

The lady of the lake

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In the collective imagination of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds the sea occupies a central position: Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, generation and fertility is born of sea-foam; the highlight of the *Iliad* is when the Trojans see the sails of the Greek fleet disappear on the horizon, and believe that the siege to their city is finally over, with catastrophic result; Odysseus and his companions are compelled to wander for ten years on the sea for having blinded Polyphemus, the son of the sea god Poseidon; Jason and his companions undertake a sea voyage on the ship Argo in search of the Golden Fleece; in the *Aeneid* the Roman poet Vergil tells of the sea-faring adventures of Aeneas, the Trojan hero and mythical founder of Rome. And I could go on and on.

By the Middle Ages the sea loses some of its allure, replaced by inlets, rivers, and especially lakes. In northern French and English mythologies, lakes are murky, mysterious places inhabited by water nymphs, fairies, and powerful queens, whose actions are closely tied to the political and social life of the time, some for the sake of good, some for good forsaken. One of the most important, appealing, and compellingly enduring figures associated with a watery kingdom is that of the Lady of the Lake, the mythical queen of Avalon who will raise Sir Lancelot and give to King Arthur the magical sword, Excalibur.

The birth of the Lady of the Lake is almost certainly ancient and pagan, and is usually referred to by variations on the names Nimue or Vivienne. The name Nimue is probably related to Mneme, the shortened form of Mnemosyne, one of the nine water-nymph Muses of Greek and Roman mythology who furnished weapons – as does the Lady of the Lake – to Perseus, the beheader of the Gorgon Medusa. Vivienne is thought to derive from the Celtic form Vi-Vianna, derived from Co-Vianna, a variant of the ubiquitous Celtic water-goddess, Coventina. Water deities were common in Celtic mythology, and offerings of weapons and valuable objects in rivers and lakes were extremely common. Even today these practices continue; however, the weapons are thrown into wishing wells, where the Lady of the Lake is called “Lady Luck”!

The background stories for Arthurian material -- and, thus, for the Lady of the Lake -- are seen in the so-called French *Vulgate*, a prose compilation assem-

bled in the first half of the thirteenth century. It is a collection of a number of other works written by such diverse authors as Geoffrey of Monmouth whose *Historia Regum Britanniae* of 1138 was then expanded by Wace in Norman French and Layamon in English; individual tales of various Arthurian heroes, as found for example in the romances of Chretien de Troyes; and incomplete works such as Robert de Boron's *Merlin*. One lengthy section of the *Vulgate* cycle is called the prose-*Lancelot*, which tells the story of the future paladin's childhood, his coming to King Arthur's court, and his love for Guinevere. Lancelot is the son of King Ban of Benwick, a province in France. The King is forced to flee his lands with his wife and son when attacked by his neighbor, King Claudas, but when he sees his city in flames he collapses and dies. The queen puts the child down near a lake and runs to her husband, but when she returns for the child, he is no longer there. He has been kidnapped by a fey, a fairy. “The lady who took Lancelot, whose name is Niniane – the text tells us – is a fairy, by which is meant a woman with a knowledge of magic.” Niniane is, of course, another name for Viviane and for Nimue, the queen of Avalon: a good fey or a bad fey, according to the text we read. The tale *Lancelot* recounts is the first of the three stages that will lead him to his destiny, that is to say his initiation. In order to gain entry into Arthur's court, the Lady of the Lake must teach the young child to become a knight; however, Lancelot's emblematic space is not the land of his father -- where a young man could prove his prowess and his mettle -- but the Otherworldly Kingdom in which the Lady of the Lake has raised him.

His weapons also attest his supernatural origins, since it is the Lady of the Lake who gives them to him. The text insists on the color of the other world, white, the color of innocence and purity: The Lady is dressed in white, Lancelot is always called “li blans chevaliers” or “li chevaliers au blanches armes.” Those weapons are no mere ornaments; they are presented as an essential attribute of the youth, and it is through them that he must win his knighthood. In providing Lancelot with those very weapons, the Lady of the Lake contravenes King Arthur's authority, for it is the King himself who is to bestow the title of knight by dressing him with new weapons. Later the Lady of the Lake will send Lancelot three shields, all made of silver. The pattern of the first is a diagonal stripe or bendy; the second has two bendies; and the third has three. These shields also belong to the other world, having as colors (tinctures) “argent” and “gules,” that is to say silver and red, and magic powers – they double, triple and quadruple the strength of the one who holds them. Worthwhile noting is the fact that when

Lancelot is knighted, he does not join Arthur's Round Table. After having received the king's knighthood, he refuses to be girdled with a sword.

But let us return to the Lady of the Lake. True, she took the young child, but only when he was left without land or kingdom, and was poor and orphaned. Yet, it is precisely because of this that she does, in fact, invest a positive role, as she herself says: «jel nori en ses grans povertés, la ou il perdi son pere et sa mere et fis tant a l'aide de Dieu que il fu biax vallés et grans: et puis l'amenai a cort et fis tant vers le roi Artu qu'il le fist chevalier¹» (Micha 1982: 459).

It is not to pull Lancelot away from his court that she takes him to the Other World under the waters of the lake, but to give him the ideal formation of the perfect knight.

When Lancelot is eighteen years old, the Lady of the Lake explains to him the history of chivalry: the origin, weapons, and role of the knight. It is important to stress the fact that the author placed such an important encomium in the mouth of such a character. It is at that moment when she decides it is time for Lancelot to leave the lake, and brings him to King Arthur's court to leave him there. She does not, however, abandon him: the fairy-nurse now becomes the fairy-godmother, who intervenes when Lancelot needs her, either in person, or through one of her fairy helpers, as when he is a prisoner of the enchantress Camille or when, after the episode of the Valley with no Return, he is first imprisoned and then freed by Morgue and the Lady of the Lake cures him of his madness. Being mad meant being excluded from court society, it meant being excluded from the court, and being confined within the limits of the forest and the monstrous creatures inhabiting it. By releasing him from his madness, the Lady of the Lake returns him to his former place within court society.

