

ARTICLE

The Forests as Ideological Spaces: The Female Characters in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of the forests as ideological spaces in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* (c. 1450) and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (c. 1450) through an analysis of female characters' actions within these settings. By exploring the adventures, challenges, combats, and encounters experienced by Arthurian knights and women in the forests, this article argues that the romance forest is constructed in alignment with the principles of medieval chivalric ideology. Thus, it functions as a crucial site for the knight's quest and moral development. However, despite the forest's association with the knight's chivalric pursuit, it is also inhabited by women whose roles are often subordinated to the knight's narrative. These female figures are usually positioned as ancillary characters whose presence reinforces the chivalric ethos by facilitating the knight's journey towards self-realization and perfection. Consequently, it is argued that the forests of these romances operate as gendered and ideological spaces that privilege the knight's chivalric identity and self-aggrandisement while they marginalize and trivialize women's actions.

Keywords: medieval romance; romance forest; chivalric ideology; gender; ideological space; gendered space

Introduction

Most Arthurian romances revolve around the knight's journey towards achieving ideal knighthood. His process of maturation is narrated through his experiences of chivalric deeds and love. In Stephen Jaeger's (1985: 242)^a words, '[a] knight of great promise and potential worth sets out in search of adventure, wins by his prowess hono[u]r, a place in society, a wife, and lands'. This transformation is enabled by the knight's movement from the court to the forest. Therefore, the forest as an essential space of quest and action plays a vital role in the knight's chivalric journey. While Arthurian romances primarily emphasize and centralize the knight's deeds in the forest, the romance forest is also populated by women, enemy/rival knights, giants, monsters, animals, hunters, and other supernatural creatures. These non-knight figures are usually employed to serve the chivalric ethos which the Arthurian knight stands for. They may function either as helpers or rivals to the knight. Either way, they are deployed to display, prove, and polish the knight's chivalric reputation.

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In fact, romance as a genre is a product of medieval chivalric and gender ideologies per se as Simon Gaunt (2000: 46) notes, drawing on Fredric Jameson's definition of the genre, 'genres are inherently ideological constructs'. Thus, the spaces incorporated in the romance genre cannot be perceived separately from these ideologies, on the contrary, they are deeply interwoven with them. As Robert Tally (2013: 117) maintains, since space 'is not empty container of Cartesian and Kantian thought, but a product,' it cannot be left 'untouched' (Lefebvre 1974: 1) by ideologies.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that space is a product and is productive at the same time. That is, 'every society – and ... every mode of production ... – produces a space, its own space' (Lefebvre 1974: 31). Space, Lefebvre (1974: 34) explains, can be deemed 'a site and a means of cultural power, informed by a set of historically and culturally specific notions that are loaded in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class'. In this respect, space cannot be considered 'the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile' (Foucault 1980: 70). Instead, it is an ideological construct which carries and circulates meanings actively. Lefebvre (1974: 1–2) further elaborates on the construction of space:

Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched? Could space be nothing more than the passive locus of social relations ...? The answer must be no. I shall show how space serves, and how hegemony makes use of it, in the establishment, on the basis of and underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a 'system'.

Hence, the spaces function as ideological constructs that sustain and propagate the meanings of the dominant ideologies, and they support and promote their values – in the case of the romances, those of chivalric and gender ideologies.

Within this framework, the knight is modelled as the embodiment of chivalric ideals, simultaneously shaped by and reproducing the ideology he represents. Neil Cartlidge (2012: 1) also emphasizes that '[r]omances are not ideologically and psychologically naïve texts,' but rather rely on the 'simplistic scales of value, intellectual commonplace and easy stereotypes' and describe the chivalric successes of the knights in order to confirm 'the intrinsic superiority of the social and ethical ideals that they [the knights] embody'. Therefore, the knight is often portrayed as 'the best knight of the world' (Liu 2006: 347). As the representative of the ideologies, the knight is formed as undefeatable and morally exemplary. Yin Liu (2006: 347) also asserts that

the knight's personal armo[u]r is always the best ever made, his horse the strongest, his battles the most spectacular; the protagonist's hardships are invariably the worst ever suffered ...; romance protagonist provides information about the ideological systems of which he or she is imagined to be exemplary.

