



Arthurian Intertextualities

Misreading and Rereading Malory's *Morte Darthur*
and the Alliterative and Stanzaic *Mortes*

Fiona Tolhurst and K. S. Whetter



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University of Michigan Press
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Dedication

Professor Fiona Tolhurst, my longtime friend and more recent collaborator, died unexpectedly as we were preparing this book for production. As we said when we first submitted the manuscript to the University of Michigan Press for review, the main argument was complete, so at the time of Fiona's death, after the book had been accepted, all that remained to be done was to finish modifying the footnotes to Chicago citation style and to make the usual sort of minor last-minute adjustments that improve clarity. As had been the case throughout the writing of the entire book, which was a genuinely collaborative, fifty-fifty undertaking, we divided this preparatory work equally and kept in constant contact. In the last conversation I had with Fiona, a mere ten days before her death, we planned some brief clarifications about how better to describe Palomydes and Priamus in Chapter 1 and discussed some remaining bibliographic matters. All of this is to say that everything you read after this dedication is not only the result of a fruitful and beautiful stint of extensive cowriting; what follows is the final version of *Arthurian Intertextualities* as Fiona intended and saw through till almost all but the proofs stage. Since the book's argument was complete and since the book was important to Fiona—as it is now, albeit in a very different way, so very important to me—Fiona's husband Christoph and I felt that the publication of the book should continue. *Arthurian Intertextualities* is entirely as Fiona wanted.

I have, though, made one substantial change and one change only that Fiona did not see or at least discuss with me in advance. *Arthurian Intertextualities* was originally going to be dedicated to our families. In the wake of Fiona's sudden death on the 21 December 2021, this book is now dedicated to her: to Fiona Tolhurst, a most worshipful collaborator and friend, and a rigorous and insightful scholar.

K. S. Whetter

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Illustration

Figure 1. Arthur and the giant in the illustration prefacing
Morte Arthure in Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91, folio 52v 159

Abbreviations

- aMA *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Mary Hamel. New York: Garland Publishing, 1984.
- Arthurian Women *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*. Edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst. Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001.
- Bruce Bruce's Introduction and Notes to the text of sMA, below.
- C *Le Morte d'Arthur: Printed by William Caxton 1485*. Introduction by Paul Needham. London: Scolar Press, 1976.
- Field Field's Introduction, Apparatus, or Commentary on the text of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, below.
- Hamel Hamel's Introduction and Notes to the text of aMA, above.
- MD The text of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, from Field's edition: Sir Thomas Malory. *Le Morte Darthur*. Edited by P. J. C. Field. 2 vols. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013.
- MED *Middle English Dictionary*. Edited by Frances McSparran. Online edition. University of Michigan, 2001.
- Originality *Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of "Le Morte Darthur."* Edited by R. M. Lumiansky. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964.
- Reassessment *The "Alliterative Morte Arthure": A Reassessment of the Poem*. Edited by Karl Heinz Göller. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981.
- sMA *Le Morte Arthur: A Romance in Stanzas of Eight Lines*.

Edited by J. Douglas Bruce. EETS e.s. 88. London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1903.

- Tale I Malory's "Fro the Maryage of Kynge Uther unto Kyng Arthur that Regned Aftir Hym and ded Many Batayles" in the Winchester *explicit*; Caxton's Books I–IV; Vinaver's "The Tale of King Arthur"; Field's "King Uther and King Arthur."
- Tale II Malory's "The Tale of the Noble Kynge Arthur that was Emperoure Hymself Thorow Dygnyté of His Hondys" at the beginning of its Winchester *explicit*, but also called "The Noble Tale betwyxt Kynge Arthur and Lucius the Emperour of Rome" in the final lines of the same *explicit*; Caxton's Book V; Vinaver's "The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself Through Dignity of His Hands"; Field's "King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius."
- Tale III Malory's "Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake"; Caxton's Book VI; Vinaver's "The Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake"; Field's "Sir Launcelot du Lake."
- Tale IV Malory's "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney"; Caxton's Book VII; Vinaver's "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was Called Bewmaynes"; Field's "Sir Gareth of Orkney."
- Tale V Malory's "Trystram," comprising "The Fyrste Boke of Syr Trystram de Lyones" and "The Secunde Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones"; Caxton's Books VIII–XII; Vinaver's "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones"; Field's "Sir Tristram de Lyones: The First Book" and "Sir Tristram de Lyones: The Second Book."
- Tale VI Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal"; Caxton's Books XIII–XVII; Vinaver's "The Tale of the Sankgreal Briefly Drawn Out of French, Which Is a Tale Chronicled for One of the Truest and One of the Holiest That Is in This World"; Field's "The Sankgreal."
- Tale VII Malory's "The Tale of Sir Launcelot"; Caxton's Books XVIII–XIX; long known by Vinaver's editorial title "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere"; renamed by Field "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere."

- Tale VIII Malory's "The Moste Pyteuous Tale of The Morte Arthure Saunz Gwerdon"; Caxton's Books XX–XXI; Vinaver's "The Most Piteous Tale of The Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon"; Field's "The Morte Arthur." This Tale is sometimes called "The Death of Arthur" by modern scholars.
- Vinaver Vinaver's Introduction, Apparatus, or Commentary to the 3rd ed. of *Works* (below).
- W The Winchester manuscript: London, British Library, Additional Manuscript 59678.
- Works* Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Edited by Eugène Vinaver. 3rd ed. revised by P. J. C. Field. Oxford: Clarendon, 1990.

Note on Citations

To save space, we have usually not given subtitles in footnote citations, restricting the footnotes to author, main title, and publication information. Full details and full titles of all sources are of course supplied in the Bibliography. When quoting the primary texts, we do not reproduce editorial brackets.

Acknowledgments

Because this book has taken several years to complete, we owe debts of gratitude to many people. To our colleagues at the August 2019 Malory at 550 conference at Acadia University as well as at several conferences sponsored by the International Arthurian Society and the International Congress of Medieval Studies, we owe thanks for thoughtful responses to conference papers that became chapters of this book.

Since bits and pieces of the book have also appeared in print in article form, we owe thanks to our editors at both *Arthuriana* and *Arthurian Literature* for allowing us to reprint in a different form material initially published in their pages. Our coauthored Introduction to a collection of essays on the stanzaic *Morte* that first appeared as “Re-Evaluating the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: Content and Contexts,” in *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 3–14, got reworked into both the Introduction to, and Chapter 2 of, *Arthurian Intertextualities*. The article “Standing Up for the Stanzaic-Poet: Artistry, Characterization, and Narration in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 86–113, is considerably reworked into Chapters 2 and 4 of the current book, just as our coauthored “Memories of War: Retracting the Interpretive Tradition of the Alliterative *Morte Arthur*,” first appearing in *Arthuriana* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 88–108, forms the nucleus of the now much longer argument that comprises Chapter 3. Finally, Fiona Tolhurst’s “Eradicating Victorian Backreading: Re-reading Malory’s Gwenyvere through Gaynour and Isode,” initially appearing in *Arthurian Literature* 38 (2022), gets considerably reworked as Chapter 4. In each case, the argument in *Arthurian Intertextualities* expands considerably upon these earlier article iterations, so this book includes much material that could not appear in the shorter articles. We hope that our own whole book is greater than its individual parts.

To the readers of earlier versions of the whole or parts of this monograph, we are grateful for invaluable feedback: special thanks go to Michael W. Twomey, Karen Cherewatuk, and especially Edward Donald Kennedy. For discussion, advice, and support about the project, we are much indebted to Elizabeth Archibald, Dorrie Armstrong, Steve Atkinson, Ben Barootes, Tom Crofts, P. J. C. Field, David F. Johnson, Amy S. Kaufman, Kevin Grimm, Megan Leitch, Alan and Barbara Lupack, Molly Martin, and Cory James Rushton. Our interlibrary loans departments, especially at Acadia, have been fantastic in helping to acquire almost everything we needed. Ellen Bauerle and Juliette Snyder at the University of Michigan Press have been a pleasure to work with.

Finally, we are grateful to our families for their love and support throughout the composition and production process—a process made more than usually complicated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This book is dedicated to them [—or at least it was going to be, until Fiona Tolhurst’s death changed that dedication; *Arthurian Intertextualities* is now dedicated to Fiona. We close this book by discussing memories: Fiona’s smile remains one of the brightest things in my own museum of recollection {KSW}].

Timeline of Selected Medieval Arthurian Texts

- c. 1138 Geoffrey of Monmouth completes *De gestis Britonum* [*Concerning the Deeds of the Britons*], commonly known as *Historia regum Britanniae* [*The History of the Kings of Britain*].
- 1155 Wace's *Roman de Brut*
- 1170–1180s Chrétien de Troyes composes his Arthurian romances.
- c. 1200 Lazamon's *Brut*
- c. 1215–30 The Vulgate Cycle, also known as the *Lancelot–Grael* Cycle
L'Estoire de Saint Graal
prose *Merlin*
prose *Lancelot* [preceded by a non-cyclic version]
La Queste del Saint Graal
La Mort le Roi Artu
- c. 1230–35 prose *Tristan*
- c. 1235–40 The Post-Vulgate Cycle, also known as the *Roman du Graal*
- c. 1375–78 *Morte Arthure* (also known as the alliterative *Morte Arthure*)
- c. 1350–1400 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- c. 1400 *Le Morte Arthur* (also known as the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*)
- 1469–70 Sir Thomas Malory completes *Le Morte Darthur*. The usual estimate is that it took about two years to compose the entire *Arthuriad*.
- 1485 William Caxton publishes Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*.
- 1934 Discovery of the Winchester manuscript, now BL Add MS 59678

Introduction

Malory's Morte Darthur, Its English Sources, and Their Critics



In an influential interpretation of Sir Thomas Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal," Charles Moorman contrasts Bors with Launcelot, arguing that Bors is able to achieve the transition from earthly to celestial knighthood that Launcelot—Moorman claims—cannot.¹ Although neither R. M. Lumiansky nor Charles W. Whitworth agrees with all of Moorman's claims, they both treat Malory's Bors as a foil for Launcelot despite viewing this foil as the hero's friend and companion.² This notion of Bors as "Lancelot's chief supporter"³ and companion is an example of the long-standing tradition in hero stories (whether epics or romances) of assigning to select heroes a beloved companion who functions as a yardstick, double, stand-in, or foil.⁴ This type of hero-companion relationship exists between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Cú Chulainn and Ferdia, Roland and Olivier, and—especially—Achilles and Patroklos. Cei and Bedwyr, and to a lesser extent Arthur and

1. Charles Moorman, "The Tale of the Sankgreal," in *Originality*, 197. (For full publication details of initial entries like this where the book title is shortened, see our Abbreviations list.)

2. R. M. Lumiansky, "Malory's Steadfast Bors," *Tulane Studies in English* 8 (1958): 5–20; Charles W. Whitworth, "The Sacred and Secular in Malory's *Tale of the Sankgreal*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 5 (1975): 25–28.

3. Lumiansky, "Malory's Steadfast Bors," 18.

4. We define the term *hero* below, but we use it in the traditional literary sense of a specific type of character, either the epic-heroic warrior or the romance knight.

Cei, have a similar relationship in the Welsh Arthurian tradition—at least until Arthur unintentionally insults Cei in *Culhwch ac Olwen*.⁵ Gwalchmei (Gawain) in *Culhwch* receives praise both for being “the best of riders” and for never returning home without having completed his task, and in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history not only is Gualguainus (Gawain) knighted by the Pope, but he also receives praise for his prowess and heroism when battling the Romans.⁶ It is, however, the English Arthurian tradition that most obviously pairs Gawain with Arthur. Even Geoffrey Chaucer, who is notoriously unenthusiastic about Arthurian romance, allows his Squire to use Gawain as the measure of courtliness, while texts as diverse as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c.1350 to 1400), *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Watheleyne* (first quarter of the fifteenth century), and *The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnelle* (circa 1450) all present Gawain as Arthur’s champion and trusted counselor.⁷

Within this hero-story tradition, Launcelot is notable in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (completed 1469–70)—to say nothing of its French and English sources—for having several close companions, including his avid admirer Lavayne and his spiritually superior son Galahad. Nevertheless, with the exception of the Grail Quest section, Bors is Launcelot’s closest companion throughout Malory’s book, and Malory’s audience will note the prominence of this hero-companion pairing in the *Morte*’s final sections. Bors even acts as Launcelot’s stand-in: first he agrees to defend Gwenyvere in Launcelot’s absence (*MD* 795.30–797.19), and then he fights on his companion’s behalf

5. See *Culhwch and Olwen*, ed. Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), 35, lines 975–84; *Culhwch and Olwen*, in *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, rev. ed. (London: Everyman, 1993), 106. Given our intertextual focus, and to aid readerly comprehension, we spell characters’ names according to each text’s linguistic tradition: Welsh *Gwalchmai*, French *Gauvain*, English *Gawain* or *Gawayne*, etc.

6. *Culhwch and Olwen*, ed. Bromwich and Evans, 15, lines 404–7; *Culhwch and Olwen*, trans. Jones and Jones, 91; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 154.241–43, 172.381–87, 173.401–3.

7. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Squire’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), lines 95–97. On the English Gawain tradition, see especially B. J. Whiting’s classic essay “Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesies and His Appearance in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*,” *Mediaeval Studies* 9 (1947): 189–234; and Roger Dalrymple, “Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance,” in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 265–77. For the influence of Arthurian romance on Chaucer, see Edward Donald Kennedy, “Gower, Chaucer, and French Prose Arthurian Romance,” *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 55–90.

at the Siege of Benwick (909.3–10).⁸ Bors, therefore, enhances Launcelot's heroism through his own.

The preceding précis of a select group of modern scholarly interpretations of Malory's Launcelot, filtered through our own interpretation of Launcelot within the context of the literary trope of the hero and companion, illustrates how we conceive of a key term in our title: *intertextualities*. The term *intertextuality* now denotes numerous and potentially contradictory meanings. As will become apparent in the pages that follow, our concern with misreading and rereading the three English *Mortes* often focuses on relations between characters or between characters and themes *within* given texts. Our focus on intertextuality, however, means that our overarching concern is to highlight relations between—and the benefits of comparing—characters, themes, plots, motifs, and contexts *across* texts.

As a theoretical construct, the term *intertextualité* is generally associated nowadays with Julia Kristeva, who coined the term in the mid- to late 1960s to denote what she considered to be the movement of dialogic signs and structures from one text or system to another.⁹ Because Kristeva's prose is often obscure, her description of how intertextuality functions never receives clear articulation, but the concept is a useful one. At first glance, our analysis of the interrelations of texts, authors, plots, and characters seems similar to Kristeva's assertion that a "literary structure . . . is generated in relation to *another* structure"; therefore, the "text is . . . a permutation of texts, an intertextuality."¹⁰ It is thus tempting to argue that what Kristeva sees as a text's relational absorption or displacement is similar to what literary critics—prior to the emergence of structuralist or modernist theory (or even, if one considers Kristeva postmodern, postmodernist theory)—used to refer to as the *influence* of one text or author upon another: the borrowings from or allusions to a previous author or text by a later author or text. Even Roland Barthes considers the text to be "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable

8. All textual references will be parenthetical by page.lines, citing *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Field (as in our Abbreviations list). Contrary to Vinaver's *Works*, Field's entire text of *Morte Darthur* is in his vol. 1, with vol. 2 containing the entire Apparatus and Commentary, so we omit the volume number in textual citations.

9. Julia Kristeva, "The Bounded Text" and "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," both of which are widely available in translation in *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36–63 and 64–91. Both essays originally appeared in *Σημειωτική / Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

10. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," 64–65, and "Bounded Text," 36.

centres of culture,”¹¹ and one of our primary aims in *Arthurian Intertextualities* is to map out and analyze the contextual and textual tissues that Malory shares with, and frequently adapts from, his English predecessors.

However, notwithstanding Linda Hutcheon’s laudable argument that “intertextuality and influence” are best considered “complementary, not oppositional” constructs,¹² our approach to intertextuality is quite different from that of Kristeva or Barthes, both of whom focus primarily upon the modern novel and, arguably, on how modern texts or theories destabilize textual authority. Our contentions, in contrast, are not only that each of the medieval texts we analyze here—the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*—is (at least relatively) stable, but also that the textual stability, themes, and characters of each text become especially apparent when the totality of each text is examined *and* when each text is analyzed alongside the other two. Such comparative analysis reveals the characters, plots, themes, and even specific phrasing that Malory shared with and adapted from his two main English sources.

It is also important for our purposes to remember that, although modern literary *theory* associates intertextuality with Kristeva, the literary and authorial *practice* of intertextuality is, to borrow Norris J. Lacy’s phrase, “as old as literature itself.”¹³ The range of authorial and textual borrowings, allusions, and influence at work in, say, Homer, the Epic Cycle, or Greek Old Comedy encouraged scholars of Classical literature to study traditional intertextual connections regardless of whether or not they shared Kristeva’s theoretical stance; indeed, much excellent Classical literary criticism explores connections between texts with no mention of Kristeva.¹⁴ Early Modern poetry and

11. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fortuna, 1977), 142–48 (quoting 146).

12. Linda Hutcheon, “Literary Borrowing . . . and Stealing: Plagiarism, Sources, Influences, and Intertexts,” *English Studies in Canada* 12, no. 2 (1986): 230–31.

13. Norris J. Lacy, preface to *Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1996), vii. Cf. Marjolein Hogenbirk, “Intertextuality,” in *Handbook of Arthurian Romance*, ed. Leah Tether and Johnny McFadyen (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 183. This traditional idea of intertextuality is apparent, in different terms, in T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in his *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), 47–59.

14. To take one notable Classical example, a convenient overview of the myriad threads of political, cultural, military, and literary allusions, jokes, and parodies in Aristophanes’s *Frogs* (405 BCE)—including its debate between Aeschylus and Euripides for the Underworld Chair of Tragedy—is offered in Sommerstein’s Introduction and Commentary: *Frogs*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1996). For an explicitly intertextual study of Old Comedy, see Zachary P. Biles,

drama were equally interrelational, with poets and playwrights echoing and responding to one another's works on a regular basis. This premodern form of intertextuality consists of more allusion and influence than does Kristeva's version, and this is the type of intertextuality likewise present in medieval texts like the three English *Mortes*.

Much medieval literature was highly interrelational and intertextual, whether the text or author being imitated or invoked was part of oral tradition, a real or putative written source, another romance author, or God himself. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner warns, in a genre as formulaic as medieval romance, scholars must take care to distinguish actual intertextual connections from the commonplace emergence of mere generic conventions.¹⁵ Nevertheless, to quote Lacy again, "medievalists . . . have routinely recognized that . . . texts [and, we would add, authors] consistently borrowed from one another and from the traditions they all shared."¹⁶ Such borrowings and influence comprise a major traditional form of intertextuality, and, by this measure, Arthurian literature has always been exceptionally intertextual.

Thus, in *Arthurian Intertextualities*, a major focus is the presence and significance of authorial and textual borrowing, adaptation, and influence. One text's or author's intertextual engagement with another text or author "can take the form of thematic echoes, of the appropriation of characters and situations, and even of direct citation."¹⁷ Intertextual connections between texts, what Bruckner calls "the play between . . . texts,"¹⁸ thus involve borrowing, adapting, alluding to, echoing, or explicitly playing with the wording, narrative, plot, theme, or characterization from one or more previous texts in a new text. Other types of intertextual play include abbreviation, amplification, "explanation, rationalization," and "doubling and displacement."¹⁹ It is these kinds of textual and authorial relations that inform our title and much of our interpretative focus.

Aristophanes and the Poetics of Competition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); we are indebted to Ian C. Story for this reference.

15. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Intertextuality," in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly, and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), vol. 1, 232–33.

16. Lacy, preface, vii. For one such Arthurian set of explicit borrowings and adaptations, see Schmolke-Hasselmann's account of Chrétien's epigones: Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, trans. Margaret and Roger Middleton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

17. Lacy, preface, vii. For more on the variety of Arthurian intertextualities and approaches, see Hogenbirk, "Intertextuality," 183–98.

18. Bruckner, "Intertextuality," 223.

19. Bruckner, "Intertextuality," 240–45.

Having established this definition of Arthurian intertextuality, we offer an additional clarification, one that again differentiates our approach from some contemporary theoretical practices. Many postmodernist intertextual studies are almost exclusively reader-based or (reader-)reception-based, a position taken to its extreme form in Barthes's famous dictum that the author is dead.²⁰ Our insistence on the importance of the relationships between the three Middle English *Mortes* is by no means a valorization of the reader over the author. It is true, as C. S. Lewis observed, that modern readers, whether amateur or professional, "partly make what we read."²¹ Yet if source-study of *Le Morte Darthur* has established anything, it should be that there was—contra Barthes—an authorial hand assembling the tissues of Malory's Arthurian. The same is true of the unknown poets who composed the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and alliterative *Morte Arthure*. It is also true that each of these Middle English authors was a reader of earlier Arthurian texts: Malory especially was influenced by both the alliterative *Morte* and the stanzaic *Morte*, along with numerous other sources. We therefore employ a more authorial and text-based model of intertextuality in part because we give more emphasis to our medieval authors' reading and writing than do many scholars using reader-based theoretical models, including Kristeva and especially Barthes or even Bruckner. Even Malorian source-study, concerned as it partly is with the presence and significance of borrowings from one text in another, is to some degree a study of (traditional) intertextuality, even if it is never given that name. Thus, to avoid using too much of our own narrative space on theorizing the definition(s) of intertextuality itself, we return to the matter of our title and our analytical focus: the elucidation of the literary, thematic, characterial, and contextual relationships between the three *Mortes*—including Malory's use of these texts as well as the use made of them by modern scholars. Hence our notion of a plural *Arthurian Intertextualities*. We use the plural form of this word to reflect our concern not only with intertextual connections between Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1469–70) and both the *Morte Arthure* (c. 1375–78, commonly referred to as the alliterative *Morte Arthure*) and *Le Morte Arthur* (c. 1400, commonly referred to as the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*), but also with the critical traditions connected to all three of these Arthurian works—critical traditions that constitute additional intertexts.²²

20. Barthes, "Death of the Author," 142–48.

21. C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*," in *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 22.

22. For the dating of the *aMA*, see P. J. C. Field, "*Morte Arthure*, the Montagus and Milan," *Medium Ævum* 78 (2009): 98–117.

In the chapters that follow, we re-examine several intertextual pairings of plot, structure, theme, and character in *Le Morte Darthur* and the stanzaic and alliterative *Mortes*. These narrative, structural, thematic, and characterial intertexts are significant in their own right, but here they have a particular purpose: to develop new readings of each of the Middle English Arthurian *Mortes* and the relations between them. Although the stanzaic and alliterative *Mortes* are two of Malory's most important English sources, they derive from different literary traditions: the former derives from the romance tradition and the latter from the epic-heroic. At the same time, since there are standard critical approaches that undergird the current interpretation of the stanzaic and alliterative *Mortes* as well as many aspects of Malory's *Morte*, we will treat the standard critical reception of each of these three literary texts as an intertext in its own right. We do so in order to argue that the scholarly positions and interpretive traditions that continue to shape Arthurian studies require rigorous rereading. A focus on the intertextual connections not only between Malory's book and these two poems but also between these three texts and their modern literary-critical intertexts yields two key results: it brings to light significant gaps in existing scholarship on Sir Thomas Malory's late-fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*, and it reveals major flaws in the dominant scholarly interpretations of these two Middle English poems, poems whose influence on Malory's Arthuriad most critics have repeatedly underestimated.²³

Rereading Malory's *Morte*

Given the prominence of source-study in Arthurian scholarship since 1891, we are certainly not working *ex nihilo*.²⁴ Indeed, we are consciously building

23. All textual references will be parenthetical by line numbers, citing *Morte Arthure*, ed. Hamel (as in our abbreviations list), sometimes abbreviated to *aMA*, and *Le Morte Arthur*, ed. Bruce (as in the Abbreviations list), sometimes abbreviated to *sMA*.

24. Although Southey made considerable headway in tracing and describing Malory's sources for the 1817 Longman edition, modern source-study of Malory's *Morte* might be said to begin with Sommer: Robert Southey, introduction and notes to *The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of Kyng Arthur*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1817); H. Oskar Sommer, ed., *Le Morte Darthur by Syr Thomas Malory*, vol. 3: *Studies on the Sources* (London: Nutt, 1891). The most influential—and reliable—modern source-studies are those by Robert H. Wilson, Eugène Vinaver, and P. J. C. Field. For details of some of these critics' works and a recent overview of Malory's sources, see our Bibliography and especially Ralph Norris, "Malory and His Sources," in *A New Companion to Malory*, ed. Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 32–52.

upon the work of the staunchest defenders of Malory's English sources: Terence McCarthy and Edward Donald Kennedy, especially the latter.²⁵ In the chapters that follow, we will link several sections of Malory's book to these two English sources in order to reveal that Malory's debt to the English *Morte* tradition is even greater than current scholarship usually acknowledges. By doing so, we will argue that Malory prepares for *Le Morte Darthur's* tragic ending through several plot strands that involve many characters other than Arthur, Launcelot, and Gwenyvere, and that these interweavings of characters and themes occur throughout the narrative—not only in its famous final Tales, Tales VII and VIII.

With this book we attempt to fill a major gap in scholarship on Malory's *Morte Darthur*: namely, detailed analysis of Malory's debt to the alliterative and stanzaic *Mortes*. Malory's use of these two texts has, of course, long been known, but the full extent of that debt has yet to be documented. For one thing, much contemporary scholarship focuses on Malory's French rather than his English sources, a focus encouraged by Malory's own repeated citation and seeming valorization of the "auctorysed" French Book (*MD* 940.9–10).²⁶ Malory's seeming preference for French romance over English was explicitly reinforced and popularized by one of his most influential twentieth-century critics: Eugène Vinaver. Vinaver's remarks on Malory's "Boke off Sir Trystram" typify Vinaver's conviction that French romance was generally superior to English romance.²⁷ Malory, however, cites "the Frensshe book" not only when he follows one or more actual French sources but also when he departs from them. We therefore contend that Malory's invocation of the intertextual and, for Malory, multitudinous "Frensshe Book" should encourage as much in-depth study of his *English* sources as of his French ones. Accordingly, *Arthurian Intertextualities* offers the first book-length study to

25. See particularly Terence McCarthy, "Malory and His Sources," in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 75–95 (especially 75, 84, 94–95); and Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory and His English Sources," in *Aspects of Malory*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 27–55 (with the notes on 189–93).

26. As Robert H. Wilson observes, Malory makes seventy references to the French book, some of which are accurate, but many of which disguise Malory's originality: "Malory's 'French Book' Again," *Comparative Literature* 2 (1950): 173. Tomomi Kato, ed., *A Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1974), 237, lists thirty-eight explicit references to a "French book" (with various spellings), but Wilson's fuller count is corroborated by P. J. C. Field, "Malory's Minor Sources," in *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 27.

27. Vinaver, 1445–48. Cf. notes 49 and 50, below.

re-examine the full extent of Malory's debt to the English poetic *Mortes*. Two primary goals of this study are to defend the often-disparaged stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and to correct the usual interpretation of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* as a martial poem that supposedly critiques both war and Arthur's tyrannical kingship. The reevaluation of these poems is, we believe, important for its own sake. However, by pairing these poems with each other as well as with Malory's prose *Arthuriad*, we are able to offer new insights into all three of these pivotal English Arthurian texts—including the less-traveled areas of Malory's narrative landscape such as the Roman War and Trystram sections. Offering fresh readings of the undervalued narrative sections of Malory's "Hoole Book" is our third goal.

Although both the stanzaic and the alliterative *Morte* focus exclusively on the final days of Arthur's reign, the approach of each poet and therefore the plot content of each poem is quite different. Taking our cue from Malory himself, who made generous use of both poems at various points throughout what he called "The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Round Table" (*MD* 940.16–20), we hope to reveal how highlighting current gaps in the scholarship on Malory and the English *Mortes* creates exciting opportunities for renewed debate and innovative research. It is also essential to stress that Malory was influenced by the genre of each of these poems as much as by their subject matter and handling of the characters.²⁸ Malory's most obvious use of the alliterative *Morte* occurs early in *Le Morte Darthur*, in his Roman War narrative in Tale II, while his use of the stanzaic *Morte* occurs predominantly in the final two Tales. Nevertheless, because the stanzaic *Morte* tends to be less studied than its alliterative counterpart, we shall invert critical norms by devoting at least as much attention to the stanzaic poem as to its more popular and more often praised counterpart. Privileging the stanzaic *Morte* over the alliterative *Morte* facilitates greater awareness of not only the stanzaic-poet's artistry but also Malory's recognition of, and intertextual building upon, that artistry. Awareness of how much Malory's artistry depends upon that of his stanzaic predecessor is crucial to understanding how Malory manipulates romance expectations and traditions as well as how he develops his characters.

28. On the genre of the English poems, see K. S. Whetter, "The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Medieval Tragedy," *Reading Medieval Studies* 28 (2002): 87–111, and K. S. Whetter, "Genre as Context in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Arthuriana* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 45–65. On the genre of Malory's *Morte*, see K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), especially 99–149.

Rereading the Stanzaic *Morte*

The ongoing critical neglect of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is undoubtedly the largest gap in scholarship that *Arthurian Intertextualities* attempts to fill. The need for a full-length study of the stanzaic poem becomes evident when one considers that, while the alliterative poem has been the subject of several major studies (including William Matthews's monograph, a prominent collection of essays, and influential articles by John Finlayson and Russell A. Peck), the stanzaic *Morte* has yet to receive book-length analysis.²⁹ In addition, it has inspired only a fraction of the number of scholarly articles devoted to its alliterative counterpart.³⁰ For example, volume 3 of the *Arthurian Bibliography*, which summarizes scholarly works published between 1978 and 1992, lists eighty studies of the alliterative poem in comparison to only twenty-five of the stanzaic *Morte*; similarly, the comprehensive *History of Arthurian Scholarship* (published in 2006) devotes a half-dozen references as well as a long paragraph to the alliterative *Morte* but only four sentences—sentences that appear not in a block but rather on two widely separated pages—to the stanzaic *Morte*.³¹ Although several excellent studies of the stanzaic *Morte* have been published since 1992, notably by Edward Donald Kennedy, Elizabeth Archibald, and Marco Nievergelt, scholars' tendency to dismiss the stanzaic *Morte* is well attested by the fact that the relevant—and very fine—volume of *The Oxford English Literary History* devoted to the late Middle Ages discusses both the alliterative *Morte* and Malory's *Arthurian* yet nowhere mentions the stanzaic *Morte*.³²

29. See William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative "Morte Arthure"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960); *Reassessment* (as in our Abbreviations list); John Finlayson, "Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount," *Medium Ævum* 33 (1964): 112–20; John Finlayson, "Morte Arthure: The Date and a Source for the Contemporary References," *Speculum* 42, no. 4 (Oct. 1967): 624–38; John Finlayson, "The Concept of the Hero in 'Morte Arthure,'" in *Chaucer und seine Zeit*, ed. Arno Esch (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1968), 249–74; Russell A. Peck, "Willfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1981), 153–82.

30. For a full discussion of this critical neglect, see Fiona Tolhurst and K. S. Whetter, "Introduction," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 3–14; the entire issue is devoted to the stanzaic *Morte*.

31. *The Arthurian Bibliography*, vol. 3, compiled by Caroline Palmer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998); Norris J. Lacy, ed., *A History of Arthurian Scholarship* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 45, 58, 140, 142, 149, 152, 153–54, 156 versus 140, 154.

32. See, respectively, Edward Donald Kennedy, "The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: The

One of the major aims of this book is to redress this investigative imbalance, an imbalance that becomes even more striking in light of the cottage industry within medieval English studies dedicated to the most famous late-fourteenth-century poem not written by Chaucer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Worse than the critical neglect of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, however, is the critical hostility that this engaging poem often receives: many of the comparatively few scholarly evaluations of it are, in general, either strongly negative or only grudgingly positive. Until very recently, the notable exceptions to this rule were the nuanced readings of Dieter Mehl and Carole Weinberg, together with the studies of Kennedy, Archibald, and Nievergelt mentioned above; Helen Cooper also offers brief but illuminating remarks.³³ Nevertheless, even in the work of these scholars, there are critical stances that we reject: namely, Weinberg's contention that the stanzaic poem "scrutinizes" as well as "celebrates" chivalry, and Nievergelt's that the stanzaic-poet is not especially interested in fleshing out his characters.³⁴ These critical positions, to our minds, are as problematic as the stance that the alliterative poem criticizes Arthur's imperial ambitions and conquests, an attitude to which we return below.

It is our contention that the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* possesses literary value equal to that of its alliterative counterpart, and that it is precisely because of the stanzaic *Morte*'s literary merits that Malory adopted this poem as one of his major sources. The stanzaic *Morte* shapes not only the content of particular Malorian episodes but also the tragic vision of this fifteenth-century prose author's presentation of the end of the Arthurian world, a tragic end that

Adaptation of a French Romance for an English Audience," in *Culture and the King*, ed. Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 91–112; Elizabeth Archibald, "Lancelot as Lover in the English Tradition Before Malory," in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P. J. C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 199–216; Marco Nievergelt, "The Place of Emotion," *Arthurian Literature* 32 (2015): 31–57; James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 2, 1350–1547: *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 106–14.

33. Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 186–93; Carole Weinberg, "The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 100–111; Nievergelt, "The Place of Emotion," 55–56; Helen Cooper, "The *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle in England," in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. Carol Dover (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 147–62, especially 151–52, 159–60.

34. Weinberg, "The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," 100; Nievergelt, "The Place of Emotion," 31–57, especially at 55–56. Much of Nievergelt's own examination of emotional space in the poem reveals precisely the extent to which the characters are in fact interiorized.

gains emotional power because of its romance sensibility. Because Malory's reimagining of the Arthurian world draws on both of these English poems and thereby creates a narrative that intermingles the genres of epic-heroic literature and romance, as well as the values these two genres tend to express, his aesthetic is considerably more female-friendly than that of the poet who composed the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.³⁵ Significantly, the main English source of that female-friendliness is the stanzaic *Morte*. It is well known that Malory used the stanzaic *Morte* as a major source in his final *Tales*, but Cooper argues with characteristic insight that, in fact, "it is hard to find any points in this section [of Malory's Arthur book] where the [French] *Mort Artu* is not transmitted through the English."³⁶ We can, however, go further than Cooper does: as Kennedy notes, Malory was familiar with the stanzaic *Morte* early in his career, so its profound influence on *Le Morte Darthur* is to be expected; therefore, this influence should be investigated in all sections of Malory's book, not just in its famous final scenes.³⁷ Such an investigation reveals that the influence of the stanzaic poem is palpable not only in Malory's development of particular characters and adaptation of particular sources, but also in his overarching conception of the end of the Arthurian world as a tragedy.

The Critical Stance of *Arthurian Intertextualities*:
The Stanzaic-Poet as Artist, Arthur as Conqueror-King,
and Malory's *Morte* as "Hoole Book"

Building upon the work of critics who acknowledge (sometimes reluctantly) the originality and artistry of the stanzaic *Morte*, we will offer a counterinterpretation of both poem and poet. Although the purpose of Robert H. Wilson's trenchant study of the poem is to trace Malory's sources and document his originality, Wilson praises the stanzaic *Morte* as "an original treatment" of the French *Mort le Roi Artu*.³⁸ E. Talbot Donaldson likewise notes the stan-

35. Compare, for instance, the entire issue of *Arthuriana* 20.2, re-examining the alliterative *Morte*, with the entire issue of *Arthuriana* 28.3, re-examining the stanzaic *Morte*.

36. Cooper, "Lancelot-Grail Cycle in England," 159; see also Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthure*, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and Chaucer," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 51-65.

37. Kennedy, "English Sources," 48. See also Robert H. Wilson, "Malory's Early Knowledge of Arthurian Romance," *Studies in English* 29 (1950): 38, 50.

38. Robert H. Wilson, "Malory, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthure*, and the *Mort Artu*," *Modern Philology* 37, no. 2 (1939): 136.

zaic poet's important changes to his French source, yet Donaldson succumbs to the poem's generally negative critical heritage when he disparages the very skills he helps to reveal, concluding that "the poet . . . on several occasions works changes of a bold and striking nature in the *matière* of his original, only to fail to realize their inner significance."³⁹ Because the weight of the textual evidence favors Wilson's rather than Donaldson's conclusion, we hope to reveal additional evidence of this English poet's originality and artistry. We are particularly committed to defending the stanzaic-poet against the charge that he is a second-rate rhymester whose presentation of female figures is inadequate and uninteresting. Our analysis of the poem indicates that its two main female figures—Gaynour and the Maid of Ascalot—are pivotal rather than marginal. Consequently, we fundamentally disagree with Richard A. Wertime's dismissal of the poet's Guenevere-figure (Gaynour) as a nonentity: "The queen, though the most self-oriented of the characters, is important primarily as a causal factor in the breakup of Arthur's court; this accomplished, she becomes little more than a passive object of dispute, and effectively disappears for a large part of the action."⁴⁰ Wertime's praise of Gaynour's being "self-oriented" accurately describes *some* of her behavior but is, nevertheless, an oversimplification of her as a character. Even Donaldson—usually an insightful close reader of texts—misreads the stanzaic poem's Gaynour. Donaldson's insistence that Malory's Gwenyvere possesses greater "force and dignity" than her counterparts in the stanzaic *Morte* and the French *Mort Artu* is quite correct, but this reading clashes with his dismissal of the stanzaic-poet's queen as a "wishy-washy clinging vine."⁴¹ In Chapters 2 and 4, we set out to debunk the frequent dismissal of the stanzaic-poet's artistry and characterization, particularly his development of female characters.

More specifically, we contend that the stanzaic poem is, in fact, the primary source of Malory's passionate Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat and noble Gwenyvere. It is the female-friendly approach of the stanzaic-poet that determines the memorable conception of his poem, and when Malory emulates this approach, he ennobles Gwenyvere and intensifies the tragic end of the Arthurian world in the final episodes of his *Morte Darthur*. Careful attention to the stanzaic poem enables readers to recognize that the originality of

39. E. Talbot Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic 'Le Morte Arthur,'" *Studies in Philology* 47, no. 3 (1950): 470.

40. Richard A. Wertime, "The Theme and Structure of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," *PMLA* 87, no. 5 (October 1972): 1076.

41. Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic," 462.

Malory and the alliterative-poet is equaled by the originality of the stanzaic-poet. Far from being a minstrel “of humbler virtues,” as Robert W. Ackerman asserts despite his own praise of this poet elsewhere in the same essay in which he denigrates him, the stanzaic-poet was—as Ackerman notes—an accomplished author.⁴² Indeed, although the stanzaic-poet expresses his attitude toward his material much less explicitly than does the alliterative-poet, Malory, or even the author of *Mort Artu*, his poem has a subtlety of narration and characterization that is typically considered a hallmark of great literary talent.⁴³ Our investigation of the stanzaic poem will also help to correct scholars’ current overemphasis on Malory’s use of French sources, and it will offer a more complete understanding of Malory’s creative process as a translator and redactor. Thus one purpose of this book is to rescue the stanzaic *Morte* from the outskirts of the Middle English canon, a marginal position that is the result of its largely negative critical heritage.

At the same time, a complementary purpose is to correct the current misreading of the alliterative *Morte*. In *Arthurian Intertextualities*, we attempt to remedy the major weakness of scholarship on the alliterative *Morte Arthur*: the lack of critical responses to the poem that credit King Arthur with retaining positive traits until its final lines. This gap in the interpretive tradition of the poem is a function of modern critics’ focus on the supposed transformation of King Arthur from model king into immoral tyrant. As with critics’ persistent disparagement of the stanzaic *Morte*, the critical insistence on Arthur’s supposed failings in the alliterative *Morte* is a product of *Morte Arthur*’s intertextual—or rather, intercritical—history. In other words, this moralistic interpretation of the poem as a portrait of failed kingship has become the essence of its critical heritage. Therefore, if at times our rehabilitation of alliterative Arthur (as we refer to the poem’s king to distinguish him from Malory’s king) relies heavily on a seemingly reductive negative-positive polarity, this reliance on moralistic categories reflects the poem’s scholarly reception and attempts to correct that reception on its own terms. Such a moralistic and negative reading of the Arthur of this poem receives strong emphasis in William Matthews’s highly influ-

42. Robert W. Ackerman, “The English Rimed and Prose Romances,” in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 489–91.

43. We are indebted to P. J. C. Field for this point, one he made as chair of the session “Reading Malory” at which we first articulated this claim: “Reading the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, or Malory and the Critics,” Twenty-Fourth Triennial Congress of the International Arthurian Society, University of Bucharest, Romania, 24–28 July 2014.

ential 1960 monograph titled *The Tragedy of Arthur*.⁴⁴ Because Matthews's study remains the only monograph devoted to the alliterative *Morte*, his argument that Arthur becomes morally corrupt has limited the scope, and therefore the range of interpretive possibilities, of even the most recent work on the poem. Matthews published his monograph over half a century ago, yet scholars continue to reiterate and nuance rather than challenge his conclusions—leaving unexplored plotlines other than that of Arthur's supposed transformation from great king into immoral tyrant. Considering that the poem consists of over four thousand lines and contains several plotlines, there is a real need for critics to take the risk of studying the poem as a whole and, by doing so, to interrogate Matthews's interpretation and the homogeneous critical heritage that his reading created.

Taking this interpretive risk, we examine in Chapter 3 of *Arthurian Intertextualities* the alliterative *Morte*'s conflicted opening lines as well as its several plotlines. The alliterative poem's opening lines attempt to package the work as didactic but then shift to such strong praise of the Round Table's conquests that the audience are left struggling to decide whether the poem can provide moral education (*aMA* 1–25). Therefore, we will explore the apparent tensions in the poem between pious and heroic language as well as the interaction of its several plotlines: those involving Mordred and Waynor's relationship (*aMA* 645–704); the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel's rape and murder of a young duchess (974–1197); and the heroic deeds of Gawayne (also Wawayne), Priamus, Cador, and Arthur (*aMA passim*). Both here and throughout *Arthurian Intertextualities*, our definition of heroism and assessment of hero-figures are grounded in the long-established scholarly tradition in which the epic-heroic hero is someone notable for courage, justifiable boasting, and exceptional martial prowess. This specific type of hero appears in a specific genre and is motivated primarily by honor and the winning of honor through martial display, including—in alliterative Arthur's case—conquest. The romance hero is a different but equally specific generic type and, like the epic-heroic hero, is notable for skill in arms and the winning of *worshyp*; at the same time, the romance hero is influenced by, and balances these martial traits with, love and relationships with women more than is usual for his epic-heroic counterpart.⁴⁵

44. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, throughout.

45. See further C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, trans. B. J. Timmer (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); and Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 22–23, 49–64.

Our intertextual analysis will also connect the alliterative poet's development of the giant's crimes and Arthur's heroism in the Mont Saint-Michel episode with both Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century and Lazamon's early thirteenth-century versions of this scene. (For readers who wish to refresh their literary history, we include a Timeline in the front matter that shows how these works fit into the Arthurian tradition as a whole.) In Geoffrey's *De gestis Britonum* (*Concerning the Deeds of the Britons*, traditionally known as *The History of the Kings of Britain*), the giant kidnaps two women, then attempts to rape the younger one before raping the older; in Lazamon's *Brut*, the giant kills the younger woman in the act of raping her and then repeatedly rapes the older one.⁴⁶ The alliterative-poet, apparently inspired by Lazamon, develops the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel into an even more horrific villain who is a serial murderer of women (aMA 1029–32). Because the interweaving of and interrelationships among the alliterative *Morte's* various plotlines are our focus, we have sufficient evidence to question and revise the standard reading of King Arthur as losing his status as model king and becoming like the Giant. Our intertextual analysis of paired characters and themes, not only within the poem but also between the poem and *Le Morte Darthur*, reveals the artistry and originality of both the alliterative-poet and Malory.

With regard to Malory's *Morte Darthur*, our stance is that, given Malory's emphasis on "The Hoole Book" in his final colophon (MD 940.16–20), the largest gap in Malory scholarship is the insufficient attention given to the narrative in its entirety. This gap exists partly because, to borrow Andrew Lynch's phrase, Malory's "*Morte Darthur* is a very big book."⁴⁷ A more powerful cause of this gap, however, is critics' continued focus on the text's final two Tales: those that deal with the revelation of Launcelot and Gwenyvere's affair and the death of Arthur. This focus leads to some misleading and even erroneous conclusions due to the selective nature of the evidence gathered. The narrow scope of critical inquiry (albeit partly dictated by the word limits of scholarly articles) produces a large number of studies that interpret a particular Tale or section of *Le Morte Darthur* in isolation from the book as a whole; even some monographs focus on the beginning of the book and then skip to the Grail Quest, the latter part of the Launcelot and Gwenyvere story,

46. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De gestis Britonum*, x.165.33–67; Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, EETS 277 (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), vol. 2, Caligula 674.12889–678.12945.

47. Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), xx.

and the death of Arthur section.⁴⁸ It might not be coincidental that Malory's final two Tales also happen to be the sections that are most often taught in isolation from "The Hoole Book" and most often anthologized or printed separately from the rest of the text. Readers can partly account for this isolation of the final Tales through narrative logic and suspense: the collapse of the Round Table is often viewed as the most significant element of the plot, an element that can be looked at separately due to two factors. One is the popularity of the Arthurian legend as a whole, which gives many readers at least a general knowledge of the main plotline, and the other is the fact that critics have—justifiably—long considered the closing Tales to represent the height of Malory's artistic success. However, by drawing upon key moments in "The Hoole Book," including the neglected "Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones," our study will challenge many standard readings of Malory's characters: this challenge is our third major goal.

A long-standing critical complaint, one linked perhaps (though not always explicitly) to twentieth-century perceptions of Malory as an ineffective artist, is that the part of *Le Morte Darthur* that, for simplicity's sake, we call "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones," the Tale that Vinaver called "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" and that P. J. C. Field, with some manuscript authority, calls "Sir Tristram de Lyones: The First Book" and "Sir Tristram de Lyones: The Second Book," constitutes an artistic failure.⁴⁹ For example, because of the ways in which Malory borrows from and modifies his source, the thirteenth-century prose *Tristan*, both Vida Scudder and Vinaver judged this section of *Le Morte Darthur* to be but a pale imitation and mangled prosification of the more powerful early French *Tristan* stories written in

48. This is largely the case, for example, in the otherwise excellent study by Lambert, who pays far more attention to "The Last Tales" than to earlier ones: Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); we quote the title of his final chapter, 124–221. The essay collection *Studies in Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), likewise gives considerably more attention to Tales VI through VIII than it does to Tales I to V.

49. For influential critical disparagements of Malory's artistry, see both Vinaver and Field: questioning "Malory's merit as a story-teller" and "his interpretation of the Romance," Vinaver implies that the *Morte* is great despite rather than because of Malory's efforts; Field is equally dismissive, opening his account of Malory's style with the proviso that Malory was in no way "a conscious artist." See, respectively, Eugène Vinaver, *Malory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 100; P. J. C. Field, *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1971), 7. Scholarship of the last fifteen years has started to resist such negative views of Malory's artistry.

verse; likewise, many critics today view both Malory's Trystram story and its French prose source as weaker narratives than the early Tristan poems that popularized the Tristan and Iseult legend.⁵⁰ Since the 1970s, however, a good number of critics have been reassessing the lengthy middle section of Malory's *Morte*, with the result that "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" is gaining the status of an essential thematic component of Malory's "Hoole Book," one that reveals the centrality throughout the text of the pursuit of knightly adventure.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the issue of precisely which themes this Tale illustrates remains unresolved. In fact, critics tend to take one of two contradictory stances: either they agree with Thomas C. Rumble that "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" highlights the sinful failures and chivalric excesses that will ensure the Round Table's destruction, or they agree with Larry D. Benson that the "Trystram" is not merely "the centerpiece of the *Morte Darthur*" but a carefully "controlled," even "lively" and "elegant" narrative akin to "a dazzling kaleidoscope of the color, sounds, and emotions of the chivalric life."⁵²

Sir Palomydes might fruitfully be considered a prominent microcosm of this bifurcated perception of "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones." Donald L. Hoffman, for instance, labels Palomydes "[o]ne of the great rewarding puzzles of the text" and argues for both his centrality to and liminality in Malory's Trystram story; nevertheless, for Hoffman, Palomydes's centrality, character, and actions are negative.⁵³ Hoffman's reading reflects the postcolonial interpretation of Palomydes that has come to dominate recent scholarship of this character. Although she does not mention Palomydes or Malory's *Morte*, Geraldine Heng further promotes a condemnatory interpretation of

50. Vida D. Scudder, *Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1921), 229–33; Vinaver, lxxxv–lxxxvi, and the Headnote to "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones," 1445–46. For a more positive reading of the prose *Tristan*, see Emanuèle Baumgartner, *Le "Tristan en prose": Essai d'interprétation d'un roman médiéval* (Geneva: Droz, 1975).

51. See, for example, Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory's King Mark and King Arthur," revised in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy (New York: Garland, 1996), 139–71; Larry D. Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 109–34; Dhira B. Mahoney, "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram,'" *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 9 (1979): 175–98; and Kevin T. Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy: Structuring the Narrative of Malory's *Tale of Sir Tristram*," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1993): 77–98.

52. Thomas C. Rumble, "The Tale of Tristram," in *Originality*, 118–83; Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"*, 109.

53. Donald L. Hoffman, "Assimilating Saracens," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 43–64 (quoting 48).

Malory's Saracen knight through her recent insistence that Saracens in medieval literature represent "the international enemy-of-war *par excellence*."⁵⁴ This is not, however, how Malory portrays Palomydes, so his characterization and text complicate the standard scholarly Othering of this important character. As Elizabeth Edwards observes, "Palomedes is in no meaningful sense an unbeliever."⁵⁵ Even Bonnie Wheeler, one of the critics responsible for popularizing this notion that Palomydes does not really belong in the Arthurian community except to problematize Arthurian chivalry, admits that "[t]his seemingly outsider Saracen is no more 'Other' than the rest of the Arthurian orphanage."⁵⁶ This crucial admission is our starting point for a reevaluation of Palomydes.

The Structure of Arthurian Intertextualities

In Chapter 1 of *Arthurian Intertextualities*, "Sir Palomydes, Knight of the Round Table: Rereading Malory's Pryamus, Palomydes, and Trystram as Arthurian Insiders," we challenge the critical disparagement that might be called the postcolonializing of Palomydes. We argue that he is the same as, not alien to, his Round Table fellows. To support our claim, we compare Palomydes to Pryamus, highlighting the ways in which both Malory and his characters view prowess—not religion or race—as the basis of knightly identity. In addition to martial prowess, the other major theme running through Tale V is fellowship, and here, as Kevin T. Grimm observes, Palomydes plays a crucial role.⁵⁷ By comparing Palomydes to Trystram, we can observe that the Saracen knight is, in fact, an important Arthurian insider.

In Chapter 2, "Launcelot and His Elaynes: Malory's Romance Heroines and Their Roots in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," we turn our attention to

54. Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 112.

55. Elizabeth Edwards, *The Genesis of Narrative in Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 14. Although we disagree with her conclusions, our interpretation of Palomydes supports—and is supported by—Holbrook's emphasis on Palomydes's exemplification of such key Arthurian ideals as prowess, *worshyp*, love, and fellowship: see Sue Ellen Holbrook, "To the Well: Malory's Sir Palomides on Ideals of Chivalric Reputation, Male Friendship, Romantic Love, Religious Conversion—and Loyalty," *Arthuriana* 23, no. 4 (2013): 72–97.

56. Bonnie Wheeler, "Grief in Avalon," in *Grief and Gender, 700–1700*, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 68.

57. Kevin T. Grimm, "The Love and Envy of Sir Palomides," *Arthuriana* 11, no. 2 (2001): 65–74.

Launcelot's would-be wives, women who function as counterparts and foils for each other in part because they share a name. Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat and Elayne of Corbyn, the daughter of King Pelles and the mother of Launcelot's son Galahad, function as counterparts because they are rivals for Launcelot's love. Nevertheless, each of them also contrasts with Queen Gwenyvere. In this chapter, we attempt to rectify literary critics' relative neglect of Elayne of Ascolat and extreme neglect of Elayne of Corbyn. In doing so, we offer a more sympathetic reading of the Fayre Maydyn than has almost all previous scholarship. Detailed examination of Launcelot and his Elaynes reveals further evidence of the centrality of female figures in Malory's *Morte Darthur* and Malory's interests in developing fully rounded, human characters as well as exploring the often quite realistic relationships that are a consequence of this development. In addition, in Chapter 2 we argue that pairing the stanzaic-poet's Fair Maid with Malory's reveals that this poem influenced the fifteenth-century prose writer more profoundly than previous criticism has acknowledged—especially with regard to female-friendliness.

Chapter 3, "Misreading and Rereading Arthur: Celebrating Arthur as Hero and Conqueror-King in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*," is perhaps the most contentious chapter in our book because in it we reject the dominant interpretive tradition regarding the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. In this chapter, we re-examine the issue of Arthur's kingship by focusing on a comparison of King Arthur in Malory's Arthuriad with the "Kyd Conqueror" Arthur in the alliterative poem. Perhaps because, for over fifty years now, the dominant scholarly reading of the alliterative *Morte* has been that the poem critiques Arthur's eventual tyranny and sin, much scholarship of late on Malory's Arthur has argued that he, too, fails as both a monarch and a husband. By rereading the alliterative *Morte* within the context of medieval attitudes toward warfare and conquest, and rereading alliterative-Arthur against Malory's Arthur, we reveal that scholarship has consistently misrepresented the meaning of the *Morte Arthure* as well as the character of its king: far from being a sinful tyrant, alliterative-Arthur is a great warrior in a poem that celebrates conquest. Considering the strong influence the alliterative *Morte* had on Malory, we then show that he did much more than adopt and adapt the poem's plot in Tale II of his Arthuriad. He developed a portrait of a forceful and successful warrior Arthur throughout his "Hoole Book."

In Chapter 4, "Misreading and Rereading Malory's Gwenyvere: The Queen and Her Counterparts in the Three English *Mortes*," we attempt to overcome the critical commonplace of evaluating Malory's Gwenyvere

unsympathetically. We do so by correcting a set of problematic tendencies on the part of Malory scholars. One such tendency is to trivialize Gwenyvere as either nothing more than an objectified love-interest or an irrational female. Closely related to this tendency, and sometimes overlapping with it, is the tendency to blame Gwenyvere more than Arthur or Launcelot for the destruction of the Arthurian world. Finally, the tendency to evaluate Gwenyvere—and other Malorian characters—according to Victorian moral standards reflects the influence of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* on subsequent literary criticism, resulting in critics imposing greater gender-based restrictions on Malory's characters than does Malory himself. Although Marylyn Jackson Parins highlights the diversity of nineteenth-century attitudes to *Le Morte Darthur* and therefore warns against overgeneralizing about the imposition of Victorian moral values on Malory's book,⁵⁸ much nineteenth-century scholarship focused on the morality or immorality of Malory's story and characters, and many nineteenth-century editions of Malory's book expurgated the parts of the text that Victorians deemed immoral.⁵⁹ As Parins notes, "the nineteenth-century [Arthurian revival] anticipates the concerns of [many] twentieth-century critics."⁶⁰ More specifically, Tennyson's blaming the collapse of Arthur's ideal order on bad women remains palpable in major works of twentieth-century literary criticism.⁶¹ To take one notable twentieth-century example, the influential essay collection *Malory's Originality* blames the collapse of Arthurian chivalry on the sinful and immoral failings supposedly embodied by Trystram and Isode, Launcelot, Arthur, and Gwenyvere.⁶²

Another problematic tendency of many modern scholars is that they underestimate the scope of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur's* influence on both Malory's characterization and his conception of the Arthurian world. This limited focus generally leads to scholars insisting that Malory's "Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" depicts the failings of Arthurian knighthood despite

58. Marylyn Jackson Parins, ed., *Malory: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 20. Victorian artists, especially, tended to disagree with Tennyson: see Joan Tasker Grimbert, "The 2018 Loomises Lecture," *Arthuriana* 29, no. 3 (2019): 66–104.

59. For an overview of such editions, see Parins, ed., *Malory: The Critical Heritage*, *passim*; also Yuri Fuwa, ed., *The "Morte Darthur": A Collection of Early-Nineteenth-Century Editions*, 7 vols. (Tokyo: Eureka; London: Routledge, 2017).

60. Parins, ed., *Malory: The Critical Heritage*, 1.

61. On Tennyson's blame of women, see James Noble, "Woman as Agent of Death in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*," in *The Arthurian Way of Death*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 193–205.

62. *Originality*, throughout.

abundant evidence to the contrary—evidence that contributes to a positive portrait of Gwenyvere. Thus, in our fourth chapter, we offer a sympathetic rereading of Malory's Gwenyvere grounded in the argument that the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is a first-rate poem that profoundly influenced Malory's portrait of Arthur's queen. In this chapter, we reinterpret Gwenyvere not only through the lens of her counterparts in the alliterative and stanzaic *Mortes* but also through the lens of her understudied counterpart in the "Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones," *La Beale Isode*.

It is our hope that, by focusing more than is typical upon Malory's use of the alliterative and stanzaic *Mortes*, we will encourage greater appreciation of the merits of these two poems as well as deeper understanding of how and why they so influenced Malory. Elucidating the many relations among these three texts allows for a better—and more sympathetic—understanding of female characters in both the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Similarly, an intertextual reevaluation of the vexed questions of kingship and heroism in the alliterative *Morte* and Malory's *Morte* reveals the Arthur of these two texts to be a more positive figure than current scholarship acknowledges. Finally, we hope to establish new readings of all three English *Mortes* and their principal characters and themes. Although there is no need to resuscitate the Unity Debate (whether or not Malory's text is one romance or eight disparate parts), it is, we contend, necessary to document the textual and artistic significance of the essential unity of Malory's *Arthuriad* and to account for why it is that he himself called his story "The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (940.17–18).

One

Sir Palomydes, Knight of the Round Table

Rereading Malory's Pryamus, Palomydes, and Trystram as Arthurian Insiders



One of the intriguing details scattered throughout the magnificent catalog of names in Sir Thomas Malory's episode of the healing of Sir Urry near the end of *Le Morte Darthur* is the inaccurate assertion that "Sir Pryamus . . . was crystynde by the meyns of Sir Trystram."¹ As P. J. C. Field points out in the Commentary to his edition, Trystram has nothing to do with the christening of Pryamus: Winchester's reading is a scribal error, one not corrected in previous editions.² The text should read, as Field emends, that it was *Gawayne* who brought about Pryamus's conversion. What is telling about this error for our purposes, however, is not its textual longevity (although that is surprising), but rather the way in which it conflates the pagan hero-knight Pryamus with the equally pagan and even more heroic Palomydes. For it is—in Field's convincingly emended version of the passage—"Sir Palomydes which

1. See *The Winchester Malory*, introduction by N. R. Ker, EETS s.s. 4 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1976), fol. 447r (line 1); cf. *Works*, 1149.18–19. Cf. and contra Field's corrected reading in *MD* 864.31–33. (Full details of shortened titles, such as *Works* or *MD* in this note, are given in our Abbreviations list in the front matter.)

2. Field, Commentary on 864.31–33. Both Spisak and Shepherd acknowledge this error in a note, but neither corrects the reading in his edition: respectively, *Caxton's Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), I:551.31–32 for the textual error and II, Note on 551.31–32; Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004), 641.28–29 for the error and 641 n. 9 for the note.

was crystened by the means of Sir Trystram” (*MD* 864.32–33). It is precisely this sort of pairing (whether of character, theme, situation, or narration) that undergirds the textual analysis in this book.³ The specific Pryamus–Palomydes pairing is a major focus of this chapter, for it provides a means of correcting a problematic critical commonplace: that Palomydes is an Other in relation to the Round Table Fellowship.

The scribal confusion of these two pagan characters, accidental though it be, creates an intertextual and characterological pairing that is thematically apt because both Pryamus and Palomydes provide models of chivalric heroism. As a minor Malorian character, Pryamus receives little critical attention, especially in comparison to Palomydes.⁴ This neglect is understandable, for Pryamus appears in only three episodes. He is introduced in a lengthy interaction with Gawayne in the final stages of the Roman War early in Malory’s *Arthuriad* (*MD* 178–85), but subsequently receives only two passing mentions: he reappears in the penultimate Tale as one of the knights who attempts to heal Sir Urry (864.31);⁵ and in the final Tale he is among the unfortunates killed by Launcelot’s “russhynge and hurlynge” during the rescue of Gwenyvere from the stake (884.33–885.11). Palomydes, in marked contrast, appears consistently as Trystram’s rival throughout the long “Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones” in the middle third of Malory’s *Morte*.⁶ In addi-

3. By “pairing of narration” we mean anything ranging from the Middle English fondness for repetition, to Malory’s (or his scribes’) occasional confusion of character, to anaphora, to doublings of plot episodes and generic formulae.

4. Holbrook briefly compares the conversions of Pryamus and Palomydes, but her focus is on the details of adult baptism in *Morte Darthur*, whereas our focus is on chivalric fellowship and Malory’s care to unify the *Morte* through parallels of character and theme: see Sue Ellen Holbrook, “To the Well: Malory’s Sir Palomides on Ideals of Chivalric Reputation, Male Friendship, Romantic Love, Religious Conversion—and Loyalty,” *Arthuriana* 23, no. 4 (2013): 84–85 and 88–89.

5. Based partly on the erroneous notion that Trystram brought about Pryamus’s christening, Wilson concludes that the Pryamus of the Roman War and the Pryamus of the Urry catalog “are two different characters,” but Wilson’s own thesis—that Malory was deliberately populating his *Arthuriad* with a recognizable and recurring cast of characters—together with the obviously corrupt reading in Winchester and Field’s emendation of it all suggest otherwise: see Robert H. Wilson, “Addenda on Malory’s Minor Characters,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956): Appendix A, 581, s.v.

6. Scholars sometimes refer to Malory’s “Trystram” as “Tale V”; Field uses the titles “Sir Tristram de Lyones: The First Book” and “Sir Tristram de Lyones: The Second Book”; Winchester—and, one must assume, Malory—clearly designate the title as the “Boke of Syr Trystram,” but equally clearly, if artificially, differentiate between “The Fyrste Boke . . .” (W 148v and 229v) and “The Secunde Boke . . .” (W 229r and 346v).

tion, he makes appearances at pivotal moments in Tales VII and VIII: he is a guest at the queen's politically disastrous dinner party (*MD* 793.6–21), a contestant in the tournament at Westminster (835.19–837.18), and a participant in the healing of Urry (864.32–33). Palomydes retains his narrative prominence during the closing civil war as a supporter of Launcelot (both in England and again in Benwick) against Arthur and Gawayne (*MD* 892.32–895.22, 903.30–905.27). Tellingly, and in marked contrast to the standard critical readings of Palomydes as an Other who never belongs to the Arthurian Fellowship, Malory casually but clearly lists Palomydes as one of the victorious “knygt[es] of the Rounde Table that were . . . presente . . . at that justes at Allhalowmasse” (*MD* 824.15–16 and 824.32). At Westminster, too, Palomydes is listed, with Gawayne, Mordred, and Gareth, as one of the “many Knyghtes of the Rounde Table” taking part in the tournament (*MD* 835.15–20 and 836.3–13). The textual evidence thus belies the consistent critical claim that Palomydes is a failure or outsider.

As for Pryamus, despite his relatively few appearances in *Le Morte Darthur*, the extra detail and “direct discourse” preserved in the Winchester manuscript (as opposed to the Caxton incunabulum) version of the Roman War make a key point: that Pryamus, although a pagan, is wholly admirable.⁷ Elizabeth Archibald compellingly illustrates the importance of direct speech in both Malory's *Morte* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, specifically how direct speech can flesh out character and theme.⁸ Such fleshing out likewise happens at the conclusion of Pryamus and Gawayne's combat in Malory's *Morte* when, in the Winchester version of the fight that happens because both knights are in search of adventure, Malory uses direct speech to reveal that Pryamus possesses mystical healing waters: “Now fecche me, seyde Sir Pryamus, ‘my vyall that hangys by the gurdyll of my haynxman, for hit is full of the floure of the foure good watyrs that passis from Paradyse, . . . and [with which] we shall be hole within foure houres” (*MD* 180.14–19). Sally Shaw points out in her discussion of Caxton's changes to Winchester that, typically, Caxton “substitutes narrative for direct speech,” and she uses this passage as an example.⁹ Shaw concludes that, in this instance, nothing sub-

7. Shunichi Noguchi, “The Winchester Malory,” in *The Malory Debate*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick, and Michael N. Salda (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 121.

8. Elizabeth Archibald, “Some Uses of Direct Speech in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory,” *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 66–85.

9. Sally Shaw, “Caxton and Malory,” in *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 140–41.

stantial is lost due to the abbreviated substitution, for the audience still learns the key fact of the supernatural healing. Yet Shunichi Noguchi argues convincingly that the extra—and no doubt authorial—dialogue in Winchester includes Pryamus himself authorizing Gawayne to retrieve the magic elixir “from his page,” thereby emphasizing the knights’ moment of “reconciliation” and highlighting Pryamus’s “trust in the mutuality of human ties.”¹⁰ This fact is, for our purposes, crucial: through Pryamus, Malory presents his audience with a noble pagan character capable of winning that all-important Malorian reward of *worsbyþ* and entirely worthy of friendship with the Knights of the Round Table. One function of Malory’s maintaining the Pryamus episode is thus to present his audience with a noble non-Christian warrior who foreshadows the equally positive portrait of Palomydes later in the “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17).

To return to the catalog of knights in the Urry episode, Field notes that it is puzzling that Pryamus, a foreign prince rewarded with the dukedom of Lorraine, is listed with a number of “obscure British knights” (*MD* 864.30–31); Field is therefore skeptical that Malory meant these obscure figures to qualify even as brothers-in-arms.¹¹ Notably, however, all of the other knights listed with Pryamus are—like him—veterans of the Roman War. Consequently, we suggest that it is precisely within this context of martial comradeship and the strengthening of Arthur’s kingship through war that Malory positions Pryamus and grants significance even to such very minor figures as Edward of Carnarvon through their inclusion in the Round Table Fellowship. Although one of the guiding principles of Malory’s Urry catalog—as in most literary catalogs, oral or written—seems to have been basic thoroughness and onomastic grandeur (naming as many knights as possible), it is equally true that Malory uses the catalog to link many of the names in meaningful ways. The narrative and thematic links between Gawayne and Pryamus or among Trystram, Isode, and Palomydes provide considerable evidence of the catalog’s careful construction.

Given these linkages, it follows that Pryamus gains distinction in the Urry catalog precisely because of his Roman War prowess and status as a preexisting character. His introduction in Tale II as a pagan knight who is heir to Africa and Alexandria and other lands that his father took from Rome (*MD*

10. Shunichi Noguchi, “Caxton’s Malory,” *Poetica* 8 (1977): 80–81.

11. Field, Commentary on 864.31–33. As Field explains, the Round Table associations make it unlikely that “Edward of Carnarvon” is meant to refer to the historical King Edward II (reigned 1307–27), who was born at Caernarfon Castle in 1284 and thus sometimes called “Edward of Caernarfon.”

178.16–22) is manifestly less significant than his consistent martial prowess and worthiness to be a companion to both Gawayne and Arthur. Indeed, despite some theoretical tendencies to conflate religious and racial difference when presenting literary Saracens as Other,¹² Malory (like his alliterative source) is imprecise about Pryamus's race or religion. All the audience knows for certain is that Pryamus is not Christian (because he later converts) and that he is descended from four of the Nine Worthies (*MD* 178.18–20). The same racial and religious imprecision, we contend, applies to Palomydes. As Winchester's rubrication of all character names—including those of Pryamus and Palomydes—helps to reveal, religious and racial differences are ultimately nonissues for Malory. What is important, from the moment *Le Morte Darthur* begins until the moment it ends, is the *characters*, specifically their deeds and (for the knights) degree of prowess as well as their connection to the Round Table and its chivalric exemplars.¹³ These knightly exemplars include Gawayne, Trystram, and Arthur himself, in addition to the exemplar whom literary critics discuss most often: Launcelot. However, the Urry catalog also includes knights—notably Pryamus and Palomydes—whom scholars tend to problematize or whom they claim Malory subverts due to their religious or racial difference. These knights merit rereading. Both Pryamus and Palomydes convert to Christianity, so they clearly have religious differences from those Round Table Knights who are Christian. These difference, though, have become much greater in modern criticism than they are in Malory's text.

Rereading Pryamus and Palomydes as Knights of the Round Table

Pryamus's presence in the Arthurian world is something that Malory inherits from one of his principal English sources, the only other text (so far as we are aware) to mention this character: the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.¹⁴ Readers

12. Most thoroughly by Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

13. On the thematic and characterological functions of Winchester's rubrication, see K. S. Whetter, *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017).

14. See also Robert W. Ackerman, *An Index of the Arthurian Names in Middle English* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952; New York: AMS, 1967), 199, s.v. "Priamus (The Good Knight)." All references to the alliterative *Morte (aMA)* are parenthetical by line number, citing Hamel's edition. We silently correct Hamel's knightly titles by capitalizing "Sir," and we do not reproduce her editorial brackets.

first encounter Priamus at the same time as does Wawayne:¹⁵ during the foraging expedition to feed Arthur's army during the siege of Metz (*aMA* 2513–716). Priamus could theoretically be an Other to the Briton Wawayne for three reasons: (i) he is a pagan and potential enemy whose father has rebelled against Rome and now reigns in the lands he seized (*aMA* 2595–601); (ii) he possesses the eastern territories of Alexandria, Africa, and “all þa owte landes” 2607–11); and (iii) his relations include both Alexander the Great (a Greek) and the Jewish “knyghtes” Judas Maccabeus and Joshua (2595–605). Although the Nine Worthies are, as we note in more detail in Chapter 3, traditionally divided into three Classical, three Jewish, and three Western Christian exemplars, the main point is less any different origins among the Nine and more their collective fame and worth. Priamus's descent from no fewer than four of the Nine (*aMA* 2602–5) reinforces the crucial point that his martial excellence supersedes any supposed religious or racial Othering. The poet's focus on shared chivalric worth is further reinforced by the significant fact that Priamus is also akin to both Arthur and Arthur's nephew: just as Priamus descends from Hector of Troy (*aMA* 2603–4), so too does Wawayne, for his uncle Arthur is himself “of Ectores blude” (*aMA* 4342–43). The links between Priamus's father, Priamus himself, Wawayne, and Arthur are further reinforced because all of them are in justifiable conflict with Rome. Priamus's introduction thus suggests that all great knights—regardless of ethnicity or faith tradition—are somehow blood relations. If not literally related, they are nonetheless connected by common chivalric values and worshipful performance. Hence, for instance, Malory's listing of Pryamus with his Roman War brothers-in-arms in the Urry catalog (*MD* 864.30–31).

Despite the overall epic-heroic qualities of Malory's alliterative source, Wawayne's encounter with Priamus is (as is often remarked) classic romance *matière*, for the quest for the necessary siege supplies that enables his encounter with Priamus is interlaced with Wawayne's quest for individual adventure: “Thane weendes owtt the wardayne, Sir Wawayne hym selfen, . . . wondyrs to seke” (*aMA* 2513–14). In a parallel of plot and motivation, Priamus is in a similarly double-edged situation, for he has been “sente hedire with seuen score knyghttez / To asaye of this werre” (*aMA* 2614–15). However, Priamus encounters Wawayne precisely because the pagan knight, as his location and behavior illustrate, likewise seeks individual adventure. Behaving like the

15. Although the alliterative-poet uses the forms *Gawayne* and *Wawayne* interchangeably, we use *Wawayne* to distinguish the *aMA* version of the character from Malory's *Gawayne*. We likewise use *Priamus* for the *aMA* character and *Pryamus* for Malory's character.

classic romance challenger in a classic *pas d'armes* situation, Priamus secures this adventure by positioning himself “Baytand on a wattire banke by þe wodde eyuis,” whence, if errant knights do not challenge him, he can easily “chalange who lykēs” (*aMA* 2516–24). Nevertheless, Wawayne’s mission of acquiring supplies for Arthur’s besieging army reminds readers even here—in this romance subplot—of the alliterative *Morte*’s central theme: conquest and warfare. The romance excursus is as carefully plotted and thematically relevant as other episodes in the poem, so it is not a mere digression. Neither, though, is it sufficient to alter the poem’s dominant epic-heroic genre.

As the siege background to Wawayne and Priamus’s encounter illustrates, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur* are two works whose plots center around military conflicts: the poem focuses on wars and the conquests that result from them, while the (much longer) book treats both wars and the ritualized conflict of the tournament. Because the alliterative *Morte* is one of Malory’s main English sources for *Le Morte Darthur*, arguing against received wisdom regarding one of these works often involves arguing against received wisdom about the other. One commonly expressed critical opinion that we dispute is that the pagan knights in Malory’s *Morte* are outsiders to the Round Table Fellowship, fundamentally different from, and never accepted by, the Arthurian community. To put it another way, such knights are Others with a capital *O*.

Undoubtedly the most prominent example of a pagan knight in Malory’s book is Palomydes. In an often-cited article, Dorsey Armstrong established as a critical norm the idea that Malory’s Palomydes is an outsider who desires fellowship but is constantly banished to the fringes of the Arthurian community even as his alterity threatens that community.¹⁶ Armstrong argues that “Palomides is only intelligible in the narrative space of the *Morte Darthur* as a colonized Other who longs for full admittance to the realm of chivalric fellowship, as a figure who has chosen to reject his Saracen heritage in favor of the Christian fellowship of the Round Table.”¹⁷ Such a postcolonial reading, as Jacqueline de Weever insists, necessarily defines Palomydes as never truly belonging to that fellowship. Thus de Weever claims that Saracens in *Le Morte Darthur* are self-evidently “non-Christian,” originate beyond the Arthurian pale, and are invariably “implacable” foes to the Christian and

16. Dorsey Armstrong, “Postcolonial Palomides,” *Exemplaria* 18, no. 1 (2006): 175–203. She returns to this thesis in Dorsey Armstrong, “Christianity and Social Instability,” in *Malory and Christianity*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 107–26, especially 112–17.

17. Armstrong, “Postcolonial Palomides,” 177.

Western Arthurian world.¹⁸

De Weever and especially Armstrong are persuasive, yet their sophisticated use of postcolonial theory masks a fundamental flaw in their arguments: namely, that there is relatively little *textual* evidence in Malory's *Arthuriad* that supports categorizing Palomydes as an outsider. On the contrary, Palomydes is explicitly identified as a member of the Round Table Fellowship by no less an authority than the magically inscribed names written on the Round Table itself (*MD* 576.18–23). Furthermore, this postcolonial reading of Palomydes is in itself problematic because (as Armstrong notes) the “slipperiness of this term [Saracen] reflects the confused and complicated overlap of racial and religious categories of identity during the medieval period.”¹⁹ To label Palomydes as an outsider entails generalizing the “overlap” of medieval identity categories to characterize any non-Christian knight as racially Other. Critics' insistence on conflating racial with religious difference ignores two key facts: that the term “Saracen” could refer to any non-Christian individual (Saxon, Roman, Jew, or Muslim),²⁰ and that Malory focuses on religious rather than racial difference—a difference that turns out to be not very great because it is invariably superseded by chivalric prowess. Another factor that problematizes reading Palomydes as both a racial and religious Other is the inherently contradictory nature of the theoretical underpinning of what is currently the dominant reading of this figure. As de Weever frames the issue, Saracens are (in Bakhtinian terms) the center that not only shapes and defines—but also unbinds—the narrative. According to this reasoning, Palomydes as Saracen axiomatically “complicates and compels re-definition of both love and war” as he both defines and destabilizes Malory's *Arthuriad*.²¹ Committed to this theoretical conclusion that Palomydes does not belong, critics accordingly exaggerate the idea that he “largely disappears after his baptism,” becoming “decreasingly important in the narrative after ‘The Book of Sir Tristram.’”²² As frequently happens in Malory's text, however, the supposed critical fact

18. Jacqueline de Weever, “Introduction,” *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 7; cf. Molly Martin, *Vision and Gender in Malory's “Morte Darthur”* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 107–17. Heng, *Invention of Race, passim*, makes similar claims about Saracens in general, though she does not mention Malory or Palomydes.

19. Armstrong, “Postcolonial Palomides,” 183.

20. “Saracen” can refer to any pagan: at times, pagan Saxons are referred to as “Saracens.” See *OED*, s.v. “Saracen, n., 2.a.” We are indebted to Edward Donald Kennedy for drawing this definition to our attention.

21. de Weever, “Introduction,” 4–5.

22. Respectively, Armstrong, “Postcolonial Palomides,” 201; Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 116.

of Palomydes's disappearance is and is not true; after all, Trystram and Isode themselves likewise appear far less often after this section of Malory's *Morte* ends, yet their retirement from the public eye negates neither their thematic importance nor Trystram's knightly *worshyp*. Moreover, this belonging and not-belonging reading of Palomydes is but the thin edge of a recent theoretical wedge in modern scholarship, a revisionism that expects "the figures of Arthurian legend [to] both embody chivalric ideals and act as sites of critique for the chivalric ethos."²³

It is our contention that the textual evidence in both the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory's *Morte Darthur* supports a conclusion that goes against received wisdom about these two literary texts. As we shall show in Chapter 3, the alliterative poem celebrates rather than criticizes Arthur's military conquests. Our immediate concern in the present chapter, however, is to argue that Malory consistently presents Palomydes as an insider, not an outsider. In addition, Malory's alliterative English source provides the model for how he develops his late-fifteenth-century characters: in both texts, the pursuit of knighthood is inherently bloody and physical, and that of warfare and conquest even more so; yet in such martial activities it is prowess and honor, not religion or race, that define individuals. Significantly, this is true of knights in both literature and life.²⁴ As Malory's presentation and characterization of both Pryamus and Palomydes reveals, knights in *Le Morte Darthur* are defined not by religious or racial identity but by sociopolitical affinity and, even more, by martial prowess. Significantly, it is both knights who are already members of the Round Table Fellowship and their worthy adversaries who are judged based on these shared standards of chivalric deeds. This is why nearly all of Gareth's opponents in "Sir Gareth of Orkeney" become, by the end of the story, either allies and members of his affinity or full members of the Round Table. Equally, Malory uses this measurement of knightly *worshyp* to depict supposed Others such as Pryamus and Palomydes as adhering to the same standards of behavior as the knights who are already members of the Round Table Fellowship. Consequently, modern scholars should allow

23. Quotation from Robert Rouse, "Historical Context," in *Handbook of Arthurian Romance*, ed. Leah Tether and Johnny McFadden (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 15. The fact that Rouse's essay is the lead one in this *Handbook* illustrates that he articulates a widespread scholarly commonplace.

24. See, for example, Maurice Keen, "War, Peace and Chivalry," in his *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 1–20; Richard W. Kaeuper and Montgomery Bohna, "War and Chivalry," in *A Companion to Medieval English Life and Culture c. 1350–c. 1500*, ed. Peter Brown (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 273–91.

these adversaries the same integration into that Fellowship that is granted to them in two medieval texts by both the characters who inhabit those texts and the authors who created them.

Resolving a Cultural Conflict: The Alliterative *Morte Arthur*'s Priamus Becomes *Le Morte Darthur*'s Pryamus

We contend that twenty-first-century scholars are reading Malory's Palomydes against the grain of *Le Morte Darthur*'s fifteenth-century Round Table Fellowship. The claim that pagan knights are Other in Malory's Arthuriad, however, becomes untenable in light of the overwhelming textual evidence that Malory judges his male characters based on their prowess in the field and participation in knightly brotherhood, not their religion. In this regard, he reflects his English predecessor's characterization of Priamus in the alliterative *Morte Arthur*, a portrait he adopts and adapts as he develops both Pryamus and Palomydes.

As noted above, the alliterative poem's Priamus might, at first glance, seem to be an outsider. He is the son of an unnamed prince who, having rebelled against Rome, now holds his own lands (*aMA* 2595–601). As a descendant of Alexander the Great, Priamus's inheritance could be said to be geographically other, for it includes Alexandria and Africa (*aMA* 2602–9). Although Alexander is a figure who, in the fourteenth century, was occasionally held up as an example of folly and sin, he was more often noted for his generosity, fortitude, and worthiness; Priamus's position in the poem as an heir of Alexander as well as of three of the other Nine Worthies—Hector, Judas Maccabeus, and Joshua—thus signals the poet's approbation.²⁵ His apparent outsider status, in other words, is misleading.

As the alliterative-poet develops Priamus, he reveals the pagan knight to

25. William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative "Morte Arthur"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 44–64, uses the similarities between Arthur and Alexander as well as the supposed iniquities of Alexander as key points in his critique of alliterative-Arthur. As we reveal in Chapter 3, however, Alexander's image in both chivalric literature and aristocratic courtly circles was far from that of the morally bankrupt and cruel tyrant that Matthews claims. As we note below, Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* includes a favorable portrait of him. On the variegated but generally favorable portrait of Alexander in the Middle Ages, see George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, ed. D. J. A. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956); also Charles Russell Stone, *The Roman de toute chevalerie* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). On Priamus's "distinguished lineage" linking him to four Worthies, see Mary Hamel, "The 'Christening' of Sir Priamus in the Alliterative *Morte Arthur*," *Via-tor* 13 (1982): 306.

be a chivalric insider because he is a praiseworthy companion for Wawayne. Priamus enters the alliterative *Morte Arthure* as a man “wondyre wele armyde” in shining armor, carrying a magnificently decorated shield (aMA 2515–24). Somewhat surprisingly, readers are given no details about Wawayne’s arms, but—significantly—both he and Priamus are in search of adventure (aMA 2513–24): in other words, they share the same chivalric motives and values. The fact that Priamus addresses Wawayne in the “lange of Lorryne” (aMA 2531) does not change the fact that, during their combat, Priamus becomes part of a *they* that connects him with, and likens him to, his English-speaking counterpart. The poet-narrator reports that “Thus worthylye *þes wyes* wondede ere bothen” as “Full stowttly *þey* stryke” (aMA 2547, 2553 [our italics]). Although both knights continue to fight despite life-threatening wounds, Priamus manages to wound Wawayne *after* Wawayne’s cleaving of Priamus’s shield leaves Priamus with a wound in his left side so deep that his liver is visible (aMA 2558–73). When Priamus informs Wawayne that he wishes to serve Arthur above all kings because Arthur will be the heir of Alexander (the conqueror to whom all the world once bowed), it becomes clear that Priamus and Wawayne are two knights who together will serve the next Alexander (aMA 2630–35). Just as Arthur’s status as one of the Nine Worthies announces his greatness and justifies his conquests that equal those of Alexander (aMA 3218–445), so Priamus’s descent from Alexander, Hector, and two more Worthies makes him an insider who will help Arthur attain Alexandrian greatness. Indeed, it turns out that Arthur is himself descended “of Ectores blude, the kyngge son of Troye, / And of Sir Pryamous [Priam] the prynce” (aMA 4343–44), a telling fact that further incorporates Priamus into the Arthurian community to which he is connected through his own descent from multiple Worthies. Arthur and Priamus are alike in their Trojan descent, but Priamus alone is descended from Alexander, thus linking him to two great civilizations of the past: Troy and Greece. Significantly, both civilizations are known for military conquest as well as high culture.²⁶ Although Arthur is not of Greek descent, the poet’s association of Arthur with the Nine Worthies and Priamus’s assessment of Arthur as a second Alexander, even greater than the first (aMA 2634–35), connect Priamus to Arthur by virtue of Priamus’s descent from Alexander, Hector of Troy, Judas, and Joshua

26. Given our focus on intertextuality, it is tempting to see Arthur’s descent from the king of Troy in aMA as inspiring the Trojan Frame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. ed. Norman Davis [Oxford: Clarendon, 1967], lines 1–26 and 2522–30)—or vice versa. The uncertain date of both poems, however, renders any certain influence one way or the other nothing more than tantalizing speculation.

(2602–5). Given Priamus's descent from nearly half of the Nine Worthies,²⁷ the connections between these two heroes and the Worthies glorify both king and knight.

At the conclusion of the combat between Arthur's nephew and his worthy opponent, the two warriors are healed simultaneously through the water from the four wells of Paradise that Priamus carries (aMA 2704–13). Priamus's holy water forges another link between him and Wawayne, whose might as a knight (according to Malory) increases between Terce (or nine in the morning) and noon thanks to a holy man's gift (MD 9II.I–4). Although Malory borrows the story of Gawayne's miraculous strength from the stanzaic *Morte*, and although the strength is a gift of a holy man rather than holy water (sMA 2802–7), the holy gifts Malory assigns to both warriors further attest to their similarity. Certainly, the healing water in the alliterative poem shows that Priamus is not a religious Other. Although Kenneth Hodges asserts that, in Malory's version of this scene, Priamus's surrender of his magical Edenic water for "Gawain's baptismal water" symbolizes, if not necessitates, Priamus's change of spiritual allegiance (MD 180.9–25), we agree instead with Mary Hamel, who observes that "the healing (of both Priamus and Gawain) has baptismal overtones";²⁸ both knights, we suggest, are on equal footing in this mutual baptism. Thus, although the alliterative poet could have emphasized in this passage the difference between the Muslim conception of Paradise and the Christian one (even if he did so only by resorting to basic stereotypes rather than providing detailed information about Muslim theology), he chose instead to use Priamus's possession of what a Western audience would consider paradisaic holy water to show the extent to which Wawayne's opponent shares a recognizable Western origin, both with Arthur's knights in general and with Wawayne in particular. Hamel's thesis that Priamus in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is not pagan at all but Greek—and thus, by the fourteenth century, partly schismatic and therefore in need of a partial conversion, is clever.²⁹ However, even her analysis loses sight of the poet's focus, just as Hodges loses sight of Malory's: that focus in each text is Priamus and Wawayne's innate heroism and shared core characteristics.

Priamus continues to function as a heroic companion for Wawayne when he proves his desire to advance Arthur's career by offering good advice to

27. See Hamel, "Christening' of Sir Priamus," 306–7.

28. Respectively, Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's "Le Morte Darthur"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 66, and Hamel, "Christening' of Sir Priamus," 307.

29. Hamel, "Christening' of Sir Priamus," 295–307.

Wawayne: that he and his army of no more than five hundred men should proceed with guile against an enemy force of seventy thousand (aMA 2741–46). When Saracens overwhelm Wawayne's troops, Priamus asks Wawayne's permission to lead some English troops into battle (aMA 2811–18). During the battle, the worthy Priamus then contributes to Arthur's military triumph over the Duke of Lorraine. Riding toward the company of the Round Table carrying his pennon, Priamus encourages the mercenaries fighting for the Duke of Lorraine to desert their leader in favor of Priamus and Arthur (aMA 2916–26). In the alliterative *Morte*, Priamus's potential cultural or religious difference is again irrelevant as he integrates himself into Arthur's military forces and helps the English king to become lord of Lorraine (aMA 3076). What matters in the Priamus episode is that this pagan knight is presented first as a worthy opponent, and then as a worthy comrade, of Wawayne. Significantly, too, Priamus's attitude toward winning *worshyp* by fighting against a numerically superior enemy likens him to the established heroes in the poem, Cador and especially Wawayne. Through these parallels in characterization, the alliterative-poet emphasizes the male-male bond, a bond that weaves the fantastic elements of near-fatal wounds and a healing elixir into a romance episode that enriches an epic-heroic poem focused on Arthur's military conquests. It is martial prowess and companionship that matter here, not religious or racial difference. The alliterative-poet's use of Priamus as Wawayne's *worshyppfull* companion enhances his celebration of Arthur's military conquests. By the same token, the pairing enhances Priamus's own prestige as a heroic figure cut from the same cloth as Wawayne, Cador, and Arthur himself.

Comparative analysis of Malory's version of the Priamus story with that of the alliterative-poet reveals that Malory follows the lead of his English predecessor as he further emphasizes heroic (and non-Othered) connections between this noble warrior figure and his Arthurian fellows. Consequently, Malory's Pryamus in *Le Morte Darthur* is even less of an outsider than the alliterative *Morte's* Priamus, for Malory systematically alters his fourteenth-century source in small but significant ways that further erase the marks of difference that might distinguish Pryamus from Gawayne and other Knights of Arthur's Round Table. These revisions prepare for Malory's later integration of Palomydes into the Round Table Fellowship through the same method—conversion encouraged by one of Arthur's best knights: first Gawayne enables Pryamus's own desire for baptism (*MD* 178.7–13 and 185.10–15), then Trystram enables Palomydes's vow to seek baptism after his self-imposed seven battles (660.29–663.33).

