RELIGIOUS AMBIVALENCE IN SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* details an ambivalent view of religion in relation to chivalry. This is not to say Malory viewed religion with the same weight as secular values, only that a religious struggle is evident within the text. This thesis explores this ambivalence through the characters of Arthur, Merlin, and Lancelot as their narratives highlight this struggle most. In regard to Arthur, this thesis explores the contradiction of being religious while ruling. The second chapter explores Merlin's dualistic nature as both heavenly emissary to Arthur and the devil's son. The final chapter looks at Lancelot and his spiritual struggle to achieve the grail while occupying the roles of chivalric knight and courtly lover. This thesis contends that Malory's dualistic worldview and the *Morte's* ambivalence toward religion is seen through the weaving of secular ideals into the narrative compared to its more religious sources.

Note on Malory's Text

Despite its title, the text known today as *Le Morte Darthur* is the last English version of the story of Arthur and the Round Table to be produced in the Middle Ages. Although the author of many mediaeval works is unknown, the author of the *Morte* several times identifies himself as Sir Thomas Malory. We also know from his closing remarks that the book was completed in 1469-70, and that it was written in prison. The critical edition most suited for comparing Malory's text to his sources, and thus the one cited in this thesis, is *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 3rd ed. rev. P. J. C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

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Introduction

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* gives a complex depiction of religion and its relationship with chivalry in fifteenth-century England. Throughout the text we can see Malory's wavering support of religion while he impossibly tries to reconcile spirituality with earthly values. I contend that this ambivalence is what sets Malory apart from his sources as well as gives us an intimate look at a fifteenth-century knight's tenuous relationships with religion and chivalry in trying to resolve what are ultimately competing ideas. For Malory, there is an earnest attempt to depict the world as it was in all its harshness. While there is plenty of praise for the heroes in all their chivalric deeds within the text, Malory does not shy away from the brutal reality of knighthood. As Thomas H. Crofts notes, "Malory's book is far more preoccupied with death and the 'unhappe' than its sources" (115).

Eugène Vinaver states that the *Morte Darthur* "is an earnest endeavour to revive the moral grandeur of what Malory thought was the 'the old custom and usage of this land'" (64). Indeed, Malory does demonstrate a reverence for chivalry in what Vinaver says was a period "when knighthood had lost all its significance" (64). With that being said, Malory does not avoid the shortcomings of chivalry in a religious sense of sin and punishment. The grandeur and failings of chivalry are concepts Malory struggles with, but it is in that struggle that this textual ambivalence manifests itself. This ideological

struggle between religion and chivalry is a personal one, which is best viewed through the arcs of the characters within the *Morte Darthur*.

In regard to Arthur, Malory explores the contradiction of being religious while ruling. Malory depicts the fantastical origins of Arthur, destined by God to rule and restore order, yet does not hide the fact that Arthur is ultimately sinful, and it is this sin that cements his dismal fate (Malory 1237.16-21). Thomas Wright notes that "Malory projects Arthur's reign itself as destiny ordained by God and established by Merlin, an event distinct in its own promise - no longer, as in the source, mainly a preparation for the recovery of the grail" (27). Arthur's distinction as God's chosen king makes each of his ruling actions worthy of religious analysis, which is further complicated by his sins. Arthur is chosen by God and fulfills his destiny, but is also judged and punished for an action he was not aware was a sin in his incest with Morgause. Furthermore, with the May Day Massacre, Malory is careful to show that Arthur makes decisions meant to secure his rule but which are indeed grievous and sinful acts (55). As much as Malory takes account of Arthur's heroism and leadership qualities, there are constant reminders throughout the text that while Arthur is the titular hero, his fated death as a result of his sin occupies the title as well.

In this thesis I will explore Arthur's more sinful actions in the First Tale, as this is where his religious heroism is most starkly contrasted with his capacity to commit heinous acts in the name of the kingdom. While I will largely focus on Arthur's sins, this is not in an effort to demonize or condemn him, but to demonstrate how Malory relishes complicating Arthur's heroism.

Merlin represents this dualism of religion and earthly values as they exist within the *Morte Darthur*. Malory's version of Merlin in the *Morte Darthur* embraces both good and evil as aspects of humanity. Unlike Arthur and Lancelot, Merlin does not struggle between doing the right or wrong thing; in his pragmatism and with his magical abilities he will do either. He sets forth the actions that push the narrative forward in the text. Corrine Saunders notes that "[p]articularly striking is the legalistic quality of Malory's tone here: Merlin from the start presents the agreement [with Uther] as a contract, with the specific purpose of orchestrating the conception and upbringing of Arthur" (237). Essentially, Merlin orchestrates the rape of Igraine by which Arthur will be conceived, who Merlin will raise to be king. On one hand, Arthur is God's chosen king so his birth is vital for providence, however, the deceitful nature of his conception, and Merlin's role, cannot be overlooked.

When it comes to predicting death, Merlin is quick to tell others what their punishment will be as a result of their actions. Rachel Kapelle notes that "Merlin justifies Arthur's, Pellinore's and Balyn's deaths in terms of sin and punishment" (73). This is something that Merlin himself cannot escape as he prophesizes his own demise in telling Arthur that he will "dye a shamefull dethe" (44.28-9). Merlin later explains to Arthur that he "scholde nat endure longe, but for all his craftes he sholde be putte into the erthe quyk" (125.10-2). While Merlin knows precisely how he will meet his end, he is unable to prevent his actions which lead to the event. Although Merlin presumably has the greatest connection to God, and as much as Merlin is a magical force, he still succumbs to fate as any other man. As a concept within itself Merlin's fate represents a dualistic worldview as a man driven by a higher power to ensure outcomes, but who cannot alter

his own path. He is at once subject to fortune while being powerful enough to see his demise, thus suggesting Merlin accepts his fate because he embraces and respects the mechanisms of the universe, both good and bad.

P.J.C. Field says that with the Grail Quest "Malory's style makes his story even more opaque than his sources. His paratactic prose creates a vivid factual-seeming narrative, but one that tends to leave causes and relationships obscure" (144). Malory's habit of describing events and actions as a matter of fact certainly makes it difficult to evaluate its meaning. Malory, in his own sort of way, details events somewhat like a contemporary historian resisting bias and prejudice. I think to his credit this allows Malory to invite the reader to make sense of events not just in and of themselves, but in relation to other events in the narrative. With Lancelot, we must take into consideration his actions before and after his spiritual journey in the Grail Quest, as well as how Galahad, who serves as a foil, changes the way we look at Lancelot.

Lancelot perhaps best represents the internal struggle of a knight seeking penance. Malory does not evade revealing Lancelot's sin of adultery, nor does he outright condemn it. Malory depicts Lancelot as a man struggling with his own sins in a way that rejects a binary view of religion and sin. Raluca L. Radulescu argues that after the Grail Quest Lancelot "remains a sinful knight, albeit one who is painfully aware of his shortcomings in tackling penance, but unable to achieve perfection required of him in the quest" (94). This idea of the fallible hero makes Lancelot perhaps the most relatable character in the *Morte Darthur* in terms of the moral struggles of duty and desire.

Compared to his sources Malory paints a much more sympathetic portrait of Lancelot. Charles Whitworth states that Malory "could not diverge so radically from the

received version as to allow Lancelot to succeed in the Quest, [but] he at least took pains to show that Lancelot's failure is not due to any shortcomings he may have in the way of chivalry or prowess" (19). As much as Lancelot struggles between choosing a life of chivalry, or a life of religion, so too does Malory struggle at giving the reader a satisfying answer for which of these ideologies holds greater value to his favourite knight. Throughout the text Lancelot makes choices indicative of a knight seeking earthly prowess and love; however, his earnest attempts at religious redemption demonstrates that he questions his priorities.

The foil to Lancelot's struggle to obtain religious favor is his son Galahad, who displays all the chivalric aspects of knighthood but is still pure in a spiritual sense. From the very introduction of Galahad, the reader is invited to compare him to Lancelot. We are told he is given Lancelot's original name at baptism (796.31-3). Although Galahad is prophesied to achieve the grail (798.25-6), Elayne makes a point to tell Lancelot that Galahad "shall preve the best man of hys kynne - excepte one" (832.12-3), in a point to laud Lancelot, but also acknowledging the innate solicitation for both the characters, and the reader to compare them. Galahad has everything Lancelot sets out to achieve and is a reminder to Lancelot about what he could accomplish had he not had an affair with Gwenivere. Galahad serves as a statement that religious purity is indeed achievable; however, he lacks the charisma and charm that makes Lancelot a compelling character. The significance is that it demonstrates Malory's, and likely the reader's, higher esteem for and interest in a hero with faults. While Galahad's purity seems virtually unattainable, Lancelot is a character who is relatable and sympathetic in his journey.

Lancelot ultimately fails the grail quest and his adultery with Gwenivere is seen as being the chief reason. It can also be said that the act of adultery is the key factor in the destruction of the knights of the Round Table, showing how earthly desires have dire consequences within the world. For Malory, the love affair between Lancelot and Gwenivere is sinful, but also, perhaps more so, is his idolization of her. In essence, Lancelot struggles to put God before Gwenivere. While the idolization of Gwenivere is a specific judgment against Lancelot it is a religious judgment and not a moral indictment for the affair itself. When Arthur forgives Lancelot's transgression for the affair and does not pass judgment, his actions reinforce that Malory as narrator is imploring the audience to do the same. Complicating this is "The Healing of Sir Urry" where it is told that only "the beste knyght of the worlde" can heal Urry (1145.19-20). This tale is original to Malory and serves as an attempt to reconcile religious and earthly values. Malory bridges knightly prowess with the miraculous ability to heal. This tale offers Lancelot an alternative opportunity for redemption that Malory's sources did not. This tale being original to Malory perhaps demonstrates best the ambivalence that permeates throughout the *Morte Darthur*.

It is through Arthur, Merlin, and Lancelot that I will explore the wavering attitudes toward religion and chivalry throughout the *Morte Darthur*. While Arthur represents power and rule, and its inherent incompatibilities with religion, Lancelot presents a more psychological examination of personal struggles. Merlin is the embodiment of dualism within the *Morte Darthur*. He is cursed with being all knowing yet not powerful enough to circumvent his own fate even though he is aware what will happen. He works on behalf of God but often acts like a devil. There is an uncertainty

about Merlin, and it is this uncertainty that Malory embraces. Through these three characters in the *Morte Darthur* I will survey Malory's ambivalent perspective of religion and chivalry in the world.

Chapter One:

The Sinful Aspects of Arthur's Ambivalent Nature

In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, the character of Arthur displays great leadership and resolve; however, in doing so he also displays his capacity for sin. Arthur's greatness as a king often leads to actions which can be seen as loathsome in order to maintain rule. Great medieval rulers are required to proactively destroy their enemies or be ready to punish them for their transgressions. Ruling with an iron fist in the Middle Ages was probably seen as a respectable and even necessary. However, Arthur's fierce reign lends itself to exploring the contradiction of such rule in relation to the religious context of his rise to power.

In this first chapter of my thesis I focus primarily on the first tale since, as Ruth Lexton points out, Arthur's "status in the opening episodes of the 'Tale of Arthur' is portrayed more ambivalently" (174). I argue that many of the sinful aspects of Arthur's character have been overlooked in modern Malory scholarship. Perhaps this is due to methods of reading the *Morte Darthur* in relation to its sources, or neglecting properly to credit Malory for subverting some tropes of the medieval romance genre. Either way, Malory's depiction of Arthur as a complex character with conflicting motivations elevates the *Morte Darthur* as a sophisticated work of fiction. As Laura Bedwell notes:

> the text does portray incidents of Arthur's injustice as well as his justice. Both the positive and negative voices operate in dialogue

> throughout the *Morte Darthur*, presenting a complex view of Arthur's kingship that adds to the richness of Malory's tale. (4)

The character of Arthur is ambivalent in his capacity to do great evil for what he believes to be the greater good of the kingdom. For instance, the May Day massacre demonstrates Arthur as a perpetrator of mass infanticide (55.19-29), yet he is called a "noble kyng" throughout the work. Moreover, Arthur is a King who engages in lechery with Morgause in an incestuous and adulterous relationship (41.12-20). While he is unaware that Morgause is his half-sister, he is presumably aware of her marriage to King Lot and it is indicative of a king who, at least in the laws of God, commits acts which are not fitting under the Divine Right of Kings. In this chapter I will explore Arthur's ambivalent nature which can be seen through the juxtaposition of being a great leader while having a great capacity for sin. To a greater extent, how do we explain Malory's decision to have Arthur be a king both willing to commit heinous acts and capable of mortal sin in context with being a medieval romance hero? This first chapter of my thesis will explore these aspects in an effort to reconcile them with the overarching message that Malory is trying to convey regarding politics and religion.

Scholars have often struggled with the paradoxical nature of the *Morte Darthur* given its seemingly conflicting moral messages. Rachel Kappelle says that "the 'Tale of King Arthur' is notoriously mysterious. Cause and effect often lack a clear connection; sequences of events unfold according to obscure logics" (59). Kappelle's view is one that is understandable, but this is where Malory's ambivalent worldview is most apparent. For instance, King Arthur is an anointed hero destined for greatness, yet his internal fears and power give him a capacity for great evils which subverts expectations. One of the most

perplexing events in the narrative is King Arthur's ordering of the May Day massacre in an effort to kill the child Mordred. In this massacre, Arthur kills a multitude of children in the process of trying to killing Mordred to avert the prophesied fratricide, but Mordred defies the odds and escapes (55.25-30). This culling of children in order to try and prevent the prophetic death of Arthur by Mordred alludes to the *New Testament's* Herod and his efforts to kill Christ in order to elude prophecy. This raises the question of how we reconcile this horrific deed with Arthur's messiah-like destiny as King of England. The May Day slaughter takes up little of the tale and Malory does not spend much time dealing with what should be considered to be a major event. Furthermore, I argue that modern Malory scholarship has not adequately dealt with this issue regarding Arthur's Herod-like actions.

By the Middle Ages, Arthur's legacy was widely known and largely accepted as history and not merely myth. William Caxton introduces the *Morte Darthur* by proclaiming it as the "hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur" (cxlvi). Ruth Lexton claims that "by the end of the fifteenth century, the notion of Arthur's greatness and excellence as a king had achieved the status of fact: readers [of the *Morte Darthur*] are urged to see Arthur as a hero-monarch heading successful rule" (173). This begs the question that if Malory was trying to chronicle the history of King Arthur as an "excellent kyng," why did he adopt some of Arthur's more appalling and sinful actions from his sources, especially his committing incest and infanticide? Caxton's comment regarding Arthur contradicts Malory's depiction of Arthur as a king. The narrator often praises Arthur as a great king, however Arthur's actions demonstrate that

there is certainly an inherent paradox in his efforts to be both a great man and a great king.

It is clear there is an allusion to Christ in Arthur's journey to become king. Not only was his birth prophesied by Merlin, but his appointment to be king is cemented by a miracle at Christmas no less. Merlin proclaims that "Jesu, that was borne on that nyghte, that He wold of His grete mercy shewe some myracle who should be rightwys kynge of this reame" (12.18-21). The miracle of the sword in the stone is not a test as it is presented to the people, as God and Merlin already know Arthur is the rightful and chosen king. The test of the sword in the stone is to instill confidence in the people, and Arthur himself that he is ordained for the role of king. As Edmund Reiss points out, "Arthur is initially presented as saviour of the world" (37). However, this role of saviour becomes problematic when Arthur is willing to commit atrocities in order to preserve his position as king, as is shown by the May Day massacre. Arthur wishes to fulfill his role as a great king to his people, but at the same time is burdened with being asked to commit infanticide to ensure he keeps his position.

In reading the *Morte Darthur*, it is apparent that the May Day massacre is not an insignificant detail; however, this plot element which is presented at the end of the first episode of the first tale is understated by the narrator (55-6). Malory gives very little attention to the action beyond recording its happening, and some critics suggest Malory does this to create a distance between Arthur and the act. K.S. Whetter, for instance, argues that Malory emphasizes the incest rather than the murder, and that the result emphasizes the respective villainies of Lot and Mordred more than Arthur’s own guilt (see, for instance, Whetter, “Malory’s Secular Arthuriad” 161-62 and especially Whetter,

Understanding Genre 111-12). While Malory does place greater emphasis on the incest, this does not negate the event of the May Day massacre. Malory, as I will demonstrate later, had a willingness to diverge from his sources yet the infanticide remains. In Malory's source for the first tale, *La Suite du Merlin*, Lot's reason for wanting to kill Arthur is his belief that Arthur has killed Mordred; however, in the *Morte Darthur*, Malory changes Lot's motivation for revenge to Arthur's incest with Morgause (Wright 58). Thomas Wright, thus similarly, claims that Malory specifically "changes Lot's motivation in order to suppress Arthur's part in the infanticide" (58). The problem with Wright's statement is that it undermines his own assertion that Malory made very specific changes to *La Suite du Merlin*. If Malory was willing to change Lot's motivation from *La Suite du Merlin* in order to shadow Arthur's guilt he presumably would have changed or removed the May Day slaughter itself.

