Malory's *Morte Darthur*: A Critique of Courtly Chivalry

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* has become the central Arthurian text in English literature. But its romantic impressions of Arthurian themes can obscure the *Morte*'s very real capacity as a critique of late medieval courtliness and chivalry. Malory, a knight, was trained in chivalric warfare, and had a clear belief of just what chivalry entailed. His *Morte* provides a critique of chivalric culture in England during the Wars of the Roses, identifying a terminal superficiality that undermined the validity of the monarch's counsellors and, eventually, the peace of the realm.

Contemporary Politics: Yorkists, Lancastrians, and the Kingmaker

Le Morte Darthur was completed sometime in the ninth year of the reign of Edward IV: that is, between 4 March 1469 and 3 March 1470.[1] These were tumultuous times: although Edward's victory at the Battle of Towton in 1461 had cemented Yorkist control of England, Lancastrian revolts and Yorkist infighting continued to disrupt the peaceful governance of the realm. Malory's view of the political strife was not impersonal or detached: in 1468, he was writing *Morte Darthur* whilst imprisoned on a charge of sedition, ostensibly for participating in a Lancastrian uprising.[2] His exclusion

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[1] Eugène Vinaver, introduction to *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3rd ed., by Thomas Malory, edited by Eugène Vinaver, revised by P. J. C. Field, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix.

[2] Eugène Vinaver, *Malory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 7; for a fuller description of the 'Cook conspiracy/Cornelius plot' see Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 181-182; and, Field, 139-147.

by name from both of the general pardons given to Lancastrians by Edward IV, in late 1468 and early 1470, was likely as a result of his support for Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, known both as the 'Father of Courtesy' and the *kingmaker*.[3] Although a Yorkist, Warwick had fallen out of favour by charging King Edward IV in 1469 with having excluded the lords of the blood from his council, and of governing the realm through a corrupt group of courtiers and sycophants.[4] This accusation little availed the fortunes of Warwick's associates, like Malory, but still less for Warwick himself, who died in battle against King Edward at Barnet on 14 April 1471, not long after the completion of the *Morte*.[5] But Warwick's death did not resolve the Yorkist and Lancastrian conflict: the Battle of Tewkesbury and the murder of Edward of Westminster (the Lancastrian heir) in the next month only deferred the matter until Henry Tudor defeated Richard III a dozen years later—and even then, until the sixteenth century, pretenders like Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck spurred brief revolts that threatened to reopen the Yorkist-versus-Lancastrian wound.

For those more than five centuries removed and a continent away from the civil strife of England in the late fifteenth century, the back-and-forth of the Wars of the Roses can seem opaque and a trifle numbing, to say the least. But for Malory, whose

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[3] P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, Arthurian Studies XXIX, (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 110-111.

[4] M. H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History*, A History of England series (London: The Folio Society, 1997), 469.

[5] Christine Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c.1437-1509* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.

continued imprisonment was likely an act of political retribution rather than criminal

justice, the matter was of vital immediacy. At stake was not merely which group of

potentates would rule, but the very nature of that rule: how it would be organised, what

its values were to be, and how it would treat its citizens—prisoners inclusive. Malory

asks the reader to pray for his swift release from prison, after all.

All this is as much to suggest that Malory's *Morte Darthur* was not, as Sir Walter

Scott famously wrote, a mere collection, "extracted at hazard, and without much art or

combination, from the various French prose folios."[6] Rather, Malory's choices of

inclusion and emphasis afford the *Morte* the nature of a political critique that highlights

the failures of political ideology and the causes of those failures. This focus comes at a

cost, it is true: the foremost Malory scholar of the twentieth century, Eugène Vinaver,

writes of Malory's "complete lack of sympathy with the grace and mystery which are

the very essence of romantic magic," an authorial fault which results in an "utter

inability to grasp the profoundly poetic meaning" of, for example, the French source's

description of Balaain's encounter with the Castle of Maidens.[7] In exchange for the loss

of romantic magic, however, Malory delivers observations about contemporary society

and the chivalric ideals and conduct of individuals. P. J. C. Field, in his own biography

of Malory, notes areas of the texts apparently original to Malory, and concludes that

"Malory's sympathies were aroused less by causes than by individuals behaving

[6] Walter Scott, *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott* (Paris: Baudry's European Library, 1838), 323.
[7] Vinaver, *Malory*, 52-53.

chivalrously in difficult circumstances."[8] This reinforces the point that Malory was not

necessarily a partisan for either the Yorkists or the Lancastrians, but rather coolly

critical of each side's appropriation of chivalry.

