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The Death of King Arthur: How Society Shaped Malory's Writing

King Arthur and all his adventures have captivated audiences for hundreds of years. Some are intrigued by the idea of magic, while others are more invested in the missteps of Lancelot and Guinevere. No matter the reason for loving Arthur, his collection of legends is one of those trends that never fully go away. Outside of their sheer popularity, it is also because of how much has been written about his fictional life. Far more has been published about Arthur than any one person can read in a lifetime. However, one man, Sir Thomas Malory, attempted to do just that while also creating his own condensed version of the Arthur legend. Being the most famous author to work in this area, Malory is a prime source for Arthur tales and medieval writing in general. Scholars cannot look at the period or Arthur without taking him into consideration. For this reason, it is important to look at all of the different influences that impacted Malory's writing, to get a better idea behind the motivations of some King Arthur material and also to gain a better understanding of the medieval period.

The tales of King Arthur and his Round Table have been approached by many authors for a decent span of history. Those that came before Malory often differed in country of origin (with the two main ones being England and France), motives for writing, and which previous sources they were pulling from. There were also, as expected in any massive collaboration, differences in writing techniques. Individual characterization had lots of variance across texts, in some cases

story details would change, and there were also differences depending on if an author was writing one spin off tale or a group of tales. All of these small distinctions could dramatically change the overall stories being told from author to author. This being the case, Malory's effort to take everything related to King Arthur and condense it down into one text is something that had never been attempted before and has not been seen since. For this reason, the *Morte Darthur* is said by some to be "...the only English national epic" (Grimm 9).

Being written in 1469 or 1470 and finished printing by Caxton in 1485, Malory's *Morte Darthur* was created in a historical context that was tumultuous to say the least (Lexton 174). Between the tense political climate, the shift in what aristocratic lifestyle looked like, and the unignorable and not always welcome power of the church, the fifteenth century saw lots of changes that altered the way people were viewing greater society and life in general. When studying Malory's work, it is necessary to look at all of these influences in relation to the text. However, before doing that, it is just as important to consider what scholars know about Malory the author. Still a topic of debate today, academics are not sure of who the author Sir Thomas Malory was historically. This is important because "...a living Sir Thomas Malory...furthers the involvement of the values of the text with those of real fifteenth-century Englishmen" (Grimm 6). To determine if Malory is to represent your standard Englishman at this time, one must first decide if they believe he is the Sir Thomas Malory of Yorkshire or Sir Thomas Malory the "knyght-prisoner" (Lumiansky 880-881). Previously having been believed to not exist in historical records, the author of the *Morte Darthur* was completely unknown outside of the text itself until the 1890s. At this point, Sommer and Kittredge proposed that a Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire was the man they had been looking for. If this were true, it would mean that the *Morte Darthur*'s author was an earl of the French forces and a man of

Parliament during the highlights of his life, but also a criminal, accused of committing such crimes as theft, extortion, and rape, during his less flattering moments. One of the biggest issues scholars have with this is the way medieval law defines rape. As Batt notes, “The language of the law itself in large part create this confusion, for it does not distinguish between rape as forced coition and rape as an abduction which does not necessarily involve forcible coition” (81).

During this time rape was not just the act of forced sex that is usually thought of today. It could have meant other things that would not fall into this category, as mentioned above. For some who study Malory as an author, this potentially alleviates some of the discomfort that comes with immortalizing an accused rapist. However, for justified reasons, this is not enough for some scholars who are convinced by the evidence that Malory was a rapist in the sense that one would be today.

While the issues mentioned above are certainly problems if one assumes Sommer and Kittredge’s Malory is the one, true author. However, those same causes for concern disappear if it is to be believed that the Sir Thomas Malory of Yorkshire proposed by Matthews in 1966 is actually the man in question. Matthews raises lots of questions about the authorship and believes that Sommer and Kittredge’s Malory could not be the one because he would not have had the access to sources needed to be able to write a work of this volume while in prison. Additionally, he brings up the fact that Malory would have been writing the *Morte Darthur* in his 70s if this were the man. While this would have been a somewhat unusual way for a 70-year-old man to spend his time, creating a work like this at the age becomes more plausible when considering that he was imprisoned. Scholars who have responded to Matthews do not necessarily argue with the points he makes, but none have yet accepted his Sir Thomas Malory as the author either.

So, while his criticisms have been made valid, they still have not been enough to change people's minds (Lumiansky 880-881).

Due to the current research available, for the sake of this paper it will be assumed that the Sir Thomas Malory who was a knight and prisoner is the author of the *Morte Darthur*. This is likely considering the number of scholars who believe this to be the case, as well as the fact that Malory refers to himself as the "knight prisoner" in the text (Malory 110). Furthermore, it makes the most sense that a man with free time from being in prison and the privileges of being in the Tower of London to have materials brought to him while there would be the most capable of being the author of a project this massive. Condensing the entirety of the Arthurian material into a single book is not something a person in normal circumstances would do. It should also be noted that there are other theories about who Sir Thomas Malory was outside of the ones mentioned here. That being said, even when considering those options, this Malory seems to be the one with most historical evidence in his favor.