Malory's inclusion of the May Day massacre and downplaying of Arthur's guilt more likely indicates Malory's attempt to show how being a great king and a pious man are competing ideas. If Arthur is God's chosen king, he must do whatever is necessary in order to secure God's will. This becomes problematic because Merlin condemns Arthur's incestuous affair even though Arthur was unaware Morgause was his sister, which indicates intent does not dictate the sinfulness of actions, only the actions themselves. This sentiment is more in line with medieval perspectives on sin; however, Malory appears to be embracing the duality of earthly living as seen through Arthur's characterization.

It is easy to dismiss the significance of the May Day Massacre because such a small amount of detail is dedicated to the action. While very little in the narrative focuses

on the event and the horror of it, the shock of seeing the evil that Arthur is capable of is apparent and striking. Bonnie Wheeler states that “Malory carefully constructs the narrative to deepen the grotesque and maximum shock value of the enormity of the barbaric behavior” (116). Perhaps what makes the act more troubling is just how very little time is dedicated to it, not just by the narrator, but by Arthur. Deborah Ellis notes that "Malory is far more interested in the behavior of his characters than in their motives or origins" (71). Elaborating Ellis's point, in the *Morte Darthur* we are often given depictions of characters' actions without the narrator describing the psychological or emotional motivations behind them. Regarding the May Day massacre, Malory reserves any explanation of emotion aside from pure pragmatic and strategic perspective in response to Merlin's warning. The narrator of the *Morte Darthur* explains that "Kyng Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day, begotyn of lordis and borne of ladyes; for Merlyon tolde Kyng Arthure that he that sholde destroy hym and all the londe sholde be born on May-day" (55.19-22). The narrator in the *Morte Darthur*, for the most part, is unwaveringly neutral and nonjudgmental; however, the concerns of Arthur regarding this act are never addressed. There is an emotional distance within the *Morte Darthur* that requires readers to base their understanding of characters' emotions on their actions, as emotional responses are withheld by the narrator. Kapelle explains that the

> sense of distance lies in the fact that, as critics frequently note, Malory often depicts action rather than moments of introspection or complex emotion. Readers frequently lack access to the inner lives of characters, to their motivations and thoughts. Our

> understanding of a knight, king, or lady depends on what he or she does. (74)

The lack of insight into Arthur's emotional response is typical of Malory's narrative style. Raluca L. Radulescu affirms that "the scarcity of details regarding feelings or actions (or both) in *Le Morte* contributes to Malory's typical characterization of Arthurian heroes" (121). The *Morte Darthur* is a text which largely draws on the reader's response to determine appropriately the morality of the character's actions.

While the narrator never indicates how readers should respond to Arthur's part in the infanticide, interestingly, we are told that although the realm was displeased at the death of the children "many putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthure" (55.35-56.1). This passage may be viewed as an attempt by the narrator to absolve Arthur for the blame of the May Day massacre; however, this is inconsistent with the narrator's unbiased storytelling. It is more likely that the narrator is evoking a response from the reader which mirrors the response of Arthur's people; that is the difficulty in reconciling how God's chosen king could be responsible for such a horrific act. We are told that the people "for drede and for love, they held their pece" (56.1-2). This statement offers an interesting view of how Arthur's people perceive him. Certainly, at this point of the opening tale, we can see why they would "drede" Arthur, but to acknowledge their "love" in the same sentence is contradictory. While seemingly contradictory, this dualism captures the ambivalence that not only we are told Arthur's subjects feel about him, but the reader as well. Arthur is someone to be both feared and loved. He represents not only England's rise to greatness as the prophesied king, but also the willingness to commit heinous acts in order to fulfill this destiny.

The fact that Malory places the May Day massacre at the very end of the first episode of the first tale indicates Malory's intention to contrast Arthur's coming into power with his capacity for evil in an effort to retain his power. At this point of the tale, it is evident what insidious actions Uther and Merlin are capable of in order to obtain power and the parallel demonstrates the correlation between power and sin. With Uther and Merlin's conspiracy to overthrow the Duke of Tyntagail and impregnate Igraine we see underlined Malory's intent to show both a correlation and causation between evil and power. Therefore, it is a mistake to focus primarily on Arthur's intercourse with Morgause, or his failure to kill Mordred, as being the beginning spiral toward the *Morte Darthur's* tragic end. These events are significant, but the grander concept is that both of these actions do indeed show Arthur's willingness to commit sin. While Merlin, and perhaps many readers, believe Arthur's fate is directly tied to the sin of his incestuous relationship with Morgause (44.16-9), Malory consistently muddies the waters as to what constitutes sin. It is difficult to argue that Arthur's infanticide is less of a sin than Arthur's incestuous intercourse with Morgause. Therefore critics who focus too much on the incest are then focusing too much on the cause and effect of this event, while the May Day massacre cements Arthur as a man of great power willing to commit an atrocious act by any standard. While Malory places little emphasis on the May Day Massacre, that does not mean the reader should do the same. Its inclusion, however brief, shows intent as Malory makes us aware of Arthur's capacity to protect his kingdom. While it is difficult to justify the action even in a secular reading, especially given that it was done in vain, it is impossible to justify from a religious standpoint. Though Arthur's intent in the May Day Massacre may have been to preserve the kingdom under God's providence,

medieval views of sin are not judged on intent but by the action itself, as seen with Arthur's incest with Morgause.

The vain nature of the May Day slaughter, in that Arthur fails to kill Mordred, adds to the horror of the event. This also adds to the allusion to Herod as he also fails to kill Christ while causing the destructions of many infant lives in the process. While Arthur's sin of incest is often seen as the reason for the fall of Arthur's kingdom, his willingness and capability to harm children, whatever the reason may be, should not be understated. Mordred is not only the embodiment of Arthur's sin of incest; ironically, his existence exposes Arthur's immense capacity for evil through Arthur's infanticide. Mordred's evil nature can be associated as a result of his sinful conception; however, those same correlations could be applied to Arthur as well. Arthur and Mordred's conceptions are comparable in their sinful, but different, aspects.

Prior to the May Day massacre, Merlin has been key in the conception of Arthur, his coronation, and rule as king. We bear witness to the dubious nature of Merlin in the deceptive, magical nature of Uther's transformation to the image of the Duke of Tyntagil in order to sleep with Igraine. Merlin calls attention to the idea that Mordred was born out of sin (44.16-9), yet he fails to acknowledge his own complicity in Arthur's conception. The sinful aspects of Arthur and Modred's conceptions draw attention to each other and the dubious circumstances of both demonstrate Malory drawing attention to this parallel. While critics have often indicated that Arthur's incestuous relationship with Morgause is the seed that ultimately causes the destruction of the Round Table and Arthur's kingdom, I contend they are often overlooking several other factors. For instance, in speaking of Arthurian scholarship post *La Suite du Merlin*, critic David Scott Wilson-Okamura states

that critics are incorrect in their focus on the incestuous aspects of Arthur and Morgause's relationship as they often overlook the sin of adultery (18). While both Arthur and Morgause were unaware of their relation to each other, they were both aware that they were committing adultery. Morgause is certainly aware in that she was specifically sent to Arthur's court by her husband, King Lot, in a plan to spy on Arthur. While Arthur's knowledge of adultery is ambiguous there are hints within the narrative that suggest he was aware Morgause is Lott's wife. The narrator tells us that Morgause "rested hir a monthe, and at the laste she departed" (41.20-1) and "al thys tyme Kynge Arthure knew nat that King Lottis wyff was his sister" (41.24-5). We are not told by the narrator that he was unaware she was Lott's wife, but only that he was unaware that she was his sister. Furthermore, that she stayed with Arthur a month suggests that with this level of intimacy over a prolonged period of time information regarding her identity may have passed between them. The most problematic description during this portion of the text is how we are supposed to determine what Malory means by "she was sent thydir to aspye on the courte of Kynge Arthure" (41.14). While the assumption is that she came in disguise, which may be what Malory intended, certain descriptions seem to contradict this. For instance, we are told that "she com rychely beseyne with hir foure sonnes . . . with many other knyghtes and ladyes, for she was a passynge fayre lady" (41.15-7). This spectacle is far too grand an entrance for someone who wishes to remain anonymous. Furthermore, the appearance of her four sons, whom it can be assumed Arthur and his court were familiar with, gives indication that Morgause's spying was more indicative of reconnaissance in the form of an ambassadoral role on behalf of King Lot. In either case, at the very least she was aware that their relation was adulterous, even if Arthur was not.

While medieval understanding of sin did not account for intention in the same manner as it does with a contemporary audience, this does speak to two things. Foremost, if Arthur is aware that he is committing adultery with Morgause it demonstrates Arthur's willingness to commit sin, and because of this, readers, while having a certain amount of empathy given his unintended incest, are less capable of overlooking his adultery. This creates a problematic narrative of the hero's journey but it is one that Malory embraces throughout the *Morte Darthur*. Arthur is fallible, and while destined for greatness he is not a divine being but just a man. For Malory, these competing ideas of sin and duty are the essence of what it is to be human. Heroic deeds are often praised while sinful actions are glossed over but duly noted; however, their ramifications are always apparent, thus demonstrating Malory's acknowledgement of their weight in terms of fate.

Another problematic aspect of attributing Arthur's fall solely to his incestuous relationship with Morgause is that it creates inconsistent logic regarding sin. For instance, if Mordred is the result of Arthur's sin, and is the seed of destruction within Camelot, then we have to go back even further to Uther's adulterous and deceitful intercourse with Igrayne in conceiving Arthur. Merlin uses magic to disguise Uther to appear like the Duke of Tyntigil in order to have sex with her, which results in the conception of Arthur (8.1-5). If we can attribute Mordred being reflective of the evil nature indicative of his sinful conception, that same concept needs to be applied to Arthur's conception as well. In this light, the failure of Arthur's kingdom begins with his own conception and Arthur is an incarnation of sin in much the same manner as Mordred.

At the beginning of the first tale, we are given the account of Uther's infatuation with Igrayne, as well as the manner in which his son Arthur is conceived through what

can only amount to rape. As King Uther is warring with the Duke of Tyntagil, and Uther sends for a meeting with the Duke, he charges the Duke to "brynge his wyf wyth hym, for she was a fair lady and a passynge wyse" (7.6-7). The narrator never gives the pretenses for this meeting but the assumption is that it is a cordial meeting in an effort to end the war. Here, we are first given two reasons for which Uther wants Igrayne present, which is that she is a "fair lady" and "passynge wyse." The second reason would indicate that Uther is requesting her presence as an arbitrator whose wisdom would be welcome. The first reason, that Igrayne is a "fair lady" would indicate that Uther's interest is selfishly motivated by wanting to observe her beauty. Indeed, upon seeing her, we are told that:

> the Kynge lyked and loved this lady wel, and he made them grete chere oute of measure - and desyred to have lyen by her. But she was a passynge good woman and would not assente unto the Kynge. (7.9-13)

As Uther's motivations become apparent, Igrayne explains to her husband that:

> we were sente for that I shold be dishonoured. Wherfor, husband, I counceille yow that we departe from hens suddenly, that we may ryde all nyghte unto oure owne castell. (7.15-18.)

From the beginning, we are explicitly shown through Uther's actions his malicious intent and his capacity for sin. He knows Igrayne is married, yet not only covets her in the Duke's presence, but makes his intentions clear to Igrayne that he wants to have intercourse with her. We are also explicitly told of Igrayne's resistance to his advances as well as being repeatedly told that she is a "passynge good woman." In contrast to Igrayne's goodness, Uther demonstrates qualities of a sinful man desiring to engage in

adultery, and thus is a dishonorable king. In response, Uther wages war against the Duke over their flight, showing that he is willing to sacrifice many lives to his own passions.

After Uther's conquest of Castle Terrabil, he succumbs to his own passion and anger and falls ill. At this point, Merlin expresses interest in helping Uther on the condition that "Kynge Uther wille wel reward [him] and be sworne unto me to fulfille my desyre, that shall be his honour and profite more than myn, and I shalle cause hym to have all his desyre" (8.20-2). Merlin reveals a deal with Uther that should he have Uther lay with Igrayne, she will be with child and when the child is born it will be Merlin's to raise. This deal comes to fruition as a result of a magic causing Uther to appear as the Duke, and then engaging in sex with Igrayne without her knowledge of his true identity, and these actions demonstrate Merlin and Uther's capacity for evil. The conception of Arthur, through these actions, was not simply a result of Merlin's deceitful magic, but was a product of the act through its very arrangement. In this way, Arthur's conception was a result of Uther's evil and Merlin's magic. To say that Mordred's evil nature is indicative of the incestuous sinful conception is accurate, but those same rules should be applied to Arthur as well. Malory begins the tale describing how Uther is a dishonorable and deceitful King, and through magic, begets a son which he willingly gives up. To be clear, Malory is not condemning his characters for their evil actions, but instead, speaking to the greater problem of horrendous actions often being required to achieve a greater good. Essentially Malory is commenting on the idea that earthly rule and celestial obedience are incompatible for a King.

Dorsey Armstrong states that, “critics have long rightly looked to Arthur’s incestuous and adulterous relationship with Morgause as the source of one of the

destructive forces that will cause the collapse of the Arthurian community" (51). The sin of incest is incarnated with Mordred as the living indication of the act and the figure who is prophesied by Merlin to ultimately kill Arthur. Throughout the text, Merlin's prophecies are extremely accurate; however, there is a paradox regarding his prophecy of Mordred's destruction of Arthur with his advice for Arthur to try and kill Mordred to disrupt the prophecy. This suggests one of two ideas: first, that there is a certain level of indeterminacy with Merlin. If this is the case, there conceivably are alternatives to the May Day massacre. The second idea, which gives an even more pejorative depiction of Merlin that will be explored later in this thesis, is that Merlin knows that the prophecy is indeed accurate and encourages Arthur to proceed with the May Day massacre in vain. Either of these ideas demonstrates that Merlin is concerned to ensure that Arthur succeeds solely in terms of earthly power, and not divine power. Arthur's orders to enact infanticide show that Arthur has indeed placed his own will over that of God and thus becomes one of the defining moments to suggest how far he is from obtaining divinity.

Reiss notes that here "Arthur assumes more the role of Herod than of Christ, and Mordred seems more the persecuted hero than the arch-villain. This ambiguity suggested here marks the rest of the tale" (45). Arthur's actions here contrast the allusions to Christ early in the tale, but still the allusions are to Herod who sought to destroy Christ and murdered many children in the process. This stark balance of competing religious ideas is Malory's way of juxtaposing the challenges of being a king chosen by God with the realities a king must face in order to fulfill his duty and remain king. For as much as Arthur's actions are predetermined, so are Mordred's. The reader is expected to

sympathize with Mordred here as he is a product of fate as much as he is a product of Arthur's sin.

The May Day massacre not only demonstrates Arthur's capacity for immorality, but, as Amy Varin suggests, gives what will become Arthur's final enemy a birth more fitting of a hero (168). Mordred, almost miraculously, is the lone surviving child amongst the rest that were killed as "by fortune the shypp drove unto a castelle, and was all to-revynn and destroyed for the moste party, save that Mordred was cast up" (55.28-30). Helen Cooper accurately notes that Malory could have used any number of sources for Mordred's birth but chose his conception through Arthur's incestuous affair (150-51). While this does point to Mordred being born of sin, it is important not to neglect that it is Arthur committing that sin and not simply focus on this detail inferring Mordred's nature. Just as Arthur's actions allude to Herod, Mordred's survival against odds allude to Christ. Furthermore, we are notified that "a good man founde [Mordred] and fostird hym telle he was fourtene yere of age" (55.30-1). This incredible incident of fortune is not the typical beginning of a villain, whereas Arthur is given away by his father to be raised by Merlin whose actions are indicative of anything but a "good man." This subversion of heroic and villainous origins is one of the more apparent contrasts Malory sets up to demonstrate that heroes are not always infallible, and villains are capable of great feats. With these ideas established in the first tale, Malory is requiring readers persistently to question the actions of all characters and not evaluate the *Morte Darthur* based on the existing tropes of romance, but instead as a reflection of the medieval world.

Malory very carefully parallels the circumstances surrounding Arthur and Mordred's conception. For instance, just as Uther wanted to lay with Igrayne because she

was a "fair lady" when she entered his court, so does Arthur want to be with Morgause because she is a "passynge fair lady" when she enters his court. Both Uther and Arthur's sexual desire is purely based on passion and physical attraction to Igrayne and Morgause respectively, and not true love. As C. David Benson states, "human passion is always potentially dangerous because it is necessarily contingent, unlike the unchanging love of God" (225). Both Uther and Arthur's lechery become apparent upon first encounters with Igrayne and Morgause respectively, which both result in perverted representations of courtly love.