Late Medieval Courtly Chivalry: Style over Substance

Vinaver writes that Malory's "attitude towards the legacy of the Middle Ages

was essentially that of a moralist" whose aim was "to restore to the world the moral

teaching of medieval chivalry."[9] Such an avowed aim was not original in the fourteenth

or fifteenth centuries.[10] But what was unique was Malory's attempt at this goal—an

attempt that produced the *Morte's* critique of courtly attitudes and conduct. As Vinaver

succinctly notes, the approaches of other late admirers of chivalry were not focused

upon doctrine, but rather upon "outward splendor".[11] Malory, on the other hand,

brought up in actual chivalric warfare, and having lived a life more of combat than of

courtesy, must have been aware of the fact that "chivalry, having lost its material basis

could not retain its moral ascendancy."[12] In effect, chivalry as it was practised in the

court had, "degenerated into mere love of luxury and theatrical pomp," becoming a

decorative ornament of the court, rather than a set of doctrinal principles.[13]

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[8] Field, 124.
[9] Vinaver, *Malory*, 55-56.
[10] Vinaver, *Malory*, 56.
[11] Vinaver, *Malory*, 56.
[12] Vinaver, *Malory*, 56-57.
[13] Vinaver, *Malory*, 57.

The most famous of the late medieval attempts to co-opt chivalry into courtly life was the creation of The Most Noble Order of the Garter by Edward III, probably in 1348.[14] This was the same king who, intending to create an Arthurian revival at his tilts of 1344, had ordered the creation of a 'Round Table' at Windsor measuring two hundred feet in diameter (although, according to the convention of the time, the words 'Round Table' might refer to the place at which jousts were held, rather than a piece of furniture).[15] Clearly Edward knew the value of chivalric imagery. Ashmole notes in his *Institutions and Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* that at the annual feast for the Order, knights were required to be present and in their best dress, or to have leave from the sovereign otherwise and, if so absent, the knight's habit was laid on his stall to indicate his place; and moreover, in the grand procession, the habits were arranged in such a way so as to ensure "that the more grave and civil, being placed between those that are rich and gallant, entertain the beholders with a more delightful prospect".[16] This spectacle, Vinaver writes, was "perhaps the most typical expression of the chivalric temper of the late Middle Ages. The ideal of a knight combining bravery, generosity, and devotion was no longer a reality, and picturesque parades had taken the place of

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[14] Ivan de la Bere, *The Queen's Orders of Chivalry* (London: William Kimber and Company, 1961), 55.
[15] de la Bere, 54-55.
[16] Elias Ashmole, *The Institution, Laws & Ceremonies of the Most Noble Order of the Garter* (London: J. Macock, 1672), 485-486, 575, 613-617.

arms and prayers."[17] In short, the courtly revitalisation of chivalry was ripe for a moral revitalisation that would return it to the substance of its literary ideals.

Edward III was not unique in his use of chivalry as the vehicle of spectacle rather than moral improvement, nor were such efforts confined to the mid-fourteenth century. In the early fifteenth century, Henry V conferred the Garter upon "most of the great military commanders of the time"—something which would no doubt have pleased Malory—but he also published a statute that required Knights of the Garter to always wear the garter or riband when in public.[18] Later, in the reign of Henry VIII, the complete victory of spectacle over substance was at last achieved, with Cardinal Wolsey himself appointed 'Register of the Order'.[19] So, Malory's critique of courtly chivalry was, at the last, a doomed enterprise—but, perhaps this is fitting for, as the author of the *Morte Darthur*, Malory knew a thing or two about doomed enterprises.

