Death of a Maiden: La Demoiselle d’Escalot in *La Mort Artu*

La Demoiselle d’Escalot qui a inspiré plusieurs auteurs et artistes au cours des siècles, est l’un des personnages les plus captivants de la littérature arthurienne. Racontée pour la première fois au xiiiè siècle par l’auteur anonyme de *La Mort Artu*, son histoire, bien que brève, joue un rôle central dans le roman. Son influence sur d’autres personnages se présente dès son arrivée sur scène, et les conséquences de son existence littéraire persistent après sa mort. En effet, sa mort est plus significative que sa vie, qui se limite à quelques pages dans le texte. Pourtant, malgré son importance dans l’intrigue, les études consacrées à la Demoiselle d’Escalot sont extrêmement rares. Par conséquent, elle se trouve reléguée parmi les personnages secondaires et même non-essentiels. Or, une analyse détaillée démontrera que sa vie et sa mort ont un impact puissant sur les événements qui détruisent le royaume d’Arthur. En outre, ses interactions avec les figures proéminentes sont indispensables. Représentant parfois le visage de Fortune elle-même, cette demoiselle contrôle le destin du monde arthurien, ce qui lui donne une présence vitale dans le roman et exige une réévaluation de son classement comme personnage secondaire.

The Demoiselle d’Escalot is one of the most haunting figures of Arthurian literature, inspiring artists and writers alike throughout several centuries. First told by the author of the 13th-century French *Mort Artu*, her story was transformed by later writers, all of whom reshaped her into a major Arthurian character. Conversely, her textual presence is brief in the *Mort Artu*, but she nonetheless plays a prominent role, her impact reaching far beyond the simple fact that she falls in love with Lancelot and, soon after, dies of grief when her love is not reciprocated. Her influence on other characters in the romance is apparent from the moment she is introduced into the story, and the effects of her literary existence can be seen long after her death. In fact, the consequences of her death are more significant than her literary life, which comprises only a few short pages in the edited text.

Curiously, despite her importance to the romance, studies devoted to the Demoiselle d’Escalot are few and far between – in fact, virtually non-existent. Certainly, there are scholars who mention her in passing, in their endeavors to discuss her counterparts from later centuries, but in these cases, she is nothing more than a point of departure for other analyses. As a result, she is often categorized as being a far less critical figure in the French prose romance than a detailed study will demonstrate. Both her life and her death in this narrative have a powerful impact on the events that destroy Arthur’s kingdom, and her interactions with the key players are essential to the tragic ending of the *Mort Artu*. Thus, although she

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1 Malory and Tennyson, for example, both made her character a much more central figure in their works.
2 There are of course exceptions, including Virginie Greene’s recent article (2002), as well as earlier studies such as Frapper 1961, who devotes several pages (267-73) to this character and to her impact on the romance.
3 See, for example, Sklar 2001:59-70 and Noble 2001:45-57.
represents a secondary character in terms of the size of her role, she is a vital one in terms of her influence on the text. What, however, is her true function in the work?

The answer to this question is three-fold. First and foremost, she seriously complicates the relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere, prompting the queen to question both Lancelot’s honor and the validity of her own judgment of him and of herself. Similarly, the Demoiselle d’Escalot’s presence in the romance leads to the further complication of other relationships, since she inspires the kind of conflicting loyalties and suspicions that will characterize the Mort Artu. Finally, the episodes involving the maiden rely, as does the entire first half of the romance, on the deceptive nature of signs and their systematic misinterpretation in this section of the work. What is most intriguing about this character, though, is the effect she has on other characters on a psychological level, regardless of the situation taken into account. When considered from this point of view, she becomes a significant figure, shaping the narrative and its characters in powerful ways.

From the opening lines of the Mort Artu, a foreboding sense of doom underscores the title, which offers a glimpse of what the future holds for the Arthurian kingdom, even before the story begins. In this romance, as Arthur himself acknowledges (Mort 3. 38-43)\(^4\), adventures have come to an end, which is hardly fortuitous in a world defining itself through them. With the court already in a state of turmoil, the appearance of the Demoiselle d’Escalot only adds to the troubles unfolding from the outset. Our first glimpse of this captivating character comes at a pivotal moment in the text, when Lancelot, setting off incognito for a tournament, accepts the hospitality of her father and two brothers (Mort 12.1-26). When Lancelot makes a blind promise to the young woman, granting her the favor of wearing her sleeve in a tournament, he is faced immediately with an emotional crisis and a major dilemma, since, as he knows, should the queen hear of his wearing the sleeve, the consequences will be severe (Mort 14.1-22). The maiden’s initial presence in the romance and her humble request have an impact on the psychology of both Lancelot and the queen.