In his essay "Courtly Love in Malory," Charles Moorman makes the case that Malory diverts from the way courtly love was depicted in his sources to expose its sinful nature. While popular in medieval romance, courtly love was not considered to be godly or representative of purity. Moorman accurately attests that "courtly love is by definition immoral and adulterous, and it was vigorously condemned as such by the Church" (165). Malory is using the romance trope of courtly love with these two encounters to display their sinful nature and their most excessive immorality.

Malory uses many of the same elements of courtly love as his sources, but Moorman describes how:

> Malory could hardly fail to be aware of the paradoxical nature of courtly love as he found it in his sources, and it seems to me that instead of ignoring or distorting or even merely reducing the courtly love material he found there, he instead set out to exploit the paradoxical nature of courtly love in order to define and emphasize one of the chief failures of Arthur's court. For Malory

> was not confused and troubled as were his predecessors; to Malory, the adulterous courtly love of his sources was an evil, and he sets out in the *Morte Darthur* to show how this tragic confusion of earlier times contributes to the destruction of the Round Table civilization. Thus Malory consistently reduces those sections of his sources which extravagantly glorify courtly love lest his reader misconstrue his intent and think him in agreement with the attitudes of the French writers; yet he is careful to preserve the core of such passages in order to demonstrate the tragic effect of courtly love upon his characters. (165)

Of course, there are other examples of courtly love in the later tales in the *Morte Darthur* which lead to tragic consequences; however, the examples of Uther and Igrayne, as well as Arthur and Morgause, result in the transpiring of tragedy through sinful conception. Furthermore, as Benson argues, "human love is highly valued by Malory, but not erotic passion" (228). The relationships between Uther and Igrayne, as well as Arthur and Morgause are not the sort of long ongoing affairs that define lovers' identities as seen with Lancelot and Gwenivere or Tristram and Isolde. In this manner, the sinful and adulterous affairs in the *Morte Darthur* such as that of Lancelot and Gwenivere are no less detestable in the eyes of Malory than that of the passion sought by Uther and Arthur.

There are many factors by which Arthur's kingdom collapses but through Malory's translation and interpretation of his sources he focuses on the incompatibility of earthly values with human desires. For instance, Moorman states that "Malory's sources, whatever they may have been, almost certainly glorified courtly love by romanticizing its

tragic consequence" (172). For Malory, courtly love is both the aspiration and action of sin which brings about dire consequences. While Malory's sources, and medieval romance as a genre, may have glorified courtly love, the writers would have undoubtedly seen the paradox of its sinful nature under the teachings of the Church. As Moorman states, Malory:

> solve[s] the great dilemma of courtly love which had confronted the writers of his sources: he unequivocally condemns courtly love throughout his book by emphasizing its tragic consequences and thereby avoids recantation and paradox. Such changes as Malory makes therefore contribute directly to the tragic theme of the *Morte Darthur* and bear witness to the unity of Malory's vision. (176)

The unity of Malory's version of the *Morte Darthur* is the inability of earthly desires and divine aspirations to co-exist. Courtly love is the antithesis of divinity, and the birth of Arthur through deceit, sin, and magic serves as a juxtaposition to the birth of Christ. The Messianic and prophetic coming of Arthur evokes a sense of divinity but the particulars of the events in the *Morte Darthur* suggest a depraved version of the tale of Christ. While Christ was born of a virgin through the power of God, Arthur was born out of rape and the power of Merlin.

Robert Burlin defines the chivalric code as "the relation of king and knight, the ruler and those noble military followers on whom he depends for the maintenance of his realm, providing protection from enemies without and ensuring order and justice within" (3). As demonstrated throughout the *Morte Darthur*, the chivalric code is incompatible with the Christian code. Arthur is the idealized King of England in his willingness and

capacity to make difficult decisions and sacrifices on behalf of his kingdom; however, in doing these actions he is exposed as an ungodly and sinful man despite his efforts to be the best of both man and king.

The women of the *Morte Darthur* are often associated with the temptress role in seeing to the destruction of men and their kingdoms. In Malory's depiction of Morgause, she occupies the Eve role in that she must know that she is sinning by having an affair with Arthur. Morgause is obviously aware she is married and thus knows she and Arthur are guilty of adultery and seeking pleasure in sex. Elizabeth Edwards says that in the *Morte Darthur* "women are divided into an aspect of malevolence and ill-will characterized by a threatening sexual veracity" (43). I have already made an argument that Arthur may have been aware of Morgause's identity as Lott's wife; however, it is important to consider the other perspective. If Morgause did conceal her identity, like Uther upon Igrayne, it would add to her already tarnished nature and place more blame on her for Arthur's fall. Malory makes it known, through Balyn, that it is an "evyll sygne [to claim to be true and] nat telle thy name" (73.19-2L0). While the details are lacking, we know that Morgause's intent was malicious in her efforts to spy, at least from the perspective of Arthur's court. She was aware of the adultery, if not the incest, and thus serves as a temptress within the story to undo Arthur. In the grand scheme of the narrative, Morgause is unaware of the implications of her actions in entirety, but in a thematic sense she plays a role in determining Arthur's sinful nature. Although Arthur's tragedy and fall is not an immediate process, in this light of sin and punishment it evokes the fall of Original Sin in the book of Genesis. That seed of destruction comes in the form of Mordred.

The relationship between Mordred and Arthur is a curious one. We are never told how Mordred is brought to Arthur's court, only that it happens when he is fourteen (55.30-1). Arthur, as he is told in the first tale, knows that Mordred is destined to destroy him and bring devastation to the region, yet he keeps him with the court regardless. This is problematic in the narrative because we are already aware that Arthur was not only willing to kill him as a child, but that he was willing to murder a multitude of children in order to do so. The relationship between Arthur and Mordred is one of the more problematic inconsistencies in looking at the *Morte Darthur* as a single narrative.

Mordred becomes the embodiment of evil and ultimately the villain whose emergence brings the Round Table back together in the end. As Arthur has intercourse with Morgause we are told that "he begate uppon hir Sir Mordred" (41.19-20). The way in which Malory simply states the name "Mordred" with the title of "Sir" indicating his knighthood demonstrates Malory's expectation that his audience was familiar with Mordred being the villain from his previous sources. Merlin makes it known as he prophesizes that Mordred will "destroy [Arthur] and all the londe" (55.21-2). Mordred, by all accounts, should not simply be seen as a result of Arthur's sinful relationship with Morgause, but as a generational curse which began with the actions of Uther. The idea of generations being punished through the sins of their fathers is a biblical one. The Bible states that:

> the Lord is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Num 14:18).

Although Mordred's inherently evil nature in relation to Arthur's sin is more apparent than the connection to Uther, the biblical concept of a generational curse further demonstrates Malory's design as is evident in the *Morte Darthur*.

When the prophetic encounter between Mordred and Arthur happens their sins apex. Arthur is aware that fate is not on his side, at least according to Merlin, but resigns himself to it. Benson says that:

> the most symbolic terrible moment is the mutual slaying of Mordred and Arthur - the horror of which is increased by Malory's original description of how the dying, skewered son pulls himself up the shaft of this father's spear in order to strike the mortal blow against his father (714/8-9; XXI.4). (235)

Benson's description indicates the moment it becomes clear that there was never any way of circumventing Merlin's prophecy that Mordred would kill Arthur. Even after Arthur's fatal blow, Mordred is able to pull himself within striking distance of Arthur, and counters with a mortal wound himself. It is in this moment that the curse that began with Uther comes to an end. Up until his death, as Deborah Ellis states, "Mordred . . . stands for the spiritual perversion and loss of meaning" within the Kingdom (74).

In the *Morte Darthur*, Malory is not just using Arthur's actions to criticize balancing earthly and religious values, but as a criticism of politics as well. Arthur's kingdom stems from the unruly actions of Uther and Merlin, and as is foretold at the end of the first part of the first tale, yet early in the completed work, Arthur, and the land, will be destroyed (55). As Lexton points out:

> to situate our interpretation of Arthur, we must place Malory's rendering of kingship in the *Morte* in the contemporary discourse within which it was written. The *Morte Darthur* coincided in England with the culmination of almost a century of contested kingship, usurpation, civil ruin, and loss. (174)

The *Morte Darthur* was written during a tumultuous time in England's political history, that being the War of the Roses. Colin Richmond states that:

> There is little doubt that in reading the *Morte* one reads about the Wars of the Roses — or, more accurately, the decline and fall of England after the death of Henry V. Above all, book 8, written in 1469 – 70, is a reflection in untranquillity on the politics of Edward IV and the political anarchy that his politics led to in 1469. (36)

Additionally, it was printed at the end of Richard III's reign, so the political climate would have had an impact on Malory's ideological principles which seem to be manifest throughout the *Morte Darthur*. Thomas Crofts states that:

> Malory's part of the century was so dominated by the personality of Richard of York that the Duke is necessarily 'in' the *Morte Darthur* , but more in the form of a concept than an individual, and more like an ideology than an idea. (116)

The *Morte Darthur*, by virtue of its narrative, is an indictment of the regal system as Arthur, being a great king, is not evaluated by the same moral code as others. Arthur cannot be a great king and a moral man, nor can he be great king and a good husband.

Lexton accurately states that The *Morte Darthur* "mounts a tacit but persistent critique of Arthurian kingship" (175); however, based on Malory's ambivalent depiction of Arthur he is more likely not criticizing Arthur, but the regal system in its entirety. This is also seen in Uther's characterization as a king willing to sacrifice his own people to wage a war so he can fall to his lechery by engaging in adultery. Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, we are introduced to three generations of kings which display the dysfunction of monarchy. Lisa Robeson claims that in regards to Arthur and Mordred, "[t]heir actions and characterizations during the civil wars that destroy Camelot expose a portrait of malfunctioning kingship on one hand and perversion of kingship on the other" (137). Malory never provides an answer to the failure of kingship, but he shows that its troubles are inherent as are the troubles of the men who wear the crown. Malory, throughout the *Morte Darthur*, reduces Arthur from Christ-like saviour to simply a man with all his complexity intact. Further complicating Arthur's position as holy king is his tyrannical supremacy and pageantry for bloodshed in his claim. Arthur, in Tale I, demonstrates characteristics of both a great king and of a tyrant.

In Arthur's representation as a hero, Malory's overall view of Arthur is a positive one; however, in Tale I, Arthur means to assert his right to the crown through bloodshed where he cannot gain it from convincing people he is the true heir. Arthur, as a king, is great in his conquests but his actions border on being a tyrant. Arthur, even though he is the rightful heir, is not seen as such by everyone in the kingdom, and determines his rule throughout the land through bloodshed. Arthur, once God's chosen king, exerts his dominance by force and not the willful submission of the people. Lexton states that:

> the belligerency of Malory's Arthur in the "Tale of Arthur" is unjustifiable expansionism; the savagery of the combat compounds the error of an already dubiously motivated war. As war begins, Arthur's violent behavior becomes a corruption of personal fortitude in a situation where the king should be focusing on the public interest. (195)

Arthur accepts being king which comes with resistance as he challenges the current ruling system. Many feel that, because he was conceived out of wedlock, he is a bastard, and therefore not worthy of the crown in not truly being an heir (17-8.17-39,1-3). Arthur's answer for this is to engage in battle and win through victory over those who would deny him. Much of the opening of "The Tale of King Arthur" is indicative of my argument that Arthur's ambivalent nature as both a great king and a sinful man is thus given over to Arthur's wars and the fighting that is necessary to keep his kingship secure.

In the *Morte Darther*, those who challenge Arthur believe they are acting appropriately, and many in Malory's time may have sympathized with this uncertainty surrounding the crown. Malory captures this uncertainty and dissatisfaction through the perceived dubiousness of the supernatural. King Arthur was but a boy whose claim to the throne did not rest on being Uther's son, but by pulling the sword from the stone (13.34-5). This magic, to many, was not necessarily holy as many men questioned its origins and were not ready to accept Arthur as King, thus prolonging the time until his coronation (15.33-9). Soon after, as Merlin tries to build more support for Arthur, they reject Merlin's proposal that they give fealty to their new king because they view Merlin as "wytch", as opposed to prophet (18.13-4). This leads to rebellion, and for many of

Arthur's enemies throughout he often looks like and acts like the villain they always considered him. Lexton further explains that:

> in the opening parts of the Tale of King Arthur, Malory employs terms which for Malory's contemporaries frame Arthur as a usurper and a tyrant. Arthur looks like a usurper and behaves like a tyrant. The alterations that Malory makes to Arthur's kingship in the opening phases of the *Morte Darthur* are neither permanent nor unequivocal, but they cause disturbances in the Arthurian polity which ripple through the rest of the book. (201)

In a religious sense, Malory chronicles Arthur's rise to prominence through the miracle of the sword in the stone, but he later contrasts this with Arthur's inability to remove the sword from the scabbard (62.13-4). When the damsel with the scabbard enters Arthur's court, at the beginning of "The Tale of Balyn", she states:

> Thys swerde that I am gurtewithall doth me grete sorow and comberaunce, for I may nat be delyverde of thys swerde but by a knyght, and he must be a passynge good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory, and without treson. And if I may fynde such a knyght that hath all thes vertues, he may draw oute thys swerde oute of the sheethe. (61.31 -62-4)

The criteria the damsel gives Arthur and the knights to be able to pull the sword from the scabbard should not be difficult for any of them to achieve by their own chivalric standards. The damsel makes it clear that any knight with the qualities of being a good man without villainy, treachery, or treason should be able to complete the task, and it was

the expectation that such a knight be found at Arthur's court that sent her to Arthur in the first place. For Arthur to be the first to try, and fail, this task draws a contrast to how we should now view Arthur in comparison to before he became king and pulled the sword from the stone. The conclusion is that Arthur is no longer a good man, or that he is no longer without villainy, treachery, or treason. When he fails, the damsel once again emphasizes that in order to pull the sword knights must "beware ye be nat defoyled with shame, trechory, nother gyle" (62.20-1). Here it becomes apparent that by the standards of fate and magic, Arthur is now a flawed knight. Malory is not condemning Arthur, he is merely drawing attention to Arthur's fallibility. This is reinforced when the knight who does pull the sword, Balyn, follows a tragic arc which mirrors Arthur's.

By all accounts, Arthur and his knights do aspire to live a chivalric life, and what they believe to be a good Christian life. However, as is demonstrated throughout the *Morte Darthur*, those two ideals are incompatible. P.E. Tucker states that "to Malory there are two ways of life, that of . . . perfection, and that of good chivalry" (91). A dualistic balance of ideals is essentially impossible according to Malory, and while this is true of Arthur's knights, it is especially exemplified in a King who must make choices that, while great in the eyes of men, are damning in the eyes of God.

Chapter Two:
Merlin, a Devyls Son

In Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Merlin, more than any other character embodies a dualistic nature. Merlin's dualism is not represented as a dichotomy of good and evil so much as it is an ambiguous amalgamation of actions which are not dependent on the will of God, or a demonic nature, but for what Merlin perceives as the good of the kingdom. With that being said, Merlin often incorporates the will of God into his rationale and judgment, even as a justification of reprehensible actions such as his role in the rape of Igrayne or the May Day massacre events discussed in Chapter One. Thomas L. Wright sums it up adequately when he states that Merlin is "neither devil, nor man, nor god [but] wears the masks of all three. He is equally capable of the miraculous feats of heroes and gods, or the undignified failings of devils and men" (33).

Much of the medieval view of Merlin, like most characters of Arthurian legend, was already firmly set within the cultural consciousness. Malory uses the various depictions of Merlin from his sources and amalgamates them in a way which complicates the religious implications of the *Morte Darthur*. For instance, Merlin often speaks on behalf of God when fighting for Arthur's right to the throne, or, on the other hand, when admonishing Arthur for his actions. Moreover, in Malory's version of the Arthurian legend there seems to be an understanding that Merlin is the devil's son as well.

While Merlin is known to be the son of the devil, it was also likely understood that Merlin was also the son of a virgin, giving us what would be perceived as a perverted

allusion to the birth of Christ. Miranda Griffin summarizes Merlin's origins in the thirteenth-century prose *Merlin*:

> as the son of a holy virgin and a devil: projected as an Antichrist, Merlin becomes instead the prophet of the Grail. This dichotomy is present even at Merlin's conception, which is narrated as a distorted version of the Virgin Birth. A pious, holy young woman locks herself into her room in an attempt to evade the clutches of devils who are trying to tempt her. She forgets to pray before she falls asleep, however, and a devil is able to enter and rape her as she sleeps, engendering what the devils hope will be an Antichrist. However, as soon as the child has been conceived, the woman wakes up, prays to the blessed Virgin and visits her confessor. The woman's piety attenuates the force of evil, and when Merlin is born and - crucially - baptized, he is not so much diabolical as hairy and precociously knowledgeable. He has, the text tells us, the gift of knowing everything that has happened, inherited from his diabolical father, whereas his gift of prophecy is a gift from God in recognition of his mother's virtue. (92)

Merlin was understood to be an ambivalent character by both the nature of his conception, and his contradictory nature in resisting his evil purpose. In his conception, it shows the invasive nature of evil, but also the redeeming power of God. This accepted origin also gives us insight into Merlin's powers in the *Morte Darthur* where Merlin performs spells that often tread the line between being deceptive and miraculous.