One way in which Malory emulates his primary source for the Roman

War story is to erode the limited religious difference in the poem between the Priamus and Gawain figures, using small-scale but impactful revisions. The alliterative *Morte's* Priamus declares, "No surgyone in Salarne sall saue þe bettyre, / With-thy þat thowe suffre me, for sake of *thy Cryste*, / To schewe schortly my schrifte and schape for myn ende" (aMA 2586–88 [our italics]), suggesting that Wawayne will receive the best medical help available only if he will allow the pagan prince to confess his sins and prepare for his death. The limited nature of Priamus's religious difference is evident in his requesting last rites rather than christening, a detail that Hamel interprets as proof that he is a Christian.³⁰ In contrast, Malory's Pryamus refers to Christ not as Gawayne's but rather as his own savior. After stating that Gawayne will receive aid if he enables Pryamus to be christened and to confess his sins, Pryamus prays to Jesus as his Savior: "and so woll I so thou wolt succour me that I myght be fayre crystynde and becom meke for my mysdedis. Now mercy I Jesu beseche, and I shall becom Crysten and in God stedfastly beleve" (MD 178.7–10). Like Palomydes later, Malory's Pryamus largely dictates the terms of his own baptism and does so in a speech that indicates he is already a Christian in his heart. Furthermore, despite the tendency of recent scholarship to seize upon the term "Saracen" in Malory's *Morte*, "the only place" in either the alliterative *Morte Arthure* or *Le Morte Darthur* "where Priamus is actually called a 'Saracen'" is in Caxton's chapter rubric for his Book V, chapter 10: "Of a bataylle doon by Gauwayn ayenst a Sarasyn, whiche after was yelden and became Crysten."³¹ Although Caxton's Book and chapter divisions, and even some of his rubrics, take their cue from the colored initials, double virgules, and marginalia in the Winchester manuscript (and, it seems, the copy-text) of *Le Morte Darthur*,³² there is nothing at this point in the manuscript-text to justify the classification of Pryamus as Saracen. This particular rubric and its wording are clearly Caxton's, not Malory's.

Consistent with his tendency to Christianize the alliterative poem's pagan prince is Malory's revision of the passage in which Priamus reveals

30. Hamel, n. for 2587–88.

31. Hamel, "Christening³ of Sir Priamus," 295 n. 3; we quote Caxton's rubric from *Caxton's Malory*, ed. Spisak, I:10. Peter H. Goodrich, "Saracens and Islamic Alterity in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 14–15, argues that Malory's Pryamus "is too hybridized to make him clearly a Saracen," which is true; Goodrich's argument, however, relies largely on Pryamus's antipathy toward other Saracens in Lucius's army, overlooking the key point that Pryamus has switched his allegiance from Lucius to Gawayne and Arthur.

32. On correlations between Caxton's layout and Winchester's *ordinatio*, see Spisak, ed., *Caxton's Malory*, II:619, and especially Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 76–81, 84, 85, 170–71, 211.

his core values. By emphasizing chivalric likeness rather than religious or racial difference, Malory again gives Pryamus greater access to the Christian chivalric community than his alliterative counterpart possesses. When the alliterative poem's Priamus asks Wawayne his name, the pagan knight says, "Now, fore the krisome þat þou kaghte þat day þou was crystende, / Whethire thoue be knyghte or knaffe, knawe now þe sothe!" (aMA 2636–37), thereby encouraging Wawayne to reveal the truth of his identity for the sake of the holy oil with which he was christened. Malory's Pryamus, in contrast, foreshadows his future integration into the Round Table by encouraging Gawayne's truthfulness in the name of both Jesus and King Arthur. This invocation suggests Pryamus's seemingly ingrained love of both divine and earthly Christian authority figures: "Now for thy Kynges love of Hevyn and for thy kyngys love, whether thou be knave other knyght, telle thou me thy name" (MD 179.2–3). Whereas Priamus defines his identity in pagan terms, anchored in his future possession of "the tresour and the londes, / And bothe trebute and taxe" of the African realm that the line of Alexander possesses (aMA 2610–11), Malory's Pryamus defines his identity in chivalric terms, valuing above all else the treasure of his knightly bond with Gawayne: "Yet woll I beleve on thy Lorde that thou belevyst on, *and take the for thy labour tresour inow*" (MD 178.22–23 [our italics]). His assertion here that Gawayne's martial deeds are reward enough for him suggests that Pryamus values the social bond of fellowship with Gawayne so greatly that he is willing to follow Gawayne's cultural lead and join the two communities to which Gawayne belongs: the Round Table and the Christian church. Pryamus's comments foreground both Arthurian chivalric fellowship and Christian belief. In other words, Malory sacralizes the secular, martial bond of fellowship among warriors. Gawayne is thus a great warrior and boon companion, so great and so boon that Pryamus will follow him into communion with the Christian God, King Arthur, and—most importantly—the Knights of the Round Table Fellowship. Gone in Malory's version of the Priamus story is earthly wealth as the core of the character's identity. Instead, commitment to the chivalric Fellowship of the Round Table becomes his defining characteristic, an identity defined by belief in Christ, Arthur, and martial *worshyp*: the core elements of knightly excellence and Round Table Fellowship.³³ Pryamus's men are likewise more naturally Arthurian than their alliterative counterparts.

Malory's de-emphasizing even minor characters' religious Otherness strengthens the case for his interest in creating consistent characterization

33. Malory's use of "tresour" here is thus much more significant, deliberate, and thoughtful than Hamel allows: see her "Christening' of Sir Priamus," 304.

in *Le Morte Darthur*.³⁴ More importantly for our present purposes, however, Malory's modifications to his English source suggest that he made a systematic effort to decrease the difference between the Christian Knights of the Round Table and the pagan knights who join them. Indeed, it seems that, for Malory, knights are defined first by their chivalric and martial qualities, then by whether they fight for or against Arthur, and only distantly (if at all) by their religion. In the alliterative *Morte*, Priamus's men say to the Duke of Lorraine, "We forsake þe to-daye by serte [sociopolitical service] of oure lorde—/ We sewe to oure soueraynge in sere kynges londes" (*aMA* 2926–27). Their statement makes clear that they change sides in the war because of loyalty to their lord Priamus and dissatisfaction with the Duke's failure to pay them for "foure wyntteres," a failure that marks him as "feble and false" (*aMA* 2928–29). In *Le Morte Darthur*, Priamus's men still complain that the Duke has not paid them. Nevertheless, they change sides not only because they have not received their wages but also because they have incipient—perhaps inherent—affection for King Arthur: "now we forsake the *for the love of oure lyege lorde Arthure*, for we may with oure worshype wende where us lykys, for garneson nother golde have we none resceyved" (*MD* 183.26–29 [our italics]). Interestingly, even when his source condemns a non-Christian, Malory chooses to decrease the difference between pagan and Christian. The knight of Rhodes who attacks the contingent of Arthur's forces now led by Wawayne and his new companion Priamus receives a clear label as Other from the alliterative poet since he is a "rebell to Criste— / Peruertede with paynmys þat Cristen persewes— / [who] Presses in prowldy as þe praye wendes" (*aMA* 2785–87). Malory, in contrast, retains the idea that the knight is a "rebell unto Cryste" who "preced in proudly and aftir his pray wyndys" (*MD* 182.7–8), yet he makes this figure less of an Other by omitting the idea that he has been "*Peruerted* with paynmys."

Another way in which Malory emulates the alliterative *Morte's* un-Othering of the pagan Other is to raise the status of his Priamus figure so that he rivals Gawayne. First, Malory removes the martial shame that Priamus feels in the poem when bested by Wawayne. The alliterative poet emphasizes Priamus's position outside the Round Table Fellowship by having him lament his disgraceful defeat due to pride: "And I am for cyrqwityre schamely supprisede, / And be awntire of armes owtrayedede fore euer" (*aMA*

34. On Malory's handling of minor characters, see Robert H. Wilson's exemplary studies "Malory's Naming of Minor Characters," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 42 (1943): 364–85, and "Addenda," 563–87.

2616–17). Malory, in contrast, grants honor to Pryamus and elaborates upon the poet's suggestion that Wawayne and Priamus mirror each other. Malory has his Pryamus present himself as a peer of Gawayne who respects his opponent: Pryamus declares, "I have encountred with one hath gevyn me of fyghtyng my fylle" (*MD* 178.26), yet the absence of any expression of shame keeps Pryamus from becoming an Other through being either less successful or less fully integrated into the chivalric community. Malory again marks his Pryamus as more of an insider than the poet's Priamus when he rephrases Priamus's epithet in a way that grants him honor. By rewording "this wortheliche *wye* [man]" as "that worshypfull *knyght*," Malory likens Pryamus to the other Knights of the Round Table (*aMA* 2669; *MD* 179.31 [our italics]). This choice of words is doubly significant: it labels the pagan warrior as a *knight*, so he seems less of an outsider to the Round Table Fellowship, and it assigns him a quality (*worshyp*) that Malory consistently assigns to Arthur's greatest champions. To provide a few representative examples, the phrase "worshypfull knyght" is applied to Pellynore (*MD* 42.29), to Balyn (62.15), to Pelleas when he is (incorrectly) hailed as one of the future Grail knights (143.23–24), and to Gareth, including when he switches sides during the Tournament at Winchester to support Launcelot (266.20, 839.34–840.10). The epithet *worshypfull*, then, positions Pryamus among some of the top-ranked knights in Arthur's court, including, by implication, not only Gawayne but also Launcelot himself—the knight most of Malory's characters and critics consider to be the measure of chivalric worship. Significantly, then, Malory honors Pryamus by making him a near-equal to Gawayne, thereby continuing the work of the alliterative poet of linking and likening these two figures. Malory rephrases the poet's narration that knights "meruaile them thoghte / How [Wawayne] maisterede þat man [Priamus] so myghtty of strenghes" (*aMA* 2682–83), thereby making clear that the warriors are of equal stature: he records how "Sir Gawayne tolde . . . how he had macched with that myghty man of strengthe" (*MD* 180.1–3). Because *macchen* can mean both "to be an adequate opponent for" and "to contend with," Malory's Pryamus moves even closer to Gawayne in fighting prowess than his alliterative counterpart.³⁵ Equally importantly, *macchen* emphasizes the degree to which Pryamus is an equal of, not antithesis to, Gawayne and the Knights of the Round Table.

Consistently, the adjectives that Malory adds to the material he borrows from the alliterative poem raise Pryamus's status so that it approaches

35. *MED*, s.v. "macchen" (v.) "2. (a) To be an adequate opponent for (sb.), equal . . . 3. (b) to fight, contend; ~ with, fight against (sb.), strive."

Gawayne's. Where the poet labels Priamus "þat prince," Malory refers to him as "the *pryse knyght*" (*aMA* 2811; *MD* 182.19 [our italics]). This Middle English adjective praises the pagan knight as noble and worthy, even outstanding—depending on how it is translated. In a similar fashion, where the poet refers to "Sir Priamous þe prynce," Malory refers to "Sir Pryamus the *good prynce*," thereby suggesting the pagan knight's innate goodness—both martial and moral—and worthiness to join the Round Table Fellowship (*aMA* 2916; *MD* 183.20 [our italics]). Malory's addition of the word "kynde" in front of "lorde" likewise improves Pryamus's image as compared to that of Priamus (*aMA* 2923; *MD* 183.25). This adjective's wide range of meanings further enables Malory to pair this pagan prince with his Christian counterpart, for "kynde" denotes not only "kind" and "noble" but also "natural" and "true [or] lawful"—qualities that make Pryamus seem a natural to join the Round Table Fellowship.³⁶ Through subtle modifications of word choice and emphasis, then, Malory creates both thematic and syntactic links between Gawayne and Pryamus. Their similar heroics also pave the way for Pryamus to join the Round Table.

Malory further integrates Pryamus into Arthurian society by transforming him into Gawayne's co-leader of troops, thereby increasing his similarity to Arthur's knights. Malory changes the alliterative poet's reference to how "The duke dressys in his schelde and dreches no lengere / . . . Graythes to Sir Gawayne," so his duke goes instead "streyte unto Sir Gawayne and to Sir Pryamus," who share responsibility for leading troops (*aMA* 2940–42; *MD* 183.32–33). Where the poet focuses on Wawayne's battle against the marquis of Metz—without mentioning Priamus—and the death of a boy soldier of Wawayne's (*aMA* 2948–61), Malory focuses on the heroics of both Gawayne and Pryamus. Accordingly, after Gawayne and Pryamus have "gryped their spearys, and at the gaynyste in they gurde wyth hir noble myghtes," it is Pryamus—not Gawayne—who fights the "Marquesse of Moyseslonde and smytyth hym thorow" before the child is killed and Gawayne avenges the child's death (*MD* 183.33–184.1). Malory again presents Pryamus as leading troops with Gawayne when he changes the poem's description of how "oure cheualrous men" follow Wawayne's lead in attacking the "haythen knyghtez" (*aMA* 2979–92). In contrast, Malory's Pryamus joins Gawayne in leading the attack against the "hethyn knyghtes many": "And aftir Sir Gawayne dressis

36. *MED*, s.v. "kind(e)" (adj.) "1. (a) In accordance with the ordinary course of nature, natural . . . 3. (a) Having rights by birth, legitimate, lawful . . . 5. (a) Benevolent, loving, affectionate, kind . . . 6. (a) Generous, gracious, noble; (b) honorable, constant, faithful, true; (c) brave, courageous, spirited."

hym unto the route and russhyth on helmys, and rode streyte to the rere-ward and so his way holdyth—and Sir Pryamus hym allthernexte gydyng hym his wayes—and there hurtelyth and hewyth downe hethyn knyghtes many” (*MD* 184.21–24). Malory’s praising Sir Florence in this same battle for doing “what he myght” is clearly an approbative litotes, but Malory’s description of the battle also makes explicit that only Pryamus comes close to equaling Gawayne in greatness (*MD* 184.23–24).³⁷

Malory completes the process of making Pryamus seem less of an Other by interpolating into his version of the alliterative *Morte’s* siege of Metz a scene of his own creation, one in which he tells of Pryamus’s baptism and integration into the Round Table Fellowship (*MD* 185.10–18). As soon as Arthur is told of the victory over the enemy and the death of the child Chastayne, Gawayne immediately starts to praise Pryamus as both a good man who saved his life and the noblest of knights (*MD* 184.35–185.12). Gawayne then presents him to Arthur as needing only to convert to become coequal with other members of the Round Table: “Sir . . . this is a good man of armys: he macched me sore this day in the mornynge, and had nat his helpe bene, dethe had I founden. And now is he yolden unto God and to me, sir kyng, for to becom Crysten and on God beleve. And whan he is crystynde and in the fayth belevys, there lyvyth nat a bettir knyght nor a noblere of his hondis” (*MD* 185.10–15). King Arthur immediately accepts Gawayne’s argument that this pagan should promptly become a Christian and one of his knights, so he welcomes Pryamus into the fellowships of the Church and, more explicitly, the Round Table: “Than the kyng in haste crystynde hym fayre and lette conferme hym Priamus, as he was afore, and lyghtly lete dubbe hym a deuke with his hondys, and made hym *Knyght of the Table Rounde*” (*MD* 185.16–18 [our italics]). “[A]s he was afore” is a significant turn of phrase, for it suggests that just as the knight’s name does not change during this ceremony, neither does his essential nature—his *kind*. As Elizabeth Archibald astutely observes, Pryamus’s baptism and elevation to the ranks of the Round Table is Malory’s addition to his English source, an addition

37. Given that Malory was perfectly capable of modifying his sources, Gawayne’s positive image in Tale II should alert critics to the fact that Gawayne in *Le Morte Darthur* is a much more honorable and heroic figure than his reputation in most scholarship allows. For defenses of Gawayne, see C. David Benson, “Gawain’s Defence of Lancelot in Malory’s ‘Death of Arthur,’” *Modern Language Review* 78 (1983): 267–72; Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities*, 148–49; K. S. Whetter, “Characterization in Malory and Bonnie,” *Arthuriana* 19, no. 3 (2009): 123–35.

that typifies “Malory’s interest in chivalry and fellowship.”³⁸ Pryamus thus becomes an early and illustrative component in the exposition of two of Malory’s principal themes (chivalry and fellowship), a fact that indicates this pagan character’s narrative significance. Equally important, Pryamus’s conversion prefigures Palomydes’s later on, alerting Malory’s audience to a key message of his *Morte*: becoming a member of the Round Table Fellowship merely confirms a knight’s innate goodness and his membership in the Christian and chivalric communities that—in the case of Pryamus or Palomydes—he has already chosen to join.

After Malory replaces the alliterative poem’s traditional fall of King Arthur with an account of Arthur’s triumphant crowning—by the Pope himself—as Emperor of Rome (*MD* 188.3–4), he returns to the story of Pryamus. Arthur grants the dukedom of Lorraine “for ever unto [Pryamus] and [his] ayres,” along with a thousand pounds per quarter with which Pryamus can maintain all of his servants (*MD* 188.21–24). As if to obliterate the stinginess of the duke whom Pryamus and his men abandoned, the king himself announces why he gives these gifts to Pryamus: “So thou leve not my felyshyp” (*MD* 188.24). As Arthur’s insistence on Pryamus’s ongoing membership in the Arthurian affinity shows, Pryamus is indeed important to Arthur, and Pryamus’s response is loyalty: “As longe as I lyve, my servys is youre owne” (*MD* 188.27). Much later in *Le Morte Darthur*, in the famous Urry catalog with which we began this chapter, Pryamus becomes a link to “The Boke off Syr Trystram” when Malory says (in Field’s emended text) that he “was crystynde by the meanys of Sir Gawayne” immediately before mentioning that “Sir Palomydes . . . was crystened by the meanys of Sir Trystram the noble knyght” (*MD* 864.31–33).³⁹ Pryamus and Palomydes are likewise two of the “hondred knyghtes and ten [who] serched Sir Urryes woundis by the commaundemente of Kynge Arthur” (*MD* 866.7–8). It is significant that Pryamus dies loyally serving King Arthur, obeying his king’s order that his knights ensure that Queen Gwenyvere is burned for treason (*MD* 884.32–885.1). By dying in the same battle as Gaherys and Gareth (*MD* 885.4–11), Pryamus proves himself to be a conspicuous Arthurian insider, a status that becomes all the more secure due to the rift that exists between Arthur and Lancelot by this point in Malory’s book. While Pryamus remains loyal to

38. Elizabeth Archibald, “Beginnings: *The Tale of King Arthur* and *King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*,” in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 149.

39. On the textual confusion in, and emendation of, this passage, see nn. 1 and 2, above.

Gawayne and Arthur and shares their values, Launcelot becomes the enemy of his former fellows because his first loyalty is to Gwenvere—in right or wrong—rather than to Arthur and the Round Table Knights (*MD* 802.21–23). Much of the pathos of Malory's Arthuriad resides in the fact that Launcelot is both right and wrong in his dual loyalties to his true love and his king. Nevertheless, Pryamus's unfailing loyalty to Arthur and his final appearance alongside Gawayne's beloved brother Gareth foreground just how far he is from being an Other. This is true whether his Otherness is measured by religious or chivalric or even ethnic standards.

Resolving Another Cultural Conflict: Un-Othering Malory's Palomydes

Malory's Gawayne is said to be notoriously inconsistent in both his actions and critical reputation. Thus, despite Gawayne's heroic stature in Tale II, he and Pryamus approach but do not achieve the greatness of the *worshyppfull* trinity of knights whom Malory consistently holds up as the three best in the world: Launcelot, Trystram, and Lamorak.⁴⁰ Palomydes is in a similar situation with respect to his knightly status. Malory, however, takes pains to compress and homogenize the sometimes disparate hierarchy of knights he inherited from his French sources by making those knights more alike than their French counterparts. Depending on which part of "the French Book" one reads, for instance, Gauvain is either Arthur's best knight or a murderous thug. In the prose *Lancelot*, the eponymous hero eventually surpasses Gauvain, but Gauvain is initially, and for a long time thereafter, the best knight in Arthur's court and the yardstick by which the newcomer's deeds are measured.⁴¹ Indeed, Cory James Rushton convincingly argues that Gauvain's decline as a hero in the *Lancelot* occurs only after he suffers a debilitating wound as a result of performing all but unparalleled deeds of prowess in

40. At least by the close of the *MD*, however, Malory's Arthur says that all his joy and loyalty rested on both Launcelot and Gawayne (*MD* 917.34–918.4).

41. On the variety of portraits of the French Gauvain, see especially Fanni Bogdanow, "The Character of Gauvain in the Thirteenth-Century Prose Romances," *Medium Ævum* 27 (1958): 154–61; Keith Busby, "The Character of Gauvain in the Prose Tristan," *Tristania* 2, no. 2 (1977): 12–28; Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980), throughout; and Keith Busby, "Diverging Traditions of Gauvain in Some of the Later Old French Verse Romances," in *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, ed. Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly, and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), vol. 2, 93–109.

defense of Arthur's court.⁴² Only after this injury occurs does Lancelot surpass him. In turn, in the French *Queste del Saint Graal*, Lancelot is himself superseded by the Grail trio of Galaad, Perceval, and Boort, with Galaad emerging as the best of the lot; nevertheless, the quasi-apotheosis of Galaad and Perceval at the end of *La Queste* and the change of subject in *La Mort le Roi Artu* allow Lancelot (and, to a lesser extent, Gauvain) to regain pride of place.⁴³ The prose *Tristan* obviously positions Tristan among the great Arthurian knights, and at times makes him the pinnacle of Arthurian greatness, but the *Tristan* is the nadir of Gauvain's heroic fortunes.

Despite the diverse and sometimes contradictory hero stories he inherited from his sources, Malory revises them to create considerable consistency in characterization, especially of major characters such as Arthur, Launcelot, and Gawayne, but of minor characters too.⁴⁴ Thus, to take a famous example, Malory's most consistent changes to the Grail Quest he adapted from *La Queste del Saint Graal* involve decreasing the status difference between Launcelot and Galahad. So successful is he in rearranging the chivalric hierarchies he inherited that, for most of *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory glorifies Launcelot as one of the elite—even managing to set him among these three Grail elect.⁴⁵ The fact that Malory's Launcelot gains a status in the Grail sequence only slightly lower than Galahad's is recognized by many critics; our analysis of sources, characters, and themes, however, allows us to reveal the extent to which Malory similarly aggrandizes Palomydes, giving this supposedly ostracized Other a heroic and knightly status only slightly—and only sometimes slightly—lower than Trystram's.

In contrast to Priamus, who emerges suddenly and only partially formed

42. Cory James Rushton, "Layde to the Colde Erthe," in *The Arthurian Way of Death*, ed. Karen Cherevatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 155–58.

43. On Lancelot's dominance in the Vulgate Cycle, see Elspeth Kennedy, "The Figure of Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Graal*," in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed. Lori J. Walters (New York: Garland, 1996), 79–104. On Gauvain in the French *Queste and Mort*, see especially Busby, *Gauvain*, 347–74.

44. On Malory's synthesizing of character, see especially Robert Henry Wilson, *Characterization in Malory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1934), throughout; also Dorsey Armstrong, "Malory and Character," in *A New Companion to Malory*, ed. Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 144–63. On Malory's minor characters, see Wilson, "Malory's Naming," 364–85, and Wilson, "Addenda," 563–87.

45. Fiona Tolhurst, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," in *Malory and Christianity*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 139–45.

from the quill of the unknown poet who created the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Malory's Palomydes has a longer history.⁴⁶ Palamedes is—by medieval standards—a relatively well-rounded character who was invented by the author or authors of the first version of the prose *Tristan* (circa 1230–35) before, shortly thereafter, getting fleshed out by the author of the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* (circa 1235–40). As Kevin T. Grimm notes of Malory's Palomydes, this is a character who “attracts our attention because his extreme emotional displays suggest to us psychological depth and complexity.”⁴⁷ The fullness of his character is evident as early as the Post-Vulgate Cycle, where he is always and already notable for both his prowess and his love of Yseut—as well as his hunting and eventual killing of the Beste Glatissante (Malory's Questing Beast).⁴⁸ Even in Palamedes's first appearance in the Post-Vulgate *Queste*, the (initially unidentified) knight laments his unrequited love of Yseut before the narrator introduces him as “the good pagan knight, the knight of the Questing Beast,” referring readers to the prose *Tristan* to learn of his sufferings in love.⁴⁹ In both French texts, as in Malory's *Morte*, the Palamedes-figure enters the narrative as a good Saracen who eventually converts to Christianity. Although Palomydes, unlike Priamus, does not appear in the alliterative *Morte* or Malory's Roman War story, the two characters are alike in both

46. We paraphrase Brewer's account of Lancelot “spring[ing] fully-formed from the mind of Chrétien de Troyes”: Derek Brewer, “The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot,” *Arthurian Literature* 3 (1983): 26. Dulin-Mallory overlooks the Post-Vulgate Cycle in her etiology of Palamedes: Nina Dulin-Mallory, “Seven trewe bataylis for Jesus sake,” in *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 166–67.

47. Kevin T. Grimm, “The Love and Envy of Sir Palomides,” *Arthuriana* 11, no. 2 (2001): 65. On the fullness of Palomydes's character, see also John Ellis-Etchison, “A Noble Knight and a Mighty Man: Palomydes's Saracen Chivalry in Malory's *The Book of Tristram de Lyones*,” in *North and South: Essays on Gender, Race and Region*, ed. Christine DeVine and Mary Ann Wilson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 3–5.

48. On Palamedes and the Post-Vulgate Cycle, see Fanni Bogdanow, *The Romance of the Grail* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), especially 98–99, 104–9, 117–18, 124–26, 190–92, 204. On Palamedes and the Beste Glatissant, see especially *La Version Post-Vulgate de la Queste del Saint Graal et de la Mort Artu*, ed. Fanni Bogdanow, 4 vols. (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1991–2001), vol. 2, §367, 488–90; §369, 492–93; §375, 504–5; §382, 520–22; vol. 3, §474, 133; and (for his conversion and the Beste's death) vol. 3, §550, 261–§584, 313.

49. *Version Post-Vulgate de la Queste*, vol. 2, §367, 488–§369, 492: “li bon chevalier sarrazines, cil qui si longuement avoit chaciee la Beste Glatissant.” We do not reproduce Bogdanow's editorial brackets and markup. The English translation is from *Lancelot-Grail*, gen. ed. Norris J. Lacy (New York: Garland, 1993–96), Vol. 5, 218.

knightly prowess and associations with some of the greatest of the Round Table exemplars. In short, these two supposed Others have parallel careers that liken them to their Round Table sponsors. Study of all of the inter- and intra-textual episodes in which Malory's Palomydes appears reveals many parallels between the Priamus-Wawayne and Palomydes-Trystram relationships.

These parallels are not much discussed by scholars, who instead continue to interpret Palomydes as a racial or religious Other even when their own arguments undermine this critical position. Caitlyn Schwartz, for instance, claims that Malory's Palomydes differs from typical romance Saracens (an assertion that is partly true) yet also claims that he is never fully incorporated into the Round Table Fellowship (an assertion that is completely untrue since Palomydes is several times identified as a full-fledged Knight of the Round Table).⁵⁰ Tellingly, however, Schwartz admits that Palomydes is more individual, and less culturally threatening, than is typical of the romance Saracen. Bonnie Wheeler makes a similar admission: that "[t]his seemingly outsider Saracen is no more 'Other' than the rest of the Arthurian orphanage."⁵¹ Such statements undermine critical arguments that seek to render Palomydes Other because, even in romance in general, the Saracen knight is remarkably similar to his Christian counterpart.⁵² Any lessening of Palomydes's supposed religious or cultural difference thus elides what is already an often minimal distinction. Yet Schwartz goes on to insist that Malory constantly reminds his audience of the gap between Palomydes's private Christianity and his public identity as Other, suggesting that he does and does not fit.⁵³ Maria Sachiko Cecire likewise insists that Palomydes is ultimately "unmanned" in Malorian society" due to his alien race and lack of romance adventures in the bedroom, despite acknowledging Palomydes's self-control and prowess.⁵⁴

We contend that even the supposedly best pieces of evidence for Palo-

50. Caitlyn Schwartz, "Blood, Faith and Saracens in 'The Book of Sir Tristram,'" *Arthurian Literature* 28 (2011): 121–35. On Palomydes as a Round Table Knight, see *MD* 564.13–14, 576.18–23, 824.15–35, 836.3–13, and our discussion throughout this chapter.

51. Bonnie Wheeler, "Grief in Avalon," in *Grief and Gender, 700–1700*, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught and Lynne Dickson Bruckner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 68.

52. On romance Saracens in general, see Siobhain Bly Calkin, "Saracens," in *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*, ed. Neil Cartlidge (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 185–200, and Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2005), especially 13–60.

53. Schwartz, "Blood, Faith and Saracens," 126–28.

54. Maria Sachiko Cecire, "Barriers Unbroken," *Arthurian Literature* 28 (2011): 141.

mydes's status as an Other are outweighed by textual evidence of his inclusion in the Arthurian Fellowship. Although Schwartz does not adequately acknowledge (or perhaps realize) the overlap, she echoes Wheeler, and especially Armstrong and Molly Martin, in arguing that Palomydes's partial isolation is ultimately guaranteed by two facts: he and his brother Segwarydes are constantly foiled in their relations with women, and he all but disappears from *Le Morte Darthur* after his conversion.⁵⁵ Palomydes's partial disappearance is technically true, but many scholars ignore the fact that once "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" is finished, Trystram likewise largely disappears from "The Hoole Book" until Malory recounts his and Isode's tragic deaths in the Urry catalog on the eve of the final dissolution of the Round Table (*MD* 865.6–17). Once Trystram's murder is recounted, he truly disappears, whereas Palomydes is mentioned several more times later in the text. Even if Palomydes or Trystram *did* disappear, their narrative stage-time has been considerable considering that the "Boke off Syr Trystram" makes up a third of the entire *Arthuriad*. Ultimately, then, the real test of inclusion in the Arthurian Fellowship is not how often Trystram or Palomydes is mentioned after "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" ends, but rather how frequently they both appear in the rankings of best knights alongside Launcelot, Lamorak, and Gareth. As Wheeler herself acknowledges, "Palomydes is . . . often cited as the fourth best fighter in the world"; such recognized status as fourth-best is, as Nina Dulin-Mallory rightfully attests, one of "Palomides's distinguishing characteristics in both the . . . [prose] *Tristan* and the . . . *Morte Darthur*."⁵⁶ Thus a list of top knights offered by Sir Persaunte in "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney" includes Palomydes and several others, but Palomydes receives pride of place after the chivalric trinity of "Sir Launcelot du Lake, Sir Trystrams de Lyones, and Sir Lamerok de Galys" (*MD* 245.13–21).

Given his high knightly ranking, it is worth emphasizing that Palomydes distinguishes himself in all three major tournaments in "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones": at the Castle of Maidens, at Surluse, and at Lonzep. The repeated public display *and recognition* of Palomydes's chivalric excellence do not, we insist, provide evidence of his failure or liminality. On the

55. Schwartz, "Blood, Faith and Saracens," 131–34; Wheeler, "Grief in Avalon," 67, 72; Armstrong, "Postcolonial Palomides," 194, 196–98, 201; and Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 87–88, 107–8, 111–17, who argues that the lack of a valorizing female gaze cast in his direction undermines Palomydes. As we reveal in the pages that follow, Palomydes is subject to several gazes.

56. Wheeler, "Grief in Avalon," 69 and 73 (quoting 73); Dulin-Mallory, "Seven trewe bataylis," 167–68. Cf. Ellis-Etchison, "A Noble Knight," 7.

contrary: as Elizabeth Edwards observes, the “conflict between Palomides and Tristram is the chief recurring motif of the whole of ‘The Book of Sir Tristram’; it is an *organising* conflict,” one used by Malory as an appropriate means “of ending the entire ‘Tristram’ section.”⁵⁷ Consequently, in contrast to what has become the dominant method of interpreting Malory’s Palomydes, we maintain that Malory consistently presents this Saracen knight as an Arthurian insider who is very much like Trystram and who consistently functions as his foil-cum-companion. Although most critics do not address the full significance of this pairing, they do regularly claim that Trystram, like Palomydes, is a liminal figure who somehow does and does not belong.⁵⁸ In what follows, we argue that both Trystram and Palomydes do indeed belong and that it is their consistent and oft-recognized display of that all-important Malorian trait of martial prowess that establishes them as Arthurian insiders.

Trystram and Palomydes as Arthurian Insiders

Our assertion that Palomydes is a member of Arthur’s Round Table Fellowship no less respected than Trystram builds upon and responds to the work of Maureen Fries, Felicity Riddy, and Kevin J. Harty, for examining what these critics say about Trystram helps to reveal the ways in which Trystram, like Palomydes, has been misread. Fries argues that Trystram operates as a disloyal “counter-hero” who not only symbolizes but also enacts, and largely initiates, the moral failings that will ultimately destroy the Round Table; Riddy presents Trystram as “an outsider who lacks permanent membership of a solidarity of lineage and kinship” and whose history is largely “one of displacement”; and Harty relates the negative stereotypes of the Cornish that appear throughout Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, as well as the taunts that other characters consistently aim at Cornish knights, to a long-standing sociohistorical perception on the part of the English that the Cornish were “distinctly other.”⁵⁹ In other words, these critics position Trystram like other critics position Palomydes: as an inferior knight and a social outsider.

57. Elizabeth Edwards, *The Genesis of Narrative in Malory’s Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 13 [our italics]. Cf. Grimm, “Love and Envy,” 65.

58. In this sense, though not others, we agree entirely with Armstrong, “Postcolonial Palomides,” 175–203, that Trystram and Palomydes and even Launcelot make more sense when taken together as a comparative whole than when isolated.

59. Maureen Fries, “Malory’s Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte Darthur*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 605–13; Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 86, 98; Kevin J. Harty, “Malory and the Cowardly Cornish Knights—‘The strangest races [that] dwell next door,’” *Études Anglaises* 66, no. 3 (2013): 379–87.

The persistence of this conclusion makes it seem compelling, yet Trystram's eventual seat at the Round Table is the former seat of the (textually) famous Marhalte, "one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde" in his day and "the good knyght that was nobly proved" in battle as "one of the famuste knyghtes of the worlde" (*MD* 294.11–295.27). Despite Marhalte's fame and prowess, however, he dies at the hands of Trystram during Trystram's first adventure after being made a knight (*MD* 293.33–300.23). The significance of Marhalte's defeat is obvious from the detail that Malory devotes to the encounter when he first recounts it: Marhalte's challenge on behalf of his brother-in-law, the King of Ireland, is introduced; this challenge instigates Trystram's desire to defend his uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, a decision that necessitates Trystram's knighting; the battle is recounted carefully and at length, as are its consequences, including Marhalte's mortal wounding and Trystram's journey to Ireland to be healed of his own wounds by the "noble surgeon" La Beale Isode (the entire episode comprises *MD* 294.9–302.9). Moreover, Trystram's victory over Marhalte is recalled later in the "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17) when Trystram himself is at last made Knight of the Round Table and given the former "syege of Sir Marhalt." Significantly, Arthur welcomes Trystram to the Round Table in language that echoes but surpasses the earlier praise of Marhalte, hailing Trystram "for one of the beste knyghtes and the jentyllst of the worlde and the man of moste worship" (*MD* 452.26–453.27). Further undermining critics' conclusion that Trystram is an outsider is the fact that Malory devotes a third of his *Arthuriad* to Trystram and stories related to him—including his rivalry-cum-friendship with Palomydes. If nothing else, the sheer length of Trystram's narrative in *Le Morte Darthur* indicates the extent to which Malory envisaged Trystram belonging to—and duplicating and ratifying the values of—the Round Table Fellowship and its chivalric exemplars. In addition, he and Palomydes have many more commonalities than differences, commonalities that reveal both knights' chivalric excellence and insider status.

Harty correctly asserts that Malory's anti-Cornish comments are generally directed at King Mark and his minions, thereby "debas[ing]" Trystram's chief enemies while concomitantly implying Trystram's higher heroic stature.⁶⁰ Yet, for Harty, "on at least three occasions" even Malory's Trystram "cannot find opponents who will take him seriously because he is a Cornish knight":⁶¹ Trystram, too, could thus be said to be an ethnic Other. Harty's

60. Harty, "Cowardly Cornish," 379–81; on Trystram's elevation (in both Malory and the earlier verse Tristan legend), Harty follows Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 398.26–27.

61. Harty, "Malory and the Cowardly Cornish," 385. Harty cites *Works*, 398, 400,

argument has textual grounding: in Trystram's first knightly encounter with Sagramoure and his companions as well as his second such encounter with Bleoberys, Trystram is unknown and his challenge is initially answered with scorn because a Cornish knight issues it (*MD* 314.21–32, 316.7–8). Trystram, however, fights anyway, and when his inevitably defeated naysayers learn his name rather than his regional identity, they (respectively) either ask him to join their fellowship (*MD* 315.29–30) or express pleasure at meeting Trystram and wish to do as he desires (317.5–318.23). Furthermore, even in these initially insulting instances, Trystram is quite distinct from his Cornish countrymen. Therefore, both of these episodes undermine Riddy's claim that Trystram is "an outsider" who lacks fellowship.⁶² Soon after these encounters, Trystram unhorses Ector and Morganoure, causing Ector to express shame and despair at having been overcome by "ony Cornysse knyght" (*MD* 319.22–320.6). Only on this occasion does the insider knight whom Trystram fights not subsequently recant his Cornish insult, but the difference is explicable: here Ector and Morganoure never learn Trystram's identity.

Trystram, in other words, is both regularly subject to yet subsequently exempt from the usual stigma associated with Cornish knights. Eugène Vinaver is consequently mistaken when he asserts that Malory would have been unable to explain the imprecations hurled at the Cornish and Trystram,⁶³ for Malory turns the traditional insults into an opportunity to extol one of his main heroes—and thereby to extol the values of Arthurian knighthood and celebrate the *worshyp* that Trystram embodies. In this sense, Fries's thesis that Malory's "Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" and its eponymous protagonist are underappreciated by critics is entirely correct.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, we dispute Fries's claim that Trystram regularly violates the chivalric principles of the Round Table Oath and causes other knights to do the same.⁶⁵ It is admittedly true, as Fries argues, that Trystram rather nonchalantly decapitates the Lady of Castle Plewre (*MD* 330.15–16).⁶⁶ But the circumstances are

404; the corresponding passages in Field's edition are cited in our discussion. Armstrong, too, raises the possibility that Trystram is Othered by his Cornish status: see "Postcolonial Palomides," 189, 198–201.

62. Riddy, *Thomas Malory*, 86 and 98.

63. Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 398.26–27. On Cornwall's identity as a distinct region and that region's simultaneous relation to the English Crown in the late Middle Ages, see S. J. Drake, *Cornwall, Connectivity and Identity in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019), throughout.

64. Fries, "Tristram as Counter-Hero," 605–6.

65. Fries, "Tristram as Counter-Hero," 607–12.

66. Fries, "Tristram as Counter-Hero," 607–8.

more complex than Fries allows, for she ignores key details that exonerate Trystram, including the explanation of why the castle “was called the Castell Plewre, that is to sey the Wepyng Castell” (*MD* 328.4–331.7). The decapitation is not (as Fries implies) a woeful example of willful masculine might making right, but rather a fulfillment of a traditional romance evil custom. This particular evil custom has lasted “many wyntyrs”: for the evil “*custom* of that castell was suche that who that rode by that castell and brought any lady wyth hym he *muste nedys fyght* with the lorde . . . Brewnour. And yf hit so were that Brewnour wan the fylde, than sholde the knyght straunger *and his lady be put to deth*[.] . . . And yf hit were so that the straunge knyght wan the fylde of Sir Brewnour, than sholde he dye *and hys lady bothe*” (*MD* 328.7–14 [our italics]). This custom is *enforced* on all who pass by, regardless of whether they seek adventure or, as do Trystram and Isode, merely safe harbor (*MD* 328.4–6). Both the barbarity of the custom and the appropriateness of Trystram’s beheading of the lady of the castle are further confirmed by the required outcome of the evil custom: whichever lady is less beautiful shall be beheaded. Malory thus makes it perfectly clear that Brewnour and his lady are responsible for their own deaths and that Trystram speaks against the custom several times (e.g., *MD* 328.19–22, 328.29–30, 329.19–21, 330.5). Malory further exculpates Trystram from any shame by having the son of the lord and lady of Castle Plewre denounce his parents and their custom, promising never to renew this horrific practice (*MD* 332.4–35). The decapitation of this lady cannot be used against Trystram without ignoring the textual contexts, particularly the force of the evil custom.

Crucially, the reason for Trystram’s exemption from the charge of Cornish cowardice, like the reason he was able to defeat Sir Brewnour and Sir Galahalte (Brewnour’s son), is the chivalric prowess that earns him that all-important Malorian trait of *worshyp*. The same is true, we contend, of Palomydes, who is and is not a typical Saracen. It is significant, we believe, that both of these misunderstood characters play leading roles in Malory’s most misunderstood Tale, “The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones.” This vast middle section of Malory’s *Arthuriad* constantly illustrates how great Arthur and his court are, as well as how successfully Arthur consolidated his kingdom and kingship in Tales I and II. Malory’s opening two Tales focus on Arthur’s rule, his own knightly prowess, and the establishment of his knightly fellowship. Indeed, Arthur’s own worship and kingship are so great that Percyvale’s aunt asserts during the Grail Quest that “all the worlde, crystenyd and hethyn, repayryth unto the Rounde Table, and whan they ar chosyn to be of the felyshyp of the Rounde Table they thynke hemself more blessed and more in worship than

they had gotyn half the worlde" (*MD* 700.20–23). The "Trystram" section of Malory's *Morte Darthur* is actually its heart, for it illustrates the truth of Percyvale's aunt's statement by detailing—at great length—the many adventures of the great many knights associated with Arthur, concomitantly and repeatedly illustrating that what binds the knights together is chivalric prowess and fellowship—not religion, race, or ethnicity.⁶⁷ This fact is evident in the inclusion, and prominence at the Round Table, of French knights, Scottish knights, Welsh knights, at least one Cornish knight (Trystram), and two Saracens (Pryamus and Palomydes).

Given that chivalric rather than religious, racial, or ethnic identity predominates in Malory's *Morte*, we agree with Dhira B. Mahoney, Kevin T. Grimm, and Andrew Lynch, each of whom resists the critical tendency to denigrate the prolix "Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones." Mahoney judiciously insists that "the theme of the 'Tristram' is not just the attainment of knighthood but the pursuit of 'worship' gained by fighting, and the bond of fellowship that develops among those who achieve it"; Tale V is therefore central to Malory's *Arthuriad* as a whole.⁶⁸ Grimm likewise argues that this seemingly disparate middle Tale of *Le Morte Darthur* actually "develops a coherent focus on a group of knights"—chief among whom are Trystram, Launcelot, and Lamorak (a list to which we would add Palomydes)—and that these knights both individually and especially collectively manifest the ideals and *fellowship* of Malory's "High Order of Knighthood."⁶⁹ Although in this Tale Malory sometimes opposes fellowship with envy, Grimm maintains (rightly, we believe) that Malory downplays the rivalry between Launcelot and Trystram in order to emphasize their friendship.⁷⁰ Lynch is also concerned with fellowship and envy in the Trystram story, particularly with what he considers to be the ways in which Malory's economy of *worshyp* generates problems for knights like Palomydes, who can be good yet never great enough fully to equal Launcelot or Trystram.⁷¹ Lynch argues further—and we agree—that Trystram and Palomydes function as foils for each other; consequently, each

67. On the importance of fellowship and chivalric friendship in *MD*, see especially Elizabeth Archibald, "Malory's Ideal of Fellowship," *Review of English Studies* 43, no. 171 (1992): 311–28; and Richard Sève, "Malory's 'Chivalric Cliques': Public and Private *Felyshyp* in the Arthurian Community," *Arthurian Literature* 32 (2015): 105–22.

68. Dhira B. Mahoney, "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram,'" *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 9 (1979): 175.

69. Kevin T. Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1993): 83.

70. Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy," 80.

71. Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 79–133.

helps to complete aspects of the other's character. Nevertheless, we dispute Lynch's claim that Palomydes's very subjectivity "eventually comes to challenge and complicate the norms of Malory's narrative."⁷²

Norms such as the knightly achievements and fellowship displayed throughout "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones" actually follow and build upon the achievements and conduct of Arthur himself, thereby helping to cement the *worshyp* of Camelot. Both in life and in literature, moreover, all members of a chivalric order were coequal. Granted, knighthood itself required a certain amount of wealth as well as noble lineage; however, within the secular orders, no knightly companion was superior to his fellows.⁷³ This is also true in Malory's "Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table, that whan they were holé togyders there was ever an hondred and fyfty" (*MD* 940.17-19). Some of the Round Table Knights are manifestly more adept at wielding arms than others, but all are coequal members of the Fellowship: Balyn and Balan, Launcelot and Trystram, Lamorak and Percyvale, Gawayne and Gareth are Knights of the Round Table first and representatives of Northumberland, France, Cornwall, Wales, or Scotland second. Thus, as Armstrong herself concludes in a statement that undermines her postcolonial reading of Palomydes, the very cosmopolitan nature of Arthur's court reveals "the impossibility of maintaining the oppositional ideas of center/margin and inside/outside as foundational supports for the Arthurian community": in other words, careful examination of *Le Morte Darthur* reveals that it does not support "a Same/Other dichotomy."⁷⁴

In point of fact, Malory throughout *Le Morte Darthur* presents Palomydes as an insider who belongs in the company of Arthur's best knights. The only way in which Palomydes could be said not to belong is in his unrequited love—but unrequited love is a romance commonplace! Palomydes the Unsuccessful Lover is thus in good, if unhappy, company. Certainly Palo-

72. Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms*, 109.

73. Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy," 77; Grimm is following Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 196. See further D'Arcy Jonathan Dacre Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown: The Monarchical Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe, 1325-1520*, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 457-58, 466-67, 491-92.

74. Armstrong, "Postcolonial Palomides," 202-3. Significantly, Schwartz and Wheeler make similar acknowledgments: see above, nn. 50, 51. See too Kay's words at *MD* 384.7-12, where he notes that no knight "cristynde nother hethynde" can equal Launcelot's prowess: martial ability is what matters, not pagan rather than Christian faith.

mydes receives inclusion as a participant in Arthur's tournament at the Castle Perilous in "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney," and Malory lists both him and Trystram as among the "many good knyghtys" fighting against Arthur in this tourney (*MD* 270.12–27). By adding the detail that Palomydes and Gawayne strike each other so forcefully that both men, along with their horses, fall to the earth (*MD* 272.23–27), Malory assigns to Palomydes a significant deed of prowess. This tournament is Palomydes's first major appearance in the *Morte*, and hereafter the Saracen knight's good reputation and great prowess receive frequent mention. For example, when Palomydes and the disguised Trystram first meet in Ireland early in "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones," the narration labels Palomydes as both "well cherysshed with [Isode's parents] the kyng and the quene" and recognized as "a noble knyght and a myghty man" by Trystram himself (*MD* 302.14–22). Palomydes's martial feat of striking to the ground in a single day not only Gawayne but also eight other knights causes "all people [to have] mervayle" of him, and it wins him "grete worship" (*MD* 303.18–26). This type of chivalric achievement and the celebratory language applied to it identify Palomydes as a standard Malorian insider and hero. Indeed, achieving the defeat of Gawayne and many others here makes Palomydes the yardstick for Trystram's success, not the reverse. Because Isode already loves Trystram (disguised as Tramtryste) but does not love Palomydes, she asks Trystram to fight on her behalf (*MD* 302.29–303.17)—behavior that is entirely typical of relationships between lovers in the genre of romance. What is significant here, however, is that, in the resulting joust between Trystram and Palomydes, Trystram earns respect by defeating his rival. Since this joust is presented as only his second battle after being made a knight (*MD* 303.4–6), when Trystram defeats the worthy Palomydes, "Sir Gawayne and his felowys . . . had mervayle who hit myght be that had smytten downe Sir Palomydes"; consequently, they all refuse to engage the victorious newcomer (304.15–31). Shortly thereafter, when Trystram champions King Angwysch against Sir Blamour, the tournament judges view him favorably "because he slew Sir Marhalte the good knyght and because he forjusted Sir Palomydes the good knyght" (*MD* 323.29–324.2). Thus Palomydes and Trystram are alike not only in their heroic prowess but also in acquiring their chivalric identities in relation to each other. Each knight is also linked to Launcelot as a result of this battle, for Palomydes is already so impressive that Trystram's first defeat of him causes Trystram to be mistaken for Launcelot (*MD* 305.22–31). Palomydes is often said by critics to be only fourth-best, but in this instance his prowess is used to measure the greatness of Launcelot and Trystram.

Given that Launcelot, Trystram, and Lamorak are the only knights who defeat Palomydes (*MD* 543.10–25) and that he smites both Trystram and Lamorak to the ground with a single spear (378.34–379.1), Palomydes merits a place alongside Malory's top three earthly knights. Only occasionally is he presented as less than great. The two notable exceptions to the rule of his greatness both occur during the Tournament at Lonezep, and tournaments are somewhat problematic venues because they can generate envy as well as fame.⁷⁵

The first of these problematic appearances occurs early in the Tournament at Lonezep. Near the official start of the tournament, Palomydes fights “so mervaylously [that] all men had wondir” for “there myght no man wythstonde hym” (*MD* 581.8–11). So great is Palomydes here that Trystram himself exclaims, “So God me helpe, Sir Palomydes ys a passynge good knyghte and a well enduryng” (*MD* 581.13–14). However, as Martin points out, when Launcelot subsequently enters the fray and begins to take the honor from Palomydes, Palomydes slays Launcelot's horse, and then many people cry out against him (*MD* 581.29–582.10). Although Martin emphasizes how the onlookers “invoke [Palomydes's] difference [by] calling him ‘Palomydes the Saresyn,’”⁷⁶ they are angry at Palomydes because of his unknighly behavior, not because he is a Saracen. The inclusion of Palomydes's epithet gives their denunciation formality, but it does not constitute a slur against the religion, race, or ethnicity of the knight. Furthermore, as Palomydes points out to Launcelot, just as it is unknighly to slay your opponent's horse, so too is it unknighly for a rested knight to engage a weary one, and Palomydes has long been fighting while Launcelot has just entered the field (*MD* 582.22–30). Earlier in Malory's *Morte*, Trystram was reluctant to fight Lamorak under similar circumstances for exactly this reason: “hit were no worship for a noble man to have ado with” one who has fought for so long given that “hit were shame to tempte hym ony more, for his horse is wery and hymself both” (*MD* 342.18–22). When Mark demands that Trystram fight anyway (*MD* 342.2–343.3) and Trystram wins, Lamorak is furious (343.4–344.16)—as Palomydes must be when Launcelot engages him at Lonezep, though Palomydes

75. On envy in *Le Morte Darthur*, see especially Grimm, “Fellowship and Envy,” 77–98; Ridy, *Thomas Malory*, 88–97.

76. Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 109–10. Rushton discusses this episode as an example of Palomydes's duality, the ways in which he seems equally capable of great prowess and great treachery: Cory James Rushton, “Malory's Idea of the City,” in *Studies in the Role of Cities in Arthurian Literature and in the Value of Arthurian Literature for a Civic Identity: When Arthuriana Meet Civic Spheres*, ed. Cora Dietl and Claudia Lauer (Lampeter: Mellen, 2009), 108–9.

is far more polite than was Lamorak (582.22–30). That honor (not religion, race, or ethnicity) is the underlying issue in the combat of Launcelot and Palomydes is revealed when Launcelot forgives Palomydes the death of his horse because he understands what motivates Palomydes (*MD* 582.31–583.6). Tellingly, Launcelot’s response confirms that he himself—the acknowledged yardstick of chivalric excellence both within Malory’s *Morte* and among its modern critics—has been as ill-behaved as Palomydes on this occasion. Indeed, despite the subsequent deeds of Launcelot and Trystram, Arthur and the other kings present at Lonezep give Palomydes the prize for the day “bycause [he] beganne fyrste, and never he wente nor rode oute of the fylde to repose hym, but ever he was doynge on horseback or othir on foote, and lengyst durynge” (*MD* 583.25–29).

It is also entirely possible that the slaying of Launcelot’s horse was an accident, a natural consequence of energetically smiting and hewing at any creature that comes into striking range during a tournament.⁷⁷ Certainly, Palomydes’s situation is more difficult than Launcelot’s because Palomydes fights with a sword against his opponent’s “grete speare and a longe,” and although Palomydes “smote the speare . . . a-too wyth his swerde,” the blow that kills the horse could have been redirected by the remaining lance-shaft (*MD* 581.31–582.4). For that matter, as happened earlier when Trystram fought on horseback with a sword against Gyngalyn fighting on horseback with a lance, it is possible that a powerful sword “buffet upon the helme” or upper torso might then slide “adowne and carv[e] asundir [the] horse necke” (*MD* 388.20–24). This very injury happens to Palomydes’s own horse during the fighting on the second day of the Tournament of Surluse (*MD* 518.18–21). If our analysis of this combat is correct, the audience’s outcry against Palomydes is indeed angry, but the knight’s motivation for smiting is honorable and the horse-killing an accident rather than a violation of knightly ethics.

Later in the Lonezep tournament, similar complications emerge when literary critics try to evaluate Palomydes’s conduct. On the one hand, King Arthur himself calls Palomydes “a passynge good knyght”; on the other hand, Trystram’s unhorsing of Kay and three additional knights with a single spear causes Palomydes to be “clene forgotyn” by the tourney’s attendees (*MD* 599.32–34, 600.8). In addition, although Launcelot notes that Palomydes’s motivation to surpass Trystram is but “prevy envy” (*MD* 600.15), the Saracen knight is not alone in feeling such envy. Critics often focus on moments of Palomydes’s defeat or envy and consequently conclude that he is differ-

77. Dulin-Mallory, “Seven trewe bataylis,” 169.

ent from his fellows, yet readers must keep in mind that Launcelot's own kin, envious that Trystram's reputation has temporarily eclipsed Launcelot's, "wolde have slayne Sir Trystram bycause of hys fame" (*MD* 618.33–619.2).⁷⁸ Similarly, Gawayne's envy of first Pellynore and then Lamorak partially accounts for the infamous Lott-Pellynore feud that creates some of the long-standing factionalism that contributes to Arthur's downfall. Placed within the context of the Arthuriad as a whole, specifically a fictional world dominated by martial prowess, public reputation, and the winning of that all-important Malorian attribute of *worshyp*, Palomydes's envy of Trystram is not only understandable but also typical: it is a characteristic he *shares* with many of the premiere Round Table Knights.

Launcelot himself, after all, illustrates that every knight envies the success of his fellows and that knights will fight both relatives and friends to win *worshyp*. Launcelot presents as a universal truth the notion that "there ys harde batayle theras kynne and frendys doth batayle ayther ayenst other, for [then] there may be no mercy, but mortall warre" (*MD* 820.35–821.2). This "olde-seyde sawe" becomes all the more apt for being evoked after Launcelot suffers injury at the hand of his kinsman Bors in the Winchester Tournament as a direct result of Launcelot's overly successful disguise (wearing Elayne of Ascolat's sleeve) and his fighting too earnestly against his own kin (*MD* 806.16–812.10).⁷⁹ Few critics comment on the episode earlier in "The Boke of Syr Trystram" in which Launcelot fights several friends, but it reveals a key driver of his actions: the desire to be the object of others' envy. By adventuring in disguise, Arthur's greatest knight defeats, shames, or seriously injures several Round Table fellows, notably Trystram, Palomydes, Bleoberys, Gawayne, and Kay (*MD* 445.6–452.25).⁸⁰ The disguised Launcelot even claims to "hate all tho that be of Arthurs courte" (*MD* 446.13) and uses this excuse to joust with his companions; his drive to win *worshyp* results in the death of the very minor character Sir Galardonne, who is (perhaps unwittingly) slain by Launcelot (446.6–21). The greatest knight in Logres even goes so far as to

78. For ways in which this scene, and especially Launcelot's threat of violence to any who would harm Trystram (*MD* 619.3–10), testify to the important theme of fellowship in "The Boke off Syr Trystram," see Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy," 93–94.

79. This sentence is repeated, with slight variation, from K. S. Whetter, "Weeping, Wounds and Worshyp in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthurian Literature* 31 (2014): 73.

80. Vinaver notes that the episode is found in the prose *Tristan*, where the unknown assailant knight remains anonymous; as is his wont, Malory assigns a name to an unnamed source character, and this identification is more important than the resulting questions it might raise about Launcelot's actions and character: see Vinaver, Commentary on *Works*, 571.9–18.

speak “grete vylony by the kyng, and specially by the quene Gwenyvere,” words for which he is dutifully but unsuccessfully challenged by Kay—and perhaps Dynadan, though the latter characteristically eschews combat when the going gets tough (*MD* 447.23–27). Literary critics could use Launcelot’s behavior as evidence of any number of chivalric failings or inconsistencies on his part. Yet they should avoid giving in to such a temptation, for attempting to win fame by fighting in disguise—even against his own fellows—is acceptable because, when his victories are subsequently credited to him as Launcelot, both his reputation and his love of the queen receive even greater public recognition (*MD* 451.31–452.25).⁸¹ Launcelot’s desire for fame and the accompanying conduct is not a mark of vainglory but rather the maintenance of honor. As happens so often in premodern heroic literature, honor and fame in *Le Morte Darthur* must be continually and publicly won and recognized. Envy is common in such a culture, and by fighting in disguise, Launcelot can maintain his public reputation. The desire to maintain his public *worshyp* likewise motivates each of Trystram and Palomydes.

Launcelot, Trystram, Palomydes, and Gawayne inhabit a shame culture in which honorable deeds must be not only performed but also publicly acclaimed.⁸² As Derek Brewer rightly insists, the logic and values of traditional literature are not always what modern readers expect.⁸³ Consequently, for modern readers, the most remarkable aspect of this remarkable story of Launcelot battling (and, in one case, killing) his fellows is that, despite the

81. Beverly Kennedy is correct in linking this episode to Launcelot’s love of Gwenyvere, but incorrect in identifying it as the beginning of Launcelot’s “fall from humility” and corresponding change in the nature of his love: see “Malory’s Lancelot,” *Viator* 12 (1981): 423–24. Launcelot cannot (contra Kennedy) maintain his reputation as the “best knight in the world” merely by resting on his laurels. On additional problems with Kennedy’s conception of Launcelot and Gwenyvere’s love, see Chapter 4 below.

82. This acclaim was necessary in medieval life as well as literature. As Craig Taylor observes, “To be chivalrous required an audience[.] . . . Great emphasis was placed in chivalric culture upon ensuring that others were aware of a knight’s accomplishments. It was not enough to behave [or perform] well; one had to be seen to be doing so”: *Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood in France during the Hundred Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 64–65; cf. 98–99.

83. Derek Brewer, “Towards a Chaucerian Poetic,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 60 (1974): 219–52, explores some aspects of “traditional” literature that are relevant to Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Elsewhere Brewer interprets (we think incorrectly) this scene of Launcelot abusing his fellows and badmouthing Arthur and Gwenyvere as evidence of Malory’s general lack of interest in character, yet Brewer correctly notes that the scene reveals differences between medieval and modern audiences and storytelling: see Brewer, “Presentation of the Character,” 47.

fact that both Gawayne (*MD* 447.7–10) and Arthur (452.11–19) recognize the disguised Launcelot, they and the other Knights of the Round Table not only accept but also gloss over what seem like the dubious actions of their world's greatest knight. When this episode ends with the fulfillment of the long-prophesied battle between Trystram and Launcelot at Merlin's stone (*MD* 449.26–451.13), followed by Trystram's formal welcome into the Round Table (452.20–453.19), it becomes clear that the bond of knightly fellowship matters much more than religious, racial, or ethnic difference, and the maintenance of knightly honor matters much more than the occasional deception that makes winning *worshyp* possible.

Within this chivalric context, Palomydes's epithet as "Saracen" is no more a negative value judgment than are the toponymic epithets "de Lyones" or "du Lake" regularly applied (respectively) to Trystram and Launcelot.⁸⁴ The Saracen knight's status as an Arthurian insider receives considerable confirmation from leading knights who compare him with both Trystram and Launcelot. For instance, based on Palomydes's defeat of Gawayne and several other knights, Gawayne states that their unknown opponent could be Trystram (*MD* 573.5–7). Trystram himself, on one occasion, assumes that his foil must be Launcelot after Persides asserts that Palomydes "ys one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde" (*MD* 406.34–407.5). Palomydes then receives a blessing from a crowd of observers who exclaim "with a lowde voice, 'Jesu save the and kepe the, thou noble knyght Sir Palomydes!'" (*MD* 407.6–8). Lamorak likewise hails Palomydes as a "worthy knyght" without peer (*MD* 477.30–31), and although Lamorak says this after all but defeating Palomydes, his respect for his opponent is significant. Indeed, when Dynadan later reports to Arthur how Lamorak had "forjusted . . . Sir Palomydes and me bothe," Arthur is initially skeptical because, he insists, "Sir Palomydes is a passynge good knyght" (*MD* 480.15–29). Here again Palomydes functions, not as a model of failure or ostracized hybridity, but rather as a yardstick of chivalric excellence by which to measure the prowess of other leading knights. Thus, when competing against Trystram in a tournament, Palomydes so impresses Arthur that the king likens Trystram to a ferocious lion and Palomydes to a ferocious leopard (*MD* 577.34–578.4). In contrast to Palomydes, Gareth and Dynadan are mere "egir wolvis" (*MD* 578.3–4).⁸⁵ Palomydes's epithet as leopard becomes an even greater marker of respect in light of the fact that Malory also applies it to

84. See Edwards, *Genesis of Narrative*, 67–68.

85. For a sympathetic and insightful reading of Dynadan, including a convincing explanation of the significance of his parallels to Gareth, see David F. Johnson, "A grete bourder and a passynge good knyght," *Arthurian Literature* 37 (2022): 49–65.

Launcelot: it is recorded in one of the *Morte's* many inscribed prophecies that the “lybarde” Launcelot “shall engendir a lyon,” his son Galahad (*MD* 621.34–622.3). Malory’s language as applied to Palomydes is consistently approbative.

Furthermore, Malory has a habit, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, of comparing Palomydes with Trystram and Launcelot. Despite the Saracen knight’s complaint that he cannot “wyn worship” at a tournament where Trystram, Launcelot, or Lamorak is also fighting (*MD* 416.25–28), Malory subtly emphasizes Palomydes’s chivalric likeness to Trystram and Launcelot through manipulating Merlin’s prophecy about “too [of] the beste knyghtes that ever were in Kynge Arthurs dayes, and too of the beste lovers” (*MD* 449.33–35). The language just quoted, of course, harkens back to Merlin’s construction of Launceor and Columbe’s tomb and the origin of Merlin’s prophecy about the greatest battle to be fought by the two greatest knights, knights who are also the greatest lovers: Trystram and Launcelot (*MD* 56.35–57.5; recalled by Malory at 449.26–35). However, because Trystram challenges Palomydes to meet him “in the medowe by the ryver of Camelot, where Merlyon sette the [prophetic] perowne” (*MD* 444.11–13), the second version of the prophecy—the one just quoted—pairs Palomydes with both Launcelot and Trystram as members of the chivalric elite. Trystram’s challenge also unwittingly leads to the fulfillment of Merlin’s prophecy, for the knight whom Trystram meets at the stone turns out to be Launcelot. Nevertheless, by thus reminding his audience how “in that same place sholde fyght too the beste knyghtes that ever were in Kynge Arthures days” (*MD* 449.34), Malory subtly places Palomydes in the position of one of these two exemplary figures. Likewise, because Trystram is awaiting his rival, Palomydes’s status as chivalric hero is clearly anticipated and announced.⁸⁶ What happens instead—as regularly happens in Malory’s “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17)—is that Fate or chance intervenes, and it is Launcelot who rides up to challenge Trystram, thereby fulfilling the original prophecy. Given, however, that Trystram is expecting to fight Palomydes; given that many of the *Morte's* characters—as we have quoted in the previous pages—consider Palomydes to be one of the world’s preeminent knights; and given that Merlin’s prophecy is that the “too . . . beste knyghtes that ever were” will fight, the approbative language and comparisons between Palomydes, Trystram, and Launcelot all emphasize just how central Palomydes is to Malory’s Arthurian and its community of knightly fellows. It is therefore appropriate that, in the final scene of the episode that recounts the great Tournament of Lonezep, Gwenyvere

86. See also Edwards, *Genesis of Narrative*, 13–14.

is told “how Sir Palomydes wan the gre the fyrste day wyth grete nobles, and the secunde day Sir Trystram wan the gre, and the thirde day Sir Launcelot wan the gre” (*MD* 604.9–11).

Tellingly, Palomydes has already received an insider’s welcome from Dynadan as well as an insider’s gift earlier on in the *Morte*. Dynadan, who never associates with villainous knights,⁸⁷ is “glad” to learn Palomydes’s name since he is convinced that Palomydes “shall wyne grete worshyp in the courte of Kyng Arthure, and be ryghte wellcom” (*MD* 472.11–14). Later, Galahalte the Haute Prynce gives his own horse to Palomydes to replace the one accidentally beheaded during their combat on the second day at the Tournament of Surluse (*MD* 518.18–25). The thematic, characterological, and visual parallels of Tale V’s three great tournaments again invite Malory’s audience to judge Palomydes’s slaying of Launcelot’s horse at Lonezep (discussed above) as an accident similar to Galahalte’s slaying of Palomydes’s horse here at Surluse. Even Arthur’s one-time anger that Palomydes has defeated his kinsmen (*MD* 524.12–15) does not change the fact that Palomydes socializes at Surluse with Queen Gwenyvere, Galahalte the Haute Prynce, and Sir Launcelot (527.3–5). Crucially, the supposed cultural difference of the Saracen is finally unimportant, for Palomydes himself elides that distinction: on at least one occasion he swears “Be Allmyghty Jesu” (*MD* 476.3), thereby placing himself in the same culturally Christian community as his Round Table fellows. Twice he declares that he is already christened in his heart and soul, and will be baptized as soon as he completes seven battles for Christ (*MD* 527.11–16, 660.33–661.2). Critics who insist on interpreting Palomydes as a religious, racial, or ethnic Other do not give sufficient attention to these statements. The evidence we have marshaled thus far in this chapter strongly suggests that Malory and his characters assess the Saracen as a respected insider: a chivalric fellow, not the antithesis of Arthurian or Christian knighthood. Certainly Palomydes feels so much a member of the Round Table elite that he can assert that, should he be slain on the adventure of the King of the Red City, he is confident that either Trystram or Launcelot will avenge his death (*MD* 563.8–19). Indeed, having structured the “Boke off Syr Trystram” around the greatness of Trystram and Palomydes, Malory now casually announces Palomydes’s status as an Arthurian insider by having Palomydes introduce himself as “a knyght of Kyng Arthurs and of the Table Rounde” (*MD* 564.13–14).

After Palomydes is baptized in a ceremony in which Trystram serves as one of his godfathers (*MD* 663.20–33), his integration into the Round Table

87. See Johnson, “A grete bourder,” 49–65.

becomes complete. The fact that he has been christened makes not only King Arthur but also the entire court “ryght glad” (*MD* 664.1–3). Significantly, though, Palomydes’s identity is not changed by this conversion: his name and appearance remain the same. Palomydes has also, by this point in the “Hooole Book,” been twice explicitly identified as a Knight of the Round Table. Once, as just noted, is during the Red City adventure (*MD* 564.13–14). The second occurrence, as noted near the beginning of this chapter, comes from no less an authority than the magical inscriptions on the Round Table itself. Near the opening of the Tournament at Lonezep, King Arthur has Kay check “the segis” of the Table to determine which Round Table Knights have yet to arrive at the tourney: the first two names that are listed are “Sir Trystram [and] Sir Palomydes” (*MD* 576.18–23). Contrary to critics’ claims about Palomydes’s disappearance from the narrative after his conversion, Palomydes’s presence at key events later in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* indicates his ongoing status as a valued member of the Arthurian inner circle. He attends the private supper with Queen Gwenyvere through which she is trying to prove that she has as much joy in all the other Knights of the Round Table as she previously had in Launcelot (*MD* 793.6–14). In the Allhalowmasse Jousts held after Launcelot’s injury in the episode that Field titles “The Fair Maiden of Ascolat,” Palomydes is again listed as one of several “knyght[es] of the Rounde Table that were there at that tyme” (*MD* 824.15–35). Palomydes—like Sir Pryamus—is also present at the healing of Sir Urry (*MD* 864.31–33).

As noted at the outset of this chapter, Malory compares and foregrounds the two pagan knights and their substantial glory by noting that “Sir Pryamus . . . was crystynde by the meanys of Sir Gawayne; . . . Sir Palomydes . . . was crystened by the meanys of Sir Trystram” (*MD* 864.31–33). In the final Tale of Malory’s *Arthuriad*, Palomydes is among the many knights whom Bors calls to him to support Launcelot in his war against Arthur; Palomydes, however, merits a separate sentence after a long list of names that blend together (*MD* 878.26–879.2). During the war, Palomydes is among the knights, led by Bors and Ector, who ask Launcelot to let them fight Arthur’s forces (*MD* 892.31–893.8). He is, moreover, so respected an insider, and such a leading knight, that he is one of these select few who dare counsel and criticize Launcelot, complaining that Launcelot “fare[s] as a man that were aferde” and pointing out that “Sir Gawayne woll nevir suffir you to accorde wyth Kynge Arthure” (*MD* 893.4–7). Part of what gives him this elite status is his ability to fight well, an ability he demonstrates by defeating many knights in Launcelot’s defense (*MD* 894.7–8). What all of this textual evidence indicates is that it is his chivalric and martial prowess, not his Saracen heritage (whether crit-

ics interpret it in terms of religion, race or ethnicity, or culture), that defines Malory's Palomydes.

The Romance Bonds of Arthurian Insiders

Bonds between warriors are common in both epic and romance, but the bonds of love evident between specific knights in the alliterative and prose *Mortes* elucidate both the alliterative poet's and Malory's manipulation of romance tropes. Just as the alliterative-poet pairs Priamus with Wawayne so consistently that their strong male-male bond helps to create a romance subplot within his epic-heroic poem, Malory pairs Palomydes with Lamorak, Launcelot, and especially Trystram so consistently that the Saracen forms bonds with other knights that create similarly intense moments of romance tension in Malory's mixture of tragedy and romance.⁸⁸ Lamorak, for example, has an intense emotional bond with Palomydes, asserting that he loves Palomydes more than any man except his own brother Sir Torre (*MD* 478.1–4). Palomydes has the same level of devotion to Lamorak (*MD* 477.35–478.2), and Launcelot has a similarly intense bond with the Saracen knight. When Launcelot is trying to avoid harming Gawayne or Arthur despite fighting a war against them, Palomydes offers an assessment of the situation that Launcelot knows to be true: that sparing Arthur and Gawayne will not change the fact that they want Launcelot dead (*MD* 895.20–22). Likewise, Palomydes is one of the “many noble knyghtes” who swear either to share in Launcelot's exile or to support him martially should he decide to stay in England (*MD* 903.30–35). The fact that Palomydes both advises and publicly declares allegiance to Launcelot as he fights King Arthur, and especially that his support and advice are accepted, shows the extent to which the Round Table Knights view the Saracen as an equal and an insider.

The male-male bond that creates the most romance tension connected with Palomydes, of course, is his bond with Trystram: they are rivals both in tournaments and in love, yet their bond emulates that of Trystram and Isode in its emotional intensity. When the two knights suffer imprisonment together and Trystram falls ill, Palomydes comforts him as best he can—despite the fact that the Saracen's love of Isode is what created their mutual hatred in the first place (*MD* 427.1–5). Later, meeting and jousting by chance, the two knights halt their joust to talk and then commit to serving each other. They cement their bond through Palomydes's request for his rival's forgive-

88. On friendship bonds in *MD*, see Sévère, “Malory's ‘Chivalric Cliques,’” 105–22.

ness for his earlier unkind words, and Trystram's expression of admiration for the Saracen as a good knight who has achieved many "grete entirpryses" (*MD* 552.1–25). Shortly thereafter, when Palomydes volunteers to avenge the death of the King of the Red City, Trystram shows how attached he is to Palomydes by allowing him to go only on the condition that Palomydes join Trystram at the Tournament of Lonezep that will take place a week later (*MD* 556.20–25). In fact, the manner in which Palomydes takes up the Red City adventure perfectly illustrates that he is paired with Trystram, for the adventure is announced by means of a strange ship, a dead king, a letter, and the ship's crew. As both the sailors who steer the strange ship carrying the dead king and a letter on that ship assert, the knight who takes up the letter should also take up the quest of avenging the dead king (*MD* 555.8–556.22). As Rushton observes, that knight is Trystram, yet Trystram refuses to take the Red City adventure because he has already vowed to attend the upcoming Lonezep tournament.⁸⁹ For Rushton, this episode is riddled with sociopolitical hierarchies, yet he agrees with Catherine Batt that the opening scene of the Red City episode bespeaks knightly brotherhood since the easy "exchange of Palomydes for Tristram reinforces 'the interchangeability of good chivalric bodies' and Palomydes's role in corroborating 'chivalric fellowship's ideological power.'" ⁹⁰ We completely concur, but find the most important aspect of this episode to be how the substitution of Palomydes for Trystram—and Palomydes's success in fulfilling the Red City quest—highlight both Palomydes's belonging to the wider knightly community and his likeness to Trystram. More specifically, because Palomydes is successful in this adventure, achieving what Lynch terms "a salvific victory for a whole people," critics should put him in the same category as Trystram, who defended Cornwall against Ireland (*MD* 293.33–300.19), or Launcelot, whose "freeing of Tintagel from churls and giants" defended Cornwall from harm (206.20–208.8).⁹¹ Nevertheless, even Lynch, whom we quote here, highlights Palomydes's supposed lack of chivalric belonging as much as his good will and prowess. In contrast, we assert that Palomydes's actions and motivations consistently pair him with Trystram and cause him to belong to the Round Table Fellowship.

As the above-mentioned adventures reveal, throughout *Le Morte Darthur* Palomydes earns others' respect as a great knight, one who proves his likeness to Christian knights by not only matching but also outdoing them. Granted,

89. Rushton, "Idea of the City," 106–11.

90. Rushton, "Idea of the City," 106–7; quoting Catherine Batt, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 116.

91. Lynch, *Book of Arms*, 119.

when Palomydes does well at the Lonzep tournament, Trystram then does twice as many deeds of arms as Palomydes, thereby illustrating that the hero's beloved companion or second self is never quite as great as the hero.⁹² Significantly, however, Malory pauses to inform his audience about how "Trystram mervayled" at his rival's deeds before outperforming those deeds (*MD* 589.10–30). Just as Malory expresses respect for Palomydes, so does Trystram. When Isode accuses Palomydes of treason against Trystram (evidence of which she has gathered with her own eyes), Trystram accepts Palomydes's explanation of events rather than Isode's (*MD* 596.27–597.13). Later, when Palomydes is in need of rescue, his commending himself (via messenger) to Trystram and Isode results in Trystram's attempting to rescue him (*MD* 611.16–33). This rescue attempt further attests to Palomydes's worthiness: Trystram is initially unable to locate his quarry, and when Launcelot happens to see Palomydes being transported as a prisoner and rescues him, the male-male relationships devolve into a comic romance plot in which two great knights compete to rescue one knight-in-distress (*MD* 612.4–613.31). When Trystram is about to joust with Launcelot and likely suffer defeat, Palomydes intervenes by asking that Trystram not attack the knight who has just saved his life (*MD* 613.1–6). Palomydes might have suspicions about Launcelot's identity based on the latter's single-handedly defeating twelve knights in order to rescue him (*MD* 611.34–612.30), or might not want two such "noble" and "worshypfull" knights as his unnamed rescuer and Trystram to fight each other. Nevertheless, whatever Palomydes's motivation, Malory's audience cannot misconstrue this knight's acknowledgment of Trystram's greatness.

Equally strong and significant, however, is the acknowledgment of Palomydes's greatness, for Launcelot confesses at the close of this adventure that

Wyte thou well, Sir Palomydes, that I, and ony knyght in this londe of
worshyp, must of verry ryght succoure and rescow so noble a knyght
as ye ar preved and renowned thourougheoute all this realme, enlonge
and overtwarte. (*MD* 614.8–11)

Later, when Palomydes has the opportunity to kill an unarmed Trystram, Palomydes refuses to dishonor himself by doing so (*MD* 660.6–8).⁹³ Trys-

92. The gods in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* use the phrase "second self" explicitly to describe how the goddess of creation must make Gilgamesh's companion, Enkidu: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1972), 62; see also 65–69, 94, 106.

93. Launcelot extends the same courtesy to Lamorak because the latter thinks his

tram's response, "I undirstonde thy valyauntenesse," signals his respect for his fellow's strong sense of right and wrong—despite his own unwillingness to state whether he would kill an unarmed Palomydes (*MD* 660.11–25). Clearly, Palomydes's adherence to the highest standard of chivalric behavior extinguishes Trystram's desire to fight him. Although in today's world critical thinkers should consider "*ethnicity* and *race*" as markers of "the identifications made by individuals about the groups they belong to,"⁹⁴ in the world of Malory's *Morte* chivalric commitment is the marker of Palomydes's identification as belonging to a particular group: the Round Table Fellowship. Throughout *Morte Darthur* great knights are drawn to one another regardless of race, religion, or original sociopolitical affinity; Launcelot's and Trystram's rescue of Palomydes and the words spoken between them all illustrate the validity of the observation of Percyvale's aunt that it is chivalric prowess and brotherhood, not race or religion, that define the Arthurian chivalric community (*MD* 700.20–25).

As discussed above, the alliterative-poet's use of Priamus as Wawayne's worthy opponent-cum-comrade enhances the alliterative *Morte Arthure's* celebration of the military conquests of Arthur. In a similar fashion, Malory's likening Palomydes to Christian knights enhances *Le Morte Darthur's* celebration of conquests on the jousting field. The praise Palomydes receives for his martial prowess outweighs any consideration of his cultural difference as a Saracen, making chivalric glory the primary basis of knightly identity in Malory's *Morte*. Launcelot tells Palomydes outright that his worthiness made rescuing him the right thing for either Launcelot or "ony knyght in this londe of worshyp" to do (*MD* 614.8–11). Such praise of the Saracen occurs throughout the "Boke off Syr Trystram." Thus, when another knight tries to take from Palomydes the adventure of avenging the King of the Red City and must accordingly suffer defeat at Palomydes's hands, the knight admits, "Sir, wyte you well ye ar *bettir worthy* to have this batayle than I" (*MD* 564.11–12 [our italics]). This knight then explains that he prefers Palomydes to all living knights except Launcelot, Trystram, and Lamorak (*MD* 564.16–21). When the people of the Red City see Palomydes, they likewise validate him as a

lady-love is the most beautiful woman in the land, just as Launcelot thinks Gwenyvere is the most beautiful (*MD* 381.21–35). A similar argument over ladies occurs between Mellyyagaunt and Lamorak (*MD* 380.22–35). Malory again manipulates a generic trope (of ladies' beauty inspiring knightly deeds and love) to draw parallels between Palomydes and other leading Round Table Knights.

94. Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001): 41.

true knight who is “well made and clenly and bygly” rather than fault him for any physical imperfection or religious or racial difference; they praise him as a man who, although not yet christened, “belyve[s] in the beste maner” and is “full faythefull and trew of his promyse and well-condyssyonde” (*MD* 565.26–33). When the brothers Helyus and Helake threaten Palomydes with death before he can be christened, both Malory’s narration and Palomydes’s response to the threat reveal the extent to which prowess and honor—not religion, race, or ethnicity—dictate character. While Malory qualifies the prowess of Helyus and Helake by noting their penchant for falsehood and treason (*MD* 566.5–7), he validates Palomydes. Palomydes’s lack of concern about the possibility that he will die a non-Christian proves to be valid when he first asserts that he will die a better Christian than these two opponents, and then defeats and kills them (*MD* 566.23–567.30). This entire episode reinforces the Saracen knight’s position among the best knights of the world and shows that he belongs in the Round Table Fellowship. Indeed, just as Malory endorses Trystram’s and Isode’s love by letting them live together at Joyus Garde (see Chapter 4, below), so he waits till this point in the “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17), after having repeatedly drawn connections between Palomydes and Trystram and Palomydes and other knights, including Launcelot, before having Palomydes himself announce that he is “a knyght of Kynge Arthurs and of the Table Rounde” (564.13–14). Unlike with Trystram (*MD* 452.26–453.19), Malory does not show Palomydes actually taking his seat at the Round Table, but neither is Launcelot’s taking his seat narrated. Nothing about Palomydes’s character or actions during the Red City adventure indicates that he is lying; on the contrary, the entire adventure, in Malory’s hands, showcases Palomydes’s heroism and chivalric belonging—a belonging subtly enhanced by having Palomydes himself recount his Round Table membership.

During the Tournament at Lonezep, Malory continues to present Palomydes as an exemplar of martial prowess. Expressing admiration for Palomydes after he smites four knights with one spear, Malory as narrator says, “And allwayes Sir Palomydes speare was hole” (*MD* 571.25–31). Once again, Palomydes’s actions position him as a member of the chivalric and normative elite of the Round Table, for the practice of defeating multiple opponents with one lance (and being praised for it) is usually the prerogative of Malory’s top-tier knights, men who are, like Palomydes, fellows of the Round Table.⁹⁵

95. See, for example, Pelleas (*MD* 128.26–31), Marhaute (140.10–16), Gareth (274.2–10), Lamorak (481.17–482.5), Alysaunder the Orphan (513.20–22), and espe-

Palomydes is singled out for one-spear praise on other occasions as well, including when he smites “downe Sir Trystramys and Sir Lamerok bothe with one speare” (*MD* 378.34–379.1), and is identified after-the-fact as “the strong knyght [who] smote . . . downe . . . seven [others] with one speare” (478.9–26). When Palomydes smites four additional knights—including Gawayne—with several spears, Malory’s focus is again on the glory of these conquests that entitles Palomydes to membership in the most elite of knightly circles (*MD* 572.26–31). Because of his prowess and elite-insider status, when “many noble knyghtes” prepare to follow Launcelot out of the country as he gathers troops to battle Arthur, Malory places Palomydes at the head of the list of knights who swear allegiance to Launcelot (*MD* 903.30–32).⁹⁶

When Launcelot makes Palomydes duke of Provence and the Saracen knight’s brother Saffir duke of Languedoc, Palomydes receives final validation for his martial prowess and *worshypfull* status (*MD* 905.27–28). Since Launcelot here gives lands and holdings to “all hys noble knyghtes,” starting with “them off hys blood” and including friends and companions such as Palomydes and Saffir (*MD* 905.13–33), Palomydes is the same as, not different from, his Christian counterparts in *Le Morte Darthur*. Throughout “The Hoole Book” in general and “The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones” in particular, Palomydes is a foil for, companion to, and near-equal of Trystram, a great knight whose deeds earn him not only a named seat at the Round Table, but a place among the Fellowship’s elite.⁹⁷

Middle English Others Un-Othered

In *Le Morte Darthur*, social and cultural constructs—not religious, racial, or ethnic ones—determine whether a character belongs in the Arthurian com-

cially Trystram (319.29–32, 495.16–17, 577.18–20, 580.16–20, 600.1–4) and Launcelot (199.1–3, 212.14–213.17, 221.9–14, 447.4–6, 601.8–10, 612.24–26, 808.34–809.4, 836.3–7). Launcelot’s deed when he fights in disguise against Sagramour, Ector, Uwayne, and Gawayne (at 212.14–213.17 [discussed above]) receives commentary from both Launcelot himself and Gawayne and is further highlighted by one of Winchester’s marginalia (see W 108v).

96. The discussion, list, and swearing of support are all elements original to Malory: see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 1202.32–1204.13.

97. Palomydes’s role parallels other pairings that, for reasons of space, we cannot discuss here: Trystram and Launcelot; Gareth and Launcelot; Lavayne and Launcelot; Bors and Launcelot; Galahad and Launcelot; Gawayne and Launcelot; and Isode and Gwenvere—whose parallels are discussed in Chapter 4.

munity.⁹⁸ By comparing Pryamus and Palomydes, readers can discover that the evaluation of supposedly Othered Saracen knights in Malory's book is based on the universalizing standards of martial prowess, courage, honor, and *worshyp*; this is true whether the Saracens or pagans or their Arthurian peers do the evaluating. According to these knightly cultural values, Saracens are not necessarily any more different from Arthur's knights than knights fighting with red shields are from ones fighting with green ones. Although Donald L. Hoffman wittily claims that Malory's Palomydes is doomed to be "the patron saint of the second-best,"⁹⁹ Palomydes drew much of Malory's attention. Robert H. Wilson has established that "Palomydes" was in fact a "favorit[e]" name and character of Malory's, a character he frequently inserted in places where anonymous characters appear in his sources; these Palomydes additions are especially common in tournament lists from "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkeney" onward.¹⁰⁰ By consistently changing anonymous source knights to Palomydes, or using Palomydes alongside other such "favorites" as "Bors and Ector," Malory clearly associates Palomydes with martial excellence and chivalric fellowship.

Indeed, although Malory inherited most of the Palomydes story from the prose *Tristan*, the idea of concluding his "Boke off Syr Trystram" with a final battle between Trystram and Palomydes culminating in Palomydes's conversion is, as Wilson also established, Malory's invention (*MD* 659.14–663.28).¹⁰¹ Given the prominence Malory gives to Palomydes's conversion through its closing position in the "Trystram," it is difficult to countenance Peter Goodrich's claim that "Malory de-emphasises the fullness of Palomides's conversion and assimilation to the Round Table."¹⁰² Instead, Malory's original additions strongly suggest both that Palomydes had no stigma for Malory and that the Saracen knight is—in the author's mind—simply another standard knightly character, one whose prominence is prepared for, albeit not equaled, by Pryamus.

98. On the cultural determination of race and ethnicity during the Middle Ages, see Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 197–242. See also Margaret Jubb, "The Crusaders' Perceptions of Their Opponents," in *Palgrave Advances in the Crusades*, ed. Helen J. Nicholson (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 226–27.

99. Donald L. Hoffman, "Perceval's Sister," *Arthuriana* 6, no. 4 (1996): 76.

100. Wilson, "Addenda," 569–70. The quotations in the next sentence come from these same pages.

101. Robert H. Wilson, "How Many Books Did Malory Write?," *University of Texas Studies in English* 30 (1951): 6.

102. Goodrich, "Saracens and Islamic Alterity," 17.

What makes Pryamus and Palomydes worthy of Malory's narrative attention is their knightly prowess, chivalric excellence, and *worshyp*, not their religion, race, or ethnicity. As Dulin-Mallory notes, Palomydes qualifies as a Saracen Other "only" by virtue "of his distant origins, not in terms of his ethics or behavior," while Helen J. Nicholson, speaking primarily of the French Palamedes, urges scholars to realize just how "little" the "concept of religious difference" mattered compared to late-medieval ideals of knighthood.¹⁰³ When Sir Persaunte first identifies the world's top three knights as Launcelot, Trystram, and Lamorak, he then immediately qualifies his ranking by noting, "yet there be many other noble knyghtis, as Sir Palomydes the Sare-syn and Sir Saphir, his brothir, also Sir Bleobrys and Sir Blamour de Ganys, his brother; also Sir Bors de Ganys, and Sir Ector de Marys, and Sir Percivale de Galys" (*MD* 245.11–19). The fact that Palomydes appears first, ahead of Bors and Percyvale, who later succeed on the Grail Quest, provides yet more textual evidence that Malory is more interested in Palomydes's essential similarity to the best knights of *Le Morte Darthur* rather than in the fact that he happens to be un-baptized for much of Malory's book. After all, if a "principal theme of ['The Boke off Syr Trystram'] is . . . Tristram's attainment of full knighthood" and public recognition "as one of the four best knights in the world,"¹⁰⁴ then Palomydes's equally frequent recognition as one of the key players in that top four gives him a major role in the elucidation of this theme of Trystram's growth. There is no inherent shame, in Malory's knightly rankings, in being fourth-best after Launcelot, Trystram, and Lamorak. Further erasure of any negative connotations of the word "Saracen" in Malory's book occurs because *Sarras*, the fictional city in which the Grail elect achieve the Grail and where Percyvale's Sister, Galahad, and Percyvale are all eventually buried, has a name that "echoes the word 'Saracen.'"¹⁰⁵ All told, Malory's linked themes of prowess and fellowship present both Pryamus and Palomydes as major fighters, key knightly fellows, and publicly acknowledged Arthurian insiders.

103. Dulin-Mallory, "Seven trewe bataylis," 172; Helen J. Nicholson, *Love, War and the Grail* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 207.