Malory's Chivalry vs. Courtliness

If doomed, then not at least without merit: Edward IV could have learned from Malory's as-yet-unpublished *Morte* in the late 1460s, when his anti-Lancastrian alliance with Warwick was beginning to come unstuck. It was probably whilst Malory was writing the end of the *Morte* that finally Warwick charged Edward IV with having

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[17] Vinaver, *Malory*, 58.
[18] de la Bere, 62-63.
[19] de la Bere, 63.

excluded the lords of the blood from his council, choosing instead to govern the realm through a corrupt group of courtiers. The nature of this charge is important, for it alleges the replacement of an historically valid governing power—the lords of the blood—with a new, invalid chivalric group that retains the outward accidents of valid governance whilst possessing none of the substance which grants actual authority. In other words, it is the spectacle of courtliness with none of the chivalric training and lifestyle that actually give such a rule its worth. Like the hereditary right of the lords of the blood, Malory's chivalry is genealogical; something which is transmitted through birth and practised in act, so that the one is subsumed into the other. And yet, as Kenneth Hodges notes, there is still a tension over the shift, textual and chronological, "in the way that knights will be judged. The chivalry that judges men primarily by their effectiveness in war... will become less important, and the chivalry that emphasizes individual importance within one country comes to the fore."[20]

Ruth Lexton observes that "Counsel, always an intimate part of medieval governance, becomes crucial to the redefinition of Arthurian rule" in *The Tale of King Arthur* and *Arthur and Lucius*, and that "Malory offers the reader a successful model of counsel" (in both the individual and group senses of the word) "in which the Round Table knights, acting in accordance with the conventions of medieval advice books,

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[20] Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's* Le Morte Darthur (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 73.

rally around the king in support of a war of conquest."[21] Naturally, this is what Malory

should most like: as a moralising force, there is a sense in which the *Morte* functions

indirectly as an advice book for those who would be chivalrous. Knights and kings

should take heed, for "The alternative to Arthurian kingship is civil war," writes

Lexton, and it is no less true that the alternative to Edward's kingship was a recurrence

of the civil war that Malory had experienced and in which he had participated. Hence,

the earlier sections of the *Morte* show positive examples of good, Arthurian councils.

The focus on the role of counsel is not as pronounced in Malory's sources. In fact,

Malory abandons the ending of the alliterative poem so as to present instead an Arthur

who is not weak or wilful, but rather strong by virtue of his counsel. It is this counsel,

according to Lexton, which enables Arthur "to interact more effectively with his

knights", and thus reshape his kingship to meet "practical expectations."[22] Warwick

alleged that this is precisely what Edward IV was not doing. The kingmaker claimed

that, instead of uniting the guardians of a realm in a cohesive council to face down a

threat to his governance, Edward had chosen to expel the traditional lords, replacing

them with flashy, young upstarts. Malory's alternative—an Arthur who utilises council

as a unifying force—was a key feature of properly chivalric rule. No sooner does Arthur

hear the message from the Emperor Lucius than "the kynge unto counsayle called his

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[21] Ruth Lexton, *Contested Language in Malory's* Morte Darthur*: The Politics of Romance in Fifteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 47
[22] Lexton, 49.

noble lordes and knyghtes" and "commaunded hem of theire beste counceyle."[23] And, having heard his knights pledge to fight, and having this message sent back to Rome, Arthur then summons a Parliament at York where he declares, "I pray you, counseyle me that may be beste and moste worshyp," whereupon, "in the presence of all the lordis" the king passed his sovereign powers to two lords regent (Baudwen and Cador) and Gwenyvere.[24] Vitally, it is "all the lordis" that are involved in the king's council; not just a sycophantic clique. Where matters of the whole realm are concerned, all of the lords must consulted, in contrast to favouritism which is by its nature exclusive.

By the end of the *Morte*—almost certainly written after Warwick had made his charges about Edward IV's courtiers—Arthur no longer has the benefit of the council of "all the lordis". Instead, he has new upstarts like Aggravain, whose motivation is not the long-term good of the realm. Raluca Radulescu writes that Aggravain "is a counsellor... who displays no wisdom or care for peace and harmony at the court, yet who presents his intentions under the cloak of interest for the king's reputation."[25] The plan taken by Aggravain and Mordred is in opposition to the will of the council, and, it is taken because of a "prevy hate" rather than because it is beneficial to the realm. Consequently, Aggravain and Mordred "are to blame from a political point of view."[26]

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[23] Malory, 187.

[24] Malory, 194-195.

[25] Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's* Morte Darthur (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2003),122.