Malory's version of Merlin borrows heavily from his sources but in doing so he creates a more complicated account of the character in the way he deviates or omits information. Malory introduces Merlin without any explanation. Stephen Shepherd explains this by saying that "Malory expected his readership already to know of Merlin's legendary status as magician, creator of the Round Table, and prophet and facilitator of Arthur's reign" (4 note 8). In this way, Malory is able to use Merlin as a plot device which both alludes to his sources, as well as foreshadows events to come. In the *Morte Darthur*, Merlin, being the legendary figure of Arthurian lore, demonstrates a tremendous ability for being a brilliant military strategist, politician, and advisor. However, for the purpose of this thesis the focus should be on Merlin's more demonic supernatural attributes as it is those traits that give insight into Merlin's dualism in light of his more apparent benign deeds. Merlin's powers within the *Morte Darthur* are typically in the form of being able to see into the future, and the ability to change his appearance. While some of Malory's sources depict Merlin as the devil's son, Malory does not mention this until just prior to Merlin's death at the hands of Nymue (126.21-3). This is detail is significant because throughout Tale I of the *Morte Darthur*, Merlin's behaviour is sometimes confounding within a medieval Christian paradigm. By declaring Merlin to be the devil's son, Malory explains, but does not excuse, some of Merlin's evil behaviour.

The origin of Merlin as the son of the Devil is owed to the thirteenth-century French writer Robert de Boron, in the French poem *Merlin*, where Merlin, as noted above, was "created to confound Christ and bring evil into the world" (Dean 1). In de Boron's unfinished poem Merlin is an example of the capacity for Christ's forgiveness and mercy. Christopher Dean writes that "the devil's plot . . . was thwarted by Merlin's

redemption through baptism and by his mother's goodness. Instead of being evil, Merlin became God's instrument for good" (1). While this version of Merlin ultimately is redeemed through the power of God, he still implicitly embodies aspects of his father, the devil, and therefore must always struggle between becoming a man fulfilling his intended purpose for evil, or giving himself over to the will of God.

In the French prose *Merlin,* Merlin is depicted as being conceived by devils with powers not only to bring evil into the world, but to do so by fooling the people into believing he was good. Merlin was to be a false prophet, and the demonic answer to Christ's death and resurrection. The French prose *Merlin* describes how the demons concoct their plan to create the being that we know as Merlin:

> how can we have someone who might speak out and tell them our aims, our deeds, and our ways of life - who might have the power, like us, to know things done and said in the past? If we had someone who had that power and who knew things, and if he were on earth with other folk, then he could help us trick him . . . And he could also foretell things that would come to pass and be said soon and far in the future, so that he would be believed by everybody.(Lacy, ed, Lancelot-Grail 167-72)

This Merlin, thought the demons, would come into the world to use his power to see into the future to convince people he should be believed. This version of Merlin was a product of evil who would ultimately be against the will of the people, but convince them he was acting in their best interests and that he achieves his knowledge through God. Malory's Merlin appears to retain a sinister side as I have shown in Chapter One with his role in

the rape of Igraine, but he also appears to always be acting on Arthur's behalf. Malory's efforts appear to capture both aspects of Merlin's dualism which leaves the reader often questioning his motives, as well as debating whether the ends do indeed justify the means. Malory's Merlin captures all of the theological complexity of earthly living and spiritual divination.

Eugène Vinaver credits de Boron's poem as being responsible for the foundation of a "cyclic Arthuriad: the blending of the Arthurian romantic matter . . . with the Christian magic" (24). Much of the Christian magic element is based in the existence of Merlin being the devil's, and God's, prophet. It is Dean's estimation that after de Boron's reinvention of Merlin as the devil's son "the story of Merlin is always at least potentially one of struggle, often in specific Christian terms, between good and evil" (1-2). In the *Morte Darthur*, however, I contend that this may be the case with other characters such as Arthur, but not with Merlin himself. The Merlin of the *Morte Darthur* does not struggle with good and evil but embraces them both as aspects of humanity. He is free from the moral and spiritual struggles that occupy the decisions of ordinary men, yet he is still very much a man as much as he is a supernatural figure. S. E. Holbrook says that "Malory has . . . presented a mortal Merlin throughout his narrative, not an omnipotent being immune to human folly" (770). He falls into lechery in regards to Nymue (126.17-8), yet gains the knowledge of events that have yet to transpire. Merlin retains the human aspects of destiny and cannot escape his own fate. Merlin knows everything that will transpire, and how it will transpire, and escapes the temporal considerations and decisions required by other mortals. Where other humans are required to weigh their decisions in terms of ethics and considering the will of God, Merlin is relieved of these burdens and

effectively moves the pieces to ensure stability. This ability requires the reader to look at Merlin with a greater degree of scrutiny when it comes to the more religious and moral aspects of the *Morte Darthur*. The most compelling paradox is that Merlin is not exempt from moral living because of his powers, but instead he is burdened with being required to take actions outside his free will that he knows will damn him regardless. This becomes clear with his imprisonment at the hands of Nymue, an event he predicted beforehand.

De Boron's version of Merlin had him in the role of Christian moral authority and advisor. Stephen Knight says that, for de Boron, "Merlin becomes primarily a serious royal advisor speaking directly to the powerful and interpreting their ambience in the light of Christianity" (48). The English version of Merlin historically did not depict Merlin as a Christian moral authority. Much of the reason for this was that the English-speaking audience had no interest in such devices because of their social status whereas the French audience was more aristocratic. Knight states that "the English speaking audience was much less likely to be aristocratic and leisured, even learned, and there was almost no interest in massive structures using Merlin as a Christian moral authority, as in the early grail stories and the Post-Vulgate" (81). Malory never embraces the idea that Merlin is a Christian moral authority. Malory's Merlin does not portray Christian characteristics as his magic is often used to deceive, such as his glamour magic used to change his appearance (38.6-9, 73.12-4) or the appearance of others (9.7-11) He also lacks moral authority because his advice is based on outcomes, and not morality, as seen with his plan to have Arthur conceived through the rape of Igraine (Malory 9.1-5) or his advice that led Arthur to commit the May Day massacre. The only time Merlin will

admonish someone for their lack of morality is when the outcome of their immoral actions has a negative effect that goes against his own interests. This is the case with Arthur's incest with Morgause (41.17-21).

When Arthur defeats King Lott and drives his armies back, he does so in a way which slaughters many men even after the victory. Merlin admonishes Arthur for this:

> Thou hast never done! Thou hast nat done inow! Of three score thousande thys day hast thou leftte on lyve but fyftene thousand. Therefore hit ys tyme to sey 'who!' for God ys wroth with the, for thou wolt never have done. For yondir a eleven Kyngs at thys tyme woll nat be overthrowyn, but and thou tary on them any lenger, thy fortune woll turne and they shall encres. (36.26-32)

In the first part of this passage Merlin scolds Arthur for his extreme violence. It is also important to note that he is doing so in a religious manner, noting that God is upset with Arthur for the excessive killing as the battle is already done. At face value, it appear as though Merlin is protecting Arthur from God's wrath by preventing Arthur from more unnecessary killing, but this is inconsistent with Merlin's advice which led to Arthur committing mass infanticide in the May Day Massacre (55). It is thus more important to focus on the second part of Merlin's advice, where he claims that if Arthur continues to pursue and slay his enemies fortune would turn in their favour. Merlin is not being a religious voice of morality, he is being a military strategist by forcing Arthur to consider the tactical and then political ramifications of his actions. If Arthur continues to act like a tyrant, he will never win the support of his enemies after their defeat and they will increase in number in resistance to his tyranny.

It is not until Merlin encounters Nymue that his more sinister side is exposed. Compared to his sources, Malory constructs a version of Merlin that is even more morally corrupt. Holbrook states that:

> Malory's Merlin is distinctly lecherous. The line between passionate love and concupiscence may depend on one's moral perspective, but when Malory, who takes pains elsewhere to display the difference between "virtuous love" and "licours lust," refers not once to love but only to "dottage" and gives Merlin no more than an incessant desire to have the damosel's "maydenhede," we must admit that the traditional fatal love has diminished into patent lechery. (770)

It is not until the fourth part of Tale I that we are told that Nymue "was ever passynge wery of [Merlin], for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son" (126.19-20). While the concept of Merlin as the devil's son was prominent in Malory's sources, up until this point in the *Morte Darthur*, it is only implicit through Merlin's behaviour. When Merlin is introduced in Tale I of the *Morte Darthur*, "Malory begins his story at a point that corresponds to roughly two-thirds of the way through the standard edition of the prose *Merlin*, omitting the birth and early life of Merlin" (Norris 15). While the prose *Merlin* details Merlin's demonic conception as happening as a result of a diabolical intention to bring more evil into the world, the result is that Merlin instead rejects his evil nature to be a force for good. On the other hand, in the *Morte Darthur*, the narrative unfolds somewhat in reverse. When Merlin is introduced he claims to be acting on behalf of God to see that Arthur is accepted as the "ryghtwyse Kynge," but in the end he is

revealed as the devil's son, and a sinful magician falling into lechery and trying to take the maidenhood from good virgins.

Through the rest of the text after imprisoning Merlin, Nymue demonstrates that she is of good moral character and replaces Merlin in aiding Arthur with her abilities without the convoluted dualistic nature that Merlin embodies. In Nymue's imprisonment of Merlin (126.21-3), Malory reveals that Merlin is not the truly spiritual ambassador for God's will but that his motives may lie elsewhere. Nymue's actions, however, always have a logical consistency and she always acts on behalf of a greater good. Even after trapping Merlin behind the stone, Nymue "emerges as a consistently sympathetic figure" (Holbrook 765). Nymue is not perceived as Merlin's lover who kills him in an ultimate act of betrayal, but as a damsel who defended herself after being endlessly pursued by a powerful sorcerer. Nymue empowers herself by using her pursuer's powers and lust against him in an effort to protect herself from unwanted advances.

The interaction between Merlin and Nymue is oddly brief, and from their first meeting to Merlin's death covers only two pages. While Nymue's reaction to Merlin, in the *Morte Darthur,* is seemingly overly adverse given the lack of information that Malory provides, his sources suggest that there is a deeper insight into Nymue's motivations that Malory may have been expecting his audience to be aware of. Speaking of the Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*, Anne Berthelot sheds light on Nymue's perception of Merlin:

> [t]he fact that Merlin is a devil's son and the fact he wants to sleep with her are equally important or rather equivalent: it is because he wants to sleep with her that he is the devil's son. The whole idea of sexual intercourse is devilish in the eyes of a virgin. (68)

In this sense, it becomes clear that according to Malory's sources Nymue was defending her honour and her sanctity in the eyes of God. In the *Morte Darthur*, we are told that Merlin "alwayes . . . lay about to have hir maydynhode" (126.17-8). At this point Nymue acknowledges that Merlin is "a devyls son" (126.20). For all the good Merlin is capable of, he is the devil's son and ultimately capable of evil as well. Nymue was afraid of him after he essentially stalks her in that he "wolde nat lette her have no reste, but allwayes wolde be wyth her" (125.5-6). Nymue makes a tactical decision in that she uses Merlin's infatuation with her against him. While she is weary of him, she makes him "swere that he sholde never do none inchauntmente uppon hir if he wolde have his wil" (125.27-8). During this time, she uses Merlin to learn "of hym all maner of thynge that sche desyred" (125.7-8). Based on the details that Malory gives us, Nymue's fear of Merlin is understandable and her actions, being that they were not impulsive, are to be expected. Nymue is put in a precarious position in that her maidenhood is being threatened, but through learning Merlin's powers she is given the means to free herself from his unwanted advances. Malory makes it clear here that Nymue was not a villain who destroys one of Arthur's trusted heroes, but a victim who exposes Merlin as a lecherous villain.

Interestingly, Arthur and Merlin both implicitly acknowledge that Merlin's actions in regards to Nymue are evil. In the first part of Tale I, Merlin acknowledges that he will "dye a shamefull dethe" (44.28-9), but still concedes to the inevitability of it. Merlin later reminds Arthur that he "scholde nat endure longe, but for all his craftes he sholde be putte into the erthe quyk" (125.10-2). When Arthur hears of Merlin's interactions with Nymue, he warns him by telling Merlin "syn ye knowe of youre evil adventure, purvey for hit,

and putt hit away by youre crauftes, that mysseadventure," to which Merlin simply replies "Nay, . . . it will nat be so" (125.19-22). Merlin recognizes that his path will soon come to an end, and he knows precisely how it will happen. He is also aware, we can assume given his knowledge, that his behaviour is unsavory, which he seems to know will be his undoing, yet he refuses to change his actions. Merlin does not refute Arthur's claims that he is partaking in evil, but refuses to thwart his own actions. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, Merlin's behaviour is independent of the illusion of choice. Merlin accepts his fate, and his nature, as part of his destiny.

While the other characters of the *Morte Darthur* are often in awe of Merlin and accept his knowledge as being divine, or at least heed his advice by acknowledging his supernatural abilities, Nymue avoids falling prey to Merlin's will. Nymue, then, is the only character ever in a position to judge Merlin, both as a man, and as a supernatural being. In judging Merlin, she deems that he is evil, and because of his lecherous obsession with her she is concerned he will use his infatuation for his evil intentions.

If there is a defence of Merlin, or an indictment of Nymue, it is that she essentially uses Merlin for her own benefit to learn his magic and then trap him to take over his position. Some have suggested that Merlin's behaviour is a result of Nymue's seductive and persuasive actions in order to learn Merlin's magic. Carol E. Harding states that:

> while Merlin does perform some magic . . . it is that very knowledge that Nyneve wants ; she shows Merlin 'good chere' until she learns all she wants, and he dotes on her all the more because of it. So, in a way, she brings her problem onto herself,

> while still fearing him because he is the devil's son. Although Merlin is possibly a fearful being, until Nyneve's presence in the narrative his aid to Arthur and his knights has all been positive. (145-46)

Contrary to Harding's assessment of the situation between Merlin and Nymue, Malory makes it known that her motives are strictly in the vein of self-preservation as we are told that Nymue was "aferde" and she does not kill him until she is hit with the realization that he is "the devyls son" when he tried to have intercourse with her. By Malory evoking Nymue's fear because Merlin was the devil's son, he is reminding his audience that Merlin is not a savory character, and that Nymue have every reason to trap Merlin behind the stone.

Merlin's defeat at the hands of Nymue signifies a changing of the guard and one that leads Arthur's court away from the more dualistic operations under the influence of Merlin. Holbrook argues that "Malory's subsequent use of Nymue [shows her continuing] in a circumscribed way, Merlin's role as enchanter and prescient advisor, whose skills, knowledge, and loyalty are dedicated to Arthur and his court" (771). Nymue essentially assumes Merlin's role, but unlike Merlin, actively advises on behalf of a spiritual wellbeing as well as on behalf of Arthur's earthly kingship. Merlin, however, was solely focused on the earthly aspects of Arthur's court and only evoked God's displeasure when the consequences had an earthly impact.

Malory avoids establishing Merlin as a Christian moral authority, but instead makes him a sort of vizier. Malory, however, still evokes some of these Christian concepts surrounding Merlin, but always complicates matters by eventually leading to

some un-Christian actions. After Arthur has intercourse with Morgause, Merlin tells him that he has "done a thynge late that God ys displeased with you, for ye have lyene by youre syster and on hir ye have gotyn a childe that shall destroy you and all the knyghtes of your realme" (44.16-9). This action, as I argued in the first chapter, leads to the May Day massacre where Arthur kills a multitude of children in an effort to kill Mordred. Malory never tells us how much of Merlin's influence was involved, but we are told that "many putte the wyght on Merlion more than on Arthure" (55.35-56.1). Malory is indicating that the people of Arthur's kingdom saw Merlin more as an unsavory character who was manipulating Arthur to do his evil will, and were not willing to blame Arthur even in the face of such a horrendous massacre.

