

Ouachita Baptist University

## Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita

---

Honors Theses

Carl Goodson Honors Program

---

2000

### The Death of King Arthur: The Literary Evolution of a Myth

Heather M. Lyon

*Ouachita Baptist University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors\\_theses](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Lyon, Heather M., "The Death of King Arthur: The Literary Evolution of a Myth" (2000). *Honors Theses*. 130.

[https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors\\_theses/130](https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/honors_theses/130)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Carl Goodson Honors Program at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact [mortensona@obu.edu](mailto:mortensona@obu.edu).

SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

The Death of King Arthur:

The Literary Evolution of a Myth

written by

Heather M. Lyon

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for completion of the

Carl Goodson Honors Program

meets the criteria for acceptance has been  
approved by the undersigned readers.

thesis director

second reader

third reader

honors program director

May 5, 2000

RILEY-HICKINGBOTHAM LIBRARY  
QUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

## Introduction: The History of a Literary Figure

Around 1151, Geoffery of Monmouth, a priest at St. George's college in Oxford, completed a work known as *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Geoffery, Forward). Geoffery researched older texts and manuscripts in order to present what he considered an accurate account of Britain's history. In this work, Geoffery introduced King Arthur to the English and French as one of the greatest kings of Britain. His work would serve as the foundation for the French *chansons de geste*, or romances of chivalry, which in turn influenced Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1469). Malory's work would go on to serve as the model for countless retellings of the Arthurian legend. Using this foundation, authors such as Alfred Lord Tennyson and T.H. White would go on to build critiques of the problems in their societies.

Geoffery's work considers Arthur as an actual historical figure. His history shows everything from the moment of Arthur's crowning to his death, including the prophecy of the "once and future king," which states that if Britain ever has a need, her greatest king will rise from the dead and assist her. Geoffery introduces Arthur as "a young man, only fifteen years old; but he was of outstanding courage and generosity, and his inborn goodness gave him such grace that he was loved by almost all the people" (212). The Arthur of Geoffery's version has a brilliant military mind, and through many battles, he finally manages to send the Roman invaders away from Britain's shores. The king's death, as outlined by

Geoffery, shows the love and adoration he received from his subjects. Geoffery reports, "Arthur himself, our renowned king, was wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avilion so that his wounds might be attended to" (261). Geoffery certainly considers Arthur to be one of the greatest kings of England.

In her monograph, *King Arthur*, Norma Loree Goodrich also discusses the historicity of Arthur and the stories surrounding him. Goodrich maintains that Arthur actually existed, not as ruler of all of England, but as a warlord, most likely Celtic, who fought twelve battles to free Britain from the Romans. She writes,

King Arthur lived in an unsettled world. . . . he is the one man who successfully opposed floods of invasion all his life, if not forever. King Arthur seems to demonstrate the heroic theory of history, which holds that an individual can permanently alter the course of events. (13)

However, none of this explains why the French authors of the *chansons de geste* would center their fictitious works around a historical British hero like Arthur. Most likely they chose Arthur because many of their ancestors would have been dispersed Celts who were living in France, in what is now Brittany. The Arthur of these works barely resembles the war lord of Geoffery. In the French romances, Arthur's birth is shrouded in mystery and his death is embellished. Also, the code of chivalry seems to be present in the *chansons de*

*geste* but not in the historical research of Geoffery. It seems that the authors of the *chansons de geste* are the ones who managed to transform the historical figure of Arthur into a purely fictitious figure. How they achieved this remains unclear, and the transformation of Arthur from historical king to literary myth continues to be a mystery.

Today there are few people not familiar with at least the names associated with Arthur and his realm, if not the entire series of Arthurian legends. The basic foundation of the story always remains the same. The majority of this foundation comes not from the historical work of Geoffery, but from the embellishments of the *chansons de geste*. Traditionally, Arthur receives the legendary sword Excalibur in some magical way, and the sword proves his right to be king. Arthur then proceeds to form a kingdom based on the code of chivalry. Arthur surrounds himself with the best knights that the British Isle and France can provide. These knights meet together at a round table where all, including King Arthur, are considered equal. Arthur strives to make the code of chivalry law for not only himself, but everyone. He lives with the idea that the code is more important than any man, including himself. The knights of the Round Table have adventures and quests, helping the poor and oppressed. Arthur's kingdom of Camelot appears utopian. However, Camelot crumbles at the king's feet when his code is betrayed by the adulterous love between his wife, Guinevere, and his best friend, Lancelot. Lancelot, formerly considered the

best knight in the world, brings about the code's ruin because he disrespects its principles. Corrupted by Lancelot's betrayal and disenchanted with a life of peace, the other knights soon begin expressing dissatisfaction with Arthur's political system. The resulting schism in the Round Table gives Arthur's son, Mordred, an opportunity to steal the crown. This attempt to usurp the throne leads to both of their deaths in a final battle.

Many authors have used this plot structure, provided by the French romances, to discuss the problems of their society. While Arthur is always portrayed as a good king, the portrayals and the themes addressed by these authors differ greatly. One of the greatest portrayals of Arthur, which was used as a vehicle to discuss personal themes of societal troubles, came from the pen of Sir Thomas Malory. His work, *Morte Darthur*, also served as the inspiration for Alfred Lord Tennyson's Victorian classic *Idylls of the King* (1859) and T.H. White's children's book, *The Once and Future King* (1939). These three works are prime examples of authors' using the foundational plot line of the Arthurian legend to portray their own ideas and societal concerns.