It is at this point that complications leading to the eventual downfall of the Arthurian world multiply considerably. Because of the Demoiselle d’Escalot, Lancelot finds himself in a compromised position. On the one hand, if Guenevere learns of the tournament, she will undoubtedly interpret the maiden’s sleeve as a betrayal of his love for her. On the other hand, if Lancelot refuses to wear the sleeve, he will betray the honor of his word. Both are complex predicaments for a knight of any caliber. His moral duty here is in conflict with that of a courtly lover, and in this case, the former prevails. In keeping his promise to the maiden (who admits to him that he is the first knight of whom she has ever made such a request, Mort 14.30-34), he betrays his loyalty to the queen, the woman to whom he has

\(^4\) All references are to Frappier’s edition of the text. Citations refer to paragraph numbers and not to page numbers.
devoted himself entirely. Here, the young woman’s declaration shows her innocence, a character trait that will work against her later in the romance. At this point, however, it is precisely her innocence and her praise of Lancelot that, if only for a brief moment, allow her ostensibly to displace the queen in his heart, when he becomes her champion, rather than Guenevere’s. In an effort to justify this act, Lancelot declares to the maiden that, «por l’amor de li en fera il tant que ja n’en devra estre blasmez» (Mort 14.33-36). He however does not conduct himself blamelessly in Guenevere’s eyes. Learning of the sleeve, she immediately assumes that he has been unfaithful to her and accuses him of betrayal.

In addition to causing the queen to doubt Lancelot’s fidelity, her discovery that he has worn another woman’s token also takes a psychological toll on Guenevere, unveiling a vulnerability within her that is uncharacteristic of a queen – or at least of this queen. Her fear in this situation is evident. Although she hides her despair when publicly dealing with Gauvain and Girflet, who affirm to her that the knight wearing the by now notorious sleeve was indeed Lancelot, her calm and collected demeanor gives way to tears and lamentations, behind closed doors. Confronted by the possibility that she has lost Lancelot’s love, Guenevere is transformed into a weak, dependent woman whose world seems to fall apart at the thought of being betrayed. The momentary boldness and self-confidence demonstrated by the Demoiselle d’Escalot when she asks Lancelot for the favor is in sharp contrast to the queen’s reaction when she learns the news. Guenevere, generally assertive and demanding when it comes to affairs of the heart, is engaged in a reversal of roles with the maiden in this case, since it is the latter who appears to be in control of Lancelot.

Moreover, the scene brings to light two instances of misinterpretation of signs5. Whereas the maiden wrongly assumes that, in wearing her sleeve, Lancelot is devoting himself to her, Guenevere falsely concludes that he has betrayed her:

Et quant la reïne entent ceste parole, si s’en test atant et s’en entre en sa chambre lermoiant des euz del chief; si fesoit trop grant duel et disoit a soi meïmes: «Ha! Dex, tant m’a vileinnement trichiee cil en qui cuer ge cuidoie que toute loiauté fust herbergiee, por qui j’avoie tant fet que pour l’amor de lui avoie honni le plus preudome del monde! Ha! Dex, qui esprovera mes loiau-te en nul chevalier ne en nul home, quant desloiauté s’est herbegiee el meilleur de touz les bons?» Tiex paroles disoit la reïne a soi meïmes, car ele cuidoit veraiement que Lancelos amast cele qui manche il avoit portee au tournoiement et qu’il l’eüst lessiee. (Mort 32.20-33)

The queen is so convinced by the significance of the sleeve that she refuses to believe Gauvain, who later assures her that Lancelot’s wounds have prevented his

5 In the medieval sign system, as in the modern, signs were most often polyvalent. Vance, for example, repeatedly emphasizes the «equivocal nature of all conventional verbal signs» (1986:279), and that observation clearly holds for non-verbal signs as well, as these episodes in La Mort Artu demonstrate. The misinterpretation of signs often plays a role in medieval romance, and in fact certain romances, such as Chrétien’s Cligés, are systematically constructed around the interplay of illusion and reality.
return to the court. Ironically, she is betrayed not by Lancelot, but by the credence she gives to her perception of the situation. Her jealousy (for which there is no need) is brought about by the false threat she perceives in the Demoiselle d’Escalot – a threat that continues until the latter’s death proves otherwise.