In the first part of Tale I Merlin serves as Arthur's father-figure. He helps raise Arthur and shapes him to be the ruler he wants him to be. Interestingly, in supernatural terms, Merlin is more than just a father-figure, for he also aided in Arthur's mystical conception as well as bargaining with Uther for custody of Arthur. In exchange for Uther's sleeping with Igrayne, Merlin tells Uther:

> this is my desyre: the first nyght that ye shal lye by Igrayne ye shal gete a child on her; and whan that is borne, that it shall be dellyvered to me for to nourish there as I wille have it - for it shall be your worship and the child's availle, as mykel as the child is worth. (9.1-5)

Uther quickly agrees, but where this event exposes Merlin's dualistic nature is how it transpires. When Uther's unrequited love for Igrayne becomes too unbearable, Ulfius offers to seek Merlin to heal him. (8.11-4) When Ulfius finds Merlin, Merlin, through his

supernatural precognitive abilities, is already aware of why Ulfius is there. He tells Ulfius, "yf Kynge Uther wille well rewarde me and be sworne unto me to fulfille my desyre, that shalle be his honour and profite more than myn, for I shalle cause hym to have all his desyre" (8.20-4). Merlin repeats this offer to the King as well, and establishes his power as a serviceable commodity whereby a trade must be struck. Looking at what is being traded, it is a child, which is just as much Igrayne's as it is Uther's, for the death of the Duke of Cornwall and the rape of Igrayne. The transaction is cemented through Uther's swearing on the Gospels (8.40), which signifies the complexity and dualism of Merlin in that he is ever merging Christian values and sinister deeds.

It is never quite clear how much of Merlin's prophecy is foresight of the inevitable or merely a product of his own actions. For instance, the conception of Arthur is something that Merlin prophesizes will happen if Uther has intercourse with Igrayne, but is this because of Merlin's "deseyre" to raise Arthur as the future king and thus a product of his magical influence, or is Merlin aware of the predestination of events and playing his role? There is a case to be made for both interpretations of Merlin, but this ambiguity should never be overlooked. For instance, as Merlin meets the Archbishop of Canterbury, he tells him that by Christmas, God "wold of His grete mercy shewe some myracle, as He was to become kyng of Mankynde, for to shewe somme myracle who shold be rightwys kynge of this reame" (12.18-21). The miracle manifests itself in the form of the sword in the anvil within the church yard (12.29-36), but Merlin's desire for Arthur to be king, as well as his supernatural powers, should raise the question whether this is a miracle from God or a product of Merlin's will. While it is tough to argue definitively that Merlin produced the miracle, I believe it is necessary to be careful in making the assumption that

it truly was a miracle from God as well. As Merlin has shown with aiding in the rape of Igrayne, and the conception of Arthur, his end always justifies his means, which represents a dualistic nature opposed to the purity of God.

If Arthur was truly destined to be king of the realm and fall under the providence of God, it calls into question some of Arthur's actions discussed in the first chapter, such as the Herod-like May Day Massacre (55). Arthur's heroic actions cannot erase his evil actions which are incompatible with being a chosen hero of God. Arthur's nature, being raised by Merlin, is more indicative of being a product of Merlin's will rather than God's here. With that being said, Merlin's will does put the realm first, which in turn always see the King's best interests at hand, whether it be Uther or Arthur. In this case, however, these interests are earthly, and not divine, which sees these characters committing sin in the eyes of God in order to achieve great feats on Earth.

While Merlin is the closest thing to divination for Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, he represents for the reader a rejection of heavenly values. Malory's *Morte Darthur* becomes increasingly religious once it reaches the Sankgrael; however, I will argue in the next chapter that this religiousness is Malory's effort to balance his ambivalent message. Merlin, on the other hand, represents the opposing side of Malory's wavering message as he perverts any form of sanctity in Arthur's court by using magic to reinforce earthly principles, not holy ones. While the message is a confounding one, it reflects an objective and perhaps common view of religious contradictions that would not be overtly stated in the Medieval era given the tacitly understood risk religious persecution.

The impact of Merlin's influence is prevalent in that it drives most of Arthur's decisions. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the evil aspects of Arthur's nature, but many of Arthur's actions are based on the advice of Merlin. Merlin offers Arthur counsel in matters of war and diplomacy, and because of Marlin's supernatural prophetic abilities, Arthur always heeds his advice. Merlin gives Arthur counsel on several different fronts and often tells Arthur exactly what will happen as a result. A good example is the scene mentioned earlier where Merlin warns Arthur to stop killing his enemies, or risk losing the war (36.26-32).

Merlin's prophetic visions usually do not have any usefulness to those he discloses them to in that they represent an inescapable destiny. Not only does Merlin tell Arthur what will happen many times without any means of circumventing it, he is also aware, as he tells Arthur, that "I shall dye a shamefull dethe, to be putte in the erthe quycke" (44.29-30). Merlin, with all his foreknowledge, knows his own manner of death and does not put in an effort to avoid it. If anything, this suggests that Merlin not only has the ability to foresee, but that destiny is ultimately inescapable. Holbrook says that "Malory, like the writers before and after him, allows Nymue, who will make Merlin go and stay under the rock that is to be his living grave, no choice in being the instrument of this destiny" (769). Merlin also tells Arthur that Gwenivere will ultimately betray Arthur if he takes her as a wife, yet does not dispute Arthur's decision to marry her (97.28-36).

For Balyn, Merlin represents the voice of fate that immeasurably punishes those whose actions are not maliciously motivated, thus completely ignoring intent such as seen with Merlin’s condemnation of Balyn for Columbe’s suicide (69.22-5). In this manner Balyn's tragic arc mirrors Arthur's. Like Arthur, he has the ability to remove a

sword in a supernatural test demonstrating his worthiness, but once his status is elevated it leads to a series of tragic events as a result. The Sword-maiden tells Arthur that she is burdened by the sword, and in order for her to be delivered she must find a knight who is "a passyng good man of hys hondys and of hys dedis, and withoute velony other trechory, and withoute treson" (61,35-62.2). Once Balyn proves to fit this criteria, however, his action of killing of the Lady of the Lake leads to a series of events that Balyn believes are just, but have tragic consequences. In this way, Balyn proves he has all the qualities required of a good knight when he pulls the sword out, yet this goodness does not prevent his actions from being damnable in the eyes of God. Merlin, through his supernatural insight, gives readers a look at the seeming divergence between chivalry and religion.

Merlin often evokes God when explaining the punishment for sin. In terms of Balyn, Merlin takes particular issue with the suicide of Launceor's Damsel, Columbe (69.22-5). This reaction is particularly puzzling because Merlin strongly condemns the act, yet does not take issue with the main action, which is Balyn's slaying of Launceor (69.12-6). Balyn's defense of the damsel's suicide certainly seems logical, and he tells Merlin "I myght nat save hir, for she slewe hirselff suddeynly" (72.23-4). Merlin tells Balyn:

> because of the deth of that lady, thou shalt stryke a stroke so dolorous that ever a man stroke, - excepte that of Oure Lorde Jesu Cryste - for thou shalt hurte the trewyst knyght and the man of most worship that now lyvith. And thorow that stroke three kyngdomys shall be brought into grete poverte, miseri, and

> wrestchedness tweleve yere - and a knyght shall nat be hole of that wonde many yerys. (72.25-32)

Merlin is careful to evoke Christ in the midst of a punishment that by any measure is overtly excessive. Not only will Balyn suffer for the damsel's suicide, but three kingdoms will be punished as well. Vinaver notes that "[n]o rational explanation relieves the gloom of Balin's fate" (110). It is very difficult to make adequate sense of a knight "withoute velony other trechory, and withoute treson" being judged as if he was were a villain. As Whetter notes, "Columbe's death, too, is not Balyn's fault, for both Balyn himself and Malory as narrator comment on the speed with which she killed herself" (157). When Columbe does kill herself, we are told that "sorow greved Balyn passyngly sore" (69.26-7), telling us not only was her death unintentional, but that he was emotionally impacted by it. Furthermore, as Whetter notes, Malory alters his sources to indicate that Balyn could not have removed the sword from her hand without hurting her ("Misunderstanding" 157). Taking this into consideration, it is odd for Merlin, or God, to blame Balyn for Columbe's suicide. On one hand, this can be simply looked at as an inherent incompatibility of chivalry and religion, but even in this light it seems severe. It is more likely that Malory is asking us to doubt Merlin's connection to God and instead represents the injustices often brought about by fate.

Malory never tells us Merlin's motive, but there is an almost iniquitous interest by Merlin to make Balyn aware of his punishment for killing Launceor, which leads to Columbe's suicide. Merlin is aware that Columbe's death was unintentional, but passes judgment regardless. Merlin never tells Balyn how to circumvent this punishment, presumably because Merlin understands that destiny is unavoidable. Interestingly, it is

the suicide of Columbe, but not the intentional decapitation of the Lady of the Lake, which creates such a harsh punishment. Merlin is a powerful being, and ultimately an untrustworthy one. If we are to believe that Merlin is detailing an accurate depiction of events that will transpire as a result of Balyn's sin for the damsel's suicide, we must also consider the other possibility that Merlin is displaying a darker side of his dualistic nature and cursing Balyn through his enchantments.

When Balyn encounters a disguised Merlin (73.12-4), Balyn notes that "hit is an evyll sygne that thou arte a trew man, that thou wolt nat telle thy name" (73.19-20). Merlin recognizes that this is an accurate assessment as he says "be as hit be may" (73.21). While this encounter happens an undisclosed amount of time after Merlin tells Balyn his destined punishment, it happens within the same section of the text. Malory incites the reader into acknowledging, or at least considering, that Merlin is ultimately not trustworthy. The reader should, just as Balyn does, note that Merlin is not always "trewe" and we should recognize the "evyll sygne."

In Malory's sources, such as Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, the ability to shape-shift is strictly attributed to his being the son of the devil (Micha 296). Donald Hoffman notes that Merlin's "shape-shifting [is] a talent traditionally possessed by magicians and demons" (20). Hoffman, however, believes that Malory's use of Merlin's shape-shifting does not focus so much on the devilish nature of Merlin, but instead focuses on the indeterminacy that surrounds Merlin (20). Hoffman's perspective of Merlin in the *Morte Darthur* is somewhat anachronistic and ignores the idea that Malory may be writing when there was a tacit belief that shape-shifting would have been believed to be a indication of an evil being. If God represents absolute truth, there is no real way to

reconcile Merlin's supernatural ability to change himself into something he is not, as being anything but diabolical. While Hoffman is correct in his assessment that within the *Morte Darthur* the shape-shifting gives Merlin a greater sense of indeterminacy, the demonic aspects are not as aberrant as Hoffman indicates and should not to be ignored. While not all the characters are aware of Merlin's shape-shifting, Malory's use of this ability demonstrates that Merlin is not trustworthy.

Merlin's disguised encounter with Balyn is not the first time he masquerades in the *Morte Darthur*. Early in the first part of Tale I Merlin comes to Arthur disguised so that he may test Arthur's generosity by asking him for a gift (38.6-12). Later, Merlin again tests Arthur by showing up as a fourteen-year old boy to reveal that Arthur is the son of Uther and Igrayne, however, when Arthur does not believe the boy Merlin shows up as an old man, who Arthur is more willing to believe. Malory tells us that when Merlin came to Arthur as an old man that Arthur was "passynge glad, for he seemed to be ryght wyse" (44.7). Merlin tells Arthur that "the chylde tolde ye trouthe, and more he wolde a tolde you and ye wolde a suffirde hym" (44.14-5). Merlin gives Arthur a lesson in appearances by explaining that the truth would have come to him earlier had he not judged the child's knowledge based on his age. Merlin acknowledges that appearances are deceiving but while letting Arthur in on the secret, still uses his appearances to deceive others, such as Balyn.

Merlin not only uses his shape-shifting powers to deceive, but also for dramatic effect and to give him an air of superiority over regular mortals. When Ulfius first seeks Merlin, Merlin is disguised in beggar's clothes, but then reveals his true identity to Ulfius immediately after Ulfius disregards his presence by informing him that "I knowe whome

thou sekest, for thou sekest Merlyn; therefore seke no ferther, for I am he" (8.18-9). Merlin positions himself so that both his ability to change form, and his precognitive abilities, are readily known before he bargains for custody of the would-be child Arthur. When Merlin does shape-shift it is typically in an unassuming form, such as a beggar or child, and exposes a level of arrogance in others. Hoffman says of Merlin that:

> his disguises allow him to prepare for his own epiphanies and to exercise control over his sudden and arbitrary revelations to create an air of mystery that lends special authority to his announcements and councils (20).

Merlin uses his power to play with the expectations and prejudices of others and then exalt himself through his revelations. While I argue that some aspects of this ability are evil in nature, or that he often uses his powers for good, these terms, at least with regards to Merlin, have little consequence to his character. Merlin exists outside human perspectives of good and evil and plays the role of a temporal force of both natural and supernatural realities. His purpose is to serve Arthur and see that his kingdom succeeds, while paradoxically always knowing that it will ultimately fail. For Merlin, his powers, good or evil, are cosmological terms of difference for what he sees as just a pragmatic means for triumph in the earthly realm.

Merlin's shape-shifting, in regards to Arthur, is therefore complicated and it exposes Merlin's inherent dualism as he uses his craft to exercise Arthur's ability to discern truth from deceit. Hoffman states that:

> the shape-shifting contributes to the sense of Merlin's 'indeterminacy,' making it difficult to define not only his substance,

> but his accidents as well. Arthur is not only not sure of what Merlin is, he cannot even know for certain what he appears to be. As a result, he cannot always know when he has met him, or where he can be found, for his location is as arbitrary as his appearance. He has no clear identity and no fixed address. (21).

Merlin becomes the ever-watching eyes of God when it comes to Arthur. Arthur must always be on his best behaviour; always mindful of his words and actions as he might not ever be aware of where or who Merlin is. While Merlin often undertakes dubious means to achieve earthy goals, for Arthur he is God's ambassador.

Merlin's ability to change form is not restricted to performing this magic on himself for he transforms Uther to appear like Gorlois in Tale I as well. Merlin performs this spell so that Uther is able to trick Igrayne into having intercourse with him (9.7-9). The purpose is more overtly to deceive in a diabolical way. Merlin agrees to using his magic to aid Uther into having intercourse with Igrayne even though at the time the plan is conceived her husband is still alive. While it might be anachronistic to apply the term rape in regards to Uther's actions, even in Malory's time, there is an underlying, if not overt, disturbing nature of the entire event. The conception of Arthur through supernatural and diabolical circumstances evokes the conception of Merlin from Malory's sources. In regards to Uther's rape of Igrayne and the conception of Arthur, Hoffman argues that:

> the trickery, the compounded deceptions, disguised violations, all the machinery required to accomplish the conception of Arthur,

> make Merlin's conception, a simple demonic rape, seem a model of decorum (21).

Corinne Saunders claims that for Malory in the rape of Igrayne "[d]eception and pain are unimportant, justified in the figure of Arthur" (238). However, Malory does not shy away from Arthur's sins and flaws throughout the *Morte Darthur*. In fact Malory goes out of his way to draw attention to these sins such as demonstrated by his inability to pull the sword from the Sword-maiden's scabbard (62.13-4). It is true that perhaps Malory did not view Igrayne's rape the same way a modern audience would; however, he would acknowledge the deceptive, supernatural nature of Arthur's conception. While some may argue that what is an unsavory action or sacrifice meant for a greater significance for the world in the birth of Arthur, Merlin's deceitful nature should eliminate the idea that he works solely on behalf of God in that his behaviour does not have a logical consistency with medieval Christian values. For Merlin, the end justifies the means, and that end is to see to the conception and birth of Arthur so that he can be the King that England needs.

Hoffman says that "Malory, by erasing the story of Merlin's birth, inscribes the riddle of his origin in the margins of his text" (15). We do not learn that he is the devil's son until the very point before Nymue uses his own magic against him to trap him behind a stone. Just as Malory's sources indicate, Merlin being the devil's son does not necessarily indicate that he is an immoral or evil character. It is Merlin's actions that should be judged, and based on his actions alone Merlin remains a dualistic being capable of great feats of heroism or deplorable acts. Merlin's curse is that he is not under an illusion of free will so all of his experiences and actions fall under the will of God where he is simply a passenger through life on earth.

Merlin is a conundrum because he embodies aspects of the devil and a prophet while also being fully human. He is capable of falling into temptation, as he does with Nymue, but is cursed with the foreknowledge of his own failings and his own death. Many of the decisions Arthur makes are under the advice of Merlin, and they all lead down a road that Merlin prognosticates. Furthermore, Merlin uses his prophecy not to change the future but simply to recognize that it is destined, or doomed, to happen. He is cursed with the knowledge of the death of the ones he loves, as well as knowing the "shamefull" manner of his own death but being unable to prevent it. He also knows the shortcomings and ultimate end of a kingdom he desperately tries to build and sustain. Hoffman details Merlin's character and involvement in the *Morte Darthur*:

> Merlin's participation in the deceits of destiny implicate him intimately in both the success and defeat of the Arthurian project. Just as he himself is the product of his father's evil and his mother's good, he is the source of both the creation and collapse of the kingdom. His ambiguous complicity is nowhere clearer than in the consequences of his role in Arthur's conception and the satisfaction of his subsequent desire, to take for himself the unbaptized child begotten on the night of lust, disguise, and death. (24)

While Merlin's intentions are often good, he is capable of committing acts of evil with powers granted to him from being the son of a devil. As Hoffman suggests, his father's evil, and mother's purity, inherently give Merlin an innate dualism that he embodies and accepts.