In these three works, there are many comparable scenes that would aid in examining the use of the Arthurian legend for societal critique. However, for the sake of brevity, I have chosen to discuss only one scene from each work. The scene that provides ample examples of the authors' themes, while providing enough information for a paper of this

length, is the final battle between Arthur and his son, Mordred.

## Section 1: Arthur's Demise Through Malory's Eyes

In 1468, while England simmered in the midst of a civil war known as the Wars of the Roses, Sir Thomas Malory simmered in prison (Norton 344). The Wars of the Roses began in 1455. Generally, Richard the Duke of York receives credit for their beginnings. York fought against various groups of nobles and manorial lords in an attempt to gain the crown. Over the course of the war, the crown rested on the heads of both Yorkist supporters and Lancastrian claimants, neither of whom were the true heirs (Goodman 1). Accused of the attempted assassination of the Yorkist Duke of Buckingham, Malory found himself on the wrong side of the war. His lord, the Earl of Warwick, supported the Lancastrian claim to the crown while the Yorkists held the throne (Matthews 16-17). According to Eugene Vinavere in the preface to his translation of *Le Morte D'Arthur*, "it was during this last imprisonment, probably his longest, that he completed what he himself described as the whole book of King Arthur and of his noble knights of the Round Table" (vi). Malory had found himself in prison on more than one occasion during the war, and over a period of several years he had compiled translations of the French *chansons de geste*. These translations resulted in the epic *Morte Darthur*.

One may question, "Why would Malory spend his prison



time writing romances?" At that time, prisoners could outfit their cells in any way they deemed necessary, including bringing any of their possessions from home as long as they had the financial means to furnish it with (Weir 102). Therefore, Malory could have chosen almost any manner of activity as a distraction during his long imprisonment. However, he specifically asked for and spent his time translating copies of the *chanson de geste*. For Malory, a soldier and man of action, this seems very out of character. Edmund Reiss in *Sir Thomas Malory* argues,

One still might wonder what there was in Arthurian romances that would attract Malory. There is at least a possibility that his contact as a young man with the Earl of Warwick, the person whom all of Europe then recognize[d] as embodying the knightly ideals of the age, interested him in chivalric values; and this interest may have led him to the time when knighthood was in flower and when King Arthur presided over his Order of the Round Table. (19)

Malory's connection to the Earl of Warwick may hold the key to the question. According to Matthews, the Warwick who Malory served as liegeman was not only one of the "greatest men" ever to have borne the title of Earl of Warwick, but he was also a

companion and comrade of Henry V, Captain of Calais . . . statesman, patron of religion, commerce and the arts. A fifteenth-century genealogy claims that he



was descended from Gothgallus, a Knight of the Round Table, and that the Warwick badge, the bear and raged staff, was derived from Arthur himself. . . .

Beauchamp's fifteenth-century biographer stresses the qualities that made the Earl fit for so exalted an origin . . . his love of ancient story [and] . . . his predilection for tournaments and adventures of Arthurian kind. (12)

Malory followed Warwick to war at Calais and subscribed to his Lancastrian views, so it would not be surprising to find that he also participated in Warwick's mock Arthurian tournaments of chivalry. The influence of such a life appears in Malory's dependence on the code of chivalry in *Morte Darthur*.

Malory devotes much of his work to the definition and practice of the idealized code through the actions and quests of the knights who belong to Arthur's Round Table. However, Malory does not pay much attention to how Arthur himself applies the code. The Norton Anthology best sums up the code by saying that, "at its simplest, chivalry is the code that governs the actions of the knight-adventurer who rides out in search of wrongs that he may right--typically in search of ladies whom he may rescue from monsters, churls, and wicked knights" (345). In Malory, the code both raises Arthur to the pinnacle of success and brings about his destruction. Arthur binds together a group of unlikely companions in arms under the code. Malory then shows how each knight of the

Round Table individually practices the code, Arthur often participating in the adventures and practices of the code only as an observer, listening as the knights relate the details of their quests to him.

Malory's Arthur does not become a practitioner of the code until the final few sections of the work. Towards the end of the book, Arthur can no longer ignore, with any believability, the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. The entire Round Table is now aware of Lancelot's relationship to the queen. Mordred has been plotting a way to steal Arthur's crown. He sees Lancelot's betrayal as a golden opportunity because he knows that without Lancelot's support, Arthur's army will crumble. Mordred proves the affair to the king, and once the words about the infidelity are said aloud, Arthur can no longer ignore the situation.

In Malory's work the affair itself does not alter the relationship between Lancelot and Arthur, but the resulting bloodshed does. According to Malory, Lancelot kills several knights while attempting to escape capture in Guinevere's bedroom. Malory shows that while Arthur can ignore the affair between his two beloveds, he cannot ignore such a blow to the code as one knight senselessly slaying another. Accordingly, rather than fighting back and destroying his brethren, Lancelot should have willingly stood trial to prove his innocence before God and the court. Arthur is finally pushed beyond the bounds of friendship and love.

Lancelot's breaking of the code forces Arthur to renew

himself as a warrior. As Weir points out in *The Wars of the Roses*,

A king was not only expected to protect and defend his realm but also had to be seen as a competent warrior. A king who inclined towards peace courted adverse public opinion, for most people placed great value on success in arms and the glorification of the nation's reputation. (6)

Weir's opinion is accurate only after Lancelot's betrayal. Until Lancelot and Guinevere's failure, Arthur has been content to win a few wars as a young man and then sit back and enjoy the stories told by his knights. Following this betrayal, Malory changes Arthur back into the warrior that he had been at the beginning of the book. Arthur no longer functions just as an observer. Following the deaths of his knights, Arthur declares war on Lancelot and his followers.