104. Larry D. Benson, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 116.

105. Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe with Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1997), 348, s.v. "Sarras." Cf. Dorsey Armstrong and Kenneth Hodges, *Mapping Malory: Regional Identities and National Geographies in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 124.

The celebration of military conquest and knightly prowess supersedes individual and cultural difference in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, just as it does in his alliterative English source. Study of Pryamus as a precedent for Palomydes alerts readers to the role Malory assigns to Palomydes as honorable foil-cum-companion to Trystram. By emphasizing Palomydes's martial talent and the respect he earns through his talent, Malory reflects the historical and cultural norms of his time. Moreover, while today's literary critics tend to exaggerate Palomydes's alterity, historians downplay the differences between Eastern and Western fighting men. Thus, for Nicholson, "Knightly skill in arms and honourable conduct are depicted [in medieval Arthurian literature] as being more important than religious belief in determining the best knights in the world," while Richard W. Kaeuper and Montgomery Bohna explicitly prioritize fighting prowess over morality or religion when evaluating fighting men.¹⁰⁶ There is also a long-established "topos of the noble Saracen," evident in both chivalric literature and some Western crusading writings about Muslim enemies, that provides precedents for a more balanced interpretation of Palomydes.¹⁰⁷ In addition, Malory had a model of pro-Muslim narration in Sir John Mandeville, who, in his *Travels*, calls the Saracens "gode and feythfulle" people who are supposedly easily converted to the Christian faith because their beliefs are so similar to those of Christians.¹⁰⁸ Given this cultural context, it is not surprising that Malory's conclusion to his "Boke off Syr Trystram" focuses on Palomydes just as much as on Trystram: Trystram offers to make possible Palomydes's self-imposed requirement that he take part in one more fight before his christening; they fight long and mightily; Palomydes is—at his own request—christened and "sone afftyr they depar[t] and r[i]de towarde Camelot"; then Trystram returns to Isode at Joyous Garde, while Palomydes departs to seek the Questing Beast (*MD* 660.29–664.8).

Although literary critics sometimes claim that Palomydes's lack of success on this quest is a prime indicator of his innate lack of belonging to the Arthurian community,¹⁰⁹ we argue contrariwise. For one thing, pursuit of the Questing Beast earlier in the *Morte* is the prerogative of Pellynore (*MD*

106. Nicholson, *Love, War and the Grail*, 214–15; Kaeuper and Bohna, "War and Chivalry," 277.

107. Taylor, *Chivalry and the Ideals of Knighthood*, 186.

108. John Mandeville, *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), xv, 102, 96–98.

109. See, for example, de Weever, "Introduction," 7; Goodrich, "Saracens and Islamic Alterity," 17–18; Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 108–9.

34.23–35.15), and Pellynore—despite never capturing the Beast—is hailed by no less an authority than Merlin as “one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde and the strengyst man of armys” (38.27–28). Pellynore is also a crucial fighter and counselor in support of Arthur’s early kingship, as is evident in the role he plays in helping to defeat Lott and his rebels, and in advising Arthur on the selection of new Round Table Knights (*MD* 61.16–25, 104.17–105.20). There is, therefore, nothing in Malory’s text to support Goodrich’s argument that Palomydes’s subsequent pursuit of the Beast is symbolic “of his own otherness as an outsider and a non-Christian.”¹¹⁰

Palomydes’s peculiar ties to the Questing Beast might better be used to indicate, not his supposed difference or failure, but rather his self-awareness of the trajectory of his knightly career—a trait that likens him to the major characters in *Le Morte Darthur*. Part of the pathos of Malory’s “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17), as Whetter has argued, is that each of the principal characters in the final tragedy is aware of the significance of his or her actions and their consequences: the inability of Gawayne, Launcelot, Gwenyvere, or Arthur to avoid the dissolution of the Round Table ultimately stems from a tragic combination of Fate, free will, and their own and others’ actions.¹¹¹ The figure and fate of Balyn offer an early example of this awareness because, as Balyn approaches the castle and island where he will meet his doom in battle, he encounters first an inscribed cross that warns any knight against proceeding alone, and then hears “an horne blowe as it had ben the dethe of a best” (*MD* 70.23–30). Despite these warnings, the conventions of genre and literary heroism all dictate that he continue, however disastrous the results. Hence, as Balyn himself laconically puts it, “That blast . . . is blowen for me, for I am the pryse, and yet am I not dede” (*MD* 70.30–31).¹¹²

Malory’s Palomydes does not have a moment at which he explicitly recognizes his imminent death, but he is granted an awareness that his best

110. Goodrich, “Saracens and Islamic Alterity,” 18. We also disagree with Donald L. Hoffman, “Assimilating Saracens,” *Arthuriana* 16, no. 4 (2006): 57–58, who considers the “mini-quest” for the Questing Beast to be “little more than an allegory of the futility of questing.”

111. K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 99–149, 155–59. See also Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 159–98.

112. On Balyn and adventure, see Jill Mann, “Taking the Adventure,” in her *Life in Words*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 243–71; on Balyn and the tragedy of the *Morte*, see K. S. Whetter, “On Misunderstanding Malory’s Balyn,” in *Re-Viewing “Le Morte Darthur,”* ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 149–62.

moment is now past. At the Tournament of Lonezep, discussed above, as Palomydes excuses himself for killing Launcelot's horse, he exclaims,

I have done so much this day that *well I wote I ded never so muche nothir never shall do so muche in my dayes*. And therefore, moste noble knyght of the worlde, I requyre the spare me as this day, . . . *for and yf ye put me from my worship now, ye put me from the grettyst worship that ever I had or ever shall have[!]* (MD 582.24–30 [our italics])

The significance and pathos of Palomydes's plea are rendered all the more powerful if readers bear in mind the full explication of the idea and value of *worshyp* that the knight twice invokes here. As Mahoney perceptively phrases it, *worshyp* in *Le Morte Darthur* denotes not merely *honor* and *fame*, but “worth-ship, a man's total self-concept, measured by what is said and known about him.”¹¹³ Palomydes knows that he has reached the zenith of his heroic career—and he knows, equally, that Launcelot can easily take this position from him. Little wonder then, under such pressure, that the ever-noble Launcelot consents to spare him, and little wonder that Palomydes is so intent on winning the day that he (whether deliberately or not) strikes his opponent's horse. The entire scene is a potent mixture of adventure and emotion; therefore, we heartily concur with Dulin-Mallory's contention that Palomydes (here and throughout Tale V) epitomizes Malory's portrait of “passionate” and “long-suffering” aspiration.¹¹⁴ Tellingly, Palomydes's self-awareness reveals that he is in the select group of heroes who have both pronounced characters and pronounced self-awareness of their own contributions to the tragedies they suffer: far from displaying any Saracen Otherness, Palomydes is a true Arthurian insider.

As noted above, the Palamedes of the Post-Vulgate Cycle does, in fact, capture and kill the Beste Glatissante.¹¹⁵ In contrast, Malory never reports either the death of the Questing Beast or Palomydes's ultimate success or failure in that quest. Consequently, his pursuit of the Beast becomes a means of reminding readers of Malory's *Morte Darthur* that knights' “taking the adventure” is significant, especially when the adventure could be futile.¹¹⁶

113. Mahoney, “Malory's ‘Tale of Sir Tristram,’” 179.

114. Dulin-Mallory, “Seven trewe bataylis,” 168–69.

115. See above, p. 45 and nn. 48–49.

116. On the significance of the phrase and trope of “taking adventure” in Malory, see Mann, “Taking the Adventure,” 243–71.

The adventures and ultimate fates of Trystram and Isode, Palomydes, and Lamorak are integral to “The Hoole Book,” for they prepare Malory’s audience for—but emphatically do not cause—its tragic ending. Nevertheless, the decline from glorious adventures and tournaments in Tale V to a tragic civil war in Tale VIII that ends with the mutual slaughter of Mordred and Arthur is the final outcome of not only the errors but also the noble natures of all of Malory’s major characters. This nobility is celebrated throughout “The Boke of Syr Trystram de Lyones” by both Trystram and Palomydes.

Two

Launcelot and His Elaynes

Malory's Romance Heroines and Their Roots in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur



In Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal," one of the ubiquitous hermits who populate the Grail Quest's landscape famously but gently chastises Launcelot for being "nat stable" (*MD* 729.33–35). Although modern scholars tend to diagnose Launcelot's "unstableness" as symptomatic of one or more of the religious, moral, or chivalric failings that they tend to lay at his door, a notable feature of Launcelot's character in both *Le Morte Darthur* and its (on this issue both French and English) sources is precisely his stability: the extent to which he loves, serves, and is motivated by Queen Gwenyvere throughout his career as a knight.¹ Nevertheless, the queen is by no means the only woman in his life, even in the English Arthurian tradition that largely ignores the French account of his training by the Lady of the Lake.² In the Arthurian tradition as a whole, there are many Guenevere figures that Malory chooses

1. For examples of literary critics who equate Launcelot's lack of stability with sin, failure, or both, and for a defense of Launcelot's stability, see K. S. Whetter, *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 130–33, 137–40.

2. This training and the interactions with women it entails appear in the opening sections of both the non-cyclic and cyclic versions of the prose *Lancelot*. See, respectively, *Lancelot do Lac: The Non-Cyclic Old French Prose Lancelot*, ed. Elspeth Kennedy, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), vol. 1, 15.4–48.8, 57.14–70.16, 138.37–148.17; *Lancelot: Roman en Prose du XIIIe Siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha (Geneva: Droz, 1978–83), vol. 7, §IIIa.7, 27–§IXa.22, 86; §XIIIa.1–6, 121–23; §XVa.1–34, 173–97; §XXIa.1–25, 243–60.

not to replicate. In the Welsh *Triads*, Arthur has three wives with the name Gwenhwyfar;³ however, given that there is no evidence that Malory knew the Welsh tradition, it is not surprising that Malory's Gwenyvere is Arthur's only wife. In the French Vulgate Cycle's *Lancelot*, which Malory did know and use, there is a false Guenievre as well as the genuine one whom Lancelot must rescue from the machinations of her impostor and this false Guenievre's coconspirators.⁴ Malory could have followed this version of the French Book and related a double-Guenevere story, but he did not; instead, he pairs the queen with a doubled female figure of a different name—thereby complicating Launcelot's relationship with Gwenyvere.

In *Le Morte Darthur*, two Elaynes become a significant part of Launcelot's love-life: Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat (also referred to as Elayne le Blanke), who dies as a result of her unrequited love for Launcelot; and Elayne of Corbyn, the daughter of King Pelles, who is the mother of Launcelot's son Galahad.⁵ Because these two Elaynes attempt to rival the queen for Launcelot's love, they act as counterparts and foils both for each other and for Gwenyvere. Yet despite their shared name, the queen reacts to them quite differently. She is, albeit belatedly, somewhat sympathetic to the Maydyn of Ascolat because this Elayne poses no threat to Gwenyvere's relationship with her lover; concomitantly, she is markedly unsympathetic and hostile to Elayne of Corbyn because this other Elayne tries to become Launcelot's wife and succeeds, however briefly and magically, in getting him into her bed. Indeed, it is likely the memory of Launcelot's relationship with Elayne of Corbyn that causes the queen to overreact to his championing of other women at the opening of the Tale that Vinaver named "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere" and that Field renames simply "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere" (*MD* 791.30–792.5).

Unlike Launcelot's true love, Gwenyvere, who receives a great deal of attention from Malory scholars, both the Elaynes and the hero's odd love

3. "Triad 56: Arthur's Three Great Queens," in *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, ed. and trans. Rachel Bromwich, 4th ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), 161.

4. *Lancelot do Lac*, ed. Kennedy, vol. 1, 584.3–609.23; *Lancelot*, ed. Micha, vol. 1, §III.1, p. 18–§III.25, p. 31.

5. As a general rule, we will distinguish between Malory's spellings and his sources' spellings of character names. For the Fayre Maydyn, although Toshiyuki Takamiya, "Ascolat in the Winchester Malory," in *Aspects of Malory*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 126 and 212 n. 12, rightly argues that "the unique MS of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* . . . also reads *Ascolot*," there is in fact a slight preponderance in the Harley 2252 poem of the spelling *Ascolot*. We thus use *Ascolot* for the stanzaic-Maid and *Ascolat* for Malory's Fayre Maydyn.

affairs with them receive much less attention—with Elayne of Corbyn receiving even less than Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat. Launcelot's Elaynes arguably receive their most sustained and careful analysis from Karen Cherewatuk, Molly Martin, and Siobhán M. Wyatt.⁶ Cherewatuk's treatment of Launcelot's Elaynes is, however, finally unsympathetic and somewhat negative: against the backdrop of the historical context of gentry concerns about stable bloodlines, she interprets the two young women as warnings against adultery. Although the stories of the two Elaynes are "the same tragic tale" in that both women sacrifice themselves because they love a man who never commits to or deeply loves them back, Cherewatuk argues that these stories ultimately "reveal Malory's discomfort with the social implications of adultery" as well as a clear pattern within *Le Morte Darthur*: that Launcelot's rejections of his two Elaynes weaken "the fabric of the chivalric society."⁷ Certainly the two Elaynes are part of the narrative of the eventual disintegration of Arthurian society, and certainly Malory's Arthuriad is influenced by Malory's gentry contexts, including the gentry concern with stable bloodlines and marriage that Cherewatuk charts so thoroughly.⁸ Nevertheless, Malory's life and work are riddled with contradictions, and, as his treatment of Launcelot in the Grail Quest reveals, he often tries to have it both ways. For instance, despite Launcelot's unparalleled defeats during the Grail Quest as well as his chastisement by various hermits, Malory's Launcelot still gets a glimpse of the Grail, and Malory is far less critical of Launcelot than is the author of his French source.⁹ Malory's paradoxical treatment of Launcelot is epitomized by Gawayne's assessment of him early in the Quest: "And if one thyng were nat in Sir Launcelot he had none felow of an erthely man" (*MD* 723.21–22).

6. Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), especially 56–74; Molly Martin, *Vision and Gender in Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 148–67; Siobhán M. Wyatt, *Women of Words in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 114–38. Our thanks to Elizabeth Archibald for bringing Wyatt's book to our attention.

7. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 73.

8. On Malory's gentry contexts see, in addition to Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, her "Sir Thomas Malory's 'Grete Book,'" in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's "Morte Darthur,"* ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Jessica Gentry Brogdon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 42–67; Hyonjin Kim, *The Knight Without the Sword* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000); Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003); Thomas H. Crofts, *Malory's Contemporary Audience* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006).

9. Fiona Tolhurst, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," in *Malory and Christianity*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 127–56.

Despite their relative neglect by literary critics, however, both Elayne receive fundamentally sympathetic attention from contributors to the volume *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*.¹⁰ James Noble argues that Elayne of Ascolat is a character who benefits from Malory's "reconstruction" of her French counterpart in one of his sources for her story, *La Mort le Roi Artu*, with the result that she becomes "a figure sufficiently secure in her identity as a woman to take to task no less influential an authority figure than the churchman who has come to administer last rites to her."¹¹ According to Noble, Elayne of Ascolat is the exception to Malory's misogynist rule: Malory's female characters are "perceived and portrayed as an ever-present threat to the stability and welfare of the hegemony" in a manner that "speaks directly to a misogyny that informs Malory's telling of the Arthurian story and his treatment of the female characters who participate in it."¹² As numerous studies of the last twenty years have articulated, Malory's women are often more central and less victimized than Noble seems to allow here, but we agree with Noble that Malory's Maydyn of Ascolat receives "more sympathetic treatment than" in either his French or indeed his English source for this character. As Noble observes, Malory's Fayre Maydyn is portrayed as a character with "none of the duplicity" of her French counterpart; instead, she is naive enough that her father must protect her from Gawayne's infamous (and thus always potential) lechery.¹³ Thus, when Arthur's nephew asks to see the shield of Elayne's beloved that she has in her chamber, Barnarde quickly advises, "Nat so, . . . but sende ye for that shyld" (*MD* 815.1–816.2).¹⁴ As Cherewatuk observes, Barnarde's interjection into his daughter's conversation with Gawayne "is original to Malory," thereby emphasizing the domesticity of the Ascolat setting, including the "father's concern" for his daughter and the daughter's essential "innocence."¹⁵ Most importantly, however, Malory's Maydyn is the "erthely woman" who "in no uncertain terms defends her right to love whom she chooses"—without a word of challenge from Malory as narrator (*MD* 827.19–828.2).¹⁶ Noble's explanation for Malory's acceptance

10. Listed as *Arthurian Women* in our Abbreviations and in citations in this chapter.

11. Noble, "Gilding the Lily (Maid): Elaine of Astolat," in *Arthurian Women*, 45.

12. Noble, "Gilding the Lily (Maid)," 46–47.

13. Noble, "Gilding the Lily (Maid)," 48–49.

14. Noble, "Gilding the Lily (Maid)," 49. For a detailed comparison of Malory's Fayre Maydyn with her predecessors in the sources, see Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 125–35.

15. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 62.

16. Noble, "Gilding the Lily (Maid)," 50.

of Elayne of Ascolat's assertive behavior is that she is "prepared to subject herself completely to the needs and desires of her knight, lover, or husband," and he concludes that she remains "only a means, to either Lancelot's or some other knight's happiness."¹⁷

To his credit, Noble pays attention to a traditionally understudied female figure, but his analysis of Elayne of Ascolat is, like Cherewatuk's, rather male-centric in that he judges her based on her relationships with the men around her, regardless of whether she poses a threat to faithful love or presents a potential lover. It is noteworthy, however, that Malory creates an original and highly sympathetic deathbed speech for Elayne: we will return to this speech and its thematic repercussions later.

Elizabeth S. Sklar offers an equally sympathetic interpretation of the "Other(ed) Elaine," Elayne of Corbyn. Sklar asserts that this Elayne is not merely the mother of Galahad and therefore the means through which the age of the Grail begins: she is the "seducer, lover, healer, and common-law wife" of Launcelot.¹⁸ In addition, Sklar argues that Malory had to exert a good deal of authorial effort to develop both the character of Elayne of Corbyn and her role in the episode that Vinaver (not Malory) labels "Lancelot and Elaine."¹⁹ Sklar's full and considerate treatment of this Elayne contrasts sharply with both the terrible fates to which modern Arthurian fiction has condemned her, and the often negative or condescending—and for "the most part cursory"—assessments to which literary critics have subjected her.²⁰ Sklar argues further that this Elayne is both sexually aggressive and more successful in damaging Arthur's kingdom than even Morgan le Fay: Elayne is so loyal to Launcelot that she goes into exile with him, transforming herself from "a commodified virgin" into "a mature, autonomous, proactive, [and] self-actualizing individual."²¹ Sklar highlights Elayne of Corbyn's importance as the accidental revealer of Gwenvivere's own "instability," the healer of Launcelot, an example of ideal "heterosexual love," and the "midwife to the New Age of Christian spirituality" in Malory's *Arthuriad*; for Sklar, then, the other Elayne is important, largely admirable, and always compelling.²² Wyatt

17. Noble, "Gilding the Lily (Maid)," 50, 55.

18. Elizabeth S. Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," in *Arthurian Women*, 59.

19. Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," 59; *Works*, 787–833. Field's title for this subsection of the *Morte* is—equally tellingly—"The Begetting of Galahad" (*MD* 620–57).

20. Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," 63–64.

21. Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," 65.

22. Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," 67–68.

is similarly laudatory, identifying Elayne of Corbyn as one of many independent and praiseworthy women in *Le Morte Darthur* and one who plays “a positive role of promoting chivalry.”²³

Scholars certainly disagree about how to evaluate Elayne of Ascolat and Elayne of Corbyn, but we contend that Elayne of Ascolat is much more sympathetic than Cherewatuk and Noble allow, whereas Elayne of Corbyn (although undeniably important to the plot and themes of the *Morte*) is less admirable than Sklar and Wyatt would have people believe. We agree, however, with all of the abovementioned critics that the functions and meanings of both Elaynes are worthy of further study. One conclusion that can be drawn from Robert H. Wilson’s comparisons of Malory’s characters to their literary antecedents in the sources is that Malory was quite committed to populating his Arthuriad with a recognizable cast of characters.²⁴ Indeed, we can go further than Wilson by suggesting that Malory is also interested in the interiority of his cast. He is not writing a novel with fully rounded, psychologically realistic characters, but he does show an interest in both characterization and interiority. As Wyatt rightly asserts, Malory’s concern with character extends to women’s voices, including the voices of these two Elaynes: “If Malory’s treatment of his female characters across tales and sources remains consistent, then the emerging pattern gives a strong and cohesive indication of his general plan for female characters.”²⁵ Our contention is that study of the two Elaynes’ relationships with Gwenyvere and the corresponding triangular nature of their love for Launcelot confirms two related and frequently expressed conclusions of literary critics: that female figures in *Le Morte Darthur* are important, and that Malory’s storytelling reflects an interest in human character and relationships. Furthermore, we contend that study of the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat reveals that Malory was even more influenced by the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* than is generally realized—an influence particularly evident in his female-friendly storytelling.

23. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 115.

24. Robert Henry Wilson, *Characterization in Malory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1934); Robert H. Wilson, “Malory’s Naming of Minor Characters,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 42 (1943): 364–85, and “Addenda on Malory’s Minor Characters,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956): 563–87.

25. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 4 and *passim*. There are actually four Elaynes in the *Morte* (discussed below); unless otherwise specified, however, when we speak of “the two Elaynes,” we mean Elayne of Ascolat and Elayne of Corbyn.

Understanding the Structure of the Stanzaic *Morte* through Female Doubles

Whether scholars evaluate Elayne of Ascolat positively or negatively, Malory successfully (and apparently deliberately) reimagined this character whom he inherited from his two principal sources for the Tale of “Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere”: the French prose work *La Mort le Roi Artu* and the Middle English poem the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.²⁶ Not only is Malory’s Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat not duplicitous like her French counterpart, but the stanzaic-Maid of Ascalot is also a more important character in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* than has been previously acknowledged. Indeed, it is part of our purpose to illustrate the extent to which this character’s sympathetic treatment by Malory has its roots in the fourteenth-century English poem.

Molly Martin proposes that Malory’s Elayne of Ascolat functions as a less successful and less empowered variant of Palomydes: both are foiled in love, but Palomydes at least has the ability to define himself on the tournament ground.²⁷ This assertion is largely true, but we contend that the English tradition of the maiden whom Malory names Elayne, as represented by the stanzaic *Morte* and Malory’s *Morte*, creates a more complex portrait of this Arthurian female than previous scholarship has allowed. In the poem, the Maid of Ascalot functions very much as Gaynour’s foil, with Gaynour offering sensible advice to the two men who love her, whereas the Maid displays manipulative and deceitful (even delusional) behavior.²⁸ Because the action of the poem begins with Gaynour advising Arthur about how to remedy the declining honor of his court (sMA 17–42) and ends with her death and burial (3954–66), the queen’s appearances structure the poem as a whole. Although the Maid of Ascalot has less stage time and less of a voice than does the queen, this young woman’s appearances similarly structure the first half of the narrative within this frame established by Gaynour: first the Maid meets

26. In these sources, she is known only as the *demoiselle d’Escalot* or “Maid of Ascalot.” As is his authorial habit, it is Malory who names a character unnamed in his source(s).

27. Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 149; cf. 153.

28. All parenthetical references to the poem are by line number to *Le Morte Arthur*, ed. Bruce (as in the Abbreviations list under sMA). We do not reproduce Bruce’s editorial brackets or italics, and we frequently and silently modify and standardize his capitalization and indentation, neither of which has manuscript authority. The argument that follows overlaps with material from K. S. Whetter, “The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Medieval Tragedy,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 28 (2002): 87–111, and it repeats some elements of our “Standing Up for the Stanzaic-poet,” *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 86–113.

and immediately falls in love with Launcelot (*sMA* 177–88, 197–200); then Launcelot, however unknowingly, compounds that love by consenting to wear her token (209–16), thereby paving the way for the maiden's eventual death. The token also convinces Launcelot's kin that he cannot be Launcelot, whereupon he is grievously wounded by Ector (*sMA* 289–312). Although the stanzaic-poet's Maid is less deceptive than her French counterpart, she uses emotional manipulation both to mark Launcelot as hers and to convince him to accept her token (*sMA* 183–216). She likewise misleads Gawayne—and perhaps herself—into believing that Launcelot has become her lover, using her possession of his shield as proof of his affection for her (*sMA* 580–607). Gawayne accordingly informs Arthur and Gaynour that Launcelot has found a lover (*sMA* 635–47), and Gaynour subsequently upbraids Launcelot to the point that he again leaves court (740–83).

Gaynour and the Maid of Ascalot are thus counterparts in both their love of Launcelot and their structural function in the poem's plot, for it is precisely because of the Maid's claim that Launcelot loves her that Gaynour is very nearly without a defender when Sir Mador accuses her of murdering his brother at the knights' feast she hosted to prove that she does not herself unduly value Launcelot (*sMA* 834–927). It is worth emphasizing that the queen could have died as a result of the Maid's selfish behavior (*sMA* 928–43), but also that the queen, in the midst of her angry banishment of Launcelot and grief over his presumed infidelity (740–51), remains politically savvy, imploring Launcelot never to reveal their love and to continue to perform deeds of arms in which she can take some pleasure despite what she perceives as his abandonment of her (752–59). The associations and oppositions between the Maid and Gaynour are reinforced one final time by the appearance of the Maid's death-barge. This boat's arrival interrupts and is interlaced with the account of Gaynour's trial for murder after the poisoned apple dinner. Admittedly, the same interlacing narrative structure is present in the stanzaic-poet's source, the French *Mort le Roi Artu*, but the suspense is arguably greater in the stanzaic version in which this plot gets stripped down to its essence.²⁹ The interlace also enables the poet to contrast the Maid's

29. The story of the Maid of Ascalot's ultimately fatal love for Launcelot, together with the account of Gaynour's trial, occupies lines 177–1647 (forty-two pages) of *sMA*. Even when taking into account the missing folio between what is now fols. 102 and 103, a lacuna amounting to approximately ninety-odd lines yet comprising lines 1182–317 in the lineation of all modern editions, there would be no more than ninety-two additional lines (about three further pages). The missing text must have provided the details of the Maid's burial. The same plot material in the French prose source, in contrast, occupies

manipulative and destructive passion with Gaynour's nobler and more sympathetic love. Although this type of interlacing structure is a staple of French prose romance, particularly of the work referred to as the Vulgate Cycle or *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle,³⁰ the stanzaic-poet's effective but abbreviated use of it here stands alongside his development of both an unusual romance stanza form and rich characterization as evidence of his artistry.

Although scholars often assess the form of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* negatively, there is wide agreement among them that the poet's narrative style is a real strength; even those critics most disparaging of the poem's structure and poet's artistry concede the effectiveness of the story.³¹ The core of this narrative strength is what distinguishes the stanzaic-poet's writing style from that of his French counterpart in the prose *Mort le Roi Artu*: concision. The stanzaic-poet abbreviates and streamlines his French source, cutting away excess details to capture the essence of key moments in the plot, thereby rendering his style more powerful by making it more cinematic. Cinematic snapshots, an example being where the poet zooms in on the Maid's death-barge and Arthur's reading of her letter (*sMA* 960–1095), give the poem power.³²

As this parallel between the two leading female figures suggests, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* has a complex and rich structure constituted by a series of doublings, parallels, and antitheses. Thus, near the beginning of the poem, Agrawayne absents himself from Gaynour's tournament in order to catch the lovers (*sMA* 59–64), just as at the beginning of the second half of the poem Agrawayne denounces the lovers to Arthur (1672–1735) and subsequently attempts to trap them in the queen's chamber. There is likewise the structural parallel of the meeting between Launcelot and Gaynour as living lovers near the poem's beginning (*sMA* 53–80) and their following similarly saintly paths to Heaven as dead lovers at the poem's close, a parallel suggestive of the opening and closing leaves of the poem's manuscript in the sense that medieval readers would open the manuscript to learn, at the beginning of the story, how the lovers' affair poses a possible threat to the kingdom, and readers would close the manuscript after witnessing (or hearing) how the announce-

nearly one hundred pages in the critical edition: *La Mort le Roi Artu*, ed. Jean Frappier, 3rd ed. (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 9, §13.1–107, §85.20.

30. See Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 68–98.

31. For an overview of the critical reception of the stanzaic *Morte*, see Fiona Tolhurst and K. S. Whetter, "Introduction," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018), 5–7.

32. This cinematic quality is especially evident in the poem's dialogue, artistry ably illustrated by Elizabeth Archibald, "Some Uses of Direct Speech in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 66–85.

ment of that affair leads to the tragic ending of the story: Arthur's downfall and the death of the lovers. In these ways, as Sherron Knopp rightly observes, "the apparently casual but disarming images of chivalry in the first half of the poem . . . intensify the pathos and heighten the devastating effect of the second half, where admiring cooperation and affectionate sportsmanship give way to mortal hatred and revenge."³³ All of these intratextual relations and doublings within the stanzaic *Morte Arthur's* plot structure are mirrored by doublings of character and theme, including the contrastive doubling of Gaynour and the Maid that we have outlined here.

Doublings as Evidence of the Stanzaic *Morte's* Influence on Malory

The prominence of both Gaynour and the Maid of Ascalot in Malory's stanzaic source, combined with and reflected in the centrality of women in Malory's "Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur" (*MD* 940.17), alerts readers to the pervasive influence the poem had upon Malory. Although Malory's use of the stanzaic *Morte* has long been recognized,³⁴ the stanzaic-poet's influence upon Malory, we contend, is even greater than scholarship has traditionally acknowledged. The similarities between Malory's Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat and her stanzaic *Morte* counterpart provide evidence of the strong influence of the poem on *Le Morte Darthur*.

Malory builds his Elayne of Ascolat on the foundation of the stanzaic-Maid as would-be lover. Martin notes how the Maid's interactions with Launcelot in both the stanzaic *Morte* and Malory's *Morte* reveal her repeated but unsuccessful attempts to position herself in the role of the idealized and inspiring courtly lover.³⁵ As a would-be courtly lover, the stanzaic-Maid sits near Launcelot and gazes at him, attempting to inspire him and win his loving gaze in return (*sMA* 178–84), suffers lovesickness due to unrequited love (183–88, 555–59), takes him in her arms and tries to initiate sex (197–200), and seeks to inspire him and publicly to claim him as her own by asking him to

33. Sherron E. Knopp, "Artistic Design in the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*," *ELH* 45 (1978): 575.

34. See especially J. Douglas Bruce, "The Middle English Metrical Romance 'Le Morte Arthur' (Harleian MS 2252)," *Anglia* 23 (1901): 67–100; Robert H. Wilson, "Malory, the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*, and the *Mort Artu*," *Modern Philology* 37 (1939): 125–38; E. Talbot Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*," *Studies in Philology* 47 (1950): 460–72; Vinaver, Headnote to and Commentary on "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere."

35. Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 150–56.

wear her token in the tournament announced by Arthur (209–12). Elayne's falling in love at first sight is also a classic romance trope, although one usually associated with romance knights rather than maidens. These interactions with Launcelot make the stanzaic Maid a prominent and rather well-rounded character. Nevertheless, her behavior is problematic because she uses courtly and emotional blackmail to gain influence over Launcelot and mark him as her knight.

Martin follows Janet Knepper in interpreting Malory's Elayne of Ascolat as less aggressive and "manipulative" than her stanzaic counterpart; Wyatt similarly contrasts Malory's more sympathetic Elayne with the unnamed and even more "manipulative" damsel of the French *Mort*.³⁶ One way in which both the stanzaic-poet and Malory improve the French Demoiselle d'Escalot's character is by removing the ambiguity of her motives: in both English *Mortes*, the Maid is explicitly lovestruck as soon as she sees Launcelot (*sMA* 177–84; *MD* 806.16–20). The French Demoiselle, in contrast, does not make her overture to Lancelot until *after* she learns from his squire that the strange knight in her father's house is undoubtedly "the finest knight in the world."³⁷ It is possible, then, that there is considerable sociopolitical calculation in her subsequent request to be associated with this knight whom she has just met. Malory, even more than does the stanzaic-poet when abbreviating the French *Mort*, removes the interlace between the maiden's story and the Poisoned Apple episode, simultaneously zooming in on key moments to develop character and create suspense. Gone from his version are the stanzaic-Maid's lovesick retreat to her chamber and Launcelot's attempt to comfort her (*sMA* 181–208). Instead, the audience is told simply and remarkably briefly how "the Fayre Maydyn off Ascolot . . . keste such a love unto Sir Launcelot that she cowde never withdraw hir loove, wherefore she dyed[.] . . . So thus as she . . . was so hote in love . . . she besought Sir Launcelot to were uppon hym at the justis a tokyn of hers" (*MD* 806.17–22).³⁸ Supporting our view that the stanzaic poem strongly influenced Malory is the fact that he here follows his English source much more than his French one. In the French romance, the Demoiselle d'Escalot, having been informed of Lancelot's knightly preeminence, actively tricks Lancelot into agreeing to wear her sleeve for the sake of "whatever [he] love[s] most in the world"; the

36. Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 155; Janet Knepper, "A Bad Girl Will Love You to Death," in *Arthurian Women*, 236; Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 125–26.

37. *Mort Artu*, 9–10, §13: "li mieudres chevaliers del monde."

38. Cf. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 125, who also draws attention to the brevity of Malory's introduction of Elayne of Ascolat.

trick involves a rash boon, for Lancelot does not know beforehand what will be asked of him—merely in whose person and by what power the request is made.³⁹ He is accordingly bound to accede to the Demoiselle's request or risk breaking his promise to the damsel and, far worse, dishonoring his lady-love Guenievre. In the stanzaic *Morte*, in contrast, the Maid is more honest, and Launcelot is perfectly aware that he is being asked "In the turnement . . . [to] bere / Sum signe of [hers] þat men might se" (*sMA* 211–12). Malory is more indebted to the English than the French source; however, like the stanzaic-poet, he makes several important changes to the story.

Malory's originality in adapting this scene from his sources is threefold: he effectively reduces the source material, thereby streamlining the plot and enhancing audience interest; he creates an interesting, sympathetic, and more rounded character in the Fayre Maydyn Elayne; and he subtly modifies Launcelot's response to the Maid of Ascalot's request. Whereas in the sources it is the woman who is at pains to manipulate the man, Malory modifies both his French source and his English one by having Launcelot himself reflect upon the request to wear a token with the thought that he has "*never aforne borne no maner of tokyn of no damesell*." His acceptance of Elayne's request and gift is thus, in Malory's version, a tactic designed to trick his fellows and ensure that nobody will be able to see through his disguise:

"Damesell," seyde Sir Launcelot, "and if I graunte you that, ye may sey that I do more for youre love than ever y ded for lady or jantillwoman."

Than he remembird hymselff that he wolde go to the justis disguised, and because he had never aforne borne no maner of tokyn of no damesell, he bethought hym to bere a tokyn of hers, that none of hys bloode thereby myght know hym. And than he sayde, "Fayre maydyn, I woll graunte you to were a tokyn of youres uppon myne helmet. And therefore what ys hit? Shewe ye hit me." (MD 806.16–31 [our italics])

Malory takes the self-interested chicanery of the Demoiselle d'Escalot and the selfish but sympathetic histrionics of the stanzaic Maid and puts the calculation and deception instead into Launcelot's mouth, having him deliberately accept his would-be lover's sleeve in order to deceive others for his own advantage. As a result, the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat is the more sympathetic character here.

39. *Mort Artu*, 10, §14: "done moi un don par la foi que tu doiz a la riens el monde que tu mieuz ainmes."

Further demonstrating the stanzaic *Morte's* intertextual influence on Malory, antithetical doublings appear at key moments throughout both the stanzaic and Malorian versions of the Arthurian story. In the poem, Gaynour's wise and noble actions in advising Arthur of the need for a tournament and Launcelot of the need for caution (*sMA* 25–38, 69–80) contrast with the Maid of Ascalot's foolish and dishonest actions in her second major scene—actions in which the poet's use of doublings further characterizes her as what today's readers might call a politically dangerous stalker. Dining at her father's castle after Launcelot's earlier injury, with Launcelot and his kinsmen in attendance, the Maid is glad to sit next to him while the narrator repeats that she “alle hyr loue on hym had keste” (*sMA* 455). This is a foolish act given his explicitly expressed lack of love for her (*sMA* 201–4). When a fully recovered Launcelot is ready to return to Arthur's court, the Maid weeps and, in a scene that parallels the one in which she imposed a token on him, now demands that he leave her one of his possessions as a token by which to remember him (*sMA* 556–59). In a doubling of his earlier accession to her demand and his earlier attempt to comfort the clingy girl, Launcelot again grants her request, leaving his armor in her keeping (*sMA* 560–67). He is, however, quite explicit that armor is the only thing that she will receive from him, warning sternly (and with a double negative for added emphasis), “Loke thou ne longe not after me” (*sMA* 563)! Undeterred, the dishonest Maid subsequently uses this armor as evidence to convince Gawayne—and thence, through Gawayne's unwittingly false report, Arthur's court—that Launcelot has taken her as his “leman”: “For his leman he hathe me take, / His armure I you shewe mighte” (*sMA* 582–83). Here again, the textual evidence indicates that the stanzaic-Maid, albeit less manipulative than her French counterpart, is still far from being an innocent character. Although Knepper's thesis that the stanzaic-Maid is “marginalized” and “barely recognized” is belied by the Maid's influence on Launcelot, Gawayne, and Gaynour in the poem, it is quite true that her

excessive desire . . . quickly turns her from a foolish girl into a “bad girl,” for in her determination to be recognized as Lancelot's lover, she connives, manipulates, and lies, successfully interfering with the sign-system of courtly love and causing trouble and shame for both Gawain and Lancelot.⁴⁰

40. Knepper, “Bad Girl,” 230. Richmond, too, considers the stanzaic Maid not merely self-indulgent but actually “self-destructive”: Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *The Popu-*

The lie about her “leman” threatens first to destroy Launcelot and Gynour’s love, then rob the queen of her life when she lacks a champion and is put on trial, and then makes Gawayne’s perfectly understandable and innocent relaying of the Maid’s message seem itself to be a malicious lie—one for which Gawayne unfairly incurs the queen’s wrath (sMA 1128–71).

As noted above, Malory’s changes to this scene emphasize Elayne’s sexual innocence. He adds not only her somewhat comic and inexperienced naïveté about the dangers of taking a roving lover-knight such as Gawayne to her bedroom, but also details of a serious nature to her conversation with Gawayne—details that reveal her innocence. In Malory, as in the stanzaic *Morte*, the Maydyn loves Launcelot but does not know his identity, showing Gawayne her beloved’s shield both to provide proof of their relationship and to learn from Gawayne the identity of its owner. One of the small but original changes Malory makes to his sources, however, is to have Elayne clarify that, while the “knyght that owyth thys shyld” is verily her beloved, that love is not reciprocated: “Yee truly,’ she sayde [to Gawayne], ‘my love ys he: God wolde that I were hys love!’” (MD 816.9–12). Another such change, one also noted by Wyatt, is to give Elayne “a more active role in Lancelot’s welfare than the women in Malory’s sources do, for when Gawain tells her that Lancelot is injured, she spiritedly asks her father to let her ride out and seek the wounded knight” (MD 816.26–817.12).⁴¹ When she finds the wounded Launcelot, then “thys maydyn Elayne . . . wacched hym day and nyght, and dud such attendaunce to hym that the Freynshe booke seyth there was never woman dyd never more kyndlyer for man” (MD 819.29–32). The French Book, of course, is nowhere near as emphatic about this character’s loving service as is Malory’s English one, yet Malory repeats this positive image and sympathetic description of Elayne healing Launcelot by recounting how, throughout the convalescence, “thys maydyn Elayne ded ever hir dyligence and labour both nyght and day unto Sir Launcelot, that there was never chyld nother wyff more mekar tyll fadir and husbande than was thys Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat; wherefore Sir Bors was gretly pleased with her” (MD 822.5–9). Despite his characteristic invocation of the French Book (at 819.31), it is Malory who expands the maiden’s role to include caring for

larity of Middle English Romance (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975), 131.

41. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 127. See also D. S. Brewer, ed., *The Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight*, by Sir Thomas Malory (London: Arnold, 1968), 17–18, who likewise emphasizes Elayne’s “innocence and goodness” as well as “Malory’s worldly wit and wisdom, his sense of character and feeling.”

Launcelot—a role she assumes, as Cherewatuk observes, with all the diligence of a loyal wife.⁴²

Significantly for his portrait of a sympathetic if woefully lovesick Elayne, Malory adds yet another scene in which Elayne places herself in the role of Launcelot's wife. Launcelot is so intent on attending the next tournament, to be held at Winchester, that he secures Bors's and Lavayne's help in distracting Elayne and the hermit-physician so that Launcelot might "assay hymselff uppon horsebacke with a speare, whether he myght welde hys armour and hys speare for hys hurte or nat" (*MD* 821.32–822.16). Unfortunately, he is not yet ready for such physical strain, his wounds reopen, and he nearly bleeds to death (*MD* 822.17–32). When Elayne arrives on the scene, alerted by the cries of Launcelot and the sorrowful moaning of his fellows, she upbraids Bors and Lavayne in the most censorious terms, labeling them "false traytours" and threatening, should Launcelot die, to "appele [them] of hys deth!" (*MD* 823.2–5). Although Wyatt rightly interprets this scene as further proof of Elayne's good qualities,⁴³ the Maydyn's statement has even greater significance. As P. J. C. Field notes, Elayne's threat of legal action is not found in either the French *Mort Artu* or the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.⁴⁴ Significantly for our interpretation of Elayne's character, her words indicate the extent to which she is besotted by Launcelot: to threaten "appeal" is to threaten to take an action that, according to "fifteenth-century English law," Elayne "would" be "allowed . . . to initiate [only] if Launcelot had been her husband!"⁴⁵

Where the stanzaic-poet doubles the Maid of Ascalot and Gaynour as antitheses, with Gaynour's self-possession and wisdom contrasting with the Maid's inexperienced selfishness and deceit, Malory doubles the doubling: he maintains the contrast between Gwenyvere and Elayne, but he also, as the preceding argument attests, adds several speeches to his *Morte* that render his Elayne a much more positive, proactive, and sympathetic character.⁴⁶ That he

42. Cf. Malory's version with *Mort Artu*, 40, §38.10–45, §41.64; and see Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 64.

43. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 128.

44. P. J. C. Field, "Time and Elaine of Ascolat," in his *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer), 282, n. 7.

45. Field, "Time and Elaine," 282–83; cf. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 64.

46. M. C. Bradbrook, *Sir Thomas Malory* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1958), 27, considers the story of the Fayre Maydyn "perhaps the most inward and pathetic of all Malory's tales." Readers might disagree about which of Malory's episodes or stories (long or short) creates the strongest sense of character and greatest tragic pathos, but

does so is one of many factors indicating that the stanzaic *Morte* had a tremendous influence on Malory's thematic vision for his prose *Arthuriad*. At the same time, Malory goes beyond his stanzaic source by doubling Elayne and Launcelot; as a result, he increases Elayne's associations with, and intensifies her love for, Launcelot. The most obvious sign of Malory's doubling of Elayne of Ascolat and Launcelot is not her increased love for the knight or more sympathetic nature, but rather the manner of their deaths.

The intensity of the stanzaic-Maid's love for Launcelot matters because that love destabilizes the Round Table Fellowship just as the malice of Agrawayne and Mordred does. In the stanzaic *Morte*, even after dying of love-sickness, the Maid of Ascalot continues to destabilize Arthur's court through her insistence on clinging to a knight who neither loved her nor gave her any hope that he could love her. While Gaynour is awaiting execution because she lacks a champion to defend her in single combat, the stanzaic-Maid's body arrives at Arthur's court by boat (*sMA* 914–19, 960–67). Although the letter that arrives with her body truthfully reports that Launcelot refused to love her, it still undermines the honorable reputation of Arthur's greatest knight and therefore threatens to undermine the court's greatness. Unfairly accusing Launcelot of being “vn-hend of thewis” and “churlysshe” for refusing to be her lover (*sMA* 1072–87), the Maid positions herself as having died of true love:

for his sake
I toke to herte grete sorow and care,
So at the laste deth gonne me take,
So þat I might lyve na mare;
For trew louynge had I suche wrake. (1088–92)

This accusation causes King Arthur and Gawayne to blame Launcelot for rejecting the girl and thereby causing her death (*sMA* 1096–1103), then causes Gaynour—and Richard A. Wertime⁴⁷—first to accuse Gawayne of dishonor for communicating the Maid's lie and then harshly to reject him (1146–67). The queen then realizes that her earlier rejection of Launcelot was incorrect (*sMA* 1172–81). Although Launcelot finally saves the queen's life by defeating the knight who has accused her of murder, the root cause of Gaynour's long

we agree with Bradbrook that Elayne of Ascolat's story is notable for possessing both interiority and pathos.