Merlin's dualism complicates the *Morte Darthur* in that he presents the complex embodiment of Malory's ambivalent message. Merlin's role does not undermine Malory's work, but reinforces Malory's resistance to religious order while still acknowledging its presence and mastery over the fate of his characters. Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, Malory's text wavers between secular and religious, and Merlin is firmly situated within that tenuous relationship.

Chapter Three:
Chivalry and Divinity Through Lancelot

Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* frequently presents conflicting concepts of the compatibility of knighthood and divinity, which leaves the work's overall message ambivalent, reveling in the resistance of competing ideals. Malory's work is representative of a religious society that is engaged in war where bloodshed and battle overshadowed the religious beliefs held by Malory's audience. As Thomas H. Crofts notes, "Malory has undertaken to express, per argumentum, a vision of English history which is both redemptive and damning. The process of de-interlacing the 'good' and 'evyl', then, has something of a divided consciousness" (137). While this dualism is seen throughout the *Morte Darthur*, Malory's characterization of Lancelot embodies this ambivalence on a personal and introspective level as it pertains to knighthood in a manner not as apparent in other characters. Derek Brewer says that for Malory's version of Lancelot, "supremacy among earthly sinful men is insisted upon as much as his sinfulness" (48). Lancelot is a knight caught between heaven and earth attempting to achieve greatness by the measures of both, but whose failures document the incompatibility of ideas.

While Malory exalts Lancelot in a position of chivalric excellence, he was no doubt compelled to explore the balance of chivalric identity with Christian living. The necessity for a comprehensive and inclusive narrative of chivalric and religious values was in part due to the time in which the *Morte Darthur* was written, but also because it was an important narrative within Malory's sources. Mary Hynes-Berry aptly notes that:

> the French romance emphasizes the allegorical center by setting up a dialectic between earthly and heavenly chivalry. While we may better understand what it means to search for celestial glory by an analogy with the search for earthly glory, we also are made to understand the two kinds of glory are profoundly incompatible. (244)

Malory, on the other hand, aims to reconcile secular and religious values and in doing so creates an ambivalent work that ultimately exhibits the incompatibility of these ideas. The struggle between earthly and heavenly chivalry plays far more like a dialectic between competing ideas, where they are often contrasted but the significance of both ideas oscillate.

While there is a consistent message of religious importance throughout the *Morte Darthur*, a secular reading of the text is evidenced by Malory's extolling of chivalric values over religious values. Malory's efforts to reconcile the secular and religious values are undermined by his focus on chivalry and continued reverence for earthly values by the end of the work. As K.S. Whetter notes, "Malory's juxtaposition of Christian and secular values continually valorizes rather than condemns earthly chivalry" (“Secular Arthuriad” 159). It is hard to deny that Malory's reverence for chivalry is present; however, he also does not ignore the consequences of earthy living from a religious standpoint. Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, Malory is inconsistent and capricious with regard to what constitutes sin. The world in which the *Morte Darthur* takes place has religious rules that favour earthly chivalry, while still not fully neglecting religious sentiment. A secular reading of the text, by some margin, uses the same evidence to argue

that Malory's message was largely ambivalent towards religion. This sentiment of conflicting ideas regarding knightly chivalry is most apparent in Lancelot, especially in the latter tales of the *Morte Darthur*. As Barbara Newman notes, "Malory creates a highly attractive Lancelot yet morally ambiguous Lancelot, whose character and rhetoric virtually demand double judgment" (93). Perhaps the reason the secular reading of the *Morte Darthur* works is because a reading of the text having an ambivalent attitude toward secular and religious values demonstrates that these ideas are ultimately incompatible. While this is not the consideration necessarily being made by those critics approaching the *Morte Darthur* as a secular work, the argument does not outright negate a more ambivalent reading. As much as Malory appears to be trying to reconcile these competing ideas, his efforts toward a consistent world view are tumultuous. In short, while Malory's erratic account of values indicates an uncertain attitude toward religious and secular values, it is his ostensibly earnest endeavour at placing value on religion that sustains this ambivalence.

Catherine Batt notes that "Lancelot is famously caught between different registers of earthly and divine chivalry, his own confusion and uncertainty mirroring the text's vagaries" (135). The "vagaries" Batt refers to come from Malory's unwillingness to explore the spiritual aspects of piety while praising in detail the more secular aspects of chivalry. Within the *Morte Darthur* there does seem to be a sincere attempt by Malory to make Lancelot's arc a religious one, but ultimately he is always an "erthly" knight, even in his eventual redemption.

Lancelot is shown to be a knight of great character, honour, and chivalry. He is as adored by women as he is revered by men. Lancelot, in terms of earthly values, achieves

everything a knight could strive for. However, Malory holds Lancelot up as a divided character who often demonstrates the fallibility of mankind along with the ability for redemption. Lancelot embodies knighthood in all its facets, however, when it comes to him being the best knight, the damsel tells him he is the best "of ony synful man of the world." The damsel precedes this by telling Lancelot "ye were thys day in the morne the best knyght of the worlde. But who sholde sey so now, he sholde be a lyer, for there ys now one bettir than ye be" (863.20-3). The knight who surpasses Lancelot is his son, Galahad. Galahad is every bit the chivalric knight that Lancelot is, yet we are told that he, and not Lancelot, is the perfect knight. This is problematic at this point in Malory's story because Lancelot displays all of the values thought to be important to men and God, but falls short of achieving the grail because of his sins. This upstaging by Galahad underlines the principle dissatisfaction with chivalry. Lancelot, like Arthur, upholds all the values important to his role in the realm but eventually fails in the eyes of God. Lancelot, above all other characters within the *Morte Darthur,* exemplifies Malory's affinity for secular earthly values over religious values for the very fact that Lancelot consistently chooses earthly values over religious values.

It is important to establish that Malory was not merely retelling the story of Lancelot as provided by his sources. Many aspects throughout the *Morte Darthur* are creations of Malory, and even in the more faithful tales Malory colours the text with his own interpretation and artistic design. Larry D. Benson asserts that "the tales within the *Morte Darthur* are largely Malory's own inventions - for which he must receive the blame and the artistic credit" (66). So while the story is a familiar one, Malory delivers a perspective that is wholly his own and deviates from his sources not so much in the story,

but the ideas it presents. Dorsey Armstrong states that "[m]any of Malory's sources - including the Prose *Lancelot* and, and of course, the *Queste del Saint Graal* - specifically describe the knight's foremost duty as protection of Holy Church" (109). Malory's story, on the other hand, is more secular than his sources which may reflect a growing discontent with the Church in Pre-Reformation fifteenth-century England. Perhaps this secularization and ambivalent view of the legend is more reflective of Malory's own closely held beliefs and not a part of an elusive public consciousness, but I only intend to indicate that it is there and the manner in which it exists. For instance, F. Whitehead notes that one of Malory's sources, the *Mort Artu,* "has a religious message [:] . . . in a world of mutability, where prosperity, happiness, and human life are mere incidents in the downward rush of things, there is no trust to trust in, save in penance for past sin and mortifications that may open the gates of Heaven. Malory [however,] perverts this message" (113). Essentially, Malory's tale is one in which chivalric values hold prominence over heavenly values in spite of acknowledging their existence within the tale.

Malory writes about the aspects of chivalry and knighthood with a religious fervor that indicates a foremost significance for the spiritual aspects of a worldly life. Complicating the issue, however, is Malory's apparent passion for chivalry. At the same time Malory infuses his narrative with so many mentions of religion that a religious reading of the text is possible, albeit not wholly convincing. For instance, we are initially told that Lancelot was the “hede of al Crysten knyghts” (1259.9-10). Lancelot is established as not only being the best knight, but the head of all Christian knights. The consistent parallel between chivalry and religion is established in regard to Lancelot, but

that parallel draws attention to the incompatibility of the two ways of living. Malory recognizes the parallel, but fails to demonstrate a solution to the incompatibility within the narrative. Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, external forces are earthly and are best dealt with through violent force; internal conflicts, on the other hand, are never fully resolved yet present philosophical and theological questions.

When we are introduced to Lancelot in "A Noble Tale of Launcelot du Lake" Malory makes it clear that he is the greatest of all the knights and favoured above all other knights by the King and Queen. Malory writes:

> But in especiall hit was prevyd on sir Launcelot de Lake, for in all turnementes, justys, and dedys of armys, both for lyff and deth, he passed all other knyghtes, and at no tyme was he ovircom but yf hit were by treson other inchauntement. So this sir Launcelot encresed so mervaylously in worship and honoure; therefore he is the fyrste knyght that the Freynsh booke makyth mencion of aftir kynge Arthure com frome Rome. Wherefore quene Gwenyvere had hym in grete favoure aboven all other knyghtis, and so he loved the quene agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys and saved her from the fyre thorow his noble chevalry. (253.8-19)

Malory sets up Lancelot to be the ideal knight in all aspects of chivalry. Benson notes that Malory invents "The Tale of Sir Lancelot" in order to "raise him from the relative minor role . . . and establish him as the greatest of knights and the best of lovers, the model which all others will be judged" (81). L. Benson's use of "invention" is misleading,

because Malory did borrow several episodes or adventures from pre-existing tales, but the overall arrangement and the resulting story are Malory's creation. This becomes problematic later in the *Morte Darthur* when we see that in spite of all of Lancelot's triumphs and testaments of nobility he still falls short in the eyes of God. Malory exalts Lancelot to be the greatest of knights, the envy of men, and the desire of damsels, and the text often does little to condemn any of his actions regardless of his sins. With Lancelot, Malory demonstrates his struggle to denounce spectacular actions as something terrible in a religious sense, but at the same time showing the religious consequences of earthly living.

In addition to establishing Sir Lancelot as the greatest knight in "A Noble Tale of Launcelot du Lake," Malory also establishes religious rules for knights, which in turn foreshadows Lancelot's fall due to sin. When Lancelot accepts the quest to pursue Sir Perys de Foreste Savage, the damsel tells Lancelot that "at thys tyme, but almghyty Jesu preserve you wheresomever ye ryde or goo, for the curteyst knyght thou arte" (270.15-7). It is understood that Lancelot's deeds and character will result in God's protection. She then informs Lancelot that there are rumours of his involvement with Gwenivere, including that Gwenivere put an "enchauntment" on him so that he will never be with another woman but her (270.22-7). The "enchauntment" presumably indicates that the rumors suggest there is such a bond between Gwenivere and Lancelot that enchantments must be involved, or perhaps that Lancelot is such a true knight that he could not succumb to the sin of adultery without the aid of evil magic. Either way, the damsel's insistence that enchantments are involved suggest that there is a sinister, unholy relationship in the eyes of God.

It is Lancelot's response to the damsel's allegations that foreshadow his life as a knight and what will be his failure to the sin of adultery. Firstly, Lancelot does not outright denounce the allegations, nor does he deny them. Lancelot tells the damsel "I may nat warne peple to speke of me what hit pleasyth hem" (270.28-9). Lancelot follows this up with a philosophy regarding love and lechery not being compatible with chivalry. He states:

> to be a weddyd man, I think hit nat, for than I muste couche with hir and leve armys and turnementis , batellys and adventures. And as for to sey to take my pleassure with paramours, that woll I refuse - in prencipall for drede of God, for knights that bene adventures sholde nat be advoutrers nothir lecherous, for than they be nat happy nother fortunate unto the werrys; for other they shall be overcomwith a sympler knyght than they be hemself. (270.29-37)

Lancelot's response to the damsel does not deny his relationship with Gwenivere but outlines the dangers of knights who engage in a sexual relationship. Brewer notes that "Lancelot does not precisely deny his relationship with Guinivere, but repudiates for himself both marriage and promiscuous affairs. His relationship with Guinivere comes into neither category" (20). Interestingly, Lancelot exhibits a disdain for marriage and indicates that the union would prevent him from living the lifestyle of a knight. For Lancelot, being a true knight seeking quests and competing in tournaments will always be more important than a marriage with a woman, which is seen as a holy sacrament. However, he also goes into great detail about the dangers of having a paramour, and

admits the religious implications of having such "for drede of God" (270.33-4). It is a trite response and explains that having a paramour has a negative effect on being a knight. Lancelot gives greater explanation to how having a lover diminishes his prowess and ability in battle, which is his more honest concern, particularly with the reader knowing that the love affair with Gwenivere was likely happening.

Altogether there are five references to the relationship of Lancelot and Gwenivere within "The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot" (Lumiansky 92). While the tale is largely to establish Lancelot as the best knight, it also cements the Gwenivere-Lancelot relationship's importance. R.M. Lumiansky states that throughout the tale there is:

> an intentional pattern of progressive development for this adulterous relationship through the book as a whole [but] the function of the references in the third 'Tale' to the Lancelot-Gwenivere relationship is to show the two characters, in their own minds and in the minds of society at large, drawing more closely together in preparation for adultery." ("The Tale of Lancelot" 96)

For Malory, the relationship between Gwenivere and Lancelot is not condemnable in itself. The lack of judgment regarding the affair indicates a sophistication of Malory's writing in that he presents an empathetic and understandable situation between two people in love who must overcome their station in life to act on that love. Corey Olsen notes that:

> Malory makes no apology for Lancelot and Gwenivere's adultery; it is a sin, a crime, and a major contributor to the collapse of the court. However, Malory also never allows his narrative to

> condemn Lancelot and Gwenivere as people. Their actions may be wrong, but they, and even their love, are "trew" and "vertuouse." Malory is attempting to condemn the sin while still asserting the basic goodness and nobility of these particular sinners. (41)

Malory does little to remind readers that this is a sexual relationship. Of course, it is presumed to be a sexual affair by all accounts, but whereas Malory's sources explicitly acknowledge intercourse between the two lovers, Malory omits any specificity regarding the act (Brewer 20). By avoiding any explicit mention of intercourse Malory indicates the desire to only focus on Lancelot's character in terms of his worldly achievements. Lancelot's deeds are exemplified through his prowess as a lover and a knight, all the while accepting his love of Gwenivere as being virtuous despite the circumstances.

For Malory, Lancelot's greatest attribute is martial prowess as a knight. Within romance literature, tournaments were displays of chivalric values that epitomized the greatest aspects of knightly identity. Benson writes that "the great medieval tournament, with its knights in shining plate, its colorful lists and pavilions, and its throngs of heralds, minstrels, and brightly clad ladies, provides the popular imagination with its most vivid image of knighthood" (1). Andrew Lynch says that "Malory's highest conception of knighthood still involves making a good impression on powerful judges" (54). Tournaments provide the best stage for characters to display their prowess as knights, both within the text, and to the reader. The pageantry of tournaments for Malory, and his audience, was something that glorified chivalry in terms of both its extravagance and brutality. Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, Malory uses tournaments to demonstrate how Lancelot is above all other knights. Through mutual combat with agreed rules provided

by tournaments, Malory lets the audience know there is no doubt who the best knight is. Malory's insistence and frequency of tournaments throughout the *Morte Darthur* does, however, demonstrate an adoration and predilection toward secular, earthly values over the heavenly values which ultimately dictate the fates of our heroes.

With regards to how the Church viewed tournaments in the early medieval period, Benson states, tournaments were "crude and bloody affairs forbidden by the church and sternly oppressed by any central authority powerful enough to enforce its ban" (1). Richard W. Kaeuper notes that:

> clerical opposition is . . . a well-established historical fact; the clerks had loathed and challenged tournament from the time they became aware of its existence as a form of mock warfare dangerous to its participants and so often to others who simply happened to be in the way of wide-ranging fighting. (66-7)

By Malory's time, tournaments had far more rules and were conducted in a more orderly fashion, but they solely existed as a method to uphold and display chivalric values. Benson further writes that "the sport began to be regarded as an essential activity of those who aspired to knightly virtue" (24). There is an inherent incompatibility between the violent aspects of tournaments and warfare with Christianity and divine worship. It is an incapability that Malory seems to be both mystified and enamored with. The violence and the manner in which it tempers reputations is something that Malory spends a copious amount of description on and relishes in the gritty details of battle. P.E. Tucker notes that Malory describes "single combat and tournaments in language more vigorous than that of

his sources, sometimes adding details, and he takes special interest in the technique of fighting" (65).