Arthur fails in the wars he wages against Lancelot. This may be a precedent set by the *chansons de geste*. Arthur's losses in these wars destroy the code by causing a number of Arthur's knights to join with Lancelot. Once the code begins visibly to break down, Arthur begins losing the control he had over his knights and his fate. Arthur can not have any power outside of the code because the code provides Arthur with his identity. In Malory's vision, Arthur is the code and the code is Arthur.

While both strength and ability in arms received precedence in the views of Malory's contemporaries, Malory

seems also to seek justice in his work. Malory's own time reflected a need for justice. His experiences included the instability and destruction of society and the downfall of kings because society lacked enforced law and order. Thus, in his Arthur, upholding justice through the code becomes his most important character trait.

As the code of chivalry disintegrates, Arthur loses control of the Round Table. Only then does he begin to resemble the kings in Malory's society who ruled through war and destruction. Following his defeats by Lancelot, Arthur must return home in an attempt to wrest the crown from the opportunistic hands of Mordred. This competition for the crown and the betrayal among family and friends mirror the events taking place during the Wars of the Roses.

Before the final, fated battle between Arthur and Mordred, Malory brings an element to the story which has not been prevalent before: fantastic visit from the ghost of Gawain. As Vinavere has pointed out in his translation, Malory "had none of the romantic enthusiasm for the marvelous . . . visions, miracles, and legends did not appeal to him by reason of their distinct poetic quality, but because they helped him to express his own moral doctrine" (Malory 22). Gawain, slain in the battle against Lancelot, is accompanied by a retinue of ladies consisting of women he had saved while still alive. He explains to Arthur that these women have prayed for his soul, and only their intercession allows him to come before the king. This suggests a spiritual benefit

brought by adhering to the code of chivalry.

Malory brings Gawain's ghost into the king's tent the night before the final battle to warn Arthur of his impending death. His work is the only one which features Gawain's rescued ladies, lending more support to the importance of the code of chivalry. According to Malory, the ghost warns, "Thus much hath given me leave God, for to warn you of your death. For and ye fight tomorn with Sir Mordred, as ye both have assigned, doubt ye not ye must be slain" (Norton 355). Gawain suggests that Arthur avoid the battle until more help can arrive. Philippe Aries suggests a probable explanation for Malory's including this element of the fantastic into his tale. Aries explains that

First of all, the [the knights of the *chansons de geste*] were usually forewarned. They did not die without having had to realize that they were going to die. If their deaths were terrible ones, such as by the plague, or abrupt, they had to be presented as the exception, something one did not talk about. Normally, then, the man was forewarned. (3)

Taking this tradition into consideration, Malory also uses the element of the fantastic to provide his Arthur with a way to back out of the fight. This precedent set by Malory will not appear in either of the works by Tennyson or White. This chance of escape that Malory allows Arthur conflict with the rest of his story. Throughout the book, Malory foreshadows the destruction of Arthur and the code, laying the blame at

the feet of fate. Malory has no control over the foundation set by the authors of the *chansons de geste*. Even though he wants Lancelot to ride in and save Arthur and his kingdom, he cannot allow it due to the precedent set by the French romance writers. Malory uses Arthur's fate to suggest that eventually chaos must win over order just as Mordred must destroy Arthur. The conclusion that follows is that the Wars of the Roses must be fought to their conclusion in Malory's time.

Throughout the book Malory warns the reader of Arthur's impending demise, and, when the time has come, the means are hurried and commonplace. The moments leading up to the battle, and the battle itself, are not told in glorious detail or glowing report. Just before the battle, Arthur attempts a truce with Mordred, which serves to make the ending more bittersweet, as the truce dissolves in a way both exciting and disturbing. Malory writes,

Then were they condescended that King Arthur and Sir Mordred should meet betwixt both their hosts, and everych of them should bring fourteen persons . . . And when Arthur should depart, he warned his host that an they see any sword drawn: Look ye come on fiercely, and slay that traitor, Sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him. In like wise Sir Mordred warned his host that: An ye see any sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely, and so slay all that even before you standest; for in no wise I will not trust for this treaty, for I know well



my father will be avenged on me. And so they met as their appointment was, and so they were agreed and accorded thoroughly; and wine was fetched, and they drank. (919)

For a moment it seems that Malory will end his work with a happy ending, unlike the ending provided by his predecessors, the French authors. However, he then introduces a knight with no name or history, to force the final battle between Arthur and Mordred. Malory continues,

Right soon came an adder out of a little heath bush, and it stung a knight on the foot. And when the knight felt him stung, he looked down and saw the adder, and then he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought of none other harm. And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew beams, trumpets, and horns, and shouted grimly. And so both hosts dressed them together. And King Arthur took his horse and said; Alas this unhappy day! . . . And never was there seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land. (919-20)

In one nameless knight, Malory destroys an entire kingdom. The cause of the last battle seems anticlimactic at first. Then the disturbing reasoning behind Malory's choice sets in: the common man destroys the realm. His act of self preservation destroys the remainder of the flower of chivalry and caused the downfall of a great man (*Dictionary of Literary Biographies* 259). The act of killing the adder is useless, as the bite, being poisonous, will kill the knight



anyway. Had the knight quietly accepted his fate instead of striking out at the snake, the truce between Arthur and Mordred would have been sealed. The nameless knight represents self interest and disregard for the code, both of which were prevalent in Malory's world.