The inaccurate interpretation of the sleeve in this episode is soon followed by another misreading, this one involving Gauvain. After arriving at the Escalot castle in search of the knight bearing red arms (that is, Lancelot), Gauvain himself falls in love with the maiden and asks in vain for her affection in return (Mort 26. 17-23). Insulted by her rebuff and by her unwillingness to tell him whom she loves, he must be content with seeing the knight’s shield, belonging, of course, to Lancelot. Like Guenevere and the maiden herself, who assign the wrong significance to the sleeve, Gauvain takes the shield as proof that Lancelot loves the young woman (Mort 27. 8-15). In turn, he also interprets it as a sign of Lancelot’s innocence in the adulterous accusations against him and the queen. As a matter of fact, it is after seeing the shield and misinterpreting its meaning that Gauvain learns of the accusations from Arthur. Their ensuing discussion is the first one during which the two speak of the possibility of an illicit love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere (Mort 30. 48-80). It will not, however, be the last.

Although the conflict arising between Lancelot and Guenevere and the misreading of signs at this point in the romance are crucial consequences of the Demoiselle d’Escalot’s presence in the text, the importance of these scenes lies mainly in what they foreshadow. As noted, Guenevere calls into question Lancelot’s loyalty to her. Later in the romance, other members of the court will echo more severely her doubts concerning his character. In this respect, these episodes are analogous to those that will subsequently occur, once the boat carrying the maiden’s body (along with a letter explaining her death and thus exculpating Lancelot) arrives on the shores of the kingdom (Mort 70. 13-17). Thus, the initial scenes involving the maiden provide a prominent example of interlace in the narrative. Moreover, her inclusion in the text represents one of the last threads of interlace in this final romance of the Vulgate Cycle. The technique of interlace is, after all, one of the most distinguishing and impressive factors of this enormous cycle. That the Demoiselle d’Escalot enhances the technique only adds to the value of her narrative function.

Despite its importance to the Vulgate, examples of interlace are few and far between in the Mort Artu, especially when compared with those found in the

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6 Frappier points out the importance of interlace to the maiden’s story, when he explains that «la fatalité de l’amour s’abat dans La Mort Artu sur un autre personnage, la demoiselle d’Esca- lot. Cette histoire de la demoiselle d’Esca- lot ... débute en idylle et s’achève en tragédie. En rai- son du procédé de l’entrelacement, elle se découpe nettement en cinq actes» (1961:267). His five acts are as follows: 1) the maiden’s initial encounter with Lancelot and her request that he wear her sleeve; 2) her encounter with and rejection of Gauvain; 3) her time spent with Lancelot while he recovers from his almost fatal wound; 4) Lancelot’s rejection of the young woman; and 5) the arrival of her body at Camelot. For Frappier’s discussion on the interlacing of these episodes, see Frappier 1961:267-73.
Lancelot. However, in a sense, it is even more essential to the Mort Artu than to the other four romances. As Norris Lacy has noted, this text «is both retrospective and prospective, looking back to and concluding the cycle, while also looking ahead and meticulously preparing for the final battle in which Arthur’s reign will be ended and his Round Table undone» (86). To a considerable extent, the same can be said of the Demoiselle d’Escalot, whose presence in the text creates a link between episodes taking place before she is introduced and those following her demise. Nonetheless, by the end of the Mort Artu, after the Demoiselle d’Escalot is forgotten, interlace is virtually abandoned. The text then turns to a more coherent and linear depiction of the events leading to the final war. That war itself is the result of, and involves, further conflicting loyalties between major characters – Arthur and Gauvain, Gauvain and Lancelot, and Arthur and Mordred, among others. These tensions are all prefigured by those initiated by the maiden. The difference is that, in the tensions occurring after her death, there is a linear presentation of the causes and effects of the conflicts.

Although the Demoiselle d’Escalot’s death marks the end of interlace in this romance, it by no means represents the end of chaos. On the contrary, her death is even more problematic for the text than is her life. Rejected by Lancelot, who tells her of his devotion to another, she sees no reason to continue living without his love. Her devastation and envy of his feelings for someone other than her evoke a reaction comparable to that of Guenevere, whose jealousy was apparent when she learned of the sleeve. Yet, the maiden’s reaction is more dramatic, since, at this moment, she announces her own impending death:

«Sire, fet ele, ce poise moi; et sachiez bien que g’en sui a la mort venue, et par mort departira mes cuers de vostre amor. Et ce sera li guerredons de le bone compaignie que mes freres vos a portee, des lors que vos onques venistes en cest païs.» (Mort 57.33-41)

By this point in the narrative, Lancelot has fallen out of the good graces of two women. The knowledge that each one has of the other, combined with the sentiments that the two feel for Lancelot, creates a curious sort of love triangle whose effects will be disastrous. Once again, Lancelot is embroiled in a complex situation involving love, desire, and jealousy, which threatens the stability of the court. But in this triangle, rather than Arthur, we find the Demoiselle d’Escalot, along with Lancelot and Guenevere.