47. Richard A. Wertime, “The Theme and Structure of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” *PMLA* 87, no. 5 (1972): 1077–78.

struggle to prove her innocence is the Maid's decision to lie: to tell Gawayne that she is Launcelot's lover. As they are in the closing Tales of Malory's *Arthurian*, Agrawayne and Mordred are the undoubted villains of the second half of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, villains who destabilize and finally destroy the Fellowship of the Round Table. Nevertheless, the Maid of Ascolat affects the outcome of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* much more than literary critics tend to acknowledge. Malory clearly read the stanzaic *Morte* with some care, and was much inspired by the approach of his predecessor in the English Arthurian tradition as he shaped his characters and the complex interplay of character, Fate, and free will that brings about the destruction of the Round Table.

Malory makes Elayne of Ascolat a narrative focus, rather than a sidelight, by further detangling the interlaced accounts of the Poisoned Apple and Fayre Maydyn episodes (a detangling noted above). Although the stanzaic-poet, as noted above, primarily doubles his Maid with Gaynour, and although both the poet and Malory foreground the maiden's love for Launcelot, Malory goes well beyond his source in his characterization of the Fayre Maydyn, creating parallels between her behavior and that of Launcelot. The likeness of Launcelot and the Fayre Maydyn in Malory's *Morte Darthur* is nowhere more pronounced than in the original and parallel speeches he creates for them at their respective moments of death.

Malory assigns to his Fayre Maydyn greater authority and dignity than her stanzaic counterpart possesses by creating a lengthy speech through which she proves herself to be both honest and a model of earthly womanhood. Gone from Malory's version of her death scene is the accusation of churlishness leveled against Launcelot in the stanzaic poem. Instead, Malory gives to "this most idealistic of Malory's heroines" what Cherewatuk calls arguably "the *Morte Darthur's* fullest praise of romantic love."⁴⁸ Distraught over Launcelot's departure from Ascolat and refusal to take her as either wife or paramour, Elayne "made such sorrow day and nyght that she never slepte, ete, nother dranke, and ever she made hir complaynte unto Sir Launcelot" (*MD* 827.12–14). After her confessor tells her to desist from thinking about Launcelot, Elayne rallies long enough to deliver what Vinaver characterizes as "a monologue in which no one will fail to recognize Malory's hand," a speech that is "probably [Malory's] most important addition to the episode of the Fair Maid":⁴⁹

48. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 64.

49. Vinaver, Headnote to "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere," 1590, and Commentary on *Works*, 1092.9–1095.14.

Why sholde I leve such thoughtes [of Launcelot]? Am I nat an erthely woman? And all the whyle the brethe ys in my body I may complayne me, for my belyve ys that I do none offence, though I love an erthely man, unto God, for He fourmed me thereto, and all maner of good love comyth of God. And othir than good love loved I never Sir Launcelot du Lake. And I take God to recorde, I loved never none but hym, nor never shall, of erthely creature[.] . . . For, swete Lorde Jesu, . . . I take God to recorde I was never to The grete offenser nother ayenste Thy lawis but that I loved thys noble knyght Sir Launcelot oute of mesure. And of myselff, Good Lorde, I had no myght to withsonde the fervent love wherefore I have my deth. (*MD* 827.12–828.18)

Despite the critical commonplace that Malory's Arthurian world is ultimately destroyed by sin, including sexual sin, Elayne is adamant that her mortal love is also a good love. What is more, "Malory depicts an Elaine who remains unrepentant, resists clerical authority, and in fact silences her confessor."⁵⁰ Elayne's admission that she loves "Sir Launcelot oute of mesure," moreover, adds one more aspect to her doubling of both Launcelot and Gwenyvere. Launcelot admits during the Grail Quest that "he had loved a quene unmesurably and oute of mesure longe" (*MD* 696.18–19). Gwenyvere likewise implies a lack of moderation in her love in her final speech to Launcelot in which she takes partial responsibility for their role in the final destruction of the kingdom, lamenting how "thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my most noble lorde slayne" (*MD* 932.31–32).

Although it becomes apparent only in intratextual retrospect, Elayne's speech in defense of an earthly love worth dying for is, crucially, a precedent—and parallel—for Launcelot's own deathbed defense of his earthly love for Gwenyvere and Arthur:

"Truly," sayd Syr Launcelot [to the archbishop], "I trust I do not dysplese God, for He knoweth myn entente, for my sorow was not, nor is not, for ony rejoysyng of synne. But my sorow may never have ende, for whan I remembre of hir beaulté and of hir noblesse, that was bothe with hyr kyng and with hyr, so whan I sawe his corps and hir corps so lye togyders, truly myn herte wold not serve to susteyne my careful body. . . ."

Thenne Syr Launcelot never after ete but lytel mete, nor dranke, tyl he was dede. (*MD* 936.29–937.7)

50. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 65.

According to Launcelot's speech, God understands and accepts earthly love, yet some scholars argue that sin causes Malory's Arthurian world to fall apart. Charles Moorman, to take one prominent representative voice that articulates the moralistic interpretation of *Le Morte Darthur*, never wavered in his conviction that the Round Table is destroyed by the inevitable "failings of human nature," including "immorality."⁵¹ Attentive readers of Malory, however, will recognize that both Elayne of Ascolat and Launcelot defend their excessive passion for their earthly beloveds. What is more, Malory created both of these deathbed speeches, an artistic choice consistent with his depicting the earthly loves of both Elayne of Ascolat and Launcelot as sympathetically as possible.⁵²

Although Malory goes further than the stanzaic-poet in affording possibilities to the Fayre Maydyn's character, both by expanding her role in the story and by rendering her a more positive character than her stanzaic counterpart, he nevertheless clearly builds on the precedent presented to him by the stanzaic-poet. This precedent affects Malory's characterization of female figures throughout *Le Morte Darthur*—including ones who do not appear in the stanzaic poem. Malory consistently alters his sources in ways that present female characters more positively than the authors of those sources do.⁵³ The stanzaic-poet's influence is especially apparent in two crucial intertextual exemplars: the important role of the stanzaic-Maid and, even more profoundly, the significant and sympathetic role the stanzaic-poet creates for Gaynour. We discuss Gaynour and Gwenyvere in Chapter 4; for now, however, we examine one of the Fayre Maydyn's Malorian namesakes, Elayne of Corbyn.

Rereading Launcelot's Elaynes as Lovers and Characters

As Cherewatuk, Martin, and Wyatt have noted before us, the daughter of King Pelles of Corbyn and the daughter of Sir Barnarde of Ascolat echo one another in a number of key respects in Malory's *Morte*, including their shared

51. We quote Charles Moorman, "Yet Some Men Say . . . that Kyng Arthure ys nat Ded," in *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 189; but cf. his *The Book of Kyng Arthur: The Unity of Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), throughout; and his "The Tale of the Sankgreall," in *Originality*, 184–204.

52. On the thematic consequences of this sympathy, see Catherine Batt, *Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 174–81; and Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 185–93.

53. On this issue, see also Wyatt, *Women of Words*, throughout.

love of Launcelot, their marriageability, and their “shared name,” a name supplied by Malory for characters who are unnamed in his sources.⁵⁴ There are, in fact, four Elaynes in *Le Morte Darthur*, and three of them are associated with Launcelot. The odd one out is a half-sister to Arthur. The others are a French queen, the wife of King Ban and mother of Launcelot; Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat; and Elayne of Corbyn. There is, however, a notable difference between these last two Elaynes: although Elayne of Corbyn succeeds in bedding Launcelot only because he believes he is meeting Gwenyvere, it is nevertheless true that, whereas the Fayre Maydyn dies of unrequited love, Elayne of Corbyn twice manages to seduce Launcelot, thereby partially fulfilling her desire for a relationship with him before she disappears from Malory’s narrative.

Despite the textual and thematic opportunities for a comparative study of these two Elaynes, there is a relative dearth of critical attention paid to Elayne of Corbyn—so much so that Sklar titles her own study of this character “Malory’s Other(ed) Elaine.”⁵⁵ Partly due to the increasing prominence of feminist and gender studies approaches in Malory scholarship, and partly no doubt due to Sklar herself, the studies of this Elayne that do exist are predominantly laudatory. Sklar believes that Elayne of Corbyn matures throughout her story and goes so far as to call this Elayne “arguably second only to Guenevere as the most interesting and complexly-rendered female figure in the entire *Le Morte Darthur*”; Cherewatuk interprets Elayne of Corbyn’s first sexual union with Launcelot positively, as “the *felix culpa* of the grail world”; and Wyatt presents the mother of Galahad as another of Malory’s important female characters and an enabler of chivalry.⁵⁶ Although these interpretations are appealing to modern readers interested in female figures in Malory’s *Arthuriad*, there is a fundamental problem with them: namely, the textual evidence available in *Le Morte Darthur* does not support them. In fact, the evidence rather supports the conclusion that Elayne of Corbyn, although central to the Grail narrative, is not a character (contrary to Sklar’s thesis) who undergoes any substantial change during the course of her story. As Martin notes, the “similarity between the two Elaynes is all the more striking because of the very divergent effects each sees from those choices [each makes in positioning herself within Launcelot’s gaze]. While the Fayre May-

54. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 56–7, 73; Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 148–49, 156; Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 114–15. We quote Cherewatuk, 56.

55. Sklar, “Malory’s Other(ed) Elaine,” 59–70.

56. Sklar, “Malory’s Other(ed) Elaine,” 59; Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 66–69; Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 115–24.

dyn's efforts are rebuked at each turn until death is the only option, Elayne of Corbyn schemes against Launcelot and contrives her relationship with him to her great benefit.⁵⁷ For all the differences in their relationships with Launcelot, then, Elayne of Corbyn is like the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat in leaving Malory's narrative largely as she enters it: as a young woman much enamored of Launcelot.

One way of accounting for the important but static nature of Elayne of Corbyn is to note that Malory blends features of the epic-heroic and romance genres throughout his book.⁵⁸ The result is that, through the romance elements, female figures emerge as well-rounded (and in some cases dynamic) characters: consider, for example, Gwenyvere, Isode le Blanche Maynys, Lyonesse, Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat, and Elayne of Corbyn. At the same time, due to the preponderance of epic-heroic elements, the Fellowship of the Round Table matters most.⁵⁹ Consequently, both Elaynes remain static—although not flat—characters. This is not a gender imbalance: there operates throughout Malory's *Arthurian* a complex hierarchy of characters.⁶⁰ Excepting traitorous villains such as Aggravayne and Mordred, all Arthurian knights are good; not even all of the good knights, however, are equally important to the narrative, just as not all knights are equally adept at the use of arms. The same is true of the maidens and ladies of the *Arthurian*: just as some are more beautiful than others, so are some more active than others.

Elayne of Corbyn's initial presentation is sexualized but sympathetic. Although the text is not entirely clear on this point, we interpret this Elayne to be the same woman as the boiling and "naked as a nedyll" virgin whom Launcelot rescues—a woman whose physical state sexualizes her (*MD* 621.14).⁶¹ We make this identification for two reasons: the repeated emphasis on the boiling virgin's beauty matches the later emphasis on Elayne's beauty, and her rescue is a logical way to introduce her to both the hero and the

57. Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 156.

58. On generic mixture in the *Morte*, see K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 99–149, 155–59.

59. On the prominence of fellowship in the *Morte*, see Elizabeth Archibald, "Malory's Ideal of Fellowship," *Review of English Studies* 43, no. 171 (1992): 311–28.

60. Pace Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 92–93.

61. Cf. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 67, who says the boiling maid is "possibly Elaine herself." Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 157, does not equate the boiling virgin with Elayne, but does offer a lucid analysis of the matrix of gender, gaze, and identity at work in this scene. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 115–16, notes both the plausibility of Cherewatuk's suggestion and the uncertainty of the virgin's identity.

audience.⁶² Within this interpretive framework, Launcelot first encounters Elayne as the “dolerous lady” (*MD* 620.31) who has been trapped in a vat of boiling water for “fyve yere” (621.17). She is a beautiful virgin in need of rescue. In terms of genre, she is already potentially a sympathetic figure because she is a damsel-in-distress. However, she becomes even more sympathetic to readers when Malory describes her as the victim of the cruelty of Queen Morgan le Fay and the Queen of Northe Galys (two more female figures of unequal importance in Malory’s *Morte*)⁶³ who decide to punish her with this torment for the crime of being “the fayryst lady of that contrey” (*MD* 621.16). Launcelot’s emotional reaction to Elayne confirms her worthiness of rescue: “Sir Launcelot thought she was the fayryst lady that ever he saw but yf hit were Quene Gwenyvere” (*MD* 621.21–22). Launcelot rescues her partly by simply taking her by the hand and partly by virtue of being the requisite “beste knyght of the worlde” (*MD* 621.17–19). Elayne then reinforces her sympathetic portrait by requesting that he accompany her to a chapel so that they can “gyff lovyng and thankyng to God” (*MD* 621.24). The first impression she makes on the audience is thus one of honesty and reverence for God, an impression reinforced by the knowledge that Elayne’s taking the lead in going from the boiling water to the chapel is a product of Malory’s modification of his French source.⁶⁴ The knight’s immediate acceptance of this invitation, especially coming as it does on the eve of the Grail Quest, confirms its appropriateness and moral purity.

Although Malory could have chosen to portray Elayne of Corbyn as explicit coconspirator with her father in creating the conditions under which Galahad gets conceived, he instead presents her as a very willing participant

62. T. H. White reaches the same conclusion, for he renders the boiling virgin as “Elaine”: *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958), 384–88; for the benefit of readers of editions other than the one cited here, this is Chapter 11 of Book III: *The Ill-Made Knight*. Our thanks to Edward Donald Kennedy for bringing White’s interpretation of this scene to our attention.

63. The Queen of Northe Galys is a minor but generally wicked character in the *Morte*, almost always appearing as one of Morgan’s evil accomplices: as, e.g., in the kidnapping of Launcelot in Tale III (*MD* 193.8–194.33) and in King Mark’s plot to kill Alexander the Orphan in Tale V (506.10–17). She is less wicked but still mysterious when she appears as one of the queens who greet Arthur on the barge that might take him to Avalon (*MD* 928.5–11).

64. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 115. The source is *Le Roman de Tristan en Prose*, gen. ed. Phillipe Ménard, 9 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1987–97), 6: 116.17–27; this section of the *Tristan*, including the crowd’s leading the unnamed maiden and Lancelot to church, is itself closely based on the prose *Lancelot* (Vol. 4, §LXXVIII, 201–2): see Vinaver, 1524, “Sources” note for his “Launcelot and Elaine” subsection.

in a plot to deceive Launcelot masterminded by her father and Dame Brusen (*MD* 622.32–623.14). In contrast to her second liaison with Launcelot, the precise degree of Elayne's agency in tricking Launcelot the first time remains unstated. She certainly shares Pelles's excitement that, should she get "Sir Launcelot in her armys, . . . that same nyght sholde be bygotyn Galahad uppon her" (*MD* 624.1–4, 622.34–623.2); nevertheless, no mention is made of her actively plotting to seduce her potential beloved, for the plan she executes belongs to her father and Brusen (623.22–25). Although Wyatt may overstate Elayne's active role in this plot against Launcelot, she is right that Malory's skill in character development becomes apparent in his subtle fashioning of Elayne's unspoken level of agency.⁶⁵ Malory's choice of giving this female figure the same name as the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat further increases his audience's sympathy for Elayne of Corbyn given—as we argued above—that he makes the Fayre Maydyn a very sympathetic spokeswoman for earthly love.⁶⁶ Like the Fayre Maydyn, Elayne of Corbyn, too, is defined by her love of Launcelot; but it is initially King Pelles and Dame Brusen—not Elayne herself—who are the instigators behind getting Launcelot into Elayne's bed. The motive that inspires this manipulation is King Pelles's knowledge "that Sir Launcelot shulde gete a pusyll uppon his doughtir, whyche shulde be called Sir Galahad, the good knyght by whom all the forayne cuntrey shulde be brought oute of daunger; and by hym the Holy Grayle sholde be encheved" (*MD* 622.33–623.4). But instead of stating directly how much Elayne is involved in the plan, Malory explains that the king accepts the offer of Dame Brusen to "make [Launcelot] to lye wyth [his] doughter" (*MD* 623.8). Dame Brusen concocts the plan that ensures that Launcelot ends up in bed with Elayne: sending a knight he knows well to Launcelot's room carrying a ring, a ring the messenger-knight presents as if it comes from Launcelot's beloved, Queen Gwenyvere (*MD* 623.15–17). Given the deception practiced upon Launcelot, it is crucial to the characterization of Elayne that she gets into this bed because "Dame Brusen, by the commaundemente of Kyng Pelles . . . let sende Elayne to this castell" (*MD* 623.23–24). It is Dame Brusen who stage-manages the encounter by lying to Launcelot, claiming that Queen Gwenyvere awaits him "in her bed" (*MD* 623.30). Dame Brusen then makes certain that Launcelot will not notice that he is in bed with the wrong

65. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 115–16.

66. Cherewatuk notes the uncertainty regarding whether Malory outright invented the name "Elayne" for the daughter of King Pelles who appears in the *Tristan en prose*, or whether he "may have found the name 'Helaine' in his source(s) for 'Launcelot and Elaine': *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 56–57.

woman by giving him “a kuppe full of wyne” that makes him “so asoted and madde that he myght make no delay but wythoute ony let he wente to bedde” (*MD* 623.32–34). Clearly, Dame Brusen has drugged the wine, for Launcelot is immediately, albeit temporarily, in a state of extreme intoxication and arousal; indeed, a few lines later Malory states that “the enchauntement was paste” (*MD* 624.9). The audience, therefore, cannot blame Launcelot for sleeping with Elayne, for he is both drugged and deceived. His deception is evident in his being “glad” because “he wente that mayden Elayne had bene Quene Gwennyvere” (*MD* 623.34–624.1). Elayne of Corbyn is admittedly quite an eager participant in the deception of Launcelot, but she is not (at least on this occasion) the driving force behind it, and, unlike Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat, she does not die of a broken heart.

One reason for Elayne of Corbyn’s avoiding the fate of the Fayre Maydyn is that Launcelot does not reject her outright; in fact, he forgives her her part in his deception. Although Launcelot’s immediate reaction upon learning he has been duped is violent rejection of Elayne of Corbyn, rejection so strong that he draws his sword on the young lady, he soon relents (*MD* 624.11–15). He relents partly because she has reminded him that he is “of kynges bloodde”; partly to honor her father; partly because she beseeches his “mercy” and nobility; and partly, it bears mentioning, because “she was as fayre a lady, and therto lusty and yonge and wyse, as ony was that tyme lyvyng” (*MD* 624.16–625.7). Unlike her double the Fayre Maydyn, then, this Elayne does not suffer her (wished-for) lover’s complete rejection—although Launcelot does depart Corbyn as quickly as he can (*MD* 625.6–8). Despite her complicity in the tricking of Launcelot, Elayne of Corbyn remains—in this part of her story—an obedient daughter whom Launcelot is able to forgive. She is also a woman who has, albeit through magic and trickery, achieved her (family’s) desire of (her) having sex with Launcelot. As Wyatt argues, Malory’s version of the encounter “has consistently kept Elayne in the limelight, described her desires and troubles and has endowed her with a mind of her own”; Malory thus “establishes Elayne as a vivid character” whose “beauty and wisdom secure Lancelot’s and therefore the reader’s sympathies.”⁶⁷

At the same time, Elayne of Corbyn is not an innocent; her complicity in the plot against Arthur’s best knight and willingness to conceive her son through deception would have gotten her killed were it not for her noble

67. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 118. Malory, in fact, seems to emphasize Elayne’s wisdom as much as her beauty, and does so more than his source: see Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 69.

lineage and excuse of filial obedience combined with Launcelot's nobility and willingness to forgive her. Although Elayne may not have masterminded her liaison, her complicity is obvious in Malory's narration: just as "Sir Launcelot was glad . . . so was that lady Eleyne that she had gotyn Sir Launcelot in her armys, for well she knew that that same nyght sholde be bygotyn Galahad uppon her, that sholde preve the beste knyght of the worlde" (*MD* 624.1-4). It is Elayne's complicity in his deception that, in Launcelot's eyes, initially makes her worthy to die the death of a "traytours!" (*MD* 624.13-15). It appears that Launcelot would have killed the maiden with his already-drawn sword had Elayne not told him that she has conceived "the moste nobelyste knyght of the worlde" and that her father is King Pelles—Launcelot's host (*MD* 624.21-24). Although Wyatt claims that Elayne teaches Launcelot "mercy" and "humility," thereby recalling to Malory's audience, and possibly to Launcelot himself, the values of the Pentecostal Oath,⁶⁸ we emphasize instead that Elayne's lineage and Launcelot's adherence to the rules of hospitality and chivalry are the primary deciding factors in Launcelot's decision-making process. Certainly, her plea that she not be killed due to her pregnancy elicits only an angry repetition of the knight's initial accusation against her: "A, false traytours! Why haste thou betrayed me?" (*MD* 624.22). Elayne's attempt to use her prophesied child to appease Launcelot shows how little she understands Malory's most famous bachelor knight, one committed to chivalry and adultery rather than marriage and fatherhood. It is also the case that elsewhere in *Le Morte Darthur* false women, particularly those who use magic, get killed: Balyn beheads the first Lady of the Lake who had earlier killed his mother and who "by inchauntement and by sorcery . . . hath bene the destroyer of many good knyghtes" (*MD* 51.18-33), and Arthur himself (at the behest of Nynive the new Lady of the Lake) beheads the sorcerous Aunowre (384.15-385.35). Launcelot, whether or not he has these precedents in mind, is clearly on the verge of slaying Elayne. It is only after Elayne evokes Launcelot's mercy, knighthood, and reputation—as well as identifies herself as "Elayne, the doughter of Kynge Pelles"—that Launcelot says (with possible hesitance and annoyance) "Well, . . . I woll forgyff you" (*MD* 624.24-25). The maiden asserts that her participation in this plot was a function of filial obedience, claiming, "I have obeyde me unto the prophesye that my fadir tolde me; and by hys commaundemente to fullfyll this prophecie" she

68. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 119-20. On the centrality of women to the Oath, see especially Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 28-44.

has slept with Launcelot, sacrificing her virginity in the process (*MD* 624.35–625.2). The knight signals that he forgives her by embracing and kissing her (*MD* 624.26).

There are, however, complications on both sides to this reconciliation of lovers. Sklar's argument that the story of Launcelot and Elayne of Corbyn highlights yet again Malory's indictment of female agency and exemplifies "the latent gynophobia that underpins the romance genre in general and Malory's rendering in particular" has merit, yet it is undeniable that none of the principal actors in this episode appear to be entirely good.⁶⁹ Launcelot's behavior, for instance, is both mitigated and complicated by his desire for Elayne, a desire that emphasizes her marriageability and social prominence, yet conflicts with his love of Gwenyvere. When "he t[akes] her up in his armys and kysse[s] her," he appears to feel some attraction to the maiden, if Malory's explanation that "she was as fayre a lady, and therto lusty and yonge and wyse, as ony was that tyme lyvyng" is meant to describe *Launcelot's* perception of his seductress (*MD* 624.26–28). The knight does, moreover, state clearly that he blames Dame Brusen as the person who "made thys enchauntemente uppon me"; consequently, he will—if he can locate her—make sure that she will "lose here hede for her wycchecraftys" (*MD* 624.30–32), thereby suffering the same fate to which some other false enchantresses have been subjected throughout Malory's "Hoole Book." The hero's blaming Brusen decreases the blame the audience can put on Elayne, yet it is equally true that "Elaine's behavior reveals a decided lack of humility."⁷⁰ In point of fact, Elayne of Corbyn behaves similarly to the Demoiselle d'Escalot and the stanzaic Maid of Ascalot in manipulating her beloved for selfish reasons. The Corbyn maiden encourages Launcelot to feel responsibility, even guilt, for having taken her virginity. By referring to her maidenhood as "the grettyst ryches and the fayryst floure that ever I had," stressing the fact that she shall have it "never . . . agayne," and beseeching "Sir Launcelot . . . [to] se [her] as sone as [h]e may," she tries to make him conclude, as a "jantyll knyght," that he "owghe[s]" her his "good wyll" (*MD* 624.34–625.5). Thus, the dual mitigation of the prophecy about Galahad's conception and Pelles's desire to fulfill it notwithstanding, Elayne herself quite willingly puts the father of her child under immense emotional pressure in order to have some kind of relationship with him. The manipulation is all the more evident to modern readers—if not to Malory's original audience—when they realize that "Elaine's claim of

69. Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," 62.

70. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 68.

conception, with its biblical echoes, is original to Malory, as is her physical pleasure in their union,” pleasure that (according to medieval lore) was necessary for conception to occur.⁷¹

Another substantial complication to Launcelot and Elayne’s reconciliation process is Launcelot’s feeling of sexual violation. As Catherine Batt observes, Launcelot’s insistence—once to Gwennyvere (*MD* 630.16–17) and once to Elayne herself, that he was “made to lye” by Elayne “magry [his] hede,” thinking her another (651.2 [our italics])—evokes “the idiom of rape to mark the abuse done to his body, and denies consent in the fathering of Galahad.”⁷² Even without Launcelot’s remarks, it is clear from Dame Brusen’s words and actions that Launcelot is (twice) duped and drugged into his seductress’s bed (*MD* 623.5–624.33, 631.13–632.23). The power dynamics involved in rape are equally on display when Elayne foregrounds her royal status.

Like Elayne of Ascolat, then, Elayne of Corbyn positions herself in a loving relationship with Launcelot; like her Fayre Maydyn counterpart, Elayne of Corbyn is also concerned with Launcelot’s well-being. Nonetheless, the object of her love again keeps himself scarce, and she continues to deceive people, especially men, about the reality of their relationship. Furthermore, like Elayne of Ascolat who retains Launcelot’s armor as a token of his supposed affection, Elayne of Corbyn retains custody of Launcelot’s child as a means of binding him to her. Thus, when Sir Bromell la Pleche pursues this latter Elayne in the hope of marrying her, she rejects him because her “love ys sette uppon the beste knyght of the worlde[.] . . . Sir Launcelot du Lake” (*MD* 625.20–24). Although her fate is less pathetic than that of the Fayre Maydyn, Elayne of Corbyn’s love of Launcelot still makes her sad, and perhaps resentful, for she comments that Launcelot has been to her father’s castle only once since the begetting of Galahad (*MD* 626.17–18). When Bors reveals that Launcelot has been in prison for a year thanks to Morgan le Fay, Elayne’s love and concern are evident when she exclaims “Alas, . . . that me sore repentyth!” (*MD* 626.22). Again, however, the situation and morality of the story are complicated, for when Bors notes that the child she holds in her arms looks very much like Launcelot, she asserts her claim to the knight who has rejected her by testifying, “wyte you well, this chylde he begate uppon

71. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 68.

72. Batt, *Remaking Arthurian Tradition*, 122. This sentence and the next repeat, with some minor variation, Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 143. For Launcelot as sexual victim, see also Kristina Hildebrand, “I love nat to be constreyned to love,” *Arthurian Literature* 37 (2022): 175–92.

me” (*MD* 626.25–26). She makes no mention of the sorcerous means through which the begetting occurred, thereby deliberately misleading Bors.

From this point onward in Elayne of Corbyn’s story, Malory foregrounds the complications inherent in her relationship with Launcelot, particularly how Elayne’s desire for Launcelot now makes her complicit in her father’s plans. After Launcelot’s explanation of how he slept with Elayne “in the lyknes” of the queen causes Gwenyvere to consider him “exkused” of the crime of betrayal (*MD* 630.16–18), Elayne once again enacts her role of daddy’s little girl and manipulative lover. In response to King Arthur’s inviting all the lords and ladies of England to a great feast to celebrate his victory in France, Elayne asks her father for permission to attend (*MD* 630.24–26). Her desire coincides with that of her father, who not only wishes her to attend but also has the apparent goal of once again using Elayne’s beauty to lure Launcelot into a relationship with his daughter: he instructs her, “loke that ye be well beseyne in the moste rychest wyse, and loke that ye spare nat for no coste” (*MD* 630.28–29). King Pelles’s desire that his daughter deck herself out is so strong that he uses emotional manipulation to encourage her to do as he asks, prefacing his request with “os ye love me and woll have my blyssynge” (*MD* 630.27–28). Even more than in her first encounter with Launcelot, however, Malory’s account of the second liaison between Elayne and her beloved makes clear just how much Elayne’s own desire is congruent with the plans of her father and his—and her—magical accomplice. Once again Dame Brusen plays the part of not only Elayne’s companion “mayden” but also, more importantly, her magical pander who prepares all the finery Elayne needs to attract her man (*MD* 630.31–632.03).

Thus, although Dame Brusen is the architect of the plot to trick Launcelot and although Pelles wants Launcelot to engender Galahad upon his daughter and, perhaps, continue a relationship with her, Elayne herself is quite willing to mislead her man to ensure that plot’s success due to her obsessive love for him. When her appearance at Arthur’s court causes Launcelot to feel shame because he drew his sword on her after their first night together and, due to this shame, to refuse to greet or speak with her (*MD* 631.7–10), Elayne moves into manipulative lover mode. So “oute of mesure” is the young woman’s love for Launcelot that his avoiding her “sleyth [her] harte nere” (*MD* 631.13–17). Martin justifiably notes that Malory presents Elayne of Corbyn as “wyse” as well as beautiful (*MD* 624.26–28),⁷³ but an audience (whether medieval or modern) might well question the wisdom of any woman who thinks she

73. Martin, *Vision and Gender*, 161.

can win Launcelot's love away from Gwenyvere. Admittedly, this Elayne is more successful than her Fayre Maydyn counterpart, but her obsession with Launcelot is just as intense. Like Elayne of Ascolat, who misleads Gawayne about the extent and reciprocity of her relationship with Launcelot, Elayne of Corbyn (due to her emotional need for the father of her child) is more than happy to mislead Launcelot by acquiescing to Dame Brusen's plan to manipulate him into her bed a second time. That Elayne's desire for her man is stronger than any scruples she might have, either about misleading him or about sleeping with a man who not only does not love her but also loves Arthur's queen, is palpable in her declaration that to sleep with Launcelot "were me lever . . . than all the golde that ys abovyn erthe" (*MD* 631.20–21)! This declaration raises the question of whether Malory's audience is supposed to accept love as a possible justification for Elayne's actions. Any sympathy for Elayne of Corbyn, however, must be balanced against her selfish and spiteful dislike of Launcelot's true love. Malory reveals Elayne's awareness that Gwenyvere is her adversary in love when, during a tense audience with the queen, "aythir made other good chere as by countenance, but nothyng wyth there hartes" (*MD* 631.23–24). The queen is openly and rightly distrustful of Elayne, keeping her adversary in a bedchamber near her own and accusing Launcelot of planning to go to Elayne's bed (*MD* 631.26–31).

We have argued that Elayne of Corbyn is an active agent, but not the driving force, in her first sexual encounter with Launcelot—a distinction that, however fine, partly mitigates this lady's guilt of the treacherous seduction of the knight. Nevertheless, such a distinction disappears during their second tryst, one that repeats the disturbing trickery and "crauftes" of the night of Galahad's begetting (*MD* 632.4). When Dame Brusen informs Elayne that she will (again) lead Launcelot to Elayne's bed "by the honde . . . and he shall wyne that I am Quene Gwenyveres messyngere" (*MD* 632.7–9), Brusen highlights the deception, deception that this time hurts the queen as much as her knight. Furthermore, Elayne expresses her complete agreement with her magical maidservant's plan: "Than well were me, . . . for all the worlde I love nat so muche as I do Sir Launcelot" (*MD* 632.10–11; cf. 632.19–22). The knight's feeling "glad" because he believes he is in bed with the queen only emphasizes how far this Elayne is willing to go to be with the man she desires (*MD* 632.22).

Whereas Malory's changes to the sources for the Fayre Maydyn story all serve to minimize her duplicity and increase her sympathetic portrait, this is not true of the Elayne of Corbyn story. On the contrary, Malory's changes to this other Elayne's story all increase her agency, but they also deepen her

delusion that she has a hold on Launcelot and increase the machinations in which she is willing to engage in order to validate her delusion. Just as Elayne of Corbyn earlier attempted to justify her first sexual entrapment of Launcelot, so now, after their second encounter, she again attempts to claim innocence for herself when arguing with Queen Gwenyvere (*MD* 633.25–634.16). After the queen's branding of her lover as a traitor and expulsion of him from the royal court cause him to swoon, leap out of a window, lose his sanity, and live in woods for two years (*MD* 633.11–24), Elayne tries to put the blame for Launcelot's febrile disability on the queen. The knight's would-be love asserts "Madame, ye ar gretly to blame for Sir Launcelot, for now have ye loste hym, for I saw and harde by his countenance that he ys madde for ever" (*MD* 633.28–30). Later on in their argument, Elayne blames the queen for causing Launcelot permanent emotional damage, saying, "I dare undirtake he ys marred for ever, and that have *you* made" (*MD* 634.9–10 [our italics]). Elayne then tries to stake the moral high ground by berating the queen for betraying her husband and lord through her affair: "madame, ye have done grete synne and youreself grete dyshonoure, for ye have a lorde royall of youre owne, and therefore hit were youre parte for to love hym; for there ys no quene in this worlde that hath suche another kinge as ye have" (*MD* 633.31–34). The young woman argues further—and again falsely—that the queen has done great harm by making it impossible for Elayne to win Launcelot's love, claiming, "yf ye were nat, I myght have getyn the love of my lorde Sir Launcelot; and a grete cause I have to love hym, for he hadde my maydynhode and by hym I have borne a fayre sonne, whose name ys Sir Galahad. And he shall be in hys tyme the beste knyght of the worlde" (*MD* 633.34–634.4). By referring to Launcelot as her "lorde" and foregrounding her giving birth to his son, Elayne attempts to mark him as her common-law husband.

Elayne of Corbyn's claim of common-law marriage parallels Elayne of Ascolat's taking upon herself the legal rights of a wife in threatening to "appele" Bors and Lavayne if Launcelot were to die (*MD* 823.2–5; discussed above). But an equally important parallel is the spurious nature of each Elayne's relationship with Launcelot: as much physical beauty as each might possess, and however much each might genuinely care for Launcelot, neither has any hope of capturing his heart. Elayne of Ascolat's acceptance of this harsh fact ultimately renders her much more sympathetic and positive to Malory's audiences than Elayne of Corbyn's twice-perpetrated magical seduction of the man she claims to love. Malory reinforces the falsity of Elayne of Corbyn by having her attempt to manipulate the queen using the same argument with which she earlier tried to manipulate Launcelot: that

because Elayne lost her virginity to Launcelot and by him conceived a child who will become the greatest worldly knight, she deserves to have Launcelot for her own (*MD* 624.19–625.5, 633.34–634.4). Just as Launcelot reacts with great fury to bedding Elayne unintentionally and then rejects her by hastily departing from Pelles's court, Gwenyvere is infuriated by Elayne's argument and then rejects her by ordering Elayne to leave the royal court as soon as the sun comes up (*MD* 634.5–6). The fact that Elayne uses the same argument against both Launcelot and Gwenyvere only serves to remind the audience of the natural bond between Launcelot and Gwenyvere—a bond that, for all of its ups and downs and despite all the threats to it, is far more loving and natural than Elayne's attempted entrapment of Launcelot. After all, what alerts Gwenyvere to Launcelot's presence in Elayne's bed is not only her recognition of his voice but her recognition of his sleep-talking “of the love that had bene betwixte Quene Gwenyvere and hym” (*MD* 633.1–4), a powerful narrative observation with which Malory displays both his artistry and his sympathy for Gwenyvere and Launcelot's love.

While Elayne of Ascolat receives Malory's validation despite her lies, Elayne of Corbyn remains problematic because she denies her own responsibility for Launcelot's mental and emotional trauma. She is undoubtedly a powerful and prominent female figure in *Le Morte Darthur*; she is not, however, selfless or innocent, and it is debatable whether she teaches Launcelot anything other than to be more careful about verifying the identity of the person claiming to be his beloved queen and waiting for him in a nearby bed.⁷⁴ When Bors blames both Elayne and Gwenyvere for the situation by asserting that “betwixt you bothe ye have destroyed a good knyght” (*MD* 634.24–25), Elayne tries to convince both Bors and herself that only the queen is to blame. She claims, “*I seyde never nother dede thyng* that shulde in ony wyse displease hym. But wyth the rebuke, sir, that Quene Gwenyvere gaff hym I saw hym sowne to the erthe. And whan he awoke he . . . lepe oute at a wyndow wyth the greselyest grone” (*MD* 634.26–30 [our italics]). Her claim that she has never said nor done anything to displease Launcelot is ridiculous, for twice she has caused him to experience the horror of betraying his beloved against his will. She has tricked him and been party to tricking and raping him in order to put her own desires before his happiness with Gwenyvere. In this light, even Elayne's promise to Bors that she will do what

74. Our interpretation disputes Cherewatuk's claim that Elayne of Corbyn's love is a “noble love”: *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 72. We likewise disagree with Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 115–24, that this Elayne is a sympathetic woman who teaches Launcelot chivalry.

she can to aid Launcelot by keeping an eye out for him, and her declaration that she “wolde lose [her] lyff for hym rathir than he shulde be hurte” (*MD* 635.3–4), reflect not so much her love (although this is present) as her self-justification and denial of responsibility. In marked contrast to Elayne of Ascolat, who is ultimately destroyed by unrequited love for Launcelot, Elayne of Corbyn very nearly destroys both Launcelot’s mental stability and his true-love relationship. Jerome Mandel is, therefore, correct to argue that Elayne of Corbyn “is ultimately responsible” for Launcelot’s mental deterioration; however, his accompanying claim that Launcelot does indeed love (or at least lust after) Elayne more than Gwenyvere completely ignores the reasons for which Launcelot gets into bed with the younger woman at all.⁷⁵ Even Elayne’s accomplice Brusen responds to Elayne’s remark about helping the mentally distraught Launcelot by pointing out that only a miracle can—and will—be able to heal Launcelot (*MD* 635.5–8). This comment foregrounds several key points: (i) that Elayne’s so-called relationship with Launcelot has been dependent all along upon both his love for Gwenyvere and Brusen’s magic; (ii) that the use of magic to trick the hero foreshadows Launcelot’s eventual healing by that same magic and especially by the Holy Grail (*MD* 648.27–650.7); and (iii) that healing by the Grail serves to adumbrate the forthcoming Grail Quest, a quest that disavows earthly and sexual love even as it simultaneously foregrounds the love of Gwenyvere that emphatically prevents Launcelot from fully achieving the Quest. Taken together, these points emphasize Elayne’s guilt.

Theoretically, Elayne of Corbyn could have received validation through her title of “Dame” and a happy ending to her story, but this title is ambiguous and her happy ending does not come. As Brusen notes, it will take a miracle from the Grail to heal Launcelot, but the scene of Launcelot’s healing begins with a mention of King Pelles’s daughter as “Dame Elayne . . . that bare Galahad, Sir Launcelottys sonne” (*MD* 648.10–11). This label of “Dame” could indicate that she is the “wife (of a nobleman),” yet the word could also signify any “woman of rank,” which Elayne certainly is.⁷⁶ Therefore, this title does not fully validate Elayne. Nevertheless, her status as the bearer of Launcelot’s son creates the possibility of a happy ending were Launcelot to take Elayne as his wife because she is the mother of his child. Certainly, Elayne herself implies during her argument with the queen

75. Jerome Mandel, “Constraint and Motivation in Malory’s ‘Lancelot and Elaine,’” *Papers on Language and Literature* 20, no. 3 (1984): 257.

76. *MED*, s.v. “dame,” n. 1 (c) and (a), cited by Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 71, who advocates “Malory’s sympathy for” Elayne.

that, were it not for Gwenyvere, she could win Launcelot's love and presumably marry him (*MD* 633.30–634.3)—a claim that is both “original” to Malory and that “momentarily” raises the possibility of a happy ending for Elayne.⁷⁷ Elayne's profuse weeping when she recognizes as her beloved the man dressed as a fool and sleeping in her father's garden, and her rushing to her father to enlist his aid in healing Launcelot (*MD* 649.1–24), could likewise have served as a prelude to both Malory as narrator and Launcelot as aggrieved would-be lover forgiving her for involvement in the machinations that produced Galahad. Yet this happy ending does not occur: instead, Brusen must again enchant Launcelot to ease his mental and emotional trauma and ensure he neither escapes nor does harm before they can transport him to the Grail chamber for his miraculous cure (*MD* 649.29–650.7). This healing process recalls Brusen's earlier uses of enchantment to trick Launcelot into Elayne's bed.

Significantly, when Launcelot regains his wits, his analysis of his own situation not only puts significant blame on Elayne but also positions Launcelot as a man to whom Elayne's father owes compensation for the loss of his position at Arthur's court. Indeed, once healed, Launcelot informs Pelles's daughter in no uncertain terms of the disastrous results that have befallen him as a direct result of her, Pelles's, and Brusen's actions, stating that he feels “sore ashamed” to have been “banysshed [from] the contrey of Logryes for ever” (*MD* 650.27–28). Because Elayne willingly participated in his two deceptions and sexual violations, the knight subsequently places the blame precisely where he believes it belongs: “Fayre lady Elayne, *for youre sake I have had muche travayle, care and angwyshe*”—an assertion he underscores by using apophasis and suggesting that she already knows she is guilty: “hit nedyth nat to reherse hit, ye know how” (*MD* 650.32–33 [our italics]). After admitting his own wrongdoing when he drew his sword on her the morning after their first sexual encounter, Launcelot nonetheless explicitly—and correctly—brands Elayne as conspirator with Brusen: “And all was for the cause that *ye and Dame Brusen made me for to lye by you magry myne bede*” (*MD* 650.34–651.2 [our italics]). Elayne's guilt for ruining Launcelot's life is further reinforced by Launcelot requesting that Pelles compensate him with “a place of hym wherein [he] may dwelle,” a request immediately supported by this reason: “For in the courte of Kynge Arthure may [he] never com” (*MD* 651.5–7). The actual reason, of course, is that Elayne seems to have ruined his relationship

77. See, respectively, Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 806.19–34; Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 121–22. Cf. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 69.

with Gwenyvere, and Launcelot's ensuing psychosis has, he fears, ruined his public reputation.

Surprisingly for a knight normally held up as the flower of chivalry and courtesy, Launcelot goes so far as to doubt the veracity of Elayne's word. He responds to her favorite testimony of bearing his son with the disclaimer "And, *as ye sey*, that nyght Galahad *your sonne* was begotyn" (*MD* 651.3 [our italics]). Launcelot's words present his situation with Elayne as a he-said/she-said affair. The qualifier "as ye sey" increases the audience's sense that Launcelot blames Elayne for his troubles and does not trust her. Furthermore, the fact that Launcelot goes on to refer to the child as "your sonne" indicates that the knight does not accept a child begotten out of deception as one he will acknowledge, a moral stance that reminds a modern audience of the rape necessary for this un-immaculate conception. Not once does Launcelot refer to this child as "our son," and his negative feelings are highlighted by Bors's very different reaction to his own son. When Bors comes upon the house where he earlier begat a child, he reacts positively and welcomingly to his son: "whan Sir Bors sawe that chylde he lyked hym passynge well"; he then announces his intention to take the boy with him to Arthur's court (*MD* 655.18–31). In marked contrast, when Elayne tries to interest Launcelot in Galahad and herself by announcing "My lorde Sir Launcelot, . . . thys same feste of Pentecoste shall youre sonne and myne, Galahad, be made knyght," Launcelot disdainfully replies, "Madame, do as ye lyst" (*MD* 656.29–32).