Considering the dynamics of the genre, it can be stated that the knight undoubtedly occupies the central position in the Arthurian romances. He departs from the court to the forest to enact and convey the chivalric values and precepts. In his adventures, he mostly occupies the ideological forest in which he displays, boosts, and proves his chivalric features. In this point, it is significant to note that it is not only the forest in the romances but also the other spaces such as the castle that are ideological. What differentiates the forest as an ideological space from the others is that it is also 'a land of potentiality' (Saunders 1993: 34) that embraces a view of the forest as a space which offers myriad possibilities, such as danger, protection, conflict, mystery, chaos, serenity, reality, bliss, natural, supernatural, past, and future.

As a consequence, in such a genre and space, the characters other than the knight are deployed to serve the knightly stories. In this regard, this article analyses the romance forest as a chivalric and gendered space by focusing on the activities, the meetings, and the encounters of the Arthurian knight with female characters in the forest with regard to their function of serving and defying dominant gender and chivalric ideologies in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* and the *Wedding of Sir Gawain and the Dame Ragnelle*.

The Female Characters and their Raison d'être in the Romance Forests

The female characters in the Arthurian romances occupy minor yet important roles. Despite not being central to the plot, they are strategically incorporated into chivalric narratives to serve chivalric purposes, and they appear frequently in romance forests. These spaces, however, are imagined as uncivilized territories inhabited by wild animals, beasts, criminals, and outlaws (Saunders 2013: 333; Saunders 1993: 3). So, the forests are unsafe spaces because dangerous encounters are likely in them. The danger of these spaces is a reality for both genders, yet it is implicated that they are definitely not the spaces that women should inhabit. In this context, it is important to remember that spaces play crucial roles in the construction of gender relations (Massey 1994: 179). Also, '[g]ender has been deeply implicated in the construction of geography' (Massey 1994: 180). In this line, it can be stated that in addition to the fact that the forests are dangerous spaces in reality, such a description of the forests as dangerous spaces for women is also an outcome of the fact that medieval practices of space are intensely gendered and have distinct gender divisions.

Medieval practices of space designate specific spaces for women to safely occupy such as 'rooms, houses, quarters in the cities and villages' (Hanawalt and Kobialka 2000: ix) depending upon their economic status and social standing. Yet, men may occupy 'streets, highways, fields, cities, oceans, battles and council tables' (Hanawalt and Kobialka 2000: ix). Therefore, spaces women may occupy with freedom are the home, the village and the city quarter (Hanawalt 1998: 26). As Hanawalt (1998: 26) states, if they went beyond that space, they would be expected to do it with proper demeanour, dress and escort; otherwise, 'they risked impingement on their hono[u]r or on their persons.' Hence, it can be stated, as Martine Segalen (1996: 205) also confirms in a different context, 'there was a female house and a male outside' in the Middle Ages.

The romance forests as the examples of 'male outside' (Segalen 1996: 205) shaped by chivalric ideology render women vulnerable and unprotected. Consequently, although women commonly appear in these forests, the chivalric narratives repeatedly imply that they do not belong there and are seriously in danger. As can be observed in the romances such as *Libeaus Desconus*, *Ywain and Gawain*, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, when women are in the forest, they may be abducted, be already captured by a knight or giants, or raped. Even in such cases, women's voices cannot be heard because their viewpoint is not given. Their situation is conveyed not by themselves but through the conversations by men.

Being in need of protection in a dangerous space, the female characters in these romances reflect, to some extent, the wider medieval invisibility of women that refers to the derivative and secondary positions attributed to women in medieval society. This is interesting because some other romances feature powerful and even threatening fairy ladies. However, within this context, the namelessness of many female figures in the romances becomes a significant marker of their narrative function. That is, it reinforces their objectification by denying them individual identity and visibility, encapsulating them in anonymity. 'Anonymous' (2021) is defined as the situation of being '[n]ameless, having no name; of unknown name.' As Bliss (2008: 51) notes, anonymity may also suggest 'universality or exemplarity' or indicate 'special power.' Although namelessness or nameless characters may provide such practicalities for the romancer, it simultaneously

diminishes the visibility of the unnamed character. Furthermore, namelessness may also denote powerlessness and insignificance, and, as Bliss (2008: 51) significantly states, 'in romance more women than men are anonymous'.