As the battle begins, the warriors forgo the standards of battle set by the code, choosing instead to fight with no thought as to who they are slaying. The code of chivalry, which has served as Arthur's anchor to reason in a world where physical might easily overcomes moral right, quickly dissolves. During this battle, Arthur shifts from being a passive observer to being a practitioner of chivalry. The Arthur whom Malory envisions at the battle has been driven insane by the death of both his friends and his ideals. Malory writes, "And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there a hundred thousand laid dead upon the down. Then was King Arthur wood-wroth [crazy] out of measure when he saw his people so slain form him" (Norton 356). Malory has presented Arthur as cool, perhaps even callous, throughout the story: he has banished his best friend, put his wife in a nunnery, and even warred with his son without a hint of the emotional wreckage these tragedies are leaving in his life. At times, Arthur has swooned with grief over his losses, but he always recovers and goes on. Malory suggests that Arthur can only accomplish these feats by remaining always true to the letter of the law. Malory suggests that chaos can be brought to order only through the

law, in Arthur's case the code of chivalry. To Malory, embroiled in the midst of a civil war, order must have seemed very important. In light of this, it is no surprise that as the code breaks down so does Arthur.

Malory paints a graphic image of the final combat between Arthur and Mordred. Arthur and Mordred simultaneously deal each other death blows. Almost instantaneously the archetypes of chaos and order have snuffed each other out. Malory writes,

And there King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin of his spear, throughout the body, more than a fathom. And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death wound he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the bur of King Arthur's spear. And right so he smote his father Arthur, with his sword holden in both his hands, on the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the brain-pan, and therewithal Sir Mordred fell stark dead to the earth; and the noble Arthur fell in a swoon to the earth. (921)

The realistic but quick nature of the passage suggests that the author had grown tired of war. One of the most important aspects of this battle does not lie in Arthur's pyrrhic victory, but in the manner of his death.

In Malory's version, two of Arthur's remaining knights, the brothers Bedivere and Lucan, help the king to a nearby chapel. Lucan, grievously wounded, dies shortly after seeing the King safely inside the chapel. While Bedivere mourns the

loss of his brother, Arthur focuses on who will maintain the ideals of chivalry following his death. The moments of insanity have passed and order must be restored. In the chapel, Arthur forces Bedivere to action:

Now leave this mourning and weeping, said the king, for all this will not avail me for wit thou well an I might live myself, the death of Sir Lucan would grieve me evermore; but my time hieth fast . . . Therefore . . . take thou Excalibur, my good sword, and go with it to yonder water side . . . I charge thee throw my sword in that water and come again and tell me what thou there seest. (922)

Arthur suggests that he would grieve with Bedivere, but time will not allow it because Excalibur, the symbol of law, order, and chivalry, must be kept safe so that these ideals can be revived at some future time. By ending his tale with the words "Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus [Here lies Arthur, once king, future king]" Norton 359), Malory suggests that this revival of order will come. At the end, Malory's hope lies in the fact that Arthur's ideals may revive at just the right time in the future to help England out of her greatest peril and provide law in a lawless world.

## **Section II: Tennyson's Death of a Moral King**

The world of Alfred Lord Tennyson was one of change and excitement. Richard A. Levine in *Backgrounds to Victorian*

*Literature* writes, "The one distinguishing fact about the [Victorian] time was [that they believed] 'that we are living in an age of transition.' This is the basic and almost universal conception of the period" (15). The Industrial Revolution gained steam alongside new discoveries in the sciences and new philosophies about religion. Walter E. Houghton comments in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* that "by the late nineteenth century it was clear that the feudal and agrarian order of the past had been replaced by a democratic and industrial society" (18). While these new industries and political powers led to more economic freedom, they also led to a feeling of displacement among the masses. People moved away from their families in the rural areas to seek employment in the cities. Levine writes that,

It was the age of science, new knowledge, searing criticism, followed by multiplied doubts and shaken beliefs . . . is there a God or is there not, and if so, is he a person or an impersonal force? . . . Have we free-will or are we human automatons? and if we have the power of moral choice, what is its basis? a God-given voice of conscience? or rational calculation deciding which of two actions will promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number? (67).

Society desperately sought a logical connection between scientific advancement and the old religious beliefs (Levine 19). Under these pressures, Alfred Lord Tennyson created his masterpiece, *Idylls of the King* (1859).

Tennyson received his inspiration for the *Idylls* from Malory's *Morte Darthur*, but his motives in writing the tale differed greatly from Malory's. Malory had written about the Arthurian legend as a cry for law and order in a chaotic world. Tennyson created his story out of a need for personal connection to other humans and to a higher universal power during an age of dislocation. In his biography of Tennyson, Jerome Hamilton Buckley writes, "Tennyson came to believe that Christianity would win the battle with new ideas, but he was haunted by the fear that the pure spiritual light of former times would be partially dimmed by scientific and philosophical positivism" (203). This belief of Tennyson's, that Christianity would win over science but not without being tainted, appears clearly in the character of his Arthur.

The personality of Tennyson's Arthur differs greatly from that of Malory's because his primary concern lies not with the letter of the code of chivalry, but with its spirit. Arthur's concern centers on the ends of an action following the code even if the means did not. An example of this can be seen in the fact that Arthur binds his knights to the code through himself. Tennyson writes,

. . . . . Arthur sat  
Crowned on the dais, and his warriors cried,  
'Be thou the king, and we will work thy will  
Who love thee.' Then the King in low deep tones,  
And simple words of great authority,

Bound them by so strait vows to his own self. (9)

Arthur concerns himself more with morality than justice, depending on his knowledge of good and evil to rule his actions rather than merely following the course of actions set by the code. He has no problem operating outside of the laws of chivalry as long as the operation is morally upright.