The Two Elaynes: Different, Yet Similarly Stuck

Malory ultimately presents Elayne of Corbyn as a duplicitous female who tries to obstruct, and who succeeds in complicating, Launcelot's relationship with his true love Gwenyvere; however, Malory also highlights the marked contrast between his two Elaynes, one of whom nurses Launcelot back to health after he is injured by a fellow knight, and the other who helps to drive him out of his mind and cause him much shame. Elayne of Corbyn is equal parts a daddy's girl who willingly fulfills her father's desire by sacrificing her virginity to Launcelot, and an independent woman powerful enough to denounce Gwenyvere—even if that denunciation rests on shaky foundations. The fact that Elayne of Corbyn argues with the queen is matched only by Elayne of Ascolat's silencing of her confessor when he demands that she stop lamenting her failed love of Launcelot. Elayne of Ascolat boldly claims that God approves of her dying for love because "He fourmed me thereto, and all maner of good love" is true love (*MD* 827.23–24), but she also accepts her

fate. In contrast, Elayne of Corbyn blames Gwenyvere for both her own fate and Launcelot's insanity (*MD* 633.25–634.13); nevertheless, Launcelot blames Elayne, and his status as one of Malory's preeminent heroes gives his opinion greater weight than hers.⁷⁸ The subtlety and artistry of Malory's narration also undercuts Elayne of Corbyn's position, particularly when Launcelot's postcoital sleep-talking concerns Gwenyvere rather than the woman who lies beside him in bed and claims him as her lover (*MD* 633.1–4).

Like Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat who pursues Launcelot even unto death, Elayne of Corbyn pursues Launcelot deliberately and avidly: she continues to manipulate Launcelot by responding to his request that her father give him a place to live by insinuating herself into the life he must lead in that place of banishment. Like the Fayre Maydyn, Pelles's daughter also declares that she would die for Launcelot, but unlike the Maydyn, Elayne of Corbyn adds a typically selfish and aggressive twist: "And wher ye be, my lorde Sir Launcelot, doute ye nat but I woll be wyth you, wyth all the servyse that I may do" (*MD* 651.8–14). Launcelot's silence in response to her assertion speaks volumes: he does not dignify her claim on him with a response. Instead, in marked contrast to Elayne's hailing her beloved as "my lorde Sir Launcelot," he changes his name and effaces his identity to become instead "Le Shyvalere Ill Mafeete [or] . . . the Knyght That Hath Trespassed" (*MD* 651.29–30; repeated at 652.11–13). This is a public and identity-changing marker of the cost of his exile from Arthur's court and his one true love, an exile caused by Elayne's machinations. Such heartbroken behavior continues when he has a shield made that depicts a crowned queen with an armed knight "knelynge afore her"; Launcelot's sorrow is palpable when Malory narrates how, despite "ony myrthis that all the ladyes myght make hym," he looks each day "toward the realme of Logrys, where Kynge Arthure and Quene Gwenyvere was, and than wolde he falle uppon a wepyng as hys harte shulde to-braste" (*MD* 652.14–20). These tears increase the audience's awareness of the key fact that Launcelot's emotional life is at the court of Arthur and Gwenyvere, not at the Castle of Blyaunte and most emphatically not with Elayne of Corbyn—whatever she might say or do to suggest otherwise.

Thus, despite Elayne of Corbyn's repeated attempts to frame her relation-

78. Accordingly, although White combines the two Elaynes into one, his characterization of Galahad's mother is unsympathetic throughout *Once and Future King*. For the conflation of the Fayre Maydyn with Elaine of Corbin (in White's spelling), see 433, 441, and especially 514–22 (*Ill-Made Knight*, Chapters 23–24 and 38–40). We are again indebted to Edward Donald Kennedy for bringing White's treatment of Malory's Elaynes to our attention.

ship with Launcelot as marriage, she fails to achieve even a common-law union, let alone a formal marriage.⁷⁹ Tellingly, the only joy that Launcelot experiences during his exile from Camelot comes not from being with Elayne but from his reunion with Percyvale and Ector, a reunion that occurs because of a joust that happens to bring these two Arthurian knights into Launcelot's orbit despite his exile. Elayne does manage to insert herself into the knightly fellowship to an extent by relating to Percyvale and Ector the story of how Launcelot came to her land, was healed by the Grail, fought battles in which he was wounded, and was healed again (*MD* 655.6–13). Nevertheless, although Elayne of Corbyn's attempts to enmesh Launcelot in a life with her are, for a while, more successful than were those of Elayne of Ascolat, the end result is inevitably similar. As soon as Ector reports to his brother that Queen Gwenyvere has spent the considerable sum of £20,000 trying to find him, thereby assuring the queen's beloved that he is forgiven, Launcelot takes his leave of both Elayne and Pelles and departs (*MD* 656.12–27).⁸⁰ When Elayne makes "grete sorow" at his departure and tries to manipulate him into a familial connection with her by referring to the imminent knighting of "youre sonne and myne" (*MD* 656.27–31), Launcelot (as noted above) makes his lack of feelings for this woman clear by departing as quickly as possible for Camelot to rejoin the home and knightly family of his heart.

It is true that, after returning to a warm welcome at Camelot, Launcelot must respond to the opinion of Arthur and many at court that he "wente oute of [his] mynde . . . for the love of fayre Elayne" (*MD* 657.15–16). When Arthur's best knight responds with the vague phrase, "yf I ded ony foly I have that I sought" (*MD* 657.20–21), its meaning is unclear: the folly to which he refers might be sleeping with Elayne and thereby losing Gwenyvere's love, or perhaps (as the "yf" clause indicates) Launcelot is trying to suggest to Gwenyvere that he did not commit any folly because he was twice tricked into bed with Elayne. What is certain, however, is that Launcelot was so miserable while living as the Knyght That Hath Trespassed that he wept daily, whereas he now rejoices to be back at court—and away from Elayne. Although "Launcelottys kynnesmen knew for whom he wente oute of hys mynde" (i.e., Gwenyvere), the fellowship of Arthur's court is finally more important than Launcelot's relationships with either of his two Elaynes or

79. Pace Sklar, "Malory's Other(ed) Elaine," 61; Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance*, 68–72.

80. Vinaver laconically comments, regarding the money spent in search of Launcelot, that "There is nothing in [the French source] that could have suggested this remark": Commentary on *Works*, 831.32–33.

the queen. Tellingly, the Corbyn episode ends with “all lordys and ladyes [making] grete joy whan they harde how Sir Launcelot was com agayne unto the courte” (*MD* 657.22–26). Even near the conclusion of “The Tale off the Sankgreal,” having returned to Corbyn Castle and received a partial vision of the Grail as he completed his part of the Grail Quest, Launcelot still refuses to acknowledge Elayne’s emotional claim upon him. Having learned of her death from her father, the closest Launcelot comes to acknowledging to Pelles the relationship between himself and Elayne is to say, “wel I wote she bare the beste knyght that ys now on erthe” (*MD* 776.15–16). He values her only in chivalric terms, as mother of the child she bore—not for the love she bore him.

Malory’s Elayne of Corbyn, like her counterpart in the French sources, remains a duplicitous and manipulative character. She is not, as Sklar claims, transformed, but neither is it true that the actions of Gwenyvere, Elayne of Corbyn, or Brusen function as “damning” indictments of female agency.⁸¹ At the same time, the textual evidence we have examined here disputes Wyatt’s claim that Elayne of Corbyn is a woman who ennobles chivalry in general and Launcelot in particular.⁸² Other women do so, but not this particular one. Sklar considers Launcelot to be “guilty of” two crimes: “violating a virgin because of his adulterous love for the Queen” and “abandoning Elaine with nary a by your leave.”⁸³ As Whetter has argued at length elsewhere, however, Malory’s *Arthurian* is from beginning to end a complex generic hybrid that interweaves both epic-heroic and romance generic features and values.⁸⁴ In such a generic hybrid, knights and ladies, deeds of arms and love, are complementary. Thus, while Elayne of Corbyn never receives validation from Malory as narrator because she is not Launcelot’s true love, Elayne the Fayre Maydyn of Ascolat does receive validation because she articulates the view of earthly love that *Le Morte Darthur* presents through its most prominent examples: the loves of Gareth and Lyonesse, Trystram and Isode, and Launcelot and Gwenyvere. Love is central to knightly existence, but as the fates of Trystram and Isode, Launcelot and Gwenyvere, and the Fayre Maydyn herself illustrate, love is no more a guarantee of a happy ending in Malory’s *Morte* than is knightly prowess or heroism. As for Elayne of Corbyn, despite her claims to love, her role in duping and raping Launcelot renders her far from a true lover or even a sympathetic character.

81. Sklar, “Malory’s Other(ed) Elaine,” 65–66 and 62.

82. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 114–124, 135.

83. Sklar, “Malory’s Other(ed) Elaine,” 62.

84. Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 99–149, 155–59.

Ultimately, then, the intertextual and intratextual relations that produce Launcelot's two Elaynes foreground what Jill Mann calls "Malory's Narrative of Distance," the simultaneous alienation and explanation of cause and event, or action and reaction, that both defines and obfuscates causation and reason in Malory's *Morte Darthur*.⁸⁵ As the two Elaynes reveal, Malory is capable of creating more rounded and interiorized female characters than he is sometimes given credit for. However, some of those characters are more rounded than others, and some are more static than others. Elayne of Ascolat grows ever stronger and more sympathetic throughout her story; in contrast, Elayne of Corbyn leaves her story as she enters it: a woman who, for all of her beauty and brains, can attract Launcelot only when he is tricked into thinking she is someone else.

85. Jill Mann, "The Narrative of Distance, The Distance of Narrative in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*," in *Life in Words*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 275–311.

Three

Misreading and Rereading Arthur

Celebrating Arthur as Hero and Conqueror-King in the Alliterative Morte Arthure and Malory's Morte Darthur



We argued in Chapter 1 that Malory's Palomydes is more of an Arthurian and chivalric insider than recent scholarship has been willing to allow, and that scholars' consistent treatment of Palomydes as an outsider mirrors mainstream critical reception of "The Boke off Syr Trystram" as something of a narrative outsider within Malory's *Morte Darthur* as a whole. Malory's "Trystram" section is—to the best of our knowledge—almost never anthologized,¹ and it is abridged not only in modern retellings but also in some editions. As Eugène Vinaver long ago noted, however, the "technique of fighting, and more particularly of single combat, is Malory's favourite topic."² It is therefore, as Andrew Lynch observes, something of "a paradox" that "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones," the section of *Le Morte Darthur* that devotes a great deal of narrative space to combat, has often been maligned and even ignored by modern critics.³ Given that so much of the critical commentary devoted to this section of Malory's book presents it—as it presents Palomydes—as a

1. The recent exception is *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Arthurian Literature*, ed. Kathy Cawsey and Elizabeth Edwards (Peterborough: Broadview, 2024), 433–37, which includes the episode of Palomydes's conversion from the very end of the "Trystram."

2. Vinaver, xxxiii. See also K. S. Whetter, "Warfare and Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*," in *Writing War*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Françoise Le Saux, and Neil Thomas (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 169–86.

3. Andrew Lynch, *Malory's Book of Arms* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 79.

failure, the dominant scholarly interpretation of the “Trystram” constitutes an intertext that requires reassessment, just as the dominant scholarly interpretation of Palomydes does, and the critical traditions connected to the two verse *Mortes* do. Because critics also generally consider the Arthur of “The Boke off Syr Trystram” to be a failure, they use his (supposed) failings in the middle portion of “The Hoole Book” to forecast his (supposed) failings later on.⁴ We contend, in contrast, that Malory’s Arthur is a positive character and a good king. As Edward Donald Kennedy points out, although Arthur is less obviously a major player in “The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones” than in the opening and closing Tales of Malory’s *Morte*, one function of this Tale (Tale V) is to foreground King Mark’s villainy, a foregrounding seemingly designed to create a contrast with Arthur’s more favorable traits in the Tales that follow.⁵ Such positive traits are many, for, as Kennedy judiciously maintains, “Malory apparently thought of Arthur as a good king in the early as well as the later parts of *Morte Darthur*,” and consistently adapted and modified his sources so as to present Arthur displaying the qualities that medieval commentators desired in a good king, specifically “a sense of justice and chivalry, courage and wisdom.”⁶

Despite Kennedy’s valid argument, a good many critics of late have taken to foregrounding Arthur’s supposed failures or inequities as king in *Le Morte Darthur*. Partly these critiques of Arthur reflect the nature of scholarly inquiry, for one way to advance an argument and get it published is to rebut the argument of the previous generation of scholars. Nevertheless, Malory, we argue, consistently foregrounds Arthur’s heroic stature. A useful way to highlight Arthur’s active and successful kingship in Malory’s Arthuriad, we further contend, is to compare it with the portrait of Arthur as king presented in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. This poem presents Arthur as a brave and just king, a characterization that Malory integrated into his Arthuriad. Our argument has, we believe, considerable textual and contextual evidence to support it; we are, however, arguing against the received wisdom about alliterative-Arthur and against much current scholarship regarding Malory’s Arthur. As we shall illustrate in this chapter, despite variation in both approach and details over

4. See, for example, Ginger Thornton, “The Weakening of the King: Arthur’s Disintegration in *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*,” in *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-Views*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. (New York: AMS Press, 1992), 3–16.

5. Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark and King Arthur,” in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy (New York: Garland, 1996), 139–71.

6. Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark,” 149. See further Robert Henry Wilson, *Characterization in Malory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1934), 65–79.

the last sixty years, the vast majority of criticism on the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is scathingly judgmental, with Arthur himself being doubly damned: chastised by those critics who deem him weak or inactive, yet castigated by other critics for taking action, especially martial action.⁷ So ingrained is this portrait of alliterative-Arthur as a failed king that scholars over the last generation have even taken to doubling Arthur with the evil Giant of Mont Saint-Michel or the tyrannical Lucius (or both). In Christine Chism's phrase, Arthur's movement from England to the Continent "shatters the [poem's] ideological boundaries" as well as geographic ones: "As Arthur moves into Lucius's territory across the sea in France, he acquires symbols that recall Lucius's tyranny, while Lucius is linked to symbols originally associated with Arthur."⁸ We wish in this chapter to counter the standard reading of the *Morte Arthure* by arguing that alliterative-Arthur is paired within the poem with the more positive and heroic figure of Wawayne,⁹ and that outside of the poem modern readers might fruitfully compare alliterative-Arthur with the equally positive Arthur of Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

Contexts and Controversies

Modern scholars cannot agree on the principal themes, the major characters, or even the date or genre of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, yet there is near-universal agreement among those who read the poem that it is one of the undisputed jewels in the crown of the Alliterative Revival.¹⁰ The poem is

7. Our discussion of alliterative-Arthur in this chapter as a "negative" character to some critics and a "positive" one to others reflects the predominantly moralistic tone of critical analysis of this character to date. Nevertheless, our "positive" portrait of Arthur does more than assert that Arthur is a good king: it allows us to offer a nuanced analysis of the king that acknowledges Arthur's human imperfections without reducing him to the status of tyrant or failed ruler.

8. Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 210. Chism's view is endorsed by Dorsey Armstrong and Kenneth Hodges, *Mapping Malory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 119.

9. As in earlier chapters, we use the predominant spelling of characters' names from each text to help distinguish characters in one text (especially the *Mortes*) from characters in another. Arthur's heroic nephew is both "Gawayne" and "Wawayne" in the *aMA*, but we shall use the *W*-spelling of the hero's name to distinguish between the poem and Malory's "Gawayne" spelling.

10. This paragraph and parts of the first half of this chapter repeat material previously published as Fiona Tolhurst and K. S. Whetter, "Memories of War," *Arthuriana* 29, no. 1 (2019): 88–108. The current chapter expands considerably upon the article version of our argument.

equally important in the history of Middle English manuscript transmission by virtue of its inclusion in one of Robert Thornton's two fifteenth-century anthologies. Although scholars agree that the version of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* we have today is a revision of a lost longer poem, the text survives only in the Lincoln Thornton manuscript. The Lincoln Thornton—Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91 (circa 1430–40)—is a collection of texts ranging from secular to medicinal to religious; many of the manuscript's poems were probably originally composed in the fourteenth century before being copied in the next century by Thornton. Nevertheless, regardless of dates, the Lincoln Thornton is noteworthy for being one of the most important collections of English romance surviving from the Middle Ages.¹¹ The precise date of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is uncertain, with the most common estimated composition dates ranging from the 1370s to 1402: Larry D. Benson uses the poet's knowledge of Italian geography and politics as well as the presence of "the [English] Mownttagus" (3772–73) among Mordred's allies to build a compelling case for the poem being written between 1399 and 1402; P. J. C. Field reexamines the references to these same Montagus, as well as to Milan and Italian politics, to build an equally compelling case for composition between 1375 and 1378.¹² As with a great many works of art, the very quality of the work increases rather than reduces the range of scholarly interpretation. This is especially true when scholars try to identify the alliterative *Morte's* principal genre (or genres) and principal themes, particularly the poet's attitude toward Arthur's character and conquests.

It is our contention that the Arthur of all three English *Mortes* is a heroic

11. For a facsimile, see *The Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91)*, Introduction by D. S. Brewer and A. E. B. Owen, rev. ed. (London: Scolar Press, 1977). On the Thornton MSS, see especially Phillipa Hardman, "Reading the Spaces: Pictorial Intentions in the Thornton MSS, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91, and BL MS Add. 31042," *Medium Ævum* 63 (1994): 250–74; Thomas Howard Crofts, "The Occasion of the *Morte Arthure*: Textual History and Marginal Decoration in the Thornton MS," *Arthuriana* 20, no. 2 (2010): 5–27; John Finlayson, "Reading Romances in Their Manuscript: Lincoln Cathedral Manuscript 91 ('Thornton')," *Anglia* 123, no. 4 (2006): 632–66; and John Finlayson, "The Contexts of the Crusading Romances in the London Thornton Manuscript," *Anglia* 130, no. 2 (2012): 240–63.

12. Larry D. Benson, "The Date of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*," in *Medieval Studies in Honor of Lillian Herlands Hornstein*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger Jr. and Robert R. Raymo (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 19–40; P. J. C. Field, "*Morte Arthure*, the Montagus, and Milan," *Medium Ævum* 78 (2009): 98–117. Benson's date was accepted and reinforced by Hamel in her critical edition, *Morte Arthure*, 53–58 and n. to 3773. All references to *Morte Arthure* will be parenthetical, citing this edition but omitting Hamel's editorial brackets and silently capitalizing knightly titles.

figure whose martial and monarchical qualities can be measured and affirmed not only by the values of each text but also by the standards of what constituted good lordship in the Middle Ages. The alliterative-poet and Malory both repeatedly illustrate the potentially tragic consequences of heroism in order to valorize all the more fully the achievements and stature of the Arthurian court. Malory's *Morte Darthur* has, like the alliterative *Morte* itself, frequently challenged scholars interested in assigning it to a particular generic category.¹³ Malory's Roman War section is modeled upon the alliterative poem, so it reflects the alliterative poem's epic-heroic values—values that valorize war provided that it is justified and conducted honorably. The Roman War story thus prepares for later events in Malory's "Hoole Book" at the same time as it expands the scope of the narrative and continues to depict the early wars of Arthur, wars that establish Arthur's greatness as king and warrior. Arthur's own heroic stature, in turn, explains why a constellation of magnificent knights forms around him—knights who support him in the early wars and whose own careers are chronicled in the middle Tales of the *Morte*, including "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones."

We noted in our Introduction that one of the critical traditions regarding the three English *Mortes* is to ignore the stanzaic *Morte* in favor of its alliterative and prose counterparts. Notwithstanding changes in critical tastes and approaches over the years, our analysis of the critical contexts of the two verse *Mortes* suggests that one principal reason for the critical favoring of the alliterative over the stanzaic *Morte* is a critical bias established in the mid-twentieth century by the influential George Kane: Kane praised the alliterative poem for its "robust" manliness, "richness of treatment," "stately splendour of colour and imagery and [a] concept of its subject matter nearer to the epic level than any of the other romances"; these qualities, Kane implied, were lacking in the stanzaic poem.¹⁴ What is useful about Kane's work is not the aesthetic judgment that epic or tragedy is better (meaning, in Kane's language, more manly) than romance, but rather the recognition of the alliterative *Morte's* place in the epic-heroic tradition. Arthur's mourning manfully, despite some recent claims to the contrary, is a hallmark of epic or heroic literature, in which it is common

13. The fullest account of the genre of Malory's *Morte* is K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 99–159.

14. George Kane, *Middle English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1951), 69–70. Jane Roberts observes that Kane's book "quickly came to command a wide undergraduate audience, both in Britain and North America" and is still in print—and "in student use"—today (Jane Roberts, "George Kane: 1916–2008," *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* 11 [2012]: 428–29).

for a male hero to mourn the loss of a fallen comrade. Although some theorists of gender, masculinity, or emotion consider male tears and excessive grief to unman the hero, the tears of Arthur (and others) in the alliterative *Morte* are not only physical expressions of the power of emotion and a possible guide to reader response but also “an exaggeration of manly ideals and virtues” in a genre dominated by violence, honor, and death.¹⁵ Writing long before the rise of masculinity and affect studies, Dorothy L. Sayers makes a significant observation: “There are fashions in sensibility as in everything else. The idea that a strong man should react to great personal and national calamities by a slight compression of the lips and by silently throwing his cigarette into the fireplace” is a modern, not medieval, conception.¹⁶ We contend further that Arthur’s emotions also express his laudable qualities as king: they illustrate his love for his fellow warrior-knights and his concern for their safety.

A core argument of *Arthurian Intertextualities* is precisely that, in the late-medieval English Arthurian tradition, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*—a poem based on a careful arrangement and augmentation of Galfridian chronicle tradition and arguably the earliest of our three English *Mortes*—typifies the chronicle tradition’s depiction of Arthur as a magnificent king. Edward Donald Kennedy argues in several learned essays that Malory’s positive portrait of King Arthur is indebted to the celebratory portrait of Arthur in the chronicles, but concludes that the alliterative *Morte* does not follow this positive characterization.¹⁷ We agree with Kennedy that the chronicles valorize Arthur—but we diverge from him (and most others) in arguing instead that the alliterative *Morte* maintains rather than undermines this celebratory portrait of the king.

Indeed, in making this argument we are going against the critical grain. Elizabeth S. Sklar ably captures the dominant scholarly perception of alliterative-Arthur by seizing upon the generic and thematic problems and

15. Anne Baden-Daintree, “Kingship and the Intimacy of Grief in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” in *Emotions in Medieval Arthurian Literature: Body, Mind, Voice*, ed. Frank Brandsma, Carolyne Larrington, and Corinne Saunders (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 87–104 (quoting 95).

16. Dorothy L. Sayers, introduction to *The Song of Roland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 15.

17. See, among others, Edward Donald Kennedy, “The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: The Adaptation of a French Romance for an English Audience,” in *Culture and the King*, ed. Martin B. Shichtman, James P. Carley, and Mildred Leake Day (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 91–112; “Mordred’s Sons,” in *The Arthurian Way of Death*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 33–49; and “The Prose *Brut*, Hardyng’s *Chronicle*, and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*: The End of the Story,” in *Romance and History: Imagining Time from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 105–19.

pluralities inherent in “a protagonist who initially models the ideal king giving way to prideful folly and monstrous ambition.”¹⁸ For two generations now, following or adapting the work of William Matthews, John Finlayson, or Russell Peck, scholarship on the alliterative *Morte* has offered variations on this thesis that Arthur sooner or later becomes the monstrous tyrant he had initially set out to overcome.¹⁹ For the most part, subsequent criticism has meticulously nuanced the question of when—but not *if*—Arthur becomes a tyrannical sinner; even new scholarly positions or contextualizations ultimately tend, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, to reaffirm either Matthews’s and Peck’s critical view of Arthur, or Finlayson’s transitional portrait of Arthur as initially heroic but ultimately guilty.²⁰ Much recent criticism, moreover, tends to start with Peck, ignoring Peck’s own indebtedness to and nuancing of the arguments of Matthews and Finlayson. Consequently, taken as a whole, scholarship on the alliterative *Morte* falls into three broad categories: that concerned with genre; that concerned with a moralistic approach to Arthur’s character and actions; and that which views the poem as pacifist. There is, of course, considerable overlap of these categories, so that a critic’s reading of the character of Arthur or the validity of warfare in the poem is linked to genre, but these categories provide a convenient means of elucidating our argument.

Genre, Combat, and Kingship: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* as Epic-Heroic Poem

As Sklar puts it, for most critics, the masterful storytelling of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* contrasts with its generic uncertainties;²¹ these uncertainties—it is often claimed—cast Arthur as a dubious protagonist. Thus, for

18. Elizabeth Sklar, “Sui Generis: The Architectonics of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*,” *Medieval Perspectives* 17, no. 1 ([2004 for] 2002): 189–202 (at 194).

19. See William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative “Morte Arthure”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960); Russell A. Peck, “Willfulness and Wonders: Boethian Tragedy in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” in *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Bernard S. Levy and Paul E. Szarmach (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1981), 153–82; and John Finlayson’s series of important articles on the *aMA*: for the issue of character and guilt, see especially Finlayson’s “The Concept of the Hero in ‘Morte Arthure,’” in *Chaucer und seine Zeit*, ed. Arno Esch (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1968), 249–74, and *Morte Arthure*, ed. John Finlayson (London: Arnold, 1967), 11–20.

20. See, for example, James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 2, 1350–1547: *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107–10.

21. Sklar, “Sui Generis,” 189–90.

Peck, the poem is structured around a series of antithetical doublings that he calls a “hysteron proteron” arrangement of events, events that mirror and comment upon each other.²² According to this interpretation, Arthur’s splendor and celebrations at court at the beginning of the poem are set against Arthur’s isolation and the deaths of his principal warriors at the end of the poem. Although we agree with Peck and most other scholars that there are carefully constructed pairings of plot structures and characters at work in this poem, we reject their view that Arthur is a failure.

A major cause of this condemnation of alliterative-Arthur is what might be termed intertextual contamination that causes critics to interpret the poem within the wrong generic framework.²³ As both Larry D. Benson and Finlayson rightly observed a half-century ago, readers commonly approach the alliterative *Morte* with romance expectations, yet the fictional world of the poem, the values the poem reflects, and the characters that inhabit it belong almost entirely to the epic-heroic genre rather than to the romance genre: it is, after all, an “austere” narrative dominated by conquest, vengeance, boasting, and hatred of one’s enemies.²⁴ Although all of these features can occur in romance, they are much more typically the generic matter of epic-heroic literature. Hence Jasper Griffin’s entirely accurate remark that “fights to the death between kinsmen or friends” are commonplace in the epic-heroic genre.²⁵ Boasting in particular runs contrary to the romance expectations of courtesy and modesty: the members of Bertilak’s court in the other preeminent alliterative Arthurian work of this era are excited to learn from Gawain “þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble” and “luf-talkyng,” not how to insult one’s enemies or make grandiose claims of violent retribution.²⁶ Yet boasting is everywhere in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, particularly in exchanges of heroic flyting before battle. The idea of vengeance, likewise, is everywhere in this poem, including in Arthur’s frequent speeches expressing the desire to avenge the injuries done to, or deaths suffered by, his various captains. The death and avenging of Kayous provide a notable instance of this desire:

22. Peck, “Willfulness and Wonders,” 157–59. Cf. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 110.

23. This section of Chapter 3 repeats material from K. S. Whetter, “Genre as Context in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” *Arthuriana* 20, no. 2 (2010): 45–65.

24. We quote Larry D. Benson, “The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy,” *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 11 (1966): 75–77; but see also Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, 11–14.

25. Jasper Griffin, *Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 6.

26. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), lines 917, 927.

Cosyn of Cornewaile, take kepe to þi selfen
 That no captayne ne kyng be keypde for non siluer,
 Or Sir Kayous dede be cruelly vengede! (aMA 2262–64)

Arthur makes a similar but even longer oath of vengeance after Wawayne is killed (aMA 3997–4048),²⁷ and again the paying of tribute in blood and exacting of vengeance are actions more typical of the warrior-hero of epic than of the courtly hero of romance.

Because violence is commonplace in the epic-heroic genre, such narratives are also gory, a fact that leads many critics to read the alliterative *Morte* as an ironizing critique of war. Such a conclusion, while entirely understandable in the modern world, is belied by the textual and generic evidence of the fourteenth-century poem. The epic-heroic warrior often vows to achieve glory or death, yet the more sensitive authors of such narratives (i.e., Homer, Virgil, the *Beowulf*-poet, and the alliterative-poet) are careful not to aestheticize warfare. As the following passage illustrates, the grim realities of battle are as apparent to the fourteenth-century poet as to Homer or Malory:²⁸

With wyghte wapynez of werre thay wroghten on helmes,
 Rittez with rannke stele full ryalle maylez.
 Bot they fitt them fayre, thes frekk byernez,
 Fewters in freely one feraunte stedes,
 Foynes full felly with flyschande speris,
 Freten of orfrayes feste appon scheldez;
 So fele fay es in fyghte appon þe felde leuyde
 That iche a furthe in the firthe of rede blode rynnys!
 By that, swyftely one swarthe þe swett es byleuede;
 Swerdez swangen in two sweltand knyghtez—
 Lyes wyde opyn welterande one walopande stedez—
 Wondes of wale men, werkande sydys;

27. As observed in footnote 9, we use the W-spelling of the hero's name to distinguish between alliterative-Wawayne and Malory's Gawayne.

28. On the consequences of combat in Homer, see especially the nuanced study by Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980). On combat and its consequences in Malory, see especially Lynch, *Book of Arms*; Whetter, "Warfare and Combat," 169–86; and Stephen Atkinson, "They . . . toke their shyldys before them and drew oute their sweryds . . .': Inflicting and Healing Wounds in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 519–43.

Facez feteled vnfaire in filterede lakes,
 All craysed, fortrodyn with trappede stedez. (aMA 2137–50)

The description of battle quoted here is entirely representative of the heroic and martial value-system of the poem. At the same time, as this description of the costs of warfare attests, there is no ironic inversion of heroic combat in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Although Karl Heinz Göller and Manfred Markus both insist that the poet “destroys commonplaces of chivalry and knightly warfare through inversion, irony and black humour,” claiming that the poet ironizes and questions the heroic code, the textual facts do not support an ironic reading.²⁹ Specifically, the bloody consequences of warfare and combat are everywhere acknowledged in this poem—notably in the death scenes of Kayous, Wawayne, and, finally, Arthur himself. Violence and death, however, are defining features of the epic-heroic genre and cannot, in themselves, be taken as criticism of warfare or fighting. Instead, the poet repeatedly illustrates the potentially tragic consequences of heroism in order to valorize it all the more fully. This valorization, as we shall illustrate below, is especially evident in the cases of Cador, Wawayne, and Arthur.

Although the alliterative *Morte Arthure*'s austerity and tragic elements have frequently been noted in the past, their significance has not, we contend, been sufficiently recognized in terms of the poem's genre or the poet's characterization; as a result, the intertextual weight of the critical tradition continues to produce misreadings of the poem. An early hint of the poem's pathos came in the authoritative *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (1959) with J. L. N. O'Loughlin's classification of the *Morte Arthure* as a tragedy; but the most detailed and influential exponent of the tragedy classification was William Matthews (in 1960).³⁰ Matthews, however, discounted the epic-heroic generic qualities of the poem because, he claimed, “the heroic poem was not a Middle English genre.”³¹ Consequently, any epic-heroic generic features present in the poem were, for Matthews, products of accident or coincidence rather than deliberate and acceptable literary markers. Instead, claimed Matthews, the alliterative *Morte* is an exemplary “tragedy of fortune,” the “earli-

29. Respectively, Karl Heinz Göller, “Reality versus Romance,” in *Reassessment*, 15–29 (quoting 16); Manfred Markus, “The Language and Style,” in *Reassessment*, 57–69.

30. J. L. N. O'Loughlin, “The English Alliterative Romances,” in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 520–27; and Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, throughout.

31. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 97–98.

est” instance “in English poetry” of this genre.³² This generic classification is quite plausible, but Matthews’s assertion that the tragedy is a deserved one brought about by (and inflicting punishment upon) Arthur’s sins of pride and manslaughter works against it. We agree with Matthews that Arthur is a tragic figure, but (for reasons outlined below) disagree that he falls because he has transgressed. There is a notable precedent for our view. In John Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (circa 1438) Arthur is also overcome by Fortune, yet far from being punished for his sins, Lydgate’s Arthur dies as he lived: the “flour of cheualrie” and “first of þe worthi nyne” who is accordingly raised to the stratosphere and made into a star.³³ He is thus an exemplary ruler brought down by a capricious Fortune who punishes people willy-nilly; there is no axiomatic connection between supposedly sinful character and deserving ill fate. Given that the textual evidence reveals the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and its characters to be clearly and deliberately epic-heroic in genre, we likewise reject the thesis that this poem is actually an anti-romance.³⁴

As even these brief remarks reveal, genre and character are deeply imbricated throughout both this poem and the intertext of its scholarly reception. Because the poem’s assumed genre regularly influences scholars’ interpretation of not only Arthur’s character but also the poet’s attitude toward warfare, our analysis of these issues in the poem will be grounded in recognizing epic-heroic generic conventions and accepting the poet’s repeated praise of Arthur as genuine. This interpretive grounding is especially important when considering the poet’s characterization of the king.

Intertextual Twinings of Genre and Character: Arthur as Unduly Moralized Hero

The dominant scholarly interpretation of Arthur in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is that he is a failed king and immoral hero, a scholarly position initially established in the 1960s but repeatedly reworked and reinforced in the decades since. In what remains the only monograph devoted to the alliterative *Morte*, Matthews argued that Arthur and his knights—especially Wawayne and Cador—are guilty of sin throughout the narrative and that the

32. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, especially 105, 114.

33. John Lydgate, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, Vol. III: Books VI-IX (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1923), Book VIII, lines 3088–108.

34. See especially Göller, “Reality versus Romance,” 15–16; and the similar complaint of Mary Hamel, “Adventure as Structure in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” *Arthurian Interpretations* 3, no. 1 (1988): 37–48.

poet makes numerous changes to his sources that accentuate this theme. For Matthews, all of Arthur's actions are either negative in themselves or precursors to his inevitable sin: hence Matthews's claim that the poet "composed on the [generic] premise that Arthur or his knights must have deserved the calamity that befell them."³⁵ According to Matthews's reasoning, the poet's characterization of Arthur is dominated by ambivalence and irony.³⁶

Finlayson, in contrast to Matthews, interpreted Arthur as initially a great warrior-king who becomes guilty only after he succumbs to "cirquytrie" (*aMA* 3399) and begins to wage unjust "wars of aggression and acquisition."³⁷ Finlayson's interpretation of Arthur's character is, like Matthews's (and ours), linked to the poem's genre; for Finlayson, contra Matthews, that genre is heroic—a position that we endorse. At the same time, Finlayson detected a markedly tragic theme and structure in the poem that he associated with the medieval fall-of-princes type of tragedy. For him, Arthur is consequently both "superhuman conqueror" and all-too-human "man," so that "[w]hen tragedy does come, it is brought about partly because Arthur has departed from the path of justice."³⁸ Finlayson thus comes close to contradicting himself by presenting Arthur as heroic, yet sinful and flawed. Significantly for our purposes, however, Finlayson's Arthur remains sympathetic and heroic even in failure.

Finlayson's position was, for many years, the principal alternative to that of Matthews. Then, in the 1980s, Russell A. Peck reinforced the moralistic reading of the alliterative *Morte* by arguing (with Finlayson) that Arthur is heroic and righteous in the first half of the poem but increasingly willful and morally wrongheaded as the narrative unfolds.³⁹ Although Peck explicitly highlights the difference between his own emphasis on willfulness and Matthews's account of Arthur's fate at the hands of Fortune's Wheel, there is, in hindsight at least, considerable overlap in their arguments: sin and (wrongful) will cause Arthur's inevitable fall. Together, Matthews, Finlayson, and

35. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 120.

36. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, especially 105, 109, 113–14, 120–27, 178–79. The supposed "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" of the poem are likewise central features of the critical reading offered by Patricia DeMarco, "An Arthur for the Ricardian Age," *Speculum* 80, no. 2 (2005): 464–93.

37. Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, 80–81, summary of and commentary on lines 2352–500.

38. Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, 11–20; Finlayson, "Concept of the Hero," 249–74. We quote Finlayson's edition, 14 and 13 respectively.

39. Peck, "Willfulness and Wonders," 153–82. For Peck's debt to Matthews and Finlayson, see especially 156–57.

Peck established an influential spectrum of criticism in which the dominant reading of *Morte Arthure* positioned Arthur as either wrongheaded from the outset (Matthews and Peck) or heroic but flawed (Finlayson). It is thus no coincidence that Mary Hamel, the twentieth century's great editor of the poem, likewise considers alliterative-Arthur to be a failed hero. For Hamel, Arthur has the potential to be a redemptive hero-king, but he tragically transforms into exactly the sort of corrupt and murderous tyrant-emperor he set out to overthrow at the beginning of the narrative.⁴⁰ The contributors to the collection of essays edited by Göller (also published in the 1980s) further denounced Arthur, Wawayne, and their actions by repeatedly insisting on the many supposed flaws and errors typifying all of the major characters in the poem. So serious are these flaws that the poem is labeled "an anti-romance" and Arthur himself "morally corrupted . . . and [Wawayne] frivolous."⁴¹

At first glance, twenty-first-century scholarship seems to have moved away from the issues of genre and morality and toward the issue of historical contexts, most recently Edwardian and Ricardian ones; beneath this surface-level change in critical focus, however, lurks the long-standing presumption that Arthur is both deeply flawed and sinful. In other words, criticism still judges Arthur in terms of his positive or—much more commonly—negative performance as king and hero. Chism, for example, can be said to filter her careful explication of the poem's Edwardian and Ricardian contexts through a dual Matthewsian-Finlaysonian lens, arguing for the glorious but outmoded and ultimately self-destructive nature of kingship and knighthood in the alliterative *Morte*, a self-destruction that involves Arthur's descent into tyranny.⁴² Patricia DeMarco moves the context from Edward III's court to that of Richard II, arguing at length for similarities between Arthur's kingship and court and those of Richard II. Yet, like her predecessors, she too finds Arthur wanting: according to DeMarco, Arthur is a cipher for the weak-willed Richard while the poet is excoriating "the Ricardian crisis over the governance of military affairs."⁴³ DeMarco's Arthur is, therefore, considerably lacking as both head of the government and head of the war-band.

Judging by these important twenty-first-century moralistic readings, Wawayne's and Arthur's deaths in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* are still

40. Hamel, "Adventure as Structure," 44–47. This argument is repeated in Hamel's critical edition in many of her notes on the text.

41. *Reassessment*, throughout, quoting Göller, "Reality versus Romance," 15–16.

42. Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 189–236. Cf. Simpson, *English Literary History*, 107–10.

43. DeMarco, "Arthur for the Ricardian Age," 464–93 (especially at 478–82).

deserved punishment for Arthur's "cirquytrie" (aMA 3399) or arrogant ambition, the deadly sin of *superbia*. This sinful ambition is most evident, so the argument goes, in Arthur's appetite for warfare. As noted above, critical responses to the alliterative *Morte* generally fall into one of three broad categories: those concerned with genre; those concerned with the moral dimensions of Arthur's character and actions; and those that appropriate the poet as a proto-modern pacifist. Although most readings of the poem use one of these approaches, there is naturally considerable slippage among the three categories that creates a powerful critical intertext. As a result, we attempt to rebut this collective intertext—especially its moralistic misinterpretations of Arthur—in the following section. It is sufficient for now to summarize our position by echoing J. A. Burrow's assertion that the dominant tenor of scholarly interpretation of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is currently not merely moralistic but "inappropriately moralistic."⁴⁴

Doubled Accusations: Anti-Arthur, Anti-War

As with so many issues in modern criticism of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the question of the poet's presentation of war has already been raised by Matthews, who insists not only that alliterative-Arthur is a sinner but that the poet presents Arthur's wars negatively; Matthews suggests further that perhaps this anti-war stance reflects fourteenth-century negative views of Edward III's wars with France.⁴⁵ Finlayson, as already noted, countered Matthews by arguing that not all of Arthur's wars are sinful, and that Arthur remains great even when he succumbs to a tragic medieval fall.⁴⁶ A similar position is taken by Michael W. Twomey, who offers a careful study of the poem's legal background in order to argue that Arthur's campaigns after Metz lack legal sanction and that Arthur's actions and conquests move increasingly away from justice toward willful passion, "personal loyalty," and "misplaced desire."⁴⁷

It is, however, Göller's *Reassessment* collection that most powerfully advances the anti-war thesis—perhaps due to the influence of the Vietnam

44. J. A. Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78.

45. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 179–92. Matthews reinforced this thesis by positing a French source for the English poem.

46. See nn. 37–38.

47. Michael W. Twomey, "Heroic Kingship and Unjust War in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," in *Kings and Kingship*, ed. Joel Rosenthal (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1986 for 1984), 133–51.

War.⁴⁸ Göller concludes the opening essay of this collection by articulating the bold position that the alliterative *Morte Arthure* “is a kind of death knell, a lament on the ideal of knightly ethos which is unmasked as a fiction incompatible with the reality of war and with Christian ethics.”⁴⁹ Most of the other contributors to the collection echo and reinforce this position.⁵⁰ Since 1981, in fact, no student of the poem has successfully challenged—let alone undermined—this anti-war position, despite the fact that Elizabeth Porter attempted to refute it in 1983.⁵¹ Because most subsequent scholarship has ignored Porter’s work, critics of the last four decades have expanded upon rather than challenged this standard anti-war line of argument. Dorsey Armstrong, for example, goes so far as to assert that the alliterative *Morte* is a bifurcated tale in which the main plot is mirrored by a “second, latent, narrative” about “peaceful alternatives” that provides an obvious and consistent “critique” of King Arthur’s martial career.⁵² Although DeMarco departs from such anti-war reasoning by rightly suggesting that war itself is neither good nor bad in some narratives, she still emphasizes the negative behavior and results that occur when a king—whether Richard II or Arthur—uses warfare to advance royal interests at the “expense” of his knights and nobles.⁵³ One

48. We are indebted to David F. Johnson for the suggestion that the Vietnam War likely inspired this pacifist reading of the poem. Göller’s *Reassessment* collection was published in 1981 whereas the Vietnam War ran from 1954–55 to 1975; but in his bibliographic survey Göller urges Anglo-American scholars to pay more heed to German scholarship of the late 1950s and early 1970s (“A Summary of Research,” in *Reassessment*, 7–14)—scholarship written during the contentious conflict.

49. Göller, “Reality versus Romance,” 28.

50. Jutta Wurster, “The Audience,” in *Reassessment*, 52 and 55, for example, asserts that Robert Thornton “perceived the moralising character” of the alliterative *Morte* and interprets the Philosopher who explains the meaning of Arthur’s dream “as a vehicle for the poet’s moral verdict on Arthur”; Anke Janssen, “The Dream of the Wheel of Fortune,” in *Reassessment*, 141, echoes Göller by arguing that Arthur’s “fatal end . . . is God’s just punishment for his evil deeds”; Jean Ritzke-Rutherford, “Formulaic Macrostructure: The Theme of Battle,” in *Reassessment*, 88 and 95, likewise echoes Göller in interpreting Arthur’s military campaign as being “transformed from a semi-justifiable war of defence into one motivated by vainglory and greed for power” and therefore deems the whole work to be “a war poem with an anti-war bias”; Jörg O. Fichte, “The Figure of Gawain,” in *Reassessment*, 106–16, illustrates Göller’s position by discussing Christian ethics in relation to Wawayne and Arthur.

51. Elizabeth Porter, “Chaucer’s Knight, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and Medieval Laws of War,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 27 (1983): 56–78.

52. Dorsey Armstrong, “Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Arthur’s Sword of Peace,” *Parergon* 25, no. 1 (2008): 81–101 (at 81, 86, 92).

53. DeMarco, “Arthur for the Ricardian Age,” 464–93. DeMarco’s mixed feelings

of Arthur's many weaknesses, according to this account, is his failure to heed the long-established tradition of ransom, especially since "the capture and disposal of prisoners was fundamentally a private arrangement between two aristocratic agents."⁵⁴ Even Andrew Lynch, a perceptive scholar of combat in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, concludes his study of the relationship between peace and war in the alliterative *Morte* and its sources and cognates with the considered opinion that war in this poem is "excessive."⁵⁵ Even in more recent criticism, then, Arthur and his actions—including his martial activities—are deemed to be corrupt.

Significantly, however, the many critics who insist that the poem is an attack upon Arthur or warfare (or both) also tend, sooner or later, to acknowledge what they consider the poet's seemingly curious fondness for relating battle scenes and deeds of Arthurian greatness.⁵⁶ Such acknowledgments, we submit, are puzzling only when the poem is read through the lens of the wrong values: taken on its own merits, the poem expresses an attitude toward Arthur and toward conquest that is unironic and celebratory. We are thus once again confronted by the interpenetration of character, morality, and genre in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Based on our rereading of the poem, both its ending and its characters are still tragic, but not because of moral failure or generic inconsistency.