It is important to determine who the author of the *Morte Darthur* is outside of doing it for our own interest. Taking into account the things Malory was accused of, especially the charge of rape, having these life experiences would have had an impact on the way he chooses to write about certain topics. With the amount of bed tricks that happen throughout this work, which in modern law would be considered rape, it is interesting to see how Malory handles these issues. In all of the instances where a character is deceived about who they are having sex with, an illegitimate child is born. This not only shows the consequences of doing things like this, but it also contributes to the ending, where these problematic births matter considerably.

Malory was living in a time that was plagued with the issues that come with civil war. During this period, the crown was constantly being traded back and forth between Henry VI and

Edward IV. While their battle, like any other involving usurping, was mostly just a power struggle, formally speaking the issue was about who had a better claim to the throne. As British history progressed and Christianity became more serious, the question of who the one true king was became more of an issue in trades of power. At this time, there was a desire for the king to be ordained by God, while also having strong family ties to previous rulers (Lexton 177). These problems, which Malory would have been very familiar with, can also be found in the *Morte Darthur*. When Arthur first pulls the sword out of the stone and is recognized as king, he still has to wait for the formal election process before he can truly wield his power. This would be a similar process to what Henry VI and Edward IV would have been experiencing as they repeatedly traded off. Lexton seems to believe that this is Malory's way of critiquing Arthur and comparing him to the usurpers of his day. However, with the way Arthur is first embraced by the common people, it is unlikely that this is the case. If it were true at all, a more appropriate example would be Mordred's later rise to power when he usurps his father. However, even with that, it is stated in "The Death of King Arthur" that the people loved Mordred because he tended to things that Arthur had been neglecting. If anything, Malory's use of electoral kingship in his work is him showing its potential for abuse. It is not him necessarily saying that is what is going on during his lifetime.

As with any artist, Malory's personal life would have influenced the way he shaped his version of the King Arthur story. It takes a great amount of effort to keep personal experiences out of creative work, so it is expected that some of his experience as a knight would come through in the *Morte Darthur*. Though it is sprinkled throughout, Malory's status comes through most clearly in moments that call for technical knowledge of knighthood and cases of injury. For example, Gawain's recurring head trauma in his death sequence is a real injury that

many knights would have gotten in battle. It is very likely that at some point in his life, Malory saw a man die of the same thing Gawain does. Also, Gawain's stubbornness and lack of caution in terms of his injury is a very human response to a situation like this, and in real life, it would get him killed the same way it did in "The Death of King Arthur". This can also be seen in Lancelot's injuries in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" and some of the war scenes. Malory has specific knowledge about how to take an arrow out because he has seen men die from them. He also knows that a horse going "...in blood past the fetlocks..." is a serious matter (Malory 273). These slight details add to the story in a way that makes it seem quite realistic. In addition to these more technical knightly details, Malory also highlights the loyalty between knights on many occasions. In "The Death of Arthur", he repeatedly has characters remind each other of the great things Sir Lancelot has done for King Arthur's country. At one point, Sir Gawain even advises that Sir Agravain reconsider telling King Arthur of his adultery with the queen due to his noble history (Malory 247). This duty of knights to each other is something that Malory would have known well from real life experience, and it shows through clearly in his writing. That being said, this is important because it tells us that he was willing to let those two areas overlap, allowing us to know more about him as a person.

During Malory's time, religion was a complicated subject. With the rise of Catholicism and the enforcement of its practice by law, feelings about specific religious figures and groups were somewhat negative. This ties into the *Morte Darthur*, specifically with the use of hermits throughout the text. Real world hermits of the fifteenth century were said to have "...the desire to escape worldliness and corruption, to come closer to God in contemplation, and to imitate Christ in the wilderness" (Mahoney 2). Their main priority was to no longer be part of society, but rather to hang on the fringes of it, as of way of focusing only on their piety, similar to

anchorites. However, even with this intention, hermits were often gone to for advice and spiritual guidance, as seen in the *Morte Darthur*. In many instances they save the day when a named knight is injured or when no other rational solution can be found. Similarly, in the “The Death of King Arthur” sequence, the pope intervenes in an attempt to get King Arthur and Sir Launcelot to stop fighting. While this is not a permanent solution, it does temporarily lead to peace. This use of religious figures as advisors and assistants to key characters is interesting because of how positive it is. In the actual fifteenth century there were some who questioned the teachings of Catholicism, such as the Lollards (Thomson 42). With this tension and mistrust between the Catholic Church and the Lollards, it interesting to see an author stand so staunchly on one side without defaming the other. While Malory does push on readers the belief that the Church should be trusted, he does not go out of his way to paint non-believers within Britain as horrible people.