The differences do not end there. Malory's work focuses on chivalry without Arthur's participation in the action until the end of the book. Malory makes the king a passive observer while focusing his story on such knights as Lancelot or Gawain. Tennyson, on the other hand, fully intends to focus on Arthur. Tennyson first released the excerpts of his poem that dealt with the introduction and passing of Arthur. The two sections serve as a framework for the entire story and cannot be dismissed as unimportant (Buckley 172). Buckley asserts that "Tennyson originally planned a tightly knit Arthuriad celebrating the exploits of the king himself rather than the trials and quests of his knights" (172). Interestingly enough, Buckley feels that Tennyson then fails to complete the picture of Arthur. He argues,

[Arthur's] major role is essentially recessive; as King, he is a shadowy background presence, a legendary hero off fighting the heathen, or at his own court an aloof voice of command and judgment always a rather remote yet available standard of reference . . . his personality is no less a mystery than his



origin. . . . first and last Arthur's vitality is of spirit. (179)

This theme, that Arthur serves more as a spirit of morality in a role somewhat akin to that of God's, appears repeatedly in critiques of the *Idylls*. Tennyson himself said, "I believe in God, not from what I see in Nature, but from what I find in man" (F.B. Pinion 194). Tennyson's Arthur, a shining example of purity and truth among the baser attitudes and actions of his knights, clearly represents a man seeking God's way and will. Tennyson writes in his first idyll these words of the knights, "The King will follow Christ and we the King!" (16) This shows that Tennyson set out to present his Arthur as a God-like figure or, at the very least, a moral leader.

As Tennyson's *Idylls* progress, the spiritual aspect of Arthur's character, which will aid in his downfall, becomes more noticeable as Tennyson seeks to display God in man. Tennyson believed in the eventual triumph of Christianity, but not in an unadulterated form. If Arthur loosely represents Christianity, then it makes sense that he would be destroyed. Arthur, the foundation and purest form of chivalry dies, but his ideas live on through the words of his remaining knight. The ideals of chivalry become slightly warped and are no longer practiced in their purest form. Tennyson's Arthur dies because his purity cannot overcome the basic animal nature of man. Edward Engleberg asserts, "Certainly one of the main causes of man's fall in Tennyson's



*Idylls of the King* is his surrender to the Passions" (Tennyson 291). The high ideals of Tennyson's Arthur fall prey to the baser instincts of his knights.

In Tennyson, the event that begins the collapse of the Round Table and the demise of Arthur is the same as in Malory: Guinevere and Lancelot's adultery. However, Tennyson's Arthur handles the affair slightly differently. After Guinevere has fled to the sanctuary of a nunnery and just before Arthur's final battle, he comes to her. Tennyson's Arthur holds out forgiveness to the fallen queen while lamenting that they may never be joined on this earth:

I cannot take thy hand [Guinevere]; that too is flesh,  
And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd; and mine own flesh,  
Here looking down on this polluted, cries,  
'I loathe thee;' yet not less, O Guinevere,

. . . . .

My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my life  
So far that my doom is, I love thee still.

. . . Hereafter in that world where all are pure  
We two may meet before high God. (Tennyson 255)

Guinevere has committed a grievous sin, but because Arthur upholds Christian morals, he offers forgiveness as God would. Tennyson's Arthur, feeling troubled and compelled by duty to forgive Guinevere, offers a sharp contrast to Malory's version of Arthur, a man who gives Guinevere no thought once her infidelity has been discovered and she has been sentenced to die. The code, which Malory's Arthur strictly adheres to,

allows no room for such errors as Guinevere has made, but the morality adhered to by Tennyson's Arthur allows forgiveness.

The next actions of Arthur radically show the difference between Tennyson's and Malory's conception of the character. In Tennyson's story, Arthur goes directly from Guinevere's chamber at the nunnery to his final battle with Mordred. Tennyson's battle is narrated by an old Sir Bedivere, the only survivor of the fray, reminiscing about his glorious past. Tennyson destroys Malory's conception of a cold, impersonal Arthur by showing a man gripped in the midst of moral dilemma. Through Bedivere, Tennyson makes the reader privy to Arthur's secret thoughts. Bedivere overhears a dream that Arthur has on his way to the final battle. The words that Tennyson provides Arthur with in his fevered dreams are a troubled cry out to God.

I found Him in the shining of the stars,  
I mark'd Him in the flowering of His fields,  
But in His ways with men I find Him not.  
I waged His wars, and now I pass and die.  
. . . . .  
My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death!

(Tennyson 259)

Arthur's words show that he has searched to find God in man, this search mirrors Tennyson's belief that God could be seen in man. However, Arthur's conclusion contradicts Tennyson's belief. For a moment, Arthur has a crisis of faith in which, like a Victorian man, he cannot find God. However, Tennyson

uses Arthur and his crisis of faith to show that, even though Arthur is unaware of it, he has proven Tennyson's assumption that God can be found in man. Tennyson asserts in this passage that in Arthur's life and work, good triumphs because of an "ultimate moral order" in the universe. However, Arthur looks back on his goodness and recognizes his failure. This causes not only doubts in the moral order, but also in himself and his position as king (F.E.L. Priestly 644).

Tennyson shows Arthur receiving slight relief from his spiritual anguish from the presence of Gawain's ghost. In Malory, the ghost offers a way out of the battle and advice on how Arthur can continue his kingdom. Tennyson's ghost offers no such advice, but he does offer comfort for the doomed king.