Her role in the Arthurian cycle, however, is not only that of raising Lancelot du Lac and preparing him to become a knight -- regretfully, time does not permit me to discuss the Lady of the Lake's role in the blossoming love between Lancelot and Guinevere; in exalting courtly love and, through their passion, thereby illustrate the most important courtly values: love and chivalry -- she also has a fundamental role in the story of King Arthur.

In Sir Thomas Malory's *La Morte Darthur*, Nenyve -- one of the spellings of Nimue -- enters the male dominated political sphere whenever she feels that her guidance is warranted. As an advocate of feudal chivalry, she is a protector not just of chivalric virtues, but also of King Arthur, her chosen sovereign. It is the Lady of

the Lake who, in the so-called post-Vulgate *Merlin*, by raising her arm up from the waters of her lake gives Arthur the sword that she calls "Excalibur, that is as to say as Cut-steel." Many of you are acquainted with the story, and at this point I am sure you are thinking: Yes, but what about King Arthur and the sword in the stone? Wasn't Excalibur set in a stone, and Arthur, as the legitimate King, the only one who could pull it from the stone? Yes, this is another version of the legend or, as other legends tell us, there were two swords. First and foremost though, the sword is the ultimate symbol of the power of the king, and it is loaded with symbolic meaning. The Lady of the Lake speaks:

The sword which the knight has belted on has two sharp edges, and not without reason. Of all the arms, the sword is the most honorable and the most noble; the one, which has the most dignity, for you, can harm with it in three ways. You can thrust and kill by stabbing with the point, and you can cut right and left with the two edges. The two edges signify that the knight should be a servant to our Lord and to His people: and that one edge of the sword should strike those who are enemies of Our Lord and despisers of His faith: and the other should take vengeance on those who are destroyers of the human company, that is those who take from one another, who kill one another. Such should be the strength of the two edges, but the point is different. The point signifies obedience, for it stabs, and nothing so stabs the heart, not loss of land or of wealth, as being forced to obey. (qtd. in Dean 1993: 13)

These words are meant for Lancelot, but the same can be said for Arthur, whose sword is the symbol of his reign over Camelot. It is with this sword that he wishes to kill Lancelot, who has betrayed him with his wife Guinevere; however, after a three-month siege of Lancelot's castle, the Joyous Guard -- before the love between Lancelot and Guinevere it had been called the Sad Guard-- mortally wounds Arthur in battle. As he feels the shadow of death shift over him, he commands Griflet, one of the first Knights of the Round Table, and one of Arthur's chief advisers (in other versions Sir Bedivere is the one who is asked to do it) to throw Excalibur back into the enchanted lake. Griflet fails to do it twice, since he believes that so great a weapon should not be wasted. When he finally complies with the wounded King's request and throws the sword into the lake, a hand emerges from the water to grab it, and disappears with it under the surface. When Arthur hears that the Lady of the Lake has re-

¹ See also Boiven 1984: 18-25.

taken the sword that she had given him, he realizes that his life has finally run his course, and he dies. Suddenly a barge appears, on board are the Lady of the Lake with three other fairies all dressed in black, the color of mourning, to take his corpse to his resting place, the isle of Avalon.

Some say that King Arthur was in fact still alive and that he was cured by the Lady of the lake and her handmaids, and that he still lives there, waiting for the right time to come back to save England.

The pristine waters of that mysterious lake (some of the stories tell us that it was the lake of the ancient goddess Diana) still create magic today, and the Lady of the Lake, King Arthur, Guinevere, Sir Lancelot still live on through literature and the visual arts: painting (William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Gustave Doré just to mention a few), comic strips, cinema and television. Sir Walter Scott's long poem "The Lady of the Lake" narrates the struggle between King James V and the powerful "clan Douglas," and has little to do with the Arthurian cycle, just like Gioacchino Rossini's opera *The Lady of the Lake*, whose libretto is taken directly from Walter Scott's poem. Raymond Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake* is a thriller set near Los Angeles, yet several references to the cycle are embedded in the text. Alfred Tennyson adopted several stories of the Lady of the Lake for his poetic cycle "The Idylls of the King." In 1983 Marion Zimmer Bradley published a very long (873 pages) and very successful novel, *The Mists of Avalon*, in which the stories of King Arthur are related from the point of view of the female characters. In 1999 the Polish novelist Andrzej

Sapkowsky wrote a novel *The Lady of the Lake* immediately translated in Czech, French, Russian, German, Spanish, and Lithuanian. The Lady of the Lake has appeared in 92 stories of Marvel comics; *Excalibur* was a very successful movie, and the BBC TV serial *Merlin*, devoted several episodes to our Lady. One of the best Dallas legends is that the Lady of the Lake still lives in White-Rock lake, another in Lake Huron; and I could go on for another half hour talking about contemporary renditions of the Arthur's cycle and the Lady of the Lake.

I will end my paper in Los Angeles, city of eternal spring and visual invention, and where I live and teach, because our city also has a Lady – *Nuestra Reina de Los Angeles* – more commonly known as the "Lady of the Lake". Standing some four meters high at the edge of Echo Park Lake, this Lady overlooks and protects the City of Angels: it is the ultimate reconfiguration of the Arthurian Nimue or Viviane: the Virgin Mary, the protector of the kingdom of God on earth – at least for those who believe in her.

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