There is also an obvious irony involved here. Whereas knowledge of the maiden upsets the queen, it is a comfort to Arthur, who takes it as a sign that Lancelot and Guenevere are not engaged in an adulterous relationship. Hence, the king’s worries end where the queen’s begin, though his peace of mind will be short-lived. As these episodes demonstrate, the romance must exhibit the results of suspicions and jealousy at every turn: there are no moments free of destructive passion in this work, and this consistent level of tension contributes appropriately to the foreboding impression of a world on the edge of collapse. In this portion of the text, these suspicions depend considerably on the Demoiselle d’Escalot.
The implications of the young lady’s death for other characters in the romance are numerous. Initially, for Arthur and Gauvain, who discover the boat carrying her lifeless body, its appearance on the shores of the kingdom gives false hope that the adventures for which the king has been longing are about to begin anew (Mort 70.18-25). With this inaccurate impression comes yet another misinterpretation of signs, since the arrival of the boat represents not the beginning of new adventures, but rather the beginning of the end for all involved. Before too long, both Gauvain and Arthur themselves are aware of their misperception of the symbolism of the boat, when the former recognizes the body as being that of the maiden to whom Lancelot had presumably granted his love. The letter found with the Demoiselle d’Escalot’s body explains her fate and denounces Lancelot:

«...ge sui morte por le plus preudome del monde et por le plus vilain: ce est Lancelos del Lac, qui est li plus vilains que ge sache, car onques ne le soi tant prier o pleurs et o lermes que il volsist de moi avoir merci; si m’en a tant esté au cuer que g’en sui a ma fin venue por amer loiaument.» (Mort 71.17-23)

These accusations lead the king and Gauvain to call into question Lancelot’s honor. Furthermore, Arthur, agreeing with the maiden’s sentiments, calls Lancelot’s rejection of her «si aniouse que tous li mons l’en devroit blasmer» (Mort 71.29-30). Again, it is the maiden’s letter that causes him to severely criticize and doubt the moral value of his finest knight.

That the source of his doubt and criticism in this situation is the Demoiselle d’Escalot is ironic, considering that, when his own knights repeatedly accuse Lancelot of sleeping with the queen, Arthur chooses not to believe them. Yet, in this case, the king has faith in the words of an unknown maiden, and his opinion of Lancelot is altered. Curiously, her words are more powerful than those of the trusted knights of the Round Table. In fact, Arthur places so much faith in the young woman’s letter that he makes his knowledge public, spreading the news to Yvain and Gaheriet, who, in turn, reveal it to others. For Gauvain, in contrast, the letter vindicates Lancelot, and the former realizes that he has misinterpreted the significance of the shield. After reading the letter, he denounces his false accusation against Lancelot. At the same time, he affirms Arthur’s initial belief that Lancelot «ne daingneroit pas son cuer abessier por amer en si bas leu» (Mort 71.37-38). This affirmation, of course, made possible by the letter, revives the notion that Lancelot is free to love the queen.

The power of the maiden’s letter is significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the authority attributed to the written word in the Middle Ages, since both Arthur and Gauvain readily accept its contents. More important, though, this let-

7 Here, Arthur refuses to believe their accusations based on heresy. Of course, when Agravain and others provide indisputable evidence by finding Lancelot and Guenevere together (Mort 90.13-87), the king has no choice but to accept that evidence.

8 Burns (1985:10-27, esp. 16-17) deals in some detail with the question of auctoritas, the authority of precedent texts upon which medieval writers grounded their compositions. However, as
ter seals the fate of the court. The Demoiselle d’Escalot, who initially gives Arthur a reason – or an excuse – to deny the accusations against Lancelot and the queen, creates another cloud of suspicion with her letter. Whereas the implications of the maiden’s literary life are entirely positive ones in Arthur’s eyes, in that they exculpate Guenevere from charges of infidelity, her lifeless body and the letter accompanying it have the reverse effect. From this point forward, he begins to consider seriously the possibility that Lancelot and the queen have betrayed him. Thus, in life, the maiden represents hope for Arthur. As such, she is an asset to him, if only for a short while, providing him with a reason to believe what he has always wanted to believe, despite evidence to the contrary. Consequently, she permits his crumbling universe to thrive for a while longer than it might have otherwise. In death, on the other hand, she represents despair, forcing Arthur to face a reality that he has tried for so long to avoid. In Arthur’s case, as in Guenevere’s and Lancelot’s, the maiden determines his psychological reaction.