Then, ere that last weird battle in the west,  
There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain kill'd  
In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain blown  
Along a wandering wind, and passed his ear  
Went shrilling: "Hollow, hollow all delight!  
Hail, King! to--morrow thou shalt pass away.  
Farewell! there is an isle of rest for thee.  
And I am blown along a wandering wind,  
And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight!"  
And fainter onward . . . and Arthur woke. (206)

Tennyson does not write of an attempted truce between Arthur and Mordred. He can offer Arthur no respite.

Another important difference between Tennyson's Gawain

and Malory's shows in the ghost's arrival. Malory's Gawain has a retinue of the women he had saved while following the code, suggesting that his adherence to the code has aided him in the afterlife. Tennyson's Gawain arrives as an unattended whispering in the wind, suggesting a melancholy lost soul with no hope for rest. There will be no golden rest for him; but then, he failed to adhere to morality in his life in the same manner that Arthur has. In Tennyson's work, Gawain's ghost provides another key idea in the story by beginning and ending his speech to Arthur with the same words: "hollow, hollow all delight." Tennyson's Gawain sadly rants against "hollow delight," and seems to be making the plea for Arthur to cling to his beliefs over the treasures that the world offers. Tennyson's ghost comes to Arthur not as a warning or advisor, but as comfort and answer to the fevered prayers of the sleeping king. The Arthur that Tennyson portrays worries more about his soul and his failure as a king, so Gawain comes to offer him the eternal reward of peace, which Arthur has tried but failed to attain for his subjects at Camelot.

Tennyson's battle lacks the graphic language and realistic approach to war used by Malory. This is probably due to the fact that Tennyson's concern focuses more on the spiritual and intellectual aspects of the battle than the physical aspects. Tennyson's words seem more ethereal. The entire battle is obscured by mist, lending a weird light of unreality to the scene. Tennyson writes,

A death-white mist slept over sand and sea,

Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew  
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell  
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.  
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;  
And some had visions out of golden youth,  
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts  
Look in upon the battle; and in the mist  
Was many a noble deed, and many a base. (261)

Arthur does not turn wood-wroth, but there lies a kind of madness in the fact that people are killing without knowing whom they have slain. This battle delivers the final blow to morality because in the mist that obscures all deeds, the warriors cannot differentiate between good and evil.

Tennyson suspends the narrative action of the last battle so that Arthur, in light of the fact that all of his subjects have fallen, can question the nature of death and his kingship. Tennyson writes these words,

A bitter wind, clear from the north, and blew  
The mist aside, and with that wind the tide  
Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field  
Of battle. But no man was moving there;  
.....  
Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere,  
And whiter than the mist that all day long  
Had held the field of battle was the King:

'Hearest thou this great voice that shakes the world,  
And wastes the narrow realm whereon we move,  
And beats upon the faces of the dead?' (262)

As confusion clears from the battle field with the mist, Arthur begins questioning how he, a man with so much power or a voice which can shake the world, has allowed almost all of his knights to be slain. This questioning echoes the attitudes of the Victorian man as expressed in Levine's book *Backgrounds to Victorian Literature*, when the man questions his place in a world where everything he knew has been changed by social upheaval and the new economic freedoms. Arthur's questioning of who he is without his subjects seems similar to the Victorian man's questioning about his identity. The fast paced changes in Victorian society led not only to a physical sense of displacement as people moved away from their rural roots to the cities, but also a displacement of identity. The new freedom that allowed the Victorians to be anything they wanted to be also caused them to question themselves: "Who do I want to be?" Arthur's words here also display his grief in a poignant and gripping manner: "Confusion, till I know not what I am, /Nor whence I am, nor whether I be a king; /Behold, I seem but king among the dead" (261). Tennyson's portrayal of Arthur's grief finds action in the public denouncement of Mordred. Tennyson writes,

Then spake the King: "My house hath been my doom.  
But call not thou this traitor of my house



Who hath but dwelt beneath one roof with me.  
My house are rather they who sware my vows,  
Yea, even while they brake them, own'd me king.  
When all the puport of my throne hath fail'd,  
That quick or dead thou holdest me for king.  
King am I, whatsoever be their cry;  
And one last act of kinghood shalt thou see  
Yet, ere I pass." And uttering this, the King  
Made at the man. . . . (263)

The Arthur envisioned by Tennyson will not let Mordred escape with so easy a punishment as death. He must moralize his actions and those of his son. Tennyson gives Arthur words to combat Mordred with, proposing that the king declare aloud the unworthiness of Mordred for both family membership and the crown. The Arthur portrayed in Malory has no time for words or questions as he rushes to his death. Tennyson, on the other hand, portrays Arthur as concerned about the upholding of his word and vows until the very end. The impending personal battle with Mordred becomes more than a means of revenge in Tennyson's work.

Although Tennyson has taken artistic license throughout the *Idylls*, he follows the overall foundation of the story in which Mordred delivers the death blow to Arthur. However, Tennyson uses Arthur's last moment to explore how a man driven by faith in a divine power might view death. Tennyson paints the dying king as a man more interested in the state of his soul and in reliving the glories of past friendships



than he is in the state of his kingdom. Arthur laments,

They sleep--the men I loved. I think that we  
Shall never more, at any future time,  
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,  
Walking about the gardens and the halls  
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.