One of these nameless women is the woman who is the lover of Sir Gawain, the daughter of Sir Gilbert, and the sister of Gyamoure, Terry, and Brandles in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*. Even in defining and describing her, her namelessness causes difficulties, and she is defined not by herself and her actions but by her relation to men. In *The Jeaste*, she is first introduced during her conversation with Gawain, which reveals that he encounters her in a pavilion while hunting and subsequently seduces her. After that, her kinsmen arrive one by one to challenge Gawain to fight to avenge their loss of honour caused by the unnamed lady and Gawain's liaison. Gawain fights the last challenger Brandles to a draw and leaves the battlefield on foot, leaving his horse behind. Back at court, however, he victoriously narrates what he has experienced and whom he has encountered. The nameless lady, in contrast, is literally beaten by Brandles for causing such troubles and forced to self-exile in the forest. As the only unnamed character in the romance, her fate differs sharply from that of the knights. That is, she has been forced to exile in the forest, which is considered a dangerous place especially for women, while Brandles and Sir Gawain remain chivalric knights and continue their lives without any change.

Moreover, *The Jeaste's* plot is initiated by the discussion and the combat over the exchange of a woman. When Sir Gilbert, the woman's father, sees Gawain and his daughter together in the pavilion, he challenges Gawain to fight, rejecting the knight's offer of amends and insisting on a duel. It is believed that this negotiation is in the centre of the romance and, as Lindsay (2011: 24) points out, it 'brings the men in the romance together'. Thus, many critics support that this exchange puts the lady at the focal point of the romance. Hahn (1995: 394), for instance, clearly suggests that 'the nameless sister/daughter/lover – turns out to be the pivotal character, through whom male relations of power and hono[u]r receive definition'. For Hahn (1995: 394), '[The] *Jeaste* dramatizes the signal function of woman as the medium by which men establish relations among themselves'. Hahn is quite right in pointing out that the relations among the knights are constructed through the dispute over their kinswoman's lost virginity. However, the lady cannot be regarded as the pivotal character because of this. On the contrary, as her namelessness suggests, she is the least active figure in the romance. Even though she is the medium through which the men form a kind of relationship (martial or social), indeed, she cannot participate in this relationship. She possesses no power to stop the combats nor to decide what she will do in the aftermath of the combats. Excluded entirely from male negotiations, she is relegated to a passive commodity exchanged among men, rather than an agent with any control over her own fate.

The lady's exclusion from the action in the narrative shows itself in her spatial dismissal from the pavilion. She is already in the forest, which is a dangerous space for women. However, the pavilion she is in provides some protection for her within the forest, as pavilions are used for the purposes of protection^b (Jackson 2006: 126). Furthermore, pavilions also carry romantic and erotic connotations. Many sexual escapades take place in the pavilions in the romances. The ladies rather than men in the romances are far more frequently described in pavilions mostly for notorious reasons. It is assumed that 'a lady in a pavilion pitched somewhere in the countryside constitutes a sexual invitation' (Jackson 2006: 173). Since the beginning part of *The Jeaste* is missing, an exact statement whether it was an invitation by the lady or a(n) (enforced) seduction by Gawain cannot be made. However, it is highly probable that the sexual liaison takes place there.

Moreover, metaphorically, the pavilion verifies how the woman is excluded from the battlefield and is forced to be passive. The conversation between the lady and Gawain in the opening scene reveals the threats her father and brother may cause. She never speaks, and the scene is narrated through Gawain's perception. Yet, 'suche chere' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 8)

is disturbed by the father Gilbert, who is furious at his daughter's ravishment; nevertheless, he never directly speaks to her. His only addressee is Gawain. Gilbert almost ignores his daughter's existence. Gawain offers 'amends' to Gilbert to compensate his loss but is immediately rejected: 'Thowe hast done me great vyllanye –/Amende yt mayst thou nought' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 17–19). After Gilbert's refusal of amends, Gawain leaves the lady in the pavilion and goes to the battlefield to engage in combat with Gilbert. From this moment forward, the lady is almost entirely absent from the narrative. She remains silent and stationary in the pavilion until Brandles displaces her from there in the romance's denouement. She seems to be separated from the battlefield, which is depicted as a male area, through the pavilion.

Furthermore, these two spaces, the pavilion and the battlefield, are sharply delineated as feminine and masculine respectively. This spatial division reinforces gender roles attributed to femininities and masculinities, that is, men belong to the battlefield and fight while women wait silently in their isolated space. The woman's passivity is metaphorically reflected in her segregation in the pavilion. Although she is not actually taken captive, the pavilion functions as a metaphorical prison. She is immobile like the pavilion. Even though pavilions are inherently portable structures, this pavilion in this case restricts her mobility. She cannot move away from it, and later she cannot safely remain within it, either. Her enforced motionlessness makes her even more vulnerable.

