The accusations against the Woodville family however could have encouraged Caxton to publish *Le Morte* as a tangible association to be made by his audience. The feminine uses of magic as shown through Eleanor and Jacquetta's trials, using magic for love and not physical pain, is shown most within *Le Morte* when linked to Launcelot one of Arthur's greatest knights, who falls victim to this several times. This emphasises to an audience that even the greatest men can be fooled, again an associable thought for later audiences to the 'tricking' of Edward IV.

There are two ways in which Launcelot falls victim to the use of magic, the first occasion by the Lady Brisen and the second by Morgan (although Morgan was not solely to blame). The first occasion sees Launcelot tricked by magic into lying with the Lady Elaine, who was told by prophecy that she would on that night conceive their son Galahad, 'the most man of worship of the world'.[37] In this tale Launcelot is deceived by Brisen, guided to where he believes his true love Guenever is, and

[37] Malory, Vol. II, Ch. II. See also Malory, Vol. I, Ch. I.

given a cup of enchanted wine which makes Elaine look like Guenever to Launcelot.[38] Later in the narrative Launcelot is once again deceived in the same way into lying with Elaine, however this time he is discovered by an angry Guenever who rebukes him, causing Launcelot to flee into the forest for a number of years.[39] These tales are clear in the message they present: the threat of women and that men should be vigilant as even the noblest of men can be deceived. Indeed Launcelot falls for this use of magic numerous times; in the first half of the narrative even Morgan Le Fay uses feminine magic to lead a sleeping Launcelot to a castle, where he is held prisoner and must choose between four queens who he desires for his paramour.[40] Morgan here shows her use of magic in the most feminine way when encouraged by the other queens and arguably never shows this again. This could be interpreted in various ways, Morgan's feminine magic simply results from the influence of the other queens, or possibly that Launcelot's rejection of all of the queens, preferring to die nobly and with worship than choose between them, caused so much rage or even heartbreak that Morgan refused to use this type of magic again.[41] Most likely however the reason as to why Morgan does not use feminine magic again is simply because it is not the best way for her to gain the results she needs; therefore uses her magic in other ways. After the chapter with Launcelot's imprisonment Morgan embodies Laynesmith's argument of using her magic to be viewed by the other characters as doing the devil's work, posing the 'greatest' threat to Arthur's regime (although arguably this is not the case).[42]

Morgan is used most throughout *Le Morte* as a demonstration of both types of magical power, the use of feminine magic for love, and its masculine use for evil and destruction; shown most in *Le Morte* through the use of Morgan and Accolon's story. In this story Morgan, although innately evil is presumed to be guilty of more than she actually was, just as with the examples of real women throughout this article. This reflects the Later Middle Ages as a whole as it was easier to accuse and 'prove' noble and influential women of their guilt in order to attack political male enemies, than to accuse the man directly and prove their guilt. This is arguably because women were seen as weaker

[38] Malory, Vol. II, Ch. II.

[39] Malory, Vol. II, Ch. VIII.

[40] Malory, Vol. I, Ch. III.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens*, p. 2.

targets and were less likely to have male supporters who held powerful positions in court. The greatest example of this within *Le Morte* is the accused treason of Accolon, one of Arthur's closest knights, by Arthur himself. In this Accolon confesses to Arthur, not that he is directly guilty of witchcraft in order to threaten Arthur's life, but that Arthur's sister Morgan used magic to create a copy of Arthur's sword Excalibur with the intent that Accolon used it to kill her brother:

> this sword [the copy of Excalibur made by Morgan's magic] hath been in my keeping the most part of this twelvemonth; and Morgan le Fay, King Uriens' wife, sent it me yesterday by a dwarf, to this intent, that I should slay King Arthur, her brother. For ye shall understand King Arthur is the man in the world that she most hateth, because he is most of worship and of prowess of any of her blood […][43]

In this chapter however it is Arthur who presumes that Accolon is deceived by Morgan's 'false crafts' into carrying out her desire for his death.[44] This is not the case. Malory within this chapter suggests that it was not magic which caused Accolon's actions, nor magic to create his love for Morgan; it was a promise made to him by Morgan. Accolon continues:

> she [Morgan] loveth me out of measure as paramour, and I her again; and if she might bring about to slay Arthur by her crafts, she would slay her husband King Uriens lightly, and then had she me devised to be king in this land, and so to reign, and she to be my queen […][45]

This is the most important aspect of Accolon's story; fitting with the accusations of witchcraft made against Eleanor Cobham in particular, but also to an extent the Woodvilles. With Eleanor in particular, as discussed previously, she was accused of inciting Henry VI's death through 'witchcraft' in order to place her husband on the throne. Here Morgan is taking incitement one step further, actively using her magic to create the means by which her brother could be killed; encouraging Accolon to complete the task not so that he could become king, but most importantly for Accolon, so that he and Morgan