I perish by this people, which I made,- (264)

It seems that Arthur cares more about the loss of his friends than the loss of his kingdom. Tennyson also points out Arthur's concern for his soul,

I have lived my life, and that which I have done  
May He [God] within himself make pure! but thou,  
If thou [Bedivere] shouldst never see my face again,  
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. (270)

Tennyson's Arthur, while unsure as to whether he has lived his life morally, is certain that God will take care of him in death. Tennyson shows an Arthur who relies on the Almighty God in his final moments. This clashes against Malory's version of an Arthur who seeks resolution to his life through the code. In the end, Tennyson's Arthur passes on to Avilion convinced that his faith in God is the most important aspect of his life. The Arthur of Tennyson departs with these words to the mourning Bedivere,

For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.  
But now farewell. I am going a long way

. . . . .  
To the island-valley of Avilion;  
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,  
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies  
Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns  
And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,  
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.

(Tennyson 270)

Tennyson's Arthur wastes no time mourning the loss of his kingdom or of his ideals, since a heavenly reward awaits him in Avilion.

### Section III: The Death of Right Versus Might in White

The world seemed composed of death and madness. Every country joined the fight for freedom or oppression as its leaders saw fit. It seemed that Hitler would rule the world with his message of superiority and hate. In his home in Britain, T.H. White fought a battle with himself over whether or not he should join the forces preparing to oppose Hitler or flee to a life of peace in Ireland. Instead of fleeing to Ireland, White "turned his concern for the events leading to World War II into the unexpected--a highly original

children's book" entitled *The Sword in the Stone* (*Dictionary of Literary Biographies* 308). *The Sword in the Stone* quickly became the opening book of White's four book novel, *The Once and Future King* (1939). While White's work begins as a novel geared towards children, it soon takes on themes and images more suitable for adults. One such theme is the morality of war. John K. Crane in his book *T.H. White* addresses the author's theme of morality in war by saying that White "leaves the reader with a fairy tale on the first reading and with a major satire and demand for reconsideration of human existence on the second" (83). The truth of Crane's assertions appears most clearly in the character of White's Arthur. Neither of the other two works makes Arthur quite so human or quite so interested in being a good king. White's Arthur centers his entire political philosophy on the idea of Might not equaling Right.

In White's novel, the code of chivalry serves as a way to end the present political and social system of might equals right, a theme White starts early in the book. Early in Arthur's kingdom, White illustrates the ideas of Arthur's humanity and his chosen use of the code in a conversation between Merlin and Arthur after one of the king's first major battles. White writes,

"Well," said Arthur, "I must say it is nice to be a king. It was a splendid battle." [To which Merlin replies,] "Do you think so? . . . What is all this chivalry, anyway? It simply means being rich enough to

have a castle and a suit of armor, and then, when you have them you make the Saxon people do what you like. . . . Might is Right, that's the motto . . . but look at the country. Look at the barns burnt and the dead men's legs sticking out of ponds, and mills falling down . . . and nobody daring to walk abroad with gold or ornaments on their clothes, That is chivalry now days." (225)

The result is that Arthur responds very simply with "Might isn't right, is it, Merlin?" (225) There White shows that Arthur has received the proper moral training from Merlin; he recognizes the sanctity of human life.

White's Arthur spends much of his time learning how to be a good king and a good man. His humanity serves as the key element in all that he does. This Arthur is not the hero portrayed by Malory or the spiritual king of Tennyson.

White's Arthur makes mistakes and has to learn how to be an adult the same as any other person. White's character depends neither wholly on the code for his decisions, as Malory's does, nor on an idea of religious morality similar to Tennyson's; instead, White's king depends on his humanity to steer him in the correct direction. Crane suggests that,

I am quite certain that he [White] saw himself both in Merlin and Wart [King Arthur's boyhood nickname]-the man who thought more about daily existence and its ultimate meaning than most of his contemporaries and

the boy who could never learn enough to place the entire experience, in its multitudinous forms, in a unified experience. (83)

White removes Arthur from the realm of myth and puts him into the realm of reality by basing the character on himself. Arthur is not a legendary king and beast slayer, but a boy with an odd nickname and "fair hair and a stupid face." (225)

White shows Arthur at his most human in the section entitled "Candle in the Wind." This final section of the novel finds Arthur pensive as he considers all of the work that has been done to make his kingdom peaceful and all of the lives that have been lost. Through Arthur's thoughts, White reveals the entire truth of the book Arthur used might against might in order to create right. However, might used for oppression in any form still leads to destruction. White ends his novel not with the final battle between Arthur and his son, but with Arthur's pondering the night before the last battle. White envisions Arthur alone in his tent, the narrator's words come not from a fevered dream or a third person perspective, but they come from a man fully aware of his failings as a king and human being. White writes

The reading desk and its seat were made in one piece, and there the King himself sat drooping. . . . He looked as if he were dead--he nearly was. Arthur was tired out. (628)

Arthur is a man grown weary with the very idea of war.

Arthur does not spend his last night mourning the loss

of fame or his kingdom or even the destruction of the code. Instead, he grieves because he has been unable to make the world a better place; he has failed to uphold the sanctity of human life. Arthur muses,

His wife was a prisoner. His oldest friend was banished. His son was trying to kill him. Gawain was buried. His table was dispersed. . . . Yet he could have breasted all these things in some way, if the central tenet of his heart had not been ravaged. Long ago, when his mind had been a nimble boy's called Wart . . . he had been taught to believe that man was perfectible: that he was on the whole more decent than beastly: that good was worth trying. (628)

Arthur seems to marvel at his own humanity, at the evil in himself and its ability to overcome his good intentions. Interestingly, White's portrayal of Arthur makes the king the most upright man in the book. White's Arthur sees goodness in everyone, even his adulterous wife and cowardly best friend. This ability to see good serves as a reflection of Arthur's soul. However, the night before the final battle, Arthur doubts himself and his goodness. White asserts

He had been forged as a weapon for the aid of man, on the assumption that men were good . . . looking back on his life it seemed to him that he had been struggling all the time to dam a flood, which, whenever he had checked it, had broken through at a new place. (628)

Crane comments on Arthur's questioning by saying that White

has examined a character in conflict with himself "when [his] developed noble ideals fight furiously to overcome [his] inbred selfishness and inadequacies" (99).