At the end of *The Jeaste*, Gawain and the fourth challenger, Brandles, are unable to defeat each other. Gravely wounded, they take vows of fighting to the death only if they encounter each other again in the future, but now they end their fight. These series of fights between Gawain and the woman's kinsmen began because Gawain violated their daughter/sister at the beginning. They believe that Gawain has committed 'a great vyllanye' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 18) by laying with her. However, the knights' focus gradually shifts from kin honour to chivalric honour when Gawain successively defeats the father and two sons (Lindsay 2011). Brandles seeks not only to avenge his sister's violation but also to compensate his kinsmen's lack of martial prowess. Finally, both knights demonstrate their worthiness even though neither achieves victory.

The final combat between Gawain and Brandles eventually reminds them of the existence of the lady. As Gawain is unable to overcome Brandles, he cannot assume the role of a judge. Yet, as a chivalric knight, he is expected to protect the lady. Gawain is equally responsible for her unpleasant condition because he has directly contributed to her predicament through his earlier seduction of her. Failing to defeat Brandles, Gawain is only able to request him to be gentle to his sister:

Syr Gawayne put up hys swerde than:
 'Syr knight, be frende to that gentle woman,
 As ye be gentle knyght.'
 'As for that,' sayde Brandles than,
 'She hathe caused today, pardye, much shame.
 Yt ys pyttye she hathe her syght.' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 485–490)

Despite Gawain's plea, Brandles makes her the scapegoat for the combats and dispute which have arisen between them and tells Gawain that '[y]t ys pyttye she hathe her sight' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 490). It can be translated as such: 'it is better for her to be dead' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 490). Brandles clearly indicates that he will not be gentle to her. Despite Brandles' clear intention, Gawain leaves the lady unprotected in the forest regardless. Gawain's excuse for abandoning her there with her brother is that he has a long way to go on foot as his horse is also wounded:

'Syr knyght,' sayde Gawayne, 'have good daye,
 For on foote I have a longe waye,
 And horse were wonders deare;
 Some tyme good horses I have good wone,
 And nowe on foote I muste nedes gone.
 God in haste amende my chere!' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 491-96)

As Lindsay (2011: 23) states, this reason displays his chivalric failure because he fails to protect the lady through his martial prowess and his role as a peacemaker. All in all, Gawain loses all of his concerns for the lady. Indeed, the gendered forest already marginalizes the woman in the pavilion and does not protect the woman because of its centralization of the knight. Therefore, she is left at the mercy of Brandles.

Gawain's desertion of the lady at Brandles' discretion deteriorates her already vulnerable position. Brandles immediately calls his sister a harlot and beats her:

When he with hys syster mette
 He sayed, 'Fye on the, harlot stronge!
 Yt ys pyttie thou lyvest so longe.
 Strypes harde I wyll the sette.'
 He bete her bothe backe and syde. (*The Jeaste* 1995: 505-509)

He beats her violently as he transfers his guilt of unsuccessful combat to her. Indeed, throughout the romance, this is the second time that the lady is presented as an individual character. Although the combats are initiated due to her, she has no interaction with the men, and she has no active part in the narrative. Her situation and treatment display how profoundly she is pushed to the periphery and trivialized, and eventually she ends up in the worst situation. After being beaten up 'bothe backe and syde,' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 509), she flees into the depths of the forest: 'Than the lady gate her awaye -/They sawe her never after that daye;/She went wandrnge to and fro' (*The Jeaste* 1995: 523-525). She is coerced to go into exile into the forest as she is beaten by her brother and left homeless. At the end, there is not any other mention of the lady; however, Gawain arrives at King Arthur's court and joyfully tells his adventures including the four knights:

Also Syr Gawayne on hys partye,
 On foote he went full werylye,
 Tyll he to the courte came home.
 All hys adventures he shewed the Kinge,
 That with those foure knyghtes he had fyghtynge,
 And eche after other alone. (*The Jeaste* 1995: 527-532)

At this point, it is important to note that chivalric reputation indisputably matters for a knight. Therefore, each adventure experienced by the knight adds to the positive portrayal of his chivalric fame. In order to strengthen his reputation, he must survive. The romance heroes, the knights, are not expected to fight to the point of death for this reason. They are not depicted as heroes who are ready and eager to die for their land or country. Instead, they seek adventures and take on quests to make their chivalric reputation grow. Hence, Gawain's adventures in this forest enhance his already well-established chivalric reputation and glory despite his tempting and possible rape of the lady in the pavilion, fighting to a draw with Brandles and leaving his horse behind, and arriving at the court on foot.