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[43] Malory, Vol. I, Ch. XI.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

could be married. Morgan within the narrative genuinely loves Accolon as shown through her discovery of his death a few chapters later, where Malory describes her as 'so sorrowful that near her heart to-brast' and yet she has to keep her feelings hidden so that her love for Accolon was not apparent to those around her.[46] Within Accolon's story the use of magic only occurs through the creation of Excalibur earlier within the narrative, after this point it is pure love which drives Accolon to betray Arthur.[47] Arthur through the love of Accolon grants him mercy, nevertheless Accolon's confession of guilt reflects the witchcraft trials which were common throughout the fifteenth-century, in which those accused (such as Eleanor Cobham) confess their guilt to some extent, either through the pressure placed upon them or the treatment they receive whilst imprisoned.

Elizabeth Woodville

Morgan in *Le Morte* uses magic to an extent, although not completely, to create Arthur and Camelot's downfall (after all she did not force Accolon to enact his treason). However, she bridges the gap between using magic for love and for destruction. Although it is salient to remember that she is unsuccessful in her use of 'masculine' magic (that is to create harm directly to another, rather than tactfully creating illusions of love and infatuation which are deemed to be more 'feminine'). What is more important is that Morgan is accused by her enemies of attempted physical harm, whether or not she is guilty. This links greatly to the revived witchcraft accusations against the Woodville family by Richard III, with the same desire as Warwick previously to discredit the family and prove that Edward and Elizabeth's children were bastards, not only because their marriage was the result of witchcraft but furthermore that Edward was already married.[48] Most importantly Richard aimed to prove his right to rule as king. Although Jacquetta (Elizabeth's mother) was acquitted with the restoration of Edward to the throne, it is likely that her trial would remain within the forefront of *Le Morte*'s post-1485 audience as a topic raised numerous times.[49] During Richard III's reign (1483-1485) Elizabeth and the Woodville family 'were presented as the principal enemies of the new regime'; therefore unsurprising that Richard would attempt to discredit them and theoretically use this to increase his reputation and

[46] Malory, Vol. I, Ch. XIV.

[47] For the creation of the copy of Excalibur see Malory, Vol. I, Ch. XI.

[48] Horrox, R. (2013). Richard III (1452–1485). *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23500, accessed 26 November 2018.

[49] Hicks, M. (2010). *The Wars of the Roses*. New Haven: Yale University Press; p. 194.

support, although unsuccessfully.[50] Furthermore, Richard's anger towards Elizabeth increased with her apparent disobedience. Although this was caused by Elizabeth's fear of her family's safety, it nevertheless presented her as defiant to Richard's instructions as Lord Protector of her sons after Edward IV's death. Elizabeth's withdrawal into sanctuary with her family, most notably her and Edward's youngest son Richard, in May 1483 can be seen as the final straw for Richard III, especially given Elizabeth's refusal to allow her second son to join his brother under Gloucester's care; creating a great deal of embarrassment but mostly anger for Gloucester.[51] As Lord Protector it was Richard III's duty and responsibility to care for Edward's sons, continuing the tradition of caring for them in the Tower of London until the future Edward V's coronation. The anger created by the understandably cautious Elizabeth's refusal to allow her family to leave sanctuary, even under Gloucester's reassurance of their safety upon leaving, means that Richard needed a solution which discredited Elizabeth so much that there was no reason for her and her family to hide any longer.[52] With hindsight it is known that both Edward and his younger brother Richard disappeared, presumably murdered within the Tower never to be seen again; allowing Richard III to take the throne (although the actual events remain unknown). Yet at the time Elizabeth's actions and cautiousness would have been seen to be defiant towards not only tradition, but most importantly towards Richard himself.

For this Richard, like Malory with Morgan, needed to change Elizabeth's character from one who could bend men to her will (through using her mother's 'magic' to ensnare the king into marriage, taking him from his 'future wife'), to one who was such a threat to men that she could use magic to physically harm and potentially kill someone. Although it can be argued that with the importance of autonomy within medieval masculine society, the concepts of losing control of will or body are not wholly different, it is important to define them separately based upon the interpretation which goes with them. To use magic to bend a person's will, particularly for reasons of love, is seen as a very feminine use of magic and although could cause damage to a reputation of a man, or in Edward's case could 'change' who he married, this kind of magic could not kill. To kill or physically injure to the point where a women could take control is a very masculine use of magic; therefore could be seen as the greater threat to noblemen, particularly those who anger that woman. It is this which Richard

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[50] Hicks, *Elizabeth*.

[51] Horrox, R. (1991). *Richard III: A study in service*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 111.