At this point, White's Arthur shows the maturity that he has obtained. White points out, through Arthur's thoughts about why man makes war, that Arthur has been transformed from a simple farm hand into a king. White's Arthur has found strength and humanity in caring for others. White leaves Arthur thinking that with this new-found knowledge, he will be able to return to Camelot and begin a new and better Round Table. White ends the book with the words, "It was too late for another effort then. For that time it was his destiny to die, or, as some say, to be carried off to Avilion, where he could wait for better days" (639). The final words of White's book are "The Beginning" indicating that hope lies in the future for those who will heed Arthur's advice and seek the goodness in themselves and others.

### **Conclusion: The End is Only the Beginning**

The works of these three authors are only a few examples of countless retellings of King Arthur available today. Aside from these literary works, there are many others, including entire fantasy series still being produced for both adults and children. The various media involved in the retelling includes movies, recent television productions, and



even a musical produced for the Broadway stage. The Arthurian legend has permeated American society so much that the name of Camelot has become synonymous with the presidential administration of John F. Kennedy.

Malory, Tennyson, and White all turned to the Arthurian legends during a time of upheaval in their societies. The question remains, what upheavals in modern society are the authors of the new re-tellings protesting? A few years ago, *First Knight* (1995), a movie starring actors Sean Connery and Richard Gere was released to theaters. This re-telling focuses on the relationship between Guinevere, played by actress Julia Ormond, and Lancelot, played by Gere. The story differs significantly from the foundational story written upon by Malory, Tennyson, and White. The emphasis is less on Arthur, his kingdom, or the code, and more on the romance between Lancelot and Guinevere. While Connery portrays King Arthur as a man in love with both his kingdom and his wife, his sensitivity and intelligence are pushed aside because of the age difference between him and Guinevere. Gere's Lancelot only becomes a member of the Round Table so that he can be close to Guinevere. The implication is that the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere is right both because they are young lovers, as opposed to Arthur and Guinevere's May-December marriage, and because Guinevere has inspired Lancelot to be a better man. In the movie, King Arthur still dies, but as he dies he leaves the kingdom and his wife to Lancelot. Does this then

imply that modern society is concerned with adultery or with a happy ending?

In the end, anyone wishing to enjoy the Arthurian legend, in any medium, needs to be aware of the foundational story as recorded by Geoffery of Monmouth and later, the French authors of the *chansons de geste*. Being aware of the changes an author makes in the basic story of King Arthur will not only aid the reader in finding the author's major themes, but give the reader a clue as to what the social concerns were during the author's time period.

## Works Cited

- Aries, Philippe. *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Trans. by Patricia M. Ranum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Buckley, Jerome Hamilton. *Tennyson The Growth Of A Poet*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961.
- Chapman, Raymond. *The Victorian Debate*. New York: Basic, 1968.
- Crane, John K. *T.H. White*. New York: Twayne, 1974.
- Fredeman, William E. and Ira B. Nodel, eds. *Dictionary of Literary Biographies*. "Alfred Lord Tennyson." Detroit: Gale, 1984.
- Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Gillingham, John. *The Wars of the Roses*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981.
- Goodman, Anthony. *The Wars of the Roses: Military Activity and English Society, 1452-97*. New York: Dorset, 1990.
- Goodrich, Norma Lorre. *King Arthur*. New York: Harper, 1986.
- Gurteen, S. Humphreys. *The Arthurian Epic*. New York: Haskell, 1895.
- Helterman, Jeffrey. "Sir Thomas Malory." *Dictionary of Literary Biographies*. Detroit: 1994.
- Houghton, Walter E., ed., *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.
- Keenan, Hugh T. "T.H. White." *The Dictionary of Literary*

- Biographies*. Detroit:1996.
- Lacy, Norris J. and Geoffery Ashe. *The Arthurian Handbook*.  
New York: Garland, 1988.
- Levine, Richard A. *Backgrounds to Victorian Literature*. San  
Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1967.
- Loomis, Roger Sherman. *The Development of the Arthurian  
Romance*. New York: Norton, 1963.
- Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte D' Arthur*. New York: The Modern  
Library, 1999.
- . *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Eugene Vinaver, ed. London:  
Oxford UP, 1968.
- Matthews, William. *The Ill-Framed Knight*. Berkely and Los  
Angeles: California UP, 1966.
- Norton Anthology of English Literature The*. M.H. Abrams, et  
al eds. Vol. 1, *Morte Darthur*, by Sir Thomas Malory. New  
York: Norton, 1993.
- Pinion, F.B. *A Tennyson Companion*. New York: St. Martin's,  
1984.
- Reiss, Edmund. *Sir Thomas Malory*. New York: Twayne, 1966.
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *Idylls of the King*. New York:  
Bantam, 1965.
- Tennyson's Poetry; A Norton Critical Edition*. Robert W. Hill  
Jr., ed. "Tennyson's Idylls." F.E.L. Priestly. New York:  
Norton 1971.
- Weir, Alison. *The Wars of the Roses*. New York: Ballantine,  
1995.
- White, T.H. *The Once and Future King*. New York: Ace, 1958.