The lady inhabits the same forest as Gawain and her kinsmen, but her fate is not as pleasant as the male characters' fates. While Gawain's sexual and martial encounters in the forest offer opportunities to prove himself as a brave knight with exceptional valour, the lady is marginalized, left outside of the action, beaten, and forced into exile in the gendered forest of *The Jeaste*. Apropos of women's marginalization in romances, it is crucial to remember Maureen Fries' (1992: 7) statement, that is, 'Arthurian women are essentially ancillary to the male actors of that literary tradition, and must therefore be considered in relation to the male heroic roles they complement or defy'. According to Fries (1992: 7), women can be categorized into two groups: helpers to the knights or victims to be rescued by the knights, and rebels who do not serve the chivalric cause.

As noted, the female characters in Arthurian romances frequently function either as helper figures or (captive) damsels in distress to be rescued by the knight in the narrative, or they may be fairy ladies who sometimes prove to be threatening. In some cases, a female character begins her function as a helper to the knight, yet eventually becomes a disruptive force to the chivalric order. Ragnelle is one of these characters in *Ragnelle*. At the beginning of the romance, Arthur is threatened by Sir Gromer Soure Joure and released on the condition that he will find the answer to his question and deliver it to Gromer after a year. Despite a compilation of many possible answers to what women most desire, Arthur does not feel satisfied with any of them. He rides into the forest to find the correct answer, and there he encounters a lady: 'Kyng Arthoure rode for the on the other day/Into Yngleswod as hys gate laye/And ther he mett with a Lady' (*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* 1995: 226–228). This lady is described as extremely ugly, and her bodily description recalls the Loathly Lady motif, and her body is constituted of repulsive details:

Her mowithe was nott to lak;
Her tethe hyng overe her lyppes,
Her chekys syde as wemens hippes.
A lute she bare upon her bak;

...

And to reherse the fowlness of that Lady,
Ther is no tung may telle, securly;
Of lothynesse inowghe she had. (*Ragnelle* 1995: 234–45)

Her mouth is depicted as huge, and all of her yellow teeth are hanging over her lips. Her cheeks are described as too broad and resembled women's hips. Also, there is a lump on her back. Her ugly description is far from the medieval concept of beauty, according to which women need to have a slender symmetrical body (Curtius 1953: 181). Notably, romance heroes and heroines are often portrayed as beautiful characters. As Curtius (1953: 181) asserts, '[n]o literary genre has a greater need for beautiful heroes and heroines than has the romance'. However, the symmetry of the hag's body is especially distorted in her image. Therefore, it can be stated that the hag's description as ugly and repulsive can be considered as a kind of symbol of her otherworldliness.^c It is also highly probable that her hideousness is associated with a supernatural being, and it also evokes a dangerous situation. As expected, the hag like Gromer also threatens Arthur: '... thy lyfe is in my hand, I warn the soo' (*Ragnelle* 1995: 265). However, Arthur and the hag make an alliance in which the hag gives Arthur the correct answer: 'We desyren of men above alle maner thing/To have the sovereyntyé, without lesyng,/Of alle, bothe hyghe and lowe' (*Ragnelle* 1995: 423–425). Therefore, the agreement is fulfilled; that is, Arthur delivers Sir Gromer the correct answer thanks to the hag, and in return, Arthur weds the hag and Sir Gawain in a public ceremony.

The agreement between the hag and Arthur proves beneficial for both parties. The hag helps Arthur to deliver the correct answer to Sir Gromer Joure; thus, Arthur owes his life to her, and the hag will gain the hand of Gawain. After the wedding, a similar plotline applies: Gawain grants her sovereignty, and the wicked spell is broken. Thus, the loathly lady is transformed into a beautiful lady, and they live happily ever after.

Concerning the plot, *Ragnelle* follows the plot of a fairy tale motif, and the hag seems to fill the role of a helper successfully. Moreover, the hag disobeys her brother and reveals the correct answer to Arthur, due to which she gains her own sovereignty. Gromer Sour Joure's reaction to Arthur when he correctly delivers the answer displays the vulnerable position of the hag:

'And she that told the nowe, Sir Arthoure,
I pray to God, I maye se her bren on a fyre;
For that was my suster, Dame Ragnelle,
That old scott, God geve her shame.' (*Ragnelle* 1995: 473-76).