It is difficult to deny that throughout much of the *Morte Darthur*, Malory places a greater emphasis on earthy values overly heavenly values. This is not to say the *Morte Darthur* indicates earthly values hold greater importance, only that they are more significant in how characters are perceived. For instance, Malory indicates that ultimately heavenly values are paramount as evidenced by the fates of Arthur, Merlin, and Lancelot who all achieve great feats throughout their lives amongst men, but all succumb to dismal fates due to their sins. In short, all the characters in the *Morte Darthur* are held to a sort of religious account as sin is always punished. There is an inherent frustration throughout the text that acknowledges an incompatibility of earthly values and heavenly values, but Malory refuses to successfully separate them. To be clear, this is not a failure on Malory's part, but simply an aspect of his own creative style representing public ambivalence toward earthly daily living and cosmological principles. In other words, Malory's ambivalence toward secular and religious values is perhaps situated in the tacit beliefs, and perhaps private doubts, held by many in any religious society, let alone Medieval English society.

One of the key concepts of chivalric values is fellowship, and Malory places an even greater emphasis on fellowship than his sources. Elizabeth Archibald notes that Malory's use of the word "'felyshyp' in its double sense of the bond between members of the Round Table as well as the friendship between individual knights assumes greater importance in Malory than 'compaignie' in his French sources, and that the use of the single word for both ideals means that it acquires an increasing resonance" (317).

Fellowship is important to note because there is an arc of reverence for Lancelot amongst other knights within the *Morte Darthur*. Galahad eventually does prove his abilities as a knight and even disarms Lancelot and Perceval to cement his status as the best knight (892-3). The concept of fellowship in the *Morte Darthur* is embodied most of all in the round table. The Round Table is the symbol of unification and brotherhood, and in "The Noble Tale of the Sankgrael," the Round Table becomes a platform for chivalric heroes to use their knightly prowess to try and achieve spiritual goals in addition to earthly reputation.

With regard to the "The Noble Tale of the "Sankgreal," Malory's version of the Arthurian mythos becomes increasingly religious, but it is so infused with secular values that it further complicates interpretation. Charles Whitworth notes that "the Grail Quest is for Malory a chivalric quest as well as a spiritual one; that the sacred and the secular aspects of it are not mutually exclusive, and that the two were fused in Malory's conception of ideal knighthood" (20). On one hand, Lancelot is required to acknowledge his sins and lacks the spiritual requirements to achieve the Grail; however, on the other hand, the text praises, and does not condemn, chivalry. Regarding the "Sankgreal," Newman writes:

> Knights, tournaments, adventures, and all the normal trappings of romance are used to overturn the values we associate with the genre, promoting instead an ethos of ascetic chastity, humility, penance, and restraint in chivalric violence. Malory's values are neither so delicately hidden as Chrétien's nor clear and

> unambiguous as the *Queste* author's. Rather, they are intensely ambivalent. (107)

Malory's ambivalent version of the "Sankgreal " is a product of his secularization of the text. Amidst all the chivalric details, though, Malory does incorporate an earnest attempt to glorify the holy. One way he does this is by introducing Galahad as Lancelot's successor and the one who is able to achieve the Grail due to his divine nature.

Throughout the quest for the grail, no one is able to defeat Galahad; however, his knightly prowess is often in relation to his divinity whereas with Lancelot it is solely his worldly reputation. Malory notes that Galahad is the "servaunte of Jesu Crist" (882.10). Whitworth states that Malory "is much more specific in citing Galahad's pedigree than the authors of the French book were. In the latter there is no mention of his descent from Jesus Christ, nor any religious allusion at all, only that Galahad is descended from the best knights the world has known" (22). Whitworth explains this by arguing against the idea that Malory secularized the *Morte Darthur*; however, this explanation really highlights his ambivalence in regard to the secular and religious. The religious aspects of this ambivalence will in turn later be undermined in "The Tale of Lancelot and Gwenivere."

The introduction of Galahad presents an idyllic version of Lancelot in that he has all the characteristics of Lancelot, but lacks his sin. In fact, we are told that "he was so named Galahad bycause Sir Launcelot was so named at the fountayn stone" (796.30-2). By being given Lancelot's name at Baptism, there is an expectation that Galahad is symbolically a rebirth of Lancelot, but a newer even better version that can escape the flaws of his father. Galahad is every bit the knight that Lancelot is, and Galahad even has

Lancelot's likeness (862.1). Galahad demonstrates that chivalry is compatible with spirituality, however, the only distinguishing difference between the two knights is Lancelot's adulterous relationship with Gwenivere. Moorman notes that compared to Malory's sources, he "elevates and dehumanizes" Galahad, thus removing any of the complexities of character that may have been present and portraying Galahad simply as an unachievable standard in spirituality (196). Galahad's function is to reposition Lancelot temporarily as he is no longer the best knight (Scala 391). For Malory, Galahad exists as the embodiment of what Lancelot could be as he is every bit the fighter, yet Galahad lacks charisma as a courtly lover. Whitworth aptly states that "It is generally agreed that Galahad is a bloodless, two-dimensional figure, come, Messiah-like, to accomplish the one otherworldly mission for which he was predestined" (20). He is everything a holy knight should be, but is wholly uninteresting and lacks the capacity for earthly worship only Lancelot can achieve. For Malory, as much as Galahad is a foil to enunciate Lancelot's faults, he also underlines Lancelot's magnetism as a chivalric hero.

While Lancelot is unable completely to live up to Galahad's virtue, Malory, by avoiding a sense of human characteristics and flaws, makes Galahad's piety appear wholly unachievable by any knight. Thus, if Lancelot cannot achieve Galahad's pure stature, then it is unachievable by anyone else. It would appear that Galahad's presence in the *Morte Darthur* indicates a conviction toward the divine, however, as Whetter notes, "Galahad's opposition to secular and celestial living in no way represents the majority of Malory's characters" (160). Galahad is an anomaly that Malory presents as an enigmatic presence within the book, and not a model of earthly living. Furthermore, as Moorman explains, Malory "uses Galahad only as a supernatural object lesson in heavenly

chivalry" (196-197). Galahad is a Christ-like figure who is altogether pure and devoid of sin whose disposition should be strived for, but is ultimately unobtainable through religious or chivalric means.

While Galahad is an immeasurably holy figure he embarks on a quest that is as much an earthly as it is divine. While the grail is a divine object it must be achieved through earthly means. Armstrong notes that:

> Galahad seems to succeed because of his chastity, reluctance to kill, and all-around spiritual perfection - qualities relatively low on the list of desirable knight attributes elsewhere in Malory's text - but his participation is impossible unless he leaves the spiritual place of the convent and *becomes* a knight; holy as the grail is, it is not hermits, monks, or priests who are charged to seek it, but rather, the agents of the secular community are given the task. (118)

To support Armstrong's point, the grail quest is very much one which necessitates the knightly prowess which Malory places prominence on throughout the text. Galahad is Malory's greatest attempt at embodying perfection in a knight, thus demonstrating secular and religious ambivalence when compared to Malory's reverence for chivalric heroism. Galahad is both fully the perfect knight, and possesses a near perfect soul.

The concepts of earthly worship and predestination are problematic for Malory, as evidenced within the "The Noble Tale of the Sankgreal." We bore witness to this with regards to Merlin and Arthur in previous chapters, and now with Galahad and Lancelot. Galahad's destiny is already forged by God, as is Lancelot's sin. As noted in previous

chapters, our heroes' fates are already determined, which paradoxically creates disconnect from individual sin through freewill and the human capacity for living a pious life. Before Galahad is born there is prophecy regarding his virtue and it is told that he will achieve the Grail. The prophecy states that "this chylde, Sir Galahad, shall sytte in the Syege Perelous and enchyve the Sankgreall" (798.25-7). For Lancelot, we know that he will ultimately fail in his quest to achieve the Grail, but we are also told that he will die a holy man. The hermit, Nacien, explains to Gawain that Lancelot will "dye ryhgt and holy man, and no doute he hath no felow of none erthly synful man lyvyng" (948.28-9). It immediately seems contradictory to condemn Lancelot for his sin, then proclaim he will become a "holy man," which seems to indicate Malory's insistence that Lancelot's sins be further diluted and overlooked. This also gives readers an apathetic attitude towards the actions of our heroes as their path is already established, which alleviates the blame for sin. Malory is careful to mention prophecy, often regarding his heroes within the framework of sin or righteousness, which lends to the idea that prophecy indicates a providence over Camelot.

Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, a common theme is that heroes are not in control over their destinies, and must cede themselves to fate in the name of adventure. Jill Mann notes that "[t]he knight who undertakes an adventure submits to chance, in order to discover what chance has allotted him" (79). For Malory knights are subject to God and fate, thus making their punishment unfair in its unavoidability. However, in documenting this paradox Malory is also documenting knights' willingness, by necessity, to submit to whatever outcome destiny presents. Mann states that for Malory:

> [t]he knight does not try to close the distance between himself and events by fitting them to himself, mastering them so that they become a mere expression of himself; instead he achieves union with them by matching himself to them, by taking into himself, accepting without understanding, their mysterious inevitability and his enigmatic responsibility for them. (90)

In relation to chivalric adventure, there is a problematic aspect in regard to sin and punishment with Malory that often presents itself in apparent frustration, or more often apathy. A knight must submit himself to whatever powers control adventure, however this concept is fundamentally incompatible with the idea that Malory's heroes are accountable for their actions. Malory's ambivalent worldview embraces this uncertainty where he invites the reader to explore this paradox, even if his knights do not.

When Galahad comes into Arthur's court, he is led to the Siege Perilous where the engraved text is revealed to read "Thys ys the syege of Sir Galahad, the hawte prynce" (860.11). The engraving, like many of the miracles within the *Morte Darthur*, is signified by miraculous text. To further cement Galahad's divine nature, his ability to sit in the Siege Perilous without succumbing to harm is immediately noted by others. This is the event that convinces the people that Galahad will be the one who achieves the grail. Malory tells us that they all said "thys ys he by whom the Sankgraell shall be encheved, for there sate never none byt he there but he were myscheved" (861.11-2). This statement indicates that others have tried to sit in the Siege Perilous and died as a result. With this miracle, Galahad surpasses Lancelot in reputation without first proving his chivalric and martial status in the same manner which Lancelot has previously followed.

While Galahad succeeds in achieving the grail he is able to do so in spite of his earthly life; however, once he is finished the quest he chooses to leave the world through death. Michael Wenthe says that "Galahad understands that a different life awaits him in the-world-to-come, and his certain knowledge thereof is one of many tokens that show him to be unlike the rest of the knights of the Round Table" (132). This harkens back to the concept of Galahad as a Christ-like figure sent to live amongst men to complete his divine mission, or as he is often referred to as the "servanunt of Jesu Cryst." When Galahad is introduced it is implied he is not of this earth, whereas Lancelot is frequently referred to as an "erthly knyght" [1] By using the qualifier "erthly" to describe Lancelot, Malory is essentially removing blame from Lancelot in spite of his sin because like the rest of humanity, he is a product of the world he is from, unlike Galahad.

While Galahad is present amongst the knights of the Round Table and serves as a model of perfection, he is unlike them in origin. Galahad is not of this world, readily denounces the world, and seeks to leave it once his quest is complete. Once Galahad succeeds in his quest for the grail, "Galahad felle on hys kneys and prayde longe tyme to oure Lorde, that at what tyme he asked, he myght passe out of thys worlde" (1032.10-2). For Galahad, earthly praise is a consequence of his abilities and character, not something he desires. His mission to achieve the grail is done in the name of God, whereas Lancelot, by comparison, is never able fully to shed his earthly ambitions. Galahad's complete rejection of the world to the point he prays for the option to receive death is the ultimate demonstration of denouncing earthly values. Other knights are not capable of this.

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[1] Stephen H. A. Shepherd notes that Galahad claiming that his name "ys nat for the to know, nother none erthley man," implied that Galahad is not of this earth. (Shepherd, ed., *Le Morte Darthur* 507.1-2 n. 6)

When Galahad does ask to be taken to heaven, he says he "wold nat lyve in this wrecched world no lenger," which indicates a complete disdain for the world whose values are celebrated by the rest of the characters in the *Morte Darthur*. His last words to Bors are "salew me onto my lorde Lancelot, my fadir, and as a sonne onto hym, bydde hym remembir of this worlde unstable" (1035.10-2). C.S. Lewis notes that Galahad's final words to Lancelot "are full of knightly courtesy, filial duty, and Chistian charity, but of course they are a warning and (by delicatest implication) a reproof" (17). While there is a genuine warning for Lancelot, Galahad indicates Lancelot's key fault, which ties him to an earthly code of knighthood. Using his last words to remind Lancelot of the instability of the world reminds us that this tale is ultimately a spiritual journey for Lancelot, and it reminds us of Lancelot's fundamental flaw as the hermit explained to Gawain previously that Lancelot would have achieved the grail himself but for "hys thought and hys unstablenesse" (948.27). His "thought" relates to his motivations, which is being with the queen, and his "unstablenesses" corresponds to his earthly adoration.

Raluca L. Radulescu highlights this in saying that:

> Lancelot is unstable; this is his flaw, his weakness, which draws him closer to the reader. The reader understands that outside the quest Lancelot has to face the social consequences of his faults (disloyalty to his lord, breaking the Round Table code), but when on the quest, however, he needs to turn his attention to God and spiritual values. (101)

Lancelot, like the earth, is unstable, which throws into question his promise to God, which also throws into question whether the "Sankgreal" is a religious re-establishing of

chivalric values as Vinaver argues. Vinaver believes that with the “Sankgreal” Malory “cut out the theological arguments from [his sources and therefore] unwittingly, reasserted the ideals of earthly chivalry” (78). However, while Malory’s version of the “Sankgreal” does not accentuate religion, this does not dismiss the idea that Malory genuinely attempted to reconcile religion with chivalry on his own terms. This form of mixed meaning is indicative of an ambivalent reading of the *Morte Darthur*.

The explicit message of the tale is that one should forgo earthly worship in order truly to become holy. However, the hermit tells Lancelot that he "ought to thanke God more than ony knyght lyvynge" (896.29-30). The implications of this statement are, at least according to the hermit, that Lancelot's earthly worship is a part of God's plan. The hermit further explains:

> youre presumcion to take uppon you in dedely synne for to be in Hys presence where Hys fleyssh and Hys blood was, which caused you ye myght nat se hyt with youre worldly yen: for He woll nat appere where such synners bene, but if hit be unto their shame. (896.32-897.1)

Malory uses the hermit's speech to explain the ambivalent nature of chivalry and divinity. Within Malory's world of chivalry, a knight can only achieve earthly worship through the power of God. The earthly focus of Lancelot is not only excused, but explained as a product of God's will.

According to Malory, the sin which Lancelot commits is isolated to not putting God first. In his conversation with the hermit, Lancelot confesses:

> all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste party was for the quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batalye were hit ryght other wronge. And never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wynne worship and to cause me to bettir to be beloved, and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit. (897.17-22)

In this manner Malory differs from his sources and identifies Lancelot's sin as his lack of focus on God and not related to any of his actions. Hynes-Berry states that:

> The French romance emphasizes the allegorical center by setting up a dialectic between earthly and heavenly chivalry. While we may better understand what it means to search for celestial glory by an analogy with the search for earthly glory, we also are made to understand the two kinds of glory are profoundly incompatible. (248)

Malory, in the "Sankgreal," acknowledges the incompatibility of heavenly and earthly values by confusing them. The act of adultery in and of itself, or living a life of earthly chivalry, is never indicated as being sinful. Lancelot is deemed sinful because of his motives in pursuing the chivalric lifestyle. As Brewer indicates, "it is well known that in Malory's French source Lancelot is remorselessly attacked for his sinful love of the Queen;" however, in the *Morte Darthur* this act of love is not condemned, only Lancelot's veneration of Gwenivere (23). Radulescu argues that this view is most evident in Lancelot's confession to the hermit. Radulescu notes:

> Lancelot [. . .] knows when to ask for forgiveness; he admits that he put his love for his earthly lady before his duty to God, for he not only loved Guenevere "unmesurabely and oute of mesure longe", but he also undertook battles for her sake, for "bettir to be beloved, and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit" (897.15-22). Thus Malory's Lancelot shows he is aware of the proper order of his duties (first to God, then to his lady). However, the hermit who listens to his confession does not discuss Lancelot's sin of adultery first, but instead draws attention to the greater sin of neglecting one's Christian duty, in particular not using God-given talents in a humble and adequately grateful way. In the hermit's words, Lancelot 'ought to thanke God more than ony knyght lyvyng, for He hath caused you to have more worldly worship than ony knyght that ys now lyvynge" (896.29-31). (97-8)

In short, both Lancelot and the Hermit focus on Lancelot's sin of putting Gwenivere before God. Not only does Lancelot love of her more, but she is his motivation for his chivalric heroism. Given that Lancelot's talents are attributed to God, he should be using them for God. Therefore, it is idolatry that is Lancelot's sin, and not adultery.