Incidentally, the king’s reaction to and complete acceptance of the letter’s contents differ from those of a previous scene in the romance, where Arthur sees (and, at least initially, accurately interprets) the painted story of Lancelot’s and Guenevere’s love but refuses to accept it as conclusive proof:

"Einsint commença li rois a lire les oeuvres Lancelot par les peintures que il veoit; et quant il voit les ymages qui devisoient l’acointement Galeholt, si en fu touz esbahiz et touz trespansez; si commence a regarder ceste chose et dist a soi meïsmes tout basset: «Par foi, fet il, se la senfiance de ces letres est verai, donques m’a Lancelos honni de la reïne, car ge voi tout en apert que il s’en est acointiez». (Mort 52.1-9)

If a picture speaks a thousand words – and, here, it does – Arthur literally fails to read the writing on the wall. The denial of the truth in this case is also a misinterpretation of signs on the king’s part, albeit an understandable one, since, according to Lacy, «the Arthurian world rests on a fragile illusion, perhaps from the beginning, certainly now. That world functions only as long as illusion is maintained and unpleasant truths are concealed. The trouble is that the recognition of problems requires response to them» (91). Whereas the correct interpretation of the paintings would destroy the illusion to which Lacy alludes and the one that Arthur so desperately wants to accept as true, a misinterpretation of the letter in this case would allow him to prolong his bliss and avoid the destiny that has awaited him and the Arthurian world all along. The king’s willingness to believe what he has read at this later point in the narrative, however, suggests that, finally, he is aware of the inevitability of his fate and that of his world. Therefore, with resignation, he accepts it.

Burns points out, there were competing literary traditions: one of them underlined the truth or literary value of a work by reference to its real or putative sources; the other, generally ecclesiastical in nature, insisted that only scripture could contain and express truth. Profane texts, on the other hand, are by their very nature falsehoods.
As we would expect, Guenevere’s reaction to the news of the letter is different from Arthur’s and from that of the other knights, who interpret it as a strike against Lancelot’s honor. For the queen, it provides proof that he has been faithful to her—a significant detail, when we bear in mind that it gives Arthur a reason to believe that she has been unfaithful to him. The letter thus contains a truth for both of them, but it has further significance for Guenevere. Rather than continue to doubt Lancelot’s loyalty, she begins to question her own and the value of her judgment, accusing herself of betraying and mistreating him (Mort 72.4-7). As before, her psychological response is affected. Although she blames herself, she is naturally comforted by the knowledge of Lancelot’s innocence that accompanies the young woman’s death. From this point of view, the discovery of the maiden and of her letter has positive implications for the queen. However, within the larger framework of the narrative, the young woman’s death evokes a final turn of the Wheel of Fortune⁹ and represents yet another misread sign, since the relief it brings to Guenevere is only temporary. In the end, it turns out to be nothing more than disaster in disguise.

Despite the drama surrounding the Demoiselle d’Escalot, once buried, she is quickly forgotten. All that remains of her tragic story is an inscription commissioned by the king, explaining to the kingdom that she has died of her love for Lancelot. Choosing the inscription on the tomb is one of the last examples of Arthur exerting control over his kingdom. Soon, it will be beyond his control, for Fortune herself takes over and ensures the destruction of all in her path. Conflicts brought to the fore during the scenes involving the maiden become more intense and pronounced, after she is gone. It is as though the Demoiselle d’Escalot represents, in a sense, the face of Fortune. For a brief moment, she holds the key to the kingdom in the palm of her hand. Like Fortune, it is within her reach to slow the turn of the wheel, now on a downward spin. Had she not revealed the truth about Lancelot, the course of events might have been altered. With her death and the letter that she bears, however, comes a definitive turn; with the inscription on her tomb, the fate of the Arthurian universe is etched in stone. The finality of her demise prefigures the end of Camelot, and the war that will have no end is set in motion. For these reasons, her classification as a marginal figure is hardly accurate for a character capable of wreaking so much havoc on the Arthurian world. Without her story, the Arthurian world, like Fortune’s wheel, might well have taken a different turn.

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⁹ Fortune and her wheel play an increasingly important role in the later portions of the romance; Fortune is not only the subject of a number of allusions by Arthur and others, but she, with her wheel, is the focus of a major prophetic dream vision in which Arthur sees clearly the end of his life and kingdom (Mort 176.55-79).
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