Gromer intends to punish his sister Ragnelle's disobedience by burning her. If the alliance she had made with Arthur did not work properly, her end obviously would not be a good one. Still, the hag is independent of male power and gains more power through her alliance with Arthur. However, her marriage changes her into a beautiful and obedient wife. Her transformation in accordance with the expectations of a medieval wife is affirmed with her promise to be an obedient and submissive wife (*Ragnelle* 1995: 781-786).

Before her vow of obedience, Ragnelle emphasizes her vulnerable and fragile nature and how Gawain protects her from villainy: 'Ther she told the Kyng fayre and welle/Howe Gawen gave her he sovereynté every delle,/And whate choyse she gave to hym' (*Ragnelle* 1995: 775-777). Ragnelle's transformation into a lady makes her acceptable within the normative medieval gender criteria that was defined by Christian and feudal values and which expected women to be chaste, silent and submissive. In other words, she becomes an obedient wife. Nevertheless, this transformation does not satisfy the chivalric needs. When she is needed for the knightly benefit, she takes part in the narrative. When she turns out to be a disruptive force for the chivalric order, Ragnelle is discarded:

Gawen lovyd that Lady, Dame Ragnelle;
In alle his lyfe he lovyd none so welle,
I telle you withoute lesyng.
As a coward he lay by her bothe day and nyghte.
Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte;
Theratt mervayld Arthoure the Kyng. (*Ragnelle* 1995: 805-810)

Gawain's love for and his devotion to Ragnelle are described as negative emotions. Gawain is accused of neglecting his knightly duties because of his love for Ragnelle. Generally, Gawain is known for his pleasure for and interest in knightly exploits and adventures. His love for adventure is even depicted as an obsession in most of the romances. For this reason, in *Ragnelle*, Gawain is affronted for not pursuing adventures but laying by his wife's side. Even, he is stigmatized as 'a coward' (*Ragnelle* 1995: 803) for being uxorious and his abandoning of knightly deeds and lavishness. Therefore, Ragnelle's case once more confirms that female characters may maintain their existence in the narrative only if they are useful for the chivalric cause. Otherwise, they are removed. If they tend to pose a threat to it and/or turn out to be disruptive of it, they are also discarded. Ragnelle's instrumentality in the forest makes her life longer in the chivalric narrative. Yet, her ancillary role to Gawain exceeds its limits and goes beyond its purpose. When Gawain's

love for and loyalty to Ragnelle dangerously transforms into an unruly force against chivalry, Ragnelle's role in the romance is terminated for the maintenance of the chivalric order.

Thus, the *raison d'être* of the female characters in the romance forests is mostly tied to their chivalric function. Described as vulnerable and fragile victims and damsels in distress, they enable the knights to display prowess and embody chivalric virtues, particularly the protection of women and the weak. Their role in the narrative, therefore, is to facilitate the affirmation of the masculine chivalric identity within a space from which they are excluded.

Conclusion

By analysing female characters' experiences in the romance forests, I have demonstrated that the forest is formed as a gendered space of chivalry, in which female characters are there primarily to help the knight and/or embellish his chivalric glory and reputation in various means. Other non-knights seem to be included to challenge and defeat the knight at first glance. However, on closer examination, it is revealed that these opponents are also emplaced in the forest to serve the chivalric cause. That is, they challenge the knight to enable him to display his physical strength and martial skill as well as his other aspects of chivalry such as courtesy, defence of the weak, and mercy. Therefore, the romance forests, as the products of medieval gender and chivalric ideologies, centralize Arthurian knights and favour their interests. In this regard, the female characters I have analysed in this article are deployed to serve the chivalric order in that the non-knights in the forest exist only for the benefit of the knight. They provide the knight with anything he needs to survive and thrive. All in all, the romance forest as a gendered and chivalric space contributes to the development and maintenance of chivalric values and knights through involving and/or employing ancillary characters, several occasions, challenges, and encounters.

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Competing Interests. The author declares there are no competing interests.

Notes

- a. All quotations from the romances are cited with their line numbers.
- b. As Jackson states, pavilions are also used to facilitate travel in romances and are considered outposts of civilization in the forest. They are also preferred in recreational and entertainment activities such as hunting parties.
- c. It should be noted that the representation of the fairy ladies is an exception because there are romances in which the fairy ladies are described as very beautiful ladies.

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