While the "Sankgreal" is often seen as the tale in which Malory stays closest to his source material, many of its deviations underline the ambivalent and wavering message of the text. Batt notes that although the tale is largely faithful to the sources, "pressures from both the Arthuriad and from aspects of fifteenth-century attitudes to religious belief, with which the narrative intermittently intersects, make the *Sankreal* very

different from [Malory's] sourc[ing]" (133). The Sankgreal is perhaps Malory's most difficult work within the whole as it is tonally more religious than the preceding tales, and is undermined by the tales that come after. However, there is an overall ambivalence in its secularization of religious ideals, and vice versa.

Scala explains that the "Tale of Lancelot and Gwenivere" "marks the transition from the perfection achieved in the quest of the Grail to the imminent fall of the civilization Lancelot represents with an ambivalence about his hero that conditions our response to him" (390). The "Tale of Lancelot and Gwenivere" attempts to redeem Lancelot's martial status as the best knight of the world, and excuse the relationship of knight and queen. While Lancelot breaks his vow to never again put Gwenivere before God it demonstrates a greater attempt by Malory to put secular chivalric values before religion. We are told that:

> Launcelot began to resorte unto Quene Gwenivere agayne, and forgate the promyse and the profeccion he made in the queste[:] . . . had nat sir Launcelot bene in his prevy thoughtes and in hys myndis so sette in-wardly to the quene as he was in semynge outewarde to God, there had no knyght passed hym in the queste of the Sankgreall. (1045.10-6)

This passage also evokes Lancelot's promise to never again put the queen before God, while at the same time Malory reminds us that had Lancelot not put the queen before God, there would have been no knight that would have surpassed him in the grail quest. This passage sets the framework for what is Malory's redemption of Lancelot, which is solely based on his chivalric code and his earthly deeds, which undermine Lancelot's

spiritual arc in the "Grail Quest." Scala explains that "by framing Lancelot's return to Guinevere in terms of the Grail he could have achieved had he only set his mind on God as his private thoughts had been set on her Malory circumscribes Lancelot's failure by his potential success" (390). Lancelot's actions, and adultery with Gwenivere, are never as condemnable as his internal thoughts, as they are what dictate either his piety or sinfulness. For Lancelot, his sin is putting Gwenivere before God. Nigel Saul notes that "the perfect knight should be humble and pious. He should ascribe his achievements to the grace of God and the Virgin Mary, trusting not in his own strength as Samson did" (201). Thus, becoming the perfect knight is impossible for Lancelot as long as he reveres Gwenivere more than God, and this is the chief obstacle he faces. For Lancelot, his spiritual journey is internal and psychological, which shows that Malory evolves his view of sinfulness from that depicted in Tale I with Arthur. With Arthur, his sins are judged by his actions, not the intent, as we witnessed in his unwitting incest with Morgause.

Malory certainly shows Lancelot in a better light than his sources and it is apparent that Malory made sure his audience understood that Lancelot was still not lacking in his knightly abilities. Whitworth notes that Malory "could not diverge so radically from the received version as to allow Lancelot to succeed in the Quest, [but] he at least took pains to show that Lancelot's failure is not due to any shortcomings he may have in the way of chivalry or prowess" (19). Lancelot is the embodiment of Malory's struggle in reconciling secular and religious values within the *Morte Darthur*. The fact he is not altogether successful in that reconciliation demonstrates how secular values inherently undermine religious values by linking them at all.

"The Healing of Sir Urry," an original tale by Malory, helps him attempt to reconcile earthly worship and heavenly chivalric values. At the beginning of the episode we are told that Sir Urry can only be healed by "the beste knyght of the worlde" (1145.19-20). As Galahad is raptured into Heaven, this title is now reserved once again for Lancelot. Lancelot is the best knight, and the assertion of the caveat "worlde" indicates that earthly values once again have significance for Lancelot. Thematically, this change of values is problematic as it undermines the spiritual quest Lancelot undertook and almost achieved, ultimately failing, in the "Sankgreal." Lumiansky claims that the idea "that Lancelot is able to heal Urry, despite the recommenced adultery, is understandable with Malory's definition of 'the beste knyght of the worlde'" (231). For Lumiansky, the Grail quest and the healing of Sir Urry offer opposing qualifications, and that even in the Grail quest Lancelot would have been fit to heal Urry . The Grail Quest was a divine one, and not a test of earthly prowess as is required to heal Sir Urry. However, as Stephen C. B. Atkinson notes:

> The title "beste knyght of the worlde" was clearly Lancelot's alone through the end of Malory's fifth tale, but at the beginning of "The Tale of the Sankgreall" Lancelot voluntarily abandoned his claim to it. He refused to touch the sword in the floating stone, whose inscribed message announced that it was to hang by the side of the world's best knight. (342)

The healing of Sir Urry illustrates that the unachievable ideal embodied by Galahad does not undermine Lancelot's ability as the best knight, but this in turn undermines the significance of the Grail Quest in terms of a spiritual pursuit.

It is important to note that when Sir Urry is healed the court rejoices and Lancelot breaks down into tears (1152.35-6). The motives for the tears are never explicit, but the connotation leads us to believe it is a cry of relief at having achieved what he failed in the Grail Quest. While the quest to heal Sir Urry is one that measures earthly chivalry, it is a quest that requires a miracle, thereby signifying Malory's attempts to merge competing ideals.

Malory avoids placing blame on either Lancelot or Gwenivere for their love's tragic ending. Mark Lambert notes that "for Malory . . . Lancelot's tragedy is not so much the tragedy of having caused as having failed to prevent disaster" (854). Lambert is reinforcing the notion that Lancelot's failures are difficult to condemn because given his circumstances they are reasonable offenses, and given his character, we can trust he is acting as a "trew" knight. While he is the best knight, he is still an earthly knight. Malory's Lancelot is emphasizing that the greatest knights are subject to the injustices set by the world, very much how he may have seen himself while writing the *Morte Darthur* in prison.

It is abundantly clear that Malory is careful never to condemn chivalry even when he tries to emphasize the importance of piety. When Lancelot becomes a hermit, it is a result of the circumstances he finds himself in and not a rejection of knighthood while at the peak of his glory and reputation, thus making the sacrifice lack significance in a religious sense. Whitehead explains the circumstances that Lancelot finds himself in:

> Nothing in the concluding section of the work - in which Lancelot retires into a hermitage - mars the splendor of his chivalry. Rich in earthly renown, but with his lord and lady dead and the fellowship

> to which he belonged destroyed, and finding that his archbishop of Cantebury and his cousin Blioberis have entered religion, he decides that, having shared with them the delights of this world, he will bear them company in the life they have now chosen. (106)

Lancelot only leaves his earthly aspirations when they are no longer there for him to enjoy. His choice to live a pious life was a result of Gwenivere's rebuffing him so that she can seek penance. She instead asks Lancelot to seek another woman so that he may have a family, and asks him to vow to protect the realm from chaos and war (1253.21-7). Lancelot replies to Gwenivere saying "I shall never be so false unto you of that I have promysed . . . the same desteny that ye have takyn you to, I woll take me to" (1253.3-5). Lancelot, in essence, is still making his fundamental sin of putting Gwenivere before God. It is only when Gwenivere turns him away that he takes on a holy life and since he cannot be with her Lancelot keeps his promise to her by living celibately. By Lancelot choosing to share her destiny, he is maintaining a connection to Gwenivere even though they cannot be together physically. Gwenivere even points out that she believes Lancelot will "turne to the worlde agayne" (1253.9). Lancelot responds by telling her that for a "tyme forsakyn the vanytees of the worlde, had nat [her] love bene" (1253.13-4). While Lancelot ultimately choses a pious life until his death Malory reminds us that Lancelot does not make the choice of putting God before Gwenivere himself. That said, Malory still wants us to acknowledge that the life Lancelot is leading is now a holy life, thus placing him in a position closer to divinity than he was previously.

Malory's ambivalent approach neither condemns chivalry nor de-emphasizes the importance of piety. Lancelot's circumstances, then, speak more to the "unstablenesse" of

the world and Lancelot than a chastising of either. Malory is commenting on the concept of earthly values being inherent, and religious values being alien. In this, it makes Lancelot's spiritual struggle very relatable to even the most religious reader.

When viewing Malory's work it is important to sustain the understanding that it is a retelling of a familiar story but that it exists for a new time and a new culture. While Malory refers to "the Frensche booke" throughout the *Morte Darthur*, he writes for late fifteenth-century England as they were engaged in a lengthy civil war in the War of the Roses. Malory's book praises chivalric violence but also struggles with its ability to understand a manner in which violence is compatible with Christian values. Crofts notes that "Malory's knights, especially Lancelot, . . . are doomed to serve both truth and honour, virtues whose paths are rarely the same. . . . The inability of the knight, or of knighthood itself, to fulfill traditional functions is not new in Malory's time, but it is an urgent problem" (61). There was an identity crisis for knighthood and this is reflected in Malory's work. In many ways, the *Morte Darthur* is a celebration of medieval knighthood in all of its glory while accounting for its problematic existence in relationship with religion. Although there is insufficient historical information known about Malory successfully to apply a biographical reading of the *Morte Darthur*, the knowledge that Malory was writing the work while an imprisoned knight lends itself to the notion that there was an ambivalent attitude toward chivalry in terms of what it meant for a knight's fate. Without diving too far into conjecture, Malory's position as a prisoner knight would presumably have him question the decisions he made, as well as actions, that put him in such a position.

Whetter suggests that a secular reading of the *Morte Darthur* "does not necessarily question the instability of the world, nor condemn it" (“Secular Arthuriad” 160). The world simply is, and all the heavenly aspirations are subject to inherent theological complexities that Malory is unwilling or incapable of tackling. I contend, however, that there is an earnest attempt at reconciling secular and earthly values but that they are ultimately incompatible and opposing concepts, thus creating an ambivalence throughout the narrative in the *Morte Darthur*. Newman states that "when Malory is forced to choose between the sacred and secular values, he chooses both" (109). While this certainly leads to an intrinsic inconsistency throughout the *Morte Darthur*, it speaks to a prevalent aspect of humanity in regards to religion. Malory taps into the often unspoken theological paradoxes and inconsistencies people may have likely struggled with in Medieval England. Just as Lancelot fails to achieve the Grail due to his "unstablenesse" the message of religion also becomes unstable for Malory where secular and religious values compete and contradict while often merging.

Conclusion

Malory's wavering view of religious and secular values is a complex and interwoven tapestry of ideas. While it is tempting to argue a consistent vision that the entirety of the *Morte Darthur* is founded upon, the work itself appears more as an expression of Malory's conflicted view of the world. I have demonstrated this through the characters of Arthur, Merlin, and Lancelot as an ambivalent worldview is reflected by their ideals and actions.

Arthur, the titular hero of the *Morte Darthur*, subverts not only genre expectations, but even the expectations set within the opening Tale. While Arthur is destined to be God's chosen warrior, he is also shown to have a capacity for sinful actions which leads to his death. In his incest with Morgause, Mordred is conceived and it is he who is the one who ultimately kills Arthur (41.12-20). While this is the most overt example of Arthur's sin, Malory goes into greater detail concerning what is arguably Arthur's deservedness of his fate. Arthur not only shared in conceiving Mordred through incest, he also attempted to kill him through the May Day massacre which killed many other children (55.23-9). Arthur's capacity for evil does not undermine his achievements as a king, but instead indicates the problematic relationship between earthy rule and religious appointment. If the question is, is it truly possible to be a truly benevolent man and an effective ruler, the answer for Malory is clearly no. Arthur must embrace the earthly aspects of chivalry, but with that also must commit acts of evil in order to be an

effective king. Malory constantly reminds us that Arthur is fallible, whether it be through his failure to pull the Maiden's sword (62.13-4), or Merlin prophesying Arthur's fate due to his sin (44.20). It is this incompatibility of religious and secular values that Malory relishes, as this ambivalent view of religion while living an earthly life is an inherent struggle. While Arthur is a chosen messiah-like hero, Malory continually develops his capacity for evil in an effort to maintain earthly rule. The religious contradictions of Arthur are clear, but the significance is often overlooked. In the end Arthur accepts whatever he must do, free of moral judgment, to maintain his kingdom even at the expense of his life.

Merlin, however, demonstrates the ambivalent nature of the world itself. On one hand he is Arthur's emissary to God, but he himself is trapped in a paradox of knowing outcomes yet being unable to change his own fate. His motives are always in question, and through this Malory is demonstrating the murkiness of religious reason. It is never clear if Merlin is truly a good man, as we are told, or evil as many of his actions and his parentage would indicate. Merlin is a supernatural force whose motivations are often clear in terms of his role in Arthur's kingdom, while his methods are questionable from a moral or religious standpoint. In many ways Merlin represents a duality of good and evil which cannot be reconciled in a spiritual sense, but is easy to accept in an earthly one.

Merlin represents the clandestine nature of existence present in a spiritual view of the world. He is wholly man, but also supernatural. His powers are to be a force for good, but he uses them in dubious ways. From the sinister complicity in Arthur's conception, to his lechery towards Nymue, Merlin complicates earthly views of spirituality within the text. Merlin's ability to predict the future, even his own, but inability to circumvent fate

displays a frustrating view of predeterminism. For Malory, Merlin embodies the problematic aspects of religion, in its seeming contradictions and paradoxical lessons. While Merlin professes to be good, and takes action on behalf of God, the actions themselves are often more in line with the devil. Merlin, being the "devyls son" (126.20) is a concept that Malory wants his audience to remember from popular lore. Merlin; God's emissary, and the Devil's son. This almost hyperbolically conflicting nature found in Merlin embodies the dualism at the core of the *Morte Darthur*.

The most introspective and personal struggle is depicted through Lancelot. Perhaps the greatest knight, only to be outshone by his own son Galahad, Lancelot takes a spiritual journey in an effort to better himself morally while seeking spiritual salvation. As Andrew Lynch states, "in an ideal sense the grail story contrasts Lancelot's earthly worship with his spiritual delinquencies, [just as] the text's method of working out his humiliation and redemption effectively meshes concepts of spiritual and secular prowess" (70).

The whole of the *Morte Darthur* depicts a wavering religious journey, but through the characters of Arthur, Merlin, and Lancelot there is a progression of faith. With Arthur, there is apathy and frustration with religion in regards to world policy. However, with Merlin there is a sense of indeterminacy and confusion with regards to religion. We can recognize the spiritual nature of Merlin, but his motivations are unclear. Right and wrong are murky, and in more ways he represents the devil and the depravity of man; however, with the introduction of Nymue, there's a chronological move toward a sense of moral clarity. Nymue, a more pure figure, takes over the role of God’s magical emissary but in a broader sense signifies a more spiritual, personal view of religion. The more

internal spiritual struggle manifests itself most preeminently through Lancelot, and the Grail Quest.

Nigel Saul says that "[t]he Grail Legends invested chivalry with a religious authority entirely independent of the mediatory power of the Church. This element of independence found expression particularly in the story cycles developed around the figures of Sir Lancelot and Galahad" (202). For Malory, the Grail quest is an expression of subdued religiosity in his time that did not necessarily view Christianity and the will of the Church as synonymous. The Grail Quest, seen through the eyes of Lancelot, is a personal mission to seek salvation through penance. Lancelot's processes for redemption do not require guidance or approval from ordained officials representing the church. As Saul notes, the Grail Cycle as a whole put the Church in a precarious position as:

> [t]he Church adopted an ambivalent attitude to the Grail stories, neither wholly endorsing them nor condemning them. What concerned authorities was that, although the stories drew on a deep well of spirituality, they were yet mystical and anti-sacerdotal. There was no place in the Grail cycle for the Church, its institutions or its ministers. It is hermits and solitaires who are present as representative holy men, not bishops or archbishops or other members of the hierarchy. (203)

Richard W. Kaeuper notes how "[f]inding the balance between piety and independence challenged knighthood and all medieval writers who were certain they should speak to the chivalric ethos" (66). Malory's ambivalent approach sees Lancelot's journey toward salvation as exploring the differences between being a good person and

being a good knight. Malory does not answer this so much as presents the question of what it means to be the best version of oneself. For Malory, throughout most of the *Morte Darthur*, chivalry is the code to achieve the apex of one's being, but in the Grail Quest, the value of reputation is questioned in relation to internal thoughts about morality.

The *Morte Darthur* is a complex series of tales that have an overarching narrative that offers an ambivalent perspective of religious and earthly values. This ambivalence is one that is inherently human and reflects attitudes of earthly beings struggling to be religious subjects. The result of this struggle, however, is that the *Morte Darthur* becomes largely tragic, demonstrating that these competing ideas are ultimately incompatible, which is a frustration in which Malory creatively relishes. As K.S. Whetter notes, "some tragedies do not have answers, and . . . the mystery or undeservedness of the tragic happening actually exacerbates its pathos" (“Misunderstanding” 161). Quite simply, much of the tragedy in the *Morte Darthur* reflects the harsh realities of life, which were presumably all too apparent to the fifteenth-century knight who wrote it. Malory does not condemn chivalry, nor religion; instead he simply displays the complex and often contradictory mechanisms in a world and time that embraces both.

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