[26] Radulescu, 124.

Certainly Arthur's responsibility is diminished by the lack of good advice to the contrary, but at the same time, at the end of the *Morte,* Arthur repeatedly takes unilateral action without consulting his council, such as the decision to burn Guenevere at the stake. Thus, in Arthur's failure to act with his council's advice, Malory enunciates a sharp rebuke to Edward's failure to heed the counsel of all his lords.

The substanceless superficiality of courtly actors is implicated in the basis of Arthur's own unilateral acts; and again in the so-called evidence itself. But superficiality is Malory's great concern with chivalry, and so it infuses every facet of the *Morte*. When Guenevere is charged with adultery, Aggravain and Mordred can produce no evidence for their accusation—rather a problem when the defendant is the Queen. But Arthur proceeds swiftly to judgement nevertheless, and Radulescu concludes that "the rumour started by Aggravain and Mordred, amplified through the noise they make outside Guenevere's chamber, becomes sufficient evidence of the adultery for the entire court, and for the king: rumours and noise becomes 'real' fact."[27] The courtiers Aggravain and Mordred are pronouncedly unchivalric actors, but they are courtiers nevertheless and are dressed in the outward accoutrements of chivalric persons. Likewise, they produce no real evidence of Guenevere's guilt, but only the outward noises and rumours which might well follow actual evidence of guilt. Although their claims are not untrue, they lack evidence, and therefore rely on pageantry to prop up what reality has given them.

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[27] Radulescu, 128-129.

Whether noisome accusations or garish chivalry, outward displays, Malory suggests, are seldom to be trusted. Ann Elaine Bliss notes the outward splendour of Edward IV's court, but also observes that "the stability was not always real" which "reflects the political instability of the times. . . Processions and other ceremonious displays were deliberately designed . . . to maintain the appearance of stability."[28] Behind the façade, real divisions were pushing England back to the brink of war: Warwick's charges led to his outright rebellion. His defeat and death brought only temporary respite. Edward IV's ostentatious attempts to paper over the cracks in English society, with a heap of gold and velvet and lots of agreeable courtiers with shapely thighs, were shown up for the sham they were when, on his death, the realm once again descended into murder and eventual war.

The superficiality and exclusivity of courtliness had been the threat to chivalry in general and chivalric governance in particular, anticipating the total disconnexion Oliver Cromwell famously identified a century and a half later when wrote that he would "rather have a plain, russet-coated Captain, that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that you call a Gentleman and is nothing else." By offering a monarchically-sanctioned route to the courtly rewards of chivalry without any of the attendant costs, training, discipline, or virtue, the kings of the fourteenth and fifteenth

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[28] Ann Elaine Bliss, "The Symbolic Importance of Processions in Malory's Morte Darthur and in Fifteenth-Century England," in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's* Morte Darthur, edited by D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 76

centuries often became the schoolmasters of their own correction, encouraging their

followers to an ever-increasing degree to eschew the very qualities that had made them

valuable as warriors and counsellors. By the late fifteenth century, Malory believes that

'knights' were no longer chivalrously virtuous—and hence, as loyalty was one of the

virtues of the chivalric knight—they were no longer dependable or faithful.

At the end of "The Great Tournament" in the *Morte*, Malory writes, "he that was

curteyse, trew, and faythefull to hys frynde was that tyme cherysshed."[29] This was quite

evidently not a platitude selected to end the chapter on a note of trite banality. Malory,

who seems to have remained steadfastly loyal to Warwick, very likely remained in a

Yorkist prison for the rest of his life. The difficulty of faithfulness must have been much

on his mind; all the more so when he thought of unchivalric courtiers adopting a self-

interested pretence of loyalty in the court of the King.[30] Malory repeatedly cites "The

High Order of Knighthood;" he places unique emphasis on how "division of noble

houses could ruin a kingdom;" and, he may have been so motivated by loyalty that he

switched to the *losing* side in the wars so as to avoid a bad conscience.[31] Confronted

with the false and unchivalric conduct of courtiers and kings, and occupied with a

copious library, it is easy to understand how Malory created from his Arthurian sources

valuable lessons in chivalry suited to time in which he lived.

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[29] Malory, 1114.
[30] Field, 173-174.
[31] Field, 173-174.

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