On this same note, it is interesting to look at the way things end in terms of main characters and their religious connections. By the end of “The Death of King Arthur”, every character is dead, in a religious order, or off fighting the crusades. Seeing how few things in literature are ever a coincidence, this likely has some symbolism behind it. It could be argued that Malory’s reason for doing this ties into one of the central plot points for the entire *Morte Darthur*: the grail quest storyline. After the Holy Grail quest, all of the knights, with the exception of Bors, who were pure enough to achieve that grail are dead. This leaves Arthur’s Round Table only with knights who have sins they need to work off. Malory’s choice to have them all show their religious dedication is some way or another pushes the idea that all are redeemable. He is giving the remaining knights a chance to follow in the legacy that the others left and work towards a better eternal life for themselves. Being a seemingly religious man

himself, Malory would have known what the power of a message like this would have on Catholic readers. He knew that it would be inspiring while also very entertaining and in line with the way the story is supposed to end. It also clears up any lingering issues, such as if Lancelot and Guinevere became a couple after Arthur's death. While this type of ending may seem like the only option Malory had due to all the sources before him, this move is still strategic on his part and shows what would have mattered to him and his audience.

It is very well known that during previous eras, such as the medieval one, social roles for women were extremely limited. Living in a patriarchal society and with most women living under the constant control of either their husbands or fathers, they did not have much say in the direction their lives went. With this being the case, queens are interesting in that they are the most powerful women in the country, but yet are still often subject to their husband's desires. The way Malory characterizes Queen Guinevere in many ways goes about the gender roles found in medieval society. Excluding the issue of her infidelity with Sir Lancelot, Queen Guinevere is seen throughout the *Morte Darthur* as being feminine on the surface but having many masculine traits on the deeper levels of her personality. One example of this is the way she is prone to wrath. This is especially apparent in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere", which is the last story told before King Arthur's death sequence, in which Queen Guinevere is seen as hostile and manipulative towards Sir Lancelot in particular. While in real life wrath is no more prone to men than it is to women, in literature and traditional gender roles men are often depicted as the hot-tempered figures, not queens. Keeping that in mind, Malory's choice to show Queen Guinevere in this way is strange. However, it is possible that he was using some real-life inspiration from some very nontraditional queens that he would have known about, including the Queen of England and France during the twelfth century, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Queen Eleanor

was an incredibly powerful woman who was known mostly for "...her love for adventure and excitement and the company of men" (Chambers 459). Having been involved in the crusades through her husband, King Louis VII, she was much less confined to her gender role than most women of her day (Chambers 459). It is possible that some of Malory's inspiration for Queen Guinevere came from Queen Eleanor's life and the legends that surrounded it.

One issue that seems to come up any time Lancelot is included in a tale are the various young ladies who fall in love with him. Being completely dedicated to his affair with Guinevere, Lancelot is unwilling to court or sleep with any woman other than her. While this does not directly come up in "The Death of King Arthur", it is worth mentioning because of how these women could have prevented the story from ending in this way entirely. If Lancelot could have gotten past his love for Guinevere and settled down with either of the Elaine's that were willing to be his wife, the affair would not have been revealed and the wars would not have started in the first place. This would have prevented Mordred from stealing the kingdom and many lives would have been spared. Thinking about the ending from Malory's perspective, it makes sense that he would include all of these different ways for Lancelot to get out of his situation before the end comes. By doing this, he is showing the addictive aspect of sin. Lancelot's inability to give up his lust and his overall madness for the queen represents the real-life struggle that many Christians then and now faced. Real people do not always take the easy way out, even when it is what is best for everyone. His choice to make Lancelot function in this way makes him relatable to the medieval reader while also given him layers of complexity.

Throughout history, the belief that Arthur will someday return and rule England has not been limited to a few imaginative hopefuls. This myth has been a significant part of English society from as early as the twelfth century. "*The Story of Britain* by Wace (1155) is the first

literary statement that after the healing of Arthur's wounds in Avalon, he would return and would live again" (Peyton 56). From this point, popularity only increased, leading to a widespread belief that eventually he would return. This legend was inspiring to the Welsh and Cornish / Britons who had been living under the thumbs of the English for many years by Malory's time. They saw Arthur as their last true hero and their one hope for fighting back against their oppressors. In response to this, the English tried to reinforce the idea that Arthur was permanently dead and not coming back in any circumstance. Looking at the very end of "The Death of King Arthur", it is obvious that Malory is refusing to take a side. He leaves the whole thing very vague and up to the reader to decide. This is strategic because it allows his death to be whatever the individual reader wants it to be. It appeals to all audiences in a way that not many endings can. This allows for creativity and personalization on the readers part and keeps Malory from having to be involved in a sticky political situation.

King Arthur is one of those iconic literary characters that never find their way out of public interest. From before Malory's time to modern day, Arthur and his court have been a source of entertainment and an outlet for social critique to hundreds of artists. Malory's part in shaping his legendary reputation cannot be overstated. By bringing all the existing stories together and forming one complete work, he was able to make Arthurian stories into a manageable collection that readers could cherish. He managed to do this while also adding in subtle social critiques and historical context for the period in which he lived. These added details make Malory's work even more important because it also represents a time period that was not able to be documented in the modern sense. From Malory, we are able to learn about Arthur and the medieval period in a single story.

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