[52] Ibid, p. 112.

attempted to play upon. Before this point it can be argued that Elizabeth, despite her unusual choice of wife for Edward, was a good example of a medieval queen. Elizabeth is often interpreted as very feminine, with characteristics of the Virgin Mary and she carried out her duty as a queen giving birth to many children, most importantly two sons Edward and Richard. Richard III attempted to change this through presenting her as a masculine threat, using magic to destroy him and his regime.

In a letter on 10 June 1483 Richard wrote that Elizabeth and her associates 'have […] entended and daly doith intend to murder and utterly distroy us' pleading for military help against those who would see him dethroned.[53] This could argue Richard's paranoia during his reign, some may also argue that it is a sign of Richard's guilt: he murdered his nephews and fears his brother's loyal supporters would enact revenge on behalf of the princes, turning on Richard and killing him. However this was more likely Richard's attempt to build a case against Elizabeth. Although Richard does not specifically mention witchcraft within this letter, the murder plot was his foundation for his witchcraft allegation against the former queen; arguing that this is how she would murder him. In a clearly prejudiced writing during the Tudor period by Sir Thomas More a fictional Richard blames his weakened, withered arm on witchcraft created by Elizabeth; presenting the said arm to an audience as 'evidence' of her evil and attempts to physically harm if not destroy him.[54] Leland has since argued that Richard's claim has either been ignored or regarded as 'a clumsy invention', by both modern historians and Richard's contemporaries.[55] It is important however that Richard's claim of witchcraft against Elizabeth was theoretically of benefit to his regime; it was a practical failure because of the extreme claims being expressed. In order to make an accusation affect a person's reputation, it had to be believed by an audience. Richard's claims were simply too extreme to be believed, crossing the boundaries of witchcraft for love benefits to its use for physical harm. If Richard had accused Elizabeth of witchcraft along similar lines as her mother Jacquetta, or had greater proof of her guilt, then arguably Richard's accusation would have been more readily believed and affected Elizabeth's reputation more.

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[53] Richard III. (1991). Duke of Gloucester Asks for Military Help 15 June 1483. In L. C. Attreed (Ed.) *York House Books 1461-1490. Volume Two* (pp. 713-714). Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton for Richard III & Yorkist History Trust, p. 714.

[54] Kennedy, M. & Foxhall, L. (2015). *The Bones of a King: Richard III Rediscovered*. New York: Wiley; p. 130.

[55] Leland, *Witchcraft and the Woodvilles*, p. 267.

Even in *Le Morte* physical harm using magic is not successful, it is the use of magic to create chaos which is the most effective and leads ultimately to the destruction of Camelot through betrayal. It is therefore clear that *Le Morte* has a gender dimension running throughout the narrative which is reminiscent of the period in which it was created. In creating chaos through magic, Malory is demonstrating to his male audience that feminine uses of magic, can do just as much, if not more damage, than masculine uses of magic for physical harm. However, in most of the cases in which Malory's female characters 'create chaos' they are not the ones responsible for the overall destruction which this chaos causes. More often than not it is the actions which Arthur's knights and other male characters take in response to the female protagonists which directly causes chaos, rather than the women's actions; it is simply easier to portray the female characters as the ones responsible for that chaos in order to provide a clear warning to his male audience. Through using female characters such as Morgan Le Fay and the Lady Brisen, Malory is himself using women for his own agenda, that is to present messages to his audience about the way in which they should behave. For men it is about honour, religion and loyalty amongst other things, as well as presenting a warning about the threats women could pose. For women it was about religion, encouraging their men to behave in the same ways Arthur's knights do (when they are being 'chivalric' of course), but most importantly to learn from the mistakes made by his women characters such as Guenever and to avoid sinful acts like witchcraft. In using female characters Malory is reflecting the way in which women were used during witchcraft trials of the Later Middle Ages, the only difference is that the witchcraft trials were used to attack male political opponents through their women, rather than for providing lessons and guidance to others through their actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, during the fifteenth-century in particular, prominent male political figures used witchcraft accusations against prominent female figures as a way to attack their political enemies and destroy their reputation. These accusations did not have to be true, only believable, with accusations revolving around the use of magic for love having the greatest effect. Accusations of 'feminine' magic were easier to believe as they did not require as much proof as 'masculine' magic for physical harm or destruction. Furthermore trials within the fifteenth-century can be seen to have influenced writers such as Thomas Malory who, through his narrative, explored popular contemporary themes, with some characters who were easily relatable to real figures. This continued to be relevant throughout the

succeeding centuries, inspiring printers such as William Caxton to re-publish *Le Morte D'Arthur* several times; aiding the narrative's survival into the present day to inspire modern-day representations of the narrative. The themes running throughout *Le Morte* serve as an example of the Later Middle Ages, and has allowed modern historians to link the text to certain real events and people. *Le Morte*'s themes should be considered alongside real events in enriching our understanding of the Later Middle Ages.