An Alternative Arthur: Celebrating Conquest in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

In spite of scholarly insistence otherwise, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* from beginning to end celebrates rather than critiques King Arthur's conquests. Although we disagree with Kane's assessment of the stanzaic *Morte Arthure*, we agree wholeheartedly with the core of his interpretation of the alliterative *Morte*: that "almost every detail of [the text] glorifies Arthur either directly or by reflection."⁵⁷ The poem's celebration of Arthur is also, in effect, a celebration of Arthur's many conquests. To quote Kane again, "[f]rom the first line

about alliterative-Arthur are reflected in her frequent use of the words "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" in her article. In this emphasis on the supposed ambiguity of the poem, DeMarco echoes Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 105, 109, 113-14, 120-27, 178-79.

54. DeMarco, "Arthur for the Ricardian Age," 484-86.

55. Andrew Lynch, "Peace is good after war," in *Writing War*, 142 and 144.

56. See, for example, Göller, "Reality versus Romance," 28; Ritzke-Rutherford, "Formulaic Macrostructure," 94-95.

57. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, 70.

to the last [the poem] is alive with its author's uncomplicated and enthusiastic response to his material."⁵⁸ That material, it must be acknowledged, is unabashedly martial. Perhaps critics have insisted on complicating the alliterative poem's uncomplicated praise of Arthur's conquests because their own discomfort with war drives them to make the poem conform to their modern views. Nevertheless, a fourteenth-century poet does not subscribe to the same pacifist ideology as modern critics who are writing after a century that repeatedly illustrated the horrors of mechanized warfare and produced counterculture protest to the Vietnam War. We also argue that rereading Malory's alliterative English source requires scholars to question interpretations that claim the poet repeatedly says one thing but means another. Such rereading is essential if literary critics are going to understand the extent to which Malory's prose Arthurian reflects the alliterative poem's celebration of military conquest and emphasis on the similarities of (not differences between) several great knights.⁵⁹ The crucial context for interpreting both the poem and its characters is not modern anti-war sentiment or irony, or even Ricardian crusading ideals or Ricardian kingship; rather, it is fourteenth-century attitudes toward warfare. These attitudes, like the epic-heroic genre of the poem, justify Arthurian conquest.

It is helpful to compare historical assessments of actual medieval kings with literary-critical assessments of the fictional King Arthur. Such a comparison highlights how the itemizing and possible fabrication of royal failings have long been used to explain the downfall of both literary and historical kings. Jenni Nuttall emphasizes that Henry Bolingbroke's deposition of Richard II (who reigned 1377–99) included considerable spin-doctoring. One justification for Richard's deposition was his supposed failings as monarch, his self-acknowledged *demerita notoria*. The result, in Nuttall's words, was that Richard's "supposed awareness and admittance of his inadequacy and errors caused him to resign the throne"; the admission further allowed Henry (who reigned 1399–1413) and his supporters to paint Richard as "an unsuccessful, dishonest and selfish king who had acted against the interests of his subjects."⁶⁰ Yet things are not always what they seem. Part of the problem is subjectivity: the answer to the question of what makes a good king often

58. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, 73.

59. This celebration of great knights who are unified by their fighting prowess is evident in Malory's characterization of Palomydes as well as Malory's and the alliterative-poet's portraits of Priamus. See our discussion in Chapter 1, above.

60. Jenni Nuttall, *The Creation of Lancastrian Kingship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–2; see also 9–16.

varies depending on the author's time and place. Equally, there is often a dichotomy between medieval and modern perceptions of good kingship.

This clash of values and opinions in relation to kingship is palpable in the assessment of the figure and reign of Richard I, the Lionheart king of England (reigned 1189–99). For many modern historians, Richard I is one of England's worst kings, equal parts bloodthirsty, absent, and avaricious, if not also borderline incompetent. In the Middle Ages, in marked contrast, the Lionheart epitomized the ideal monarch and heroic knight; significantly, this positive assessment typified the attitude of Richard's Christian and Muslim contemporaries alike.⁶¹ So powerful was Richard's reputation in the Middle Ages that Nigel Saul prefaces his comparative account of *The Three Richards* by emphasizing how Richard I's influence on subsequent English kings was not confined to his namesakes. Although Richard II and Richard III were both shaped by the Lionheart's reputation, "[t]here is a sense in which *all* medieval English kings lived under the first Richard's long shadow."⁶² Indeed, partly with Richard I as template, John Gillingham gives a succinct account of the successful medieval ruler: "The King's job was to command victory in war, to maintain peace and stability at home, and to strengthen the institutions of government."⁶³ It is our contention that the Arthurs of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, slayers of evil giants and avaricious emperors, meet this standard. Our argument is based on textual evidence as well as historical assessments that define the just king.

We have already noted the strong critical tendency to read the alliterative *Morte* moralistically and consequently condemn Arthur as a sinful tyrant. DeMarco (among others) makes much of the supposed parallels between—and weaknesses of—alliterative-Arthur and Richard II. The poem opens, however, not by condemning Arthur but by celebrating his past achievements, thereby preparing for his justified war with Rome. Lines 17–21 of the poem praise the Round Table Fellowship in the highest possible terms,

61. See John Gillingham, *Richard I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), throughout.

62. Nigel Saul, *The Three Richards* (London: Hambledon, 2005), ix; our italics. In his epilogue to *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry* (printed 1484), Caxton includes Richard I and Edward III (and Henry V) in his list of exemplary monarchs, monarchs whose chivalry and fame liken them to Arthur, Launcelot, Galahad, Trystram, and Gawayne: William Caxton, trans., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, from a French version by Ramon Lull, ed. Alfred T. P. Byles, EETS o.s. 168 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926; reprint 1971), 122.3–123.5.

63. John Gillingham, "The Art of Kingship: Richard I, 1189–99," *History Today* 35, no. 4 (April 1985): 20.

lauding the knights' skill in war, their doughty deeds, and their "wyrchippis many." Arthur himself is then presented as a successful conqueror and ruler (*aMA* 26–53). Even the Roman senators (the king's political enemies) report to Lucius how Arthur

may be chosyn cheftayne[,] cheefe of all oper,
 Bathe be chauncez of armes and cheuallrye noble,
 For whysest and worthyeste and wyghteste of hanndez,

 The knyghtlyeste creatoure in Cristyndome halden,
 Of kyng or of conquerour crownde in erthe. (*aMA* 530–35)

Here is where genre becomes the key to textual interpretation. As C. M. Bowra points out, heroic literature expects its principals to be "equally notable in council and in war," speech and action.⁶⁴ The Arthur of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* undoubtedly fulfills this expectation. Modern critics, however, have tended to ignore one of the basic tenets of heroic poetry: that it functions less by lavish praise than by illustrating what great individuals do. To quote Bowra again, didactic moralizing is the bane of heroic poetry, which functions "in conditions determined by special conceptions of manhood and honour. It cannot exist unless [the audience] believe[s] that human beings are in themselves sufficient objects of interest and that their chief claim is the pursuit of honour through risk."⁶⁵ Such risky and martial pursuits are everywhere in the alliterative *Morte*—and they are entirely appropriate given the poem's epic-heroic genre.

The poem's celebration of conquest is partly formulaic: Arthur is repeatedly hailed as "kyde conquerour" (*aMA* 65, 232, 2261) or "þe Conquerour" (132, 216, 220, 243, 338, 343, 395, 543 [technically "þat conquerour"], 680, 987, 1566, 2119, 2242, 2312, 2394), while Wawayne (Gawain) receives the epithet "Wawayne þe worthethy" (233, 1302) or "Gawayne the gude" (1368). Appropriately for such worthies, the narrator explains in the opening lines that his subject is the royal men of the Round Table: how they have won many honors, killed the wicked Lucius, and conquered the kingdom of Rome (*aMA* 17–24). Early in the poem, Arthur receives the compliment from King Aungers that he "aughte to be ouerlynge ouer all oper kynges" (*aMA*

64. C. M. Bowra, *Ancient Greek Literature*, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1.

65. C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 4–5.

289); significantly, the narrator's voice is likewise unfailingly enthusiastic in its support of King Arthur. Avenging Kayous's death, Arthur is "Manly in his malyncoly" as he slashes his way through many a Roman enemy (*AMA* 2204). Yet, as we have seen, when the king besieges Metz later in the poem, literary critics from Matthews onward (including nearly all of the contributors to the Göller volume) turn against him and characterize his behavior in this episode as tyrannical.

Although the poet-narrator—significantly—remains on Arthur's side, the very idea of conquest is problematic for some literary critics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Such post-Hitler and post-Vietnam skepticism about warfare and military conquest is entirely understandable given the traumatizing horrors of modern warfare; but to impose modern anti-war sentiments on a medieval work is simply unhistorical. Chism's summary of the contentious debate over the meaning of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* remains valid. Because war and individual fighting prowess bring both positive and negative outcomes in the poem, critics are essentially divided "into two camps: those who think the poem is an ironic portrayal of the increasing corruptions of military power—an Augustinian tragedy of sin and retribution; and those who think it is a glorification of chivalric leadership that like all earthly endeavor meets a tragic end—a Boethian tragedy."⁶⁶ Like us, Chism accepts the arguments of both Porter and Juliet Vale about the legitimacy of Arthur's Lorraine campaigns, adding that Arthur is, in fact, especially magnanimous toward the Count of Milan given the Lombard reputation for tyranny, a reputation noted by Geoffrey Chaucer.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Chism insists that although Arthur's Italian campaigns might have been justified by late-medieval laws of warfare, they eventually cause his own tyranny.⁶⁸ Chism's reading constitutes part of the critical intertext that continues to shape interpretations of the alliterative *Morte*, for it echoes Matthews's pervasive and (to modern critics) appealing idea that *all* of Arthur's wars are unjust, "unchristian," and increasingly cruel and grasping, as well as Finlayson's more nuanced thesis that Arthur declines from just to unjust, sinful wars, and Peck's notion of Arthur's wrongheaded willfulness.⁶⁹

66. Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 199–200 and n. 25.

67. Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 230 and (noted by Chism) Chaucer, *Legend of Good Women*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), lines 354–55. See also Porter, "Medieval Laws of War," especially 59–73; and Juliet Vale, "Law and Diplomacy in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 23 (1979): 31–46 (especially 38–39).

68. Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 230.

69. We quote Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 128; contrast Finlayson, "Concept of the Hero," 249–74, and Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, 11–20.

We would like to suggest an alternate interpretation, one that pays due heed to the poet's opening praise of Arthur and catalog of the king's past conquests (*aMA* 26–51). *Nothing* in these lines or in Arthur's epithet of "conqueror" suggests that the poet is being ironic. Rather, the opening portrait is sincere and martial: Arthur is the epic-heroic warrior-king who "by conquete hade wonnyn / Castells and kyngdoms and contreez many," and who establishes his rule "By conquete full cruell . . . / by drede of hym seluyn, / . . . with his swerde kene" (*aMA* 26–47). It is difficult to reconcile this portrait of Arthur as a martial hero with DeMarco's claim that the alliterative-poet is criticizing the king as a Ricardian cipher who is too weak to maintain the martial accomplishments of his forebears.⁷⁰ On the contrary, as Finlayson rightly insists, the poet's opening "list of [Arthur's] conquests is long and impressive, and immediately brings the hero before us almost at the height of his powers."⁷¹ Although Finlayson's work predates DeMarco's by nearly forty years, his argument on this point is more sound. What even Finlayson fails to note, however, is that this connection between warfare and heroism is present *throughout* the poem, as is Arthur's concern with honor and vengeance. This laudable portrait of Arthur is present even at the siege of Metz.

The alliterative-poet sets the stage for the siege of Metz by encouraging readers to view this action as glorious and noble.⁷² He characterizes Arthur's men as "manliche knyghtez" as they march on Metz and presents Arthur as being on the side of right (*aMA* 2417). Although the king's choice of wearing no armor and carrying no shield provides the poet with an opportunity to critique kingly pride, he chooses instead to have Arthur celebrate himself by declaring that he needs no protection other than God's: "Sall neuer harlotte haue happe, thorowe helpe of my Lorde, / To kyll a corownde kynge with krysom enoyntte!" (*aMA* 2446–47). Here is a classic example of epic-heroic boasting superseding romance courtesy. Moreover, since God does not strike Arthur down, since Metz is defeated, and since boasting is acceptable and commonplace in epic-heroic literature so long as the hero achieves his boast, it seems Arthur is correct. Likewise, the poet-narrator does not dispute Arthur's characterization of the enemy as a "harlotte," a word the king uses insultingly to mean "scoundrel, knave," or even "coward,"⁷³ and which applies to both any individual enemy who might shoot at the king as well as to

70. DeMarco, "Arthur for the Ricardian Age," 466–68.

71. Finlayson, "Concept of the Hero," 250; repeated in Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, 15.

72. The rest of this section repeats material previously published in Tolhurst and Whetter, "Memories of War," 88–108.

73. *MED*, s.v. "harlot," (n.) 1. (b).

the enemy army in general. As Arthur's troops attack the city, the narration declares them to be "price" (*aMA* 2464). This praise of Arthur and his knights is entirely in keeping with late-medieval attitudes toward war.⁷⁴ Even when the poet-narrator describes the realities of siege warfare, including the resulting destruction of monasteries, hospitals, and churches as well as the suffering of the people, he is in no way critical of the English: Arthur's men attack Metz "boldly" (*aMA* 3036–42). Although this adverb can take on negative connotations such as "recklessly" or "arrogantly," the alliterative-poet's use of the word retains positive connotations because of the martial context within which "boldly" appears.⁷⁵

The siege of Metz, then, is not a sign of Arthur's villainy or pride, despite the destruction that occurs in the city during the attack (*aMA* 3032–42). For one thing, artillery's primary function is to hit military targets and help secure victory. Although this behavior is distasteful from a modern point of view, the rules of medieval siege warfare allowed for any actions necessary to achieve victory if a city refused to surrender. It is in this context that the full significance and purpose of Arthur's *unarmed* survey of the city (discussed above) becomes apparent: he is announcing his intention to lay siege. Because Metz willfully ignores Arthur's declaration of siege and its leaders refuse to surrender, the city lays itself open to violent assault. Thus even the monasteries in the alliterative *Morte* suffer as a result of the general damage caused by offensive weapons (*aMA* 3038–40); but the audience is never told that the monasteries were singled out for destruction in an especially terrible assault, one akin to medieval sieges in which decapitated heads or corpses were used as missiles.⁷⁶ Nor is Metz razed to the ground and its inhabitants, fighting men as well as women and children, mercilessly slaughtered, as Froissart famously but exaggeratedly claims happened at the 1370 siege of Limoges under the Black Prince.⁷⁷ Given that scholars are divided in their assessments of how brutal the Limoges siege actually was, medieval siege warfare was not always horrifically violent; even when it was violent, most historians emphasize that

74. On war and siege, see M. H. Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; reprint New York: Routledge, 2015). On the pro-conquest stance of the *aMA*, see Whetter, "Genre as Context," throughout.

75. *MED*, s.v. "böldeli(che)," (adv.): definition 3. (a) is negative but most of the word's meanings are positive, including definition 1. (a) and (b), 2. (a), and 4.

76. For examples of ballistic heads and corpses, see Jim Bradbury, *The Medieval Siege* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), 257–58.

77. Jean Froissart, *Chroniques de J. Froissart*, vol. 7, 1367–1370, ed. Siméon Luce (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, 1878), §662, p. 241 to §667, p. 252.

the laws of siege allowed for considerable punishment of recalcitrant enemies who refused clemency by refusing to surrender before a city fell to force.⁷⁸ Such was the case at Limoges, and such is the case with Metz. Furthermore, town buildings—in contrast to fortified citadels—often bore the brunt of destruction during sieges, and violence and atrocity were accepted as commonplace by medieval combatants and noncombatants alike.⁷⁹ The destruction of Metz is consequently a realistic component of medieval warfare that attests to the alliterative-poet's attention to detail. The "sieges of a towns," moreover, tended to be "tougher" and "more impressive military episodes" than the siege of a castle alone.⁸⁰ Therefore, the speed and relative clemency of Arthur's victory at Metz bespeak his greatness as a military commander. Even more importantly, when the duchess of Metz kneels before Arthur to seek peace and save the people within the city, the king immediately ceases the attack and guarantees the suppliants' safety (aMA 3044–65).⁸¹ He also ensures "A dower for þe duchez. . . and hir dere childire" (aMA 3072–73) and "Settez lawes in the lande" (3077). Similarly, he is careful in his next siege (this time of Combe) to watch for the city's surrender and, when it occurs, to command "Of payne of lyf and lym and lesynge of londes, / That no lele ligemane that to hym lonngede / Sulde lye be no lady" (aMA 3118–27). By the conventions of medieval warfare as well as martial poetry, the sieges in the alliterative *Morte* corroborate the morality of Arthur's conduct, specifically his noble and heroic conduct as conqueror-king.

Additionally, the narration during the Metz siege presents Arthur in terms that are indisputably positive. When the king responds to the duchess, he does so with a "vowt noble"; furthermore, as if to underscore the king's excellence, the poet repeats this idea in the next line before portraying Arthur as merciful, not tyrannical: "With vesage verteuous, this valyante biere; / Meles to hir myldly with full meke wordes" (aMA 3054–56). Certainly, the descriptors here—"virtuous," "valiant," "meek"—present the king in a positive light. In fact, the word *meke* can mean "unaggressive," "humble," or

78. On the divided opinions about Limoges, the probability of Froissart's exaggeration, and the very different view of the Black Prince's actions when judged by the laws of war or the Prince's desire to avenge disloyalty, see Bradbury, *Medieval Siege*, 161 and 318; Richard Barber, *Edward, Prince of Wales and of Aquitaine: A Biography of the Black Prince* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1978), 224–26; David Green, *Edward the Black Prince: Power in Medieval Europe* (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 91–93.

79. Bradbury, *Medieval Siege*, 296–333; on the greater destruction of towns, see 301.

80. Philippe Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*, trans. Michael Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 101.

81. Cf. Benson, "Morte Arthure and Medieval Tragedy," 83.

“virtuous.”⁸² Following the city’s surrender, Arthur not only forbids his men from harming the inhabitants of Metz but also receives the poet-narrator’s final nod of approval in this episode in the form of descriptors (*aMA* 3057–59). Arthur is said to have “lely conquerid” Metz before remaining in Lorraine “as lorde in his awen” and establishing laws in the land (*aMA* 3068–76). Such narratorial comments not only undermine critics’ interpretations of Arthur as a tyrant but also actively present Arthur as a good king who establishes laws and justice in the land (*aMA* 3068–76).⁸³ The poet’s narration and dialogue thus consistently refute critics’ interpretations of Arthur as a tyrant by portraying him as a good king, one who establishes justice in lands that rightfully belong to him. At no point in the Metz episode does the alliterative-poet criticize Arthur’s conduct. Instead, he praises the king continually.

The actions for which many modern scholars condemn Arthur as a tyrant actually represent a deliberate and justifiable policy of ending Rome’s threat to Britain’s sovereignty—and it works. The poet-narrator’s continually positive portrait of Arthur’s actions is important, for it helps to establish the sieges and conquests of Metz, Lombardy, Como, Milan, and Tuscany as exploits fully in keeping with the opening portrait of Arthur as *heroic* conqueror. Given that the early conquests are honorable, there is no axiomatic reason why these later ones are not equally so. In fact, these conquests en route to Rome are strategic: they are part of Arthur’s justified defiance of Rome’s threat to burn Britain (*aMA* 105–6). After all, these cities were, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, part of a Holy Roman Empire comprising Germany, Italy, and Burgundy, with roots in the Carolingian Empire. Therefore, both the poet and his audience would likely have viewed these lands as either Roman territories or Roman sympathizers. As a result, their allegiance to Arthur was a necessary precondition for the defeat and conquest of Rome. Certainly, Lombardy in the late fourteenth century was “a fief of the Holy Roman Empire,” and the prominence of the Viscount of Rome among Lucius’s allies is, for Benson, an allusion to the prominent Visconti family, whose members were regular holders of the position of viscount in the Empire.⁸⁴

The shift in Arthur’s focus from Lucius to Lorraine is announced by

82. *MED*, s.v. “mēk,” (adj.) “1. (a): Gentle, quiet, unaggressive; . . . 2. (a) Having the virtue of humility, humble, unassuming; . . . (b) good, virtuous.”

83. *MED*, s.v. “lëlli,” (adv.) “1. (a): Faithfully, sincerely, wholly, whole-heartedly; (b) with probity, lawfully, honorably, virtuously; 2. (a) Certainly, assuredly, really, indeed; (b) as weak asseverative: in fact, actually; (c) truthfully, accurately, precisely.”

84. Benson, “Date of the *Alliterative Morte*,” 23, 26–28.

another of the poem's pairings of key episodes or characters, for as with the response to the Roman challenge earlier, Arthur now calls a second war council to solicit advice on how to deal with the threat posed by the Lord of Lorraine, a leader and people who have been an ally of Rome against Britain (*aMA* 2386–415). It is true, as Finlayson notes, that Arthur here expresses a desire to own the duchy.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the poet gives no indication that the duchy is not allied with Rome, and, as he has done with the other lands reclaimed from Rome, has Arthur again promise to establish laws and royal protection (*aMA* 2406–15). Furthermore, as Twomey observes, the dukes of both Metz and Lorraine are presented as “contumacious vassal[s],” with Lorraine being “a Roman sympathizer”; Arthur’s wars against such vassals are accordingly presented as legally justified.⁸⁶ Arthur’s conquering character remains evident throughout the poem and throughout his various wars. Tellingly, after these victories, Arthur stops and “suggeournes . . . with solace in herte, / To see when the senatours sent any words” (*aMA* 3170–71). The words come soon: a week after Arthur stops campaigning, another Roman envoy arrives. In marked antithesis to the envoy who demands tribute of Britain at the poem’s beginning, this one offers Arthur sovereignty over Rome (*aMA* 78–115, 3176–86). Over the course of the plot thus far, then, Arthur has neutralized a hostile threat, established laws, and distributed wealth to his subjects: as the *Beowulf*-poet says of a different warrior-king, “þæt wæs gōd cyning [that was a good king]!”⁸⁷

The best explanation of the alliterative-poet’s positive portrait of King Arthur in the Metz episode is the one that Elizabeth Porter provides. Porter perceptively argues on the basis of fourteenth-century rules of military engagement that Arthur’s conduct during the siege of Metz is exemplary: he seeks kingdoms that are rightfully his, distributes to his knights wealth acquired by conquest, finishes wars as quickly as possible, and is kinder to his enemies than the rules of warfare require him to be.⁸⁸ According to medieval standards of siege, breeching Metz’s walls before the enemy has surrendered

85. Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure*, 80–81, summary of and commentary on lines 2352–500.

86. Twomey, “Heroic Kingship,” 133–39. See also *aMA* 1971–72 and 2650–59, where it is clear that the lords of Lorraine and Lombardy are prominent allies of Arthur’s Roman enemies.

87. *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), lines 11, 863, 2390; our translation.

88. Porter, “Medieval Laws of War,” 56–78; cf. Benson, “*Morte Arthure* and Medieval Tragedy,” 83.

entitles the king to take and destroy all he finds within; Arthur, however, grants peace to the duchess and promises that his men will not harm maidens, children, monks, or knights; later the king declares that no liegeman of his will violate a woman or mistreat a man—for fear of losing both his life and his lands (aMA 3057–59, 3122–27). As noted above, the poet-narrator describes the king as having conquered Metz honorably, even virtuously. One mark of Arthur’s virtue is his giving a dower to the duchess and her children (aMA 3073). Similarly, when Arthur takes Tuscany, he does so “full tye [very quickly]”—a good outcome by fourteenth-century standards (aMA 3151). The fact that the narration labels Arthur “the bolde kyng” immediately after he has given orders to execute hostages suggests that he is following fourteenth-century military protocol: ransom your prisoners or kill them (aMA 3588–91); certainly, no member of the warrior elite in medieval Tuscany would have objected to such a practice.⁸⁹ It is thus unsurprising that, after Arthur slices off Mordred’s sword-hand and then kills him by driving his blade through his opponent’s neck-guard (aMA 4242–51), the poet-narrator celebrates the king’s victory: “Qwen they had fenyste þis feghte, thane was þe felde wonnen, / And the false folke in þe felde feye are byleuede” (4254–55). A specific way in which the poet-narrator praises Arthur is to label Arthur’s enemies as “feye” (“fated to die”) and deserving of being left behind on the battlefield. Whether Arthur leads a siege or fights in an individual combat, then, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a poem that celebrates his conquests both enthusiastically and continually.

Pious Language Versus Deeds of Arms and Counsel

Confusingly for modern readers, the alliterative-poet juxtaposes this celebration of conquest with language celebrating God. While the *Morte Arthure* proper begins with praise of Arthur and his knights, there is a prefatory prayer in the opening lines of the narrative that extols God’s grace and glory,

89. On the treatment of hostages during siege and the atrocities accepted as commonplace following the storming of a city, see Bradbury, *Medieval Siege*, especially 296–333. On chivalry and the valorization of what can profitably be termed “honor-violence” in medieval Tuscany and Florence, see Peter W. Sposato, “Chivalry and Honor-Violence in Late Medieval Florence,” in *Prowess, Piety, and Public Order in Medieval Society: Studies in Honor of Richard W. Kaeuper*, ed. Craig M. Nakashian and Daniel P. Franke (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 102–19. The acceptance and prominence of honor-based violence in Italian historical practice and chivalric narratives is further outlined by Sposato in his *Forged in the Shadow of Mars* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), throughout.

encourages seeking shelter “fro schamesdede and synfull werkes,” and asks for inspiration to tell a good story, “[p]lesande and profitabill” (*aMA* 1–11). Matthews seizes upon the religious and didactic tone of this prayer to establish what he views as the poet’s true *sens*: that both the poet and the audience are to judge and condemn the subsequent Arthurian bloodshed and ambition.⁹⁰ The contrast between piety and imperial conquest in the first forty-seven lines of the alliterative *Morte* is certainly striking, but a closer look at the language of the entire poem reveals the prayer to be quite formulaic, equally applicable to telling a good tale or smiting an enemy. Religious language appears regularly throughout the alliterative *Morte*, particularly at times of martial exertion or display. This is especially true of the speeches and vows made by the knights and kings who pledge to aid Arthur during the early council to address the Roman threat. Cador, for instance, swears “Now wak-kenyse þe were, wyrchipide be Cryste!” (*aMA* 257). Critics sometimes try to draw contrasts between Cador and Arthur, but Cador’s mingling of martial and religious registers here mirrors Arthur’s own: Arthur considers both Constantine and Christ to have “conquerid þe Crosse” (*aMA* 282–85). King Aungers of Scotland swears “deuotly to Criste / And to þe haly Vernacle” to hew the Romans in payment for their past atrocities (*aMA* 296–99), the king of Brittany makes exactly the same oath (308–9), and Lot makes a similar one (382–92). The Welsh king likewise seeks vengeance in Christ’s honor (*aMA* 320–21). During the fighting itself, Cador swears first by Christ and then by God to avenge the death of a comrade (*aMA* 1786, 1837), and Arthur swears “with þe helpe of [his] Lorde!” to make the giant Golapos shorter as he severs the monster’s legs at the knee, then lops off his head (2123–29).

Significantly, this interpenetration of pious language with violent and vengeful deeds occurs both early and late in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Furthermore, there is no difference between this aspect of the poem and the militant Christianity of the Middle Ages as a whole, a pious militancy most obviously (but hardly exclusively) evident in the Crusades. For our purposes, both the consistency and the continued justice of Arthur’s cause in the alliterative poem are apparent when he again calls a council, this time to discuss Mordred’s revolt (*aMA* 3564), and again swears “By þe Rode” to be revenged (3559): the only difference between the three council scenes is that the object of revenge is now Mordred, not the Romans or their allies. All of this juxta-

90. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 112–13, 125–26. For a subtler reading of Arthur’s decline at the end of the poem and the poet’s use of pious language to denigrate Arthur, see Kennedy, “Mordred’s Sons,” 40–43.

positioning of religious and martial language culminates in the image of the Virgin on Arthur's shield (aMA 3648–51). Readers are not told of Arthur's shield till late in story, but Arthur has clearly borne this device throughout his career, for the poet takes care to inform readers and listeners that “With-owtten changynge in chace, thies ware þe cheefe armes / Of Arthure þe auenaunt, qwhylls he in erthe lengede” (aMA 3650–51). Arthur, that is, has always borne this device and no other: he perforce carried this shield in the wars that established him as “kyde conquerour” (aMA 65 and *passim*) before the action of the poem begins, and he continues to carry it both during the fighting that saves his rule against Roman incursion in the first half of the poem, and against Roman tributary lands in the latter half. He will bear this same shield against Mordred when fighting to reclaim his usurped throne. Far from denoting the poet's confusing and ambiguous symbolism,⁹¹ the association of Arthur and Mary late in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* valorizes Arthur's status as hero and king, and does so just before his fall. Clearly, both God and Mary are on Arthur's side in this poem.

Although our reasoning and conclusions differ substantially from those of Marco Nievergelt, we agree with his observation that the alliterative *Morte's* ample use of religious rhetoric functions not so much to condemn the focus on war in the text but rather to highlight what Nievergelt terms the “slippage” between sacred and secular in the text, suffusing the martial component with political, historical, and even divine justification.⁹² The poem's opening lines that praise God first and then Arthurian conquest are not a dichotomy, but rather a blending of sacred and secular as well as a forecast of the formulaic oaths to follow. Arthur's principal foe is Rome—ostensibly a fellow Christian and Western country but in the poem a political entity still ruled by an emperor. The historicity and realism of the poem are further complicated by the fact that Rome is the aggressor here, demanding tribute of Arthur, and that Rome's allies include Saracens and giants. Arthur, in other words, is hardly the enemy of Christianity. The real crusading context of the poem, moreover, is found not at the beginning but at the end, when first Wawayne and then Arthur inspire their men with the formulaic speech, common in

91. Contra Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 210.

92. Marco Nievergelt, “Conquest and Pilgrimage,” *Arthuriana* 20, no. 2 (2010): 89–91. Nievergelt deliberately builds upon Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 197–230. Neither critic interprets the poem or its characters as unproblematically as we do.

heroic literature, of defiance against the odds. The two speeches are similar in many ways, but crucially both king and nephew say that any of their fellow warriors who die fighting Mordred and his army of traitors are sure to be “hewede vnto heuen” (*aMA* 3790–808, 4082–104). Again, the poet’s language and theme consistently valorize Arthur’s and Wawayne’s glorious deeds—especially when those deeds occur on the battlefield.

Thus Arthur in *Morte Arthure* is always the conqueror-king, and the poet emphasizes not only his greatness but also his and his knights’ martial heroism throughout: beginning, middle, and end. The prominence of war and acknowledgment of its glorious benefits as well as its bloody consequences belie the ironizing reading of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the notion that the poet is really critiquing not only war but also Arthur and his knights. Twenty-first-century readers simply cannot and should not assume that the values of the alliterative-poet are the same as those of a post-Hitler, post-Vietnam, or post-Gulf War era: they are not, and much as it runs counter to modern sentiments, war and martial heroism are frequently acceptable and laudable ideas and subjects in many earlier ages and literatures, including the fourteenth century and including in epic-heroic literature. Even without sieges and nationalistic warfare, chivalry in general—both in reality and in literature—was inherently violent: as Maurice Keen warns, it cannot and should not be made to adhere to modern pacifist thought.⁹³ The historical contexts of this poem thus accept violence and war as givens, and the association of combat, glory, and heroism with potential or inevitable death is entirely typical of epic-heroic literature.⁹⁴ The death of Arthur and his warriors is not, in context, punishment for sin, but rather the inevitable and tragic overthrow by Time that ultimately affects all epic-heroic heroes.

Our conclusion, then, is that the supposedly excessive violence and sacralized warfare of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and its heroes are entirely of the poem’s time and genre. We argued earlier in this chapter that the alliterative *Morte* is—contra Matthews⁹⁵—a genuine example of epic-heroic poetry. Accordingly, the hero’s or heroes’ honor and glory are, for author, audience,

93. Maurice Keen, “War, Peace and Chivalry,” in his *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 18–19.

94. Pace Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 228–30, the inevitability of death does not render this type of heroism “nihilistic” or “futile.” On the contrary, it is the manner in which the hero faces this destruction that helps define his greatness; failure only comes from despair or dishonor.

95. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, throughout, especially 97–98.

and especially the characters themselves, paramount concerns. Such honor and glory are, moreover, most commonly proven, maintained, and defended through violent action. In this sense, these generic concerns overlap with, and quite often reflect, the historical contexts of literary works; for this poem is also, as we and others insist, a realistic reflection of late-medieval warfare, not a fictionalized romance of chivalry and courtesy. For all of these reasons, it is impossible to separate the issue of genre from the issues of character and meaning; yet it is equally impossible to justify the critical claim that the text is some sort of proto-modern condemnation of warfare that teaches pacifism. As several scholars have pointed out, medieval rulers in times of war were, by the standards of the time, perfectly justified in committing acts that might otherwise be considered cruel. Even saints might get involved in fighting to defend their territories and people.

The mid-thirteenth-century Latin chronicle known to specialists as *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, described by R. Andrew McDonald as “the single most important historical text for the late Norse Kingdom of Man and the Isles from the late eleventh to late thirteenth centuries,” provides evidence of such justified bloodletting in its description of what McDonald terms “the deadly game of Manx thrones.”⁹⁶ During a Scottish invasion of Man in 1156 or 1158, one Gilcolm, chieftain to the powerful Hebridean lord Somerled of Argyll (died 1164), received from his leader qualified and reluctant permission to loot the church of St. Machutus. Machutus, answering the prayers of the Manx people, appeared before Gilcolm in the chieftain’s tent, dressed in white and bearing a staff. Berating Gilcolm for his intended assault, the saint then raised aloft his shepherd’s staff and repeatedly “drove its point through his [Gilcolm’s] heart.”⁹⁷ As McDonald pithily observes, paraphrasing the chronicle, “Somerled and his army fled in terror.”⁹⁸ The saint’s violent defense of his church and people here can be taken as a thematic and (pseudo-)historical counterpart to the pious language in Arthur’s war council: entirely appropriate to the circumstances.⁹⁹ Accord-

96. R. Andrew McDonald, *Kings, Usurpers, and Concubines in the Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2 and 25.

97. *Cronica regum Mannie & Insularum*, transcribed and trans. George Broderick, 3rd ed. (Douglas: Manx National Heritage, 2004), fols. 37v–39r: “punctum eius per cor illius transfixit.”

98. McDonald, *Kings, Usurpers, and Concubines*, 50–51. McDonald also quotes the saint’s attack.

99. As McDonald elsewhere concludes, the Machutus episode “highlights the chronicler’s position that God was on the side of the Manx kings”: R. Andrew McDonald, *The Sea Kings: The Late Norse Kingdoms of Man and the Isles, c. 1066–1275* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2019), 122. The historical parallel reinforces our position that God and Mary

ingly, critics who try to read the alliterative *Morte* as a critique of war on the basis of its use of religious language are imposing anachronistic values onto a literary expression of martial glory.

The commonplace thesis that the alliterative-poet scrutinizes and finds wanting Arthur, his knights, and warfare is therefore untenable. Arthur is not only a courageous and active warrior in the alliterative *Morte* but also a good king. One key facet of good kingship in the Middle Ages was the taking of counsel, and it was expected (especially by the nobility) that the nobility would help mediate between the monarch and various affinities and factions within the kingdom.¹⁰⁰ It is thus significant that Arthur's plans to conquer the Roman feudatories of Lorraine, Lombardy, and Milan are outlined during the initial war council determining his reply to Rome's challenge (*aMA* 349–53, 421–40). It is equally significant that so many Briton men and tributary kings speak against Rome during the opening war council, for all of their speeches encourage the seeking of vengeance against Rome and voice support for Arthur. There is none of the division among the counselors here that DeMarco claims,¹⁰¹ and the united front only serves to justify Arthur's cause—against both Rome and its tributary states. Lucius, moreover, not only demands tribute but also threatens to “Bryne Bretayn . . . and bryttyn [Arthur's] knyghtes” and to “martyre hys knyghtes . . . and strwye them fore euere” (*aMA* 106, 560–61). It is also significant that Lucius's allies include several Western medieval literary paragons of evil: giants, witches, and warlocks as well as Muslims and Greeks (*aMA* 570–624)—the Greeks being perceived as enemies in a Virgilian and Galfridian epic tradition in which the Greeks are not mere enemies of Troy but wrongdoers. The tremendous threat posed by Rome and its allies is in fact subtly reiterated throughout the alliterative *Morte* by the ninety-seven references to *Rome* or *Romaynes* (or their cognates), more name-dropping than for any other country.¹⁰² Like the pious formulae of Arthur's opening war council, the many references to Rome reinforce the justness of Arthur's cause. These references to Rome also illustrate why defeating Rome requires defeating not only Lucius but also his tributary

are presented as being entirely on Arthur's side in *aMA*.

100. John Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9–80.

101. DeMarco, “Arthur for the Ricardian Age,” 469.

102. The number of Roman references was noted by John Geck, “*Casteles and kingdoms and countrees many*: Mapping the Unmappable in Medieval Romance,” Romance in Medieval Britain Conference, University of British Columbia, 16–19 August 2016. The conclusion that the numerous mentions of “Rome” and “Roman” foreground Lucius's threat is ours. For the precise number of references to Rome, we rely on *A Concordance to the Alliterative “Morte Arthure,”* ed. Kiyokazu Mizobata (Tokyo: Shohakusha, 2001), s.vv.

kingdoms: Rome's threat is everywhere.

Partisan Poetry: Pro-Arthurian Language, Structure, Characterization, and Heroics

Just as the law and the Lord are on Arthur's side in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, so too is the poet. The poet alerts his audience to the justness of Arthur's cause through his consistent use of strongly partisan diction. Arthur's army comprises "*oure* cheualrous knyghtez" (aMA 1362; cf. 1630), "*owre* folke" (1367, 1441, 2758), "*oure* men" (1399, 1405, 1428, 2473), "*oure* bolde men" (1434), "*oure* seggez" (1422), "*oure* rerewarde" (1430), "*oure* syde" (1492), and "*oure* ferse men" (2259; cf. 2450). Most of these displays of favoritism, all of which we have italicized, occur in the first half of the poem, thereby establishing a sympathetic portrait of the Briton army. However, enough partisan phrases are found near the end of the narrative—after the campaigns of Metz and Lorraine—to establish that the poet remains firmly on Arthur's side throughout his poem (see, e.g., aMA 3767, 3781, 3785, 4126, 4172, 4178, 4179). Likewise, although scholars sometimes criticize Wawayne for the boastfulness and supposed recklessness he displays in his envoy to Lucius, the epithets the poet applies to Wawayne throughout this scene reveal the justness of the knight's actions. He is "Wawayne þe worthethy" (aMA 1302) when he begins to speak his message, and "Gawayne the gude" (1368) when engaging the Romans who seek to avenge Wawayne's beheading of Lucius's uncle. Later, he is "Gawayne the gracyous" while striking down enemies in order to rescue Sir Boyce (aMA 1468). Arthur himself has similarly positive epithets: "*owre* wyese kyng," "*Oure* burlyche bolde kyng," "*Oure* prynce," and "*our* semliche kyng" (aMA 1973, 2010, 2155, 4224, 3947 [our italics]). Such approbative terms—especially "burlyche bolde kyng"—make it clear that "kyde conquerour" (aMA 65, 232, 2261, 2621) is also a positive epithet, one indicative of the poet's praise of Arthur.

Just as the alliterative *Morte's* epic-heroic genre and historical contexts support a pro-Arthur interpretative stance, so does the poet's portrait of Arthur as a hero who valiantly defends the innocent. The positive portrait of Arthur in the poem's early episodes, in which he is praised as a conqueror and hailed by his followers as a just king, establishes his heroic character rather than shows the heights from which he later descends into tyranny. This pro-Arthur bias in the poem is especially evident during the battle with the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel, a scene whose purpose is manifestly to aggrandize Arthur through his contrast with the creature. Even Matthews

and Peck admit to Arthur's heroism here: Matthews draws attention to the poet's many additions to the fight with the giant inherited from the sources, and concludes justly that the extra details sharpen the "focus . . . upon Arthur, . . . aggrandize the giant's monstrosity, and . . . enlarge the sufferings of his victims"; Peck likewise notes that "[t]he poet takes pains to present Arthur as a model Christian king in [this] encounter."¹⁰³ Certainly the warning of the duchess's foster-mother (before the battle) that Arthur should flee "Ware [he] wyghttere than Wade, or Wawayn owthire" highlights the ferocity of Arthur's opponent and thus builds suspense: this is indeed a terrible foe, all the more so for entering the narrative after Arthur's nightmare (aMA 964, 759–831). There is no doubting the giant's evil, but it is worth pausing to consider just how much more horrible the alliterative *Morte's* Giant of Mont Saint-Michel is than his counterparts in the versions of this fight that Geoffrey, Wace, and Lazamon created in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Gruesomely, the alliterative-giant's extra monstrosity is due largely to the poet's emphasis on the giant's acts of cannibalism and rape.

As Finlayson notes, the giant's fondness for devouring children is an addition of the alliterative-poet, an original detail that increases both the giant's evil and Arthur's heroism (aMA 850–51).¹⁰⁴ Even the giant's assault of his young female victim is more gruesome in the alliterative poem than in its sources. In Geoffrey's version of events, the giant's victim dies before the giant can rob her of her virginity, but in the alliterative-poet's version, she suffers a brutal rape before her horrific murder.¹⁰⁵ The duchess's helplessness and suffering in the *Morte* are further intensified through the account of a Templar knight who tells Arthur about her abduction. The Templar emphasizes her beauty and gentleness before asserting that her screams were so terrible that he will never recover from the trauma of hearing them (aMA 841–42, 852–63). Once Arthur reaches the first hill, he hears from the duchess's foster-mother how the giant slew her ward "Withowttyn mercy one

103. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 24–25; Peck, "Willfulness and Wonders," 164.

104. John Finlayson, "Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount," *Medium Ævum* 33 (1964): 112–20. See also Thomas H. Crofts, "Perverse and Contrary Deeds: The Giant of Mont Saint Michel and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," in *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 116–31.

105. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve, trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), 224–25, 165.50–67; and see Fiona Tolhurst, "What Did Lazamon(s) Do to Geoffrey's Female Figures?," in *Lazamon's Brut and Other Medieval Chronicles*, ed. Marie-Françoise Alamichel (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), 103–32.

molde; . . . / He has forsedde hir and fylede, . . . and slitt hir to þe nauyll” (*aMA* 977–79). So monstrous is this rape that the giant’s violation of the duchess apparently splits her body apart, from the inside out.

Perhaps because the alliterative-poet anticipates that his audience will be horrified by his version of this episode, he uses two techniques that simultaneously highlight the giant’s deserved punishment and give his audience release from the episode’s dark mood. First, he creates a running joke about the giant being a saint, a joke, as we note below, augmented by the idea of Arthur being on pilgrimage (*aMA* 1163, 1168, 1171). Second, he introduces some grim humor through the giant’s cartoonish imperviousness to what should be a damaging or mortal head-wound, an imperviousness that leads to Arthur’s subsequent hewing off of the giant’s genitals (*aMA* 1110–27). None of this comic relief, however, enables readers to dismiss this combat as a “burlesque travesty” or send-up designed to critique Arthurian heroism and warfare.¹⁰⁶ On the contrary, all of these details, including the original and gruesome details the alliterative-poet adds to the giant’s defeat, serve to make Arthur’s victory and heroism all the greater by presenting him as more than a foe of monsters: he is the defender of innocent children and rape victims who is considerably braver than a Templar knight.

The Templar knight is important as another historical echo in (not a confirmed influence on or source for) the poem, for the Military Orders’ reputation for bravery and military excellence was well known, while the Templars’ literary reputation—even after their dissolution in 1312—remained positive.¹⁰⁷ In Helen J. Nicholson’s phrase, the “Military Orders were the best supporting fighting force a hero could have.”¹⁰⁸ It is thus highly significant that Arthur defeats the giant in single combat, meaning that his own prowess is so great that he requires no assistance. He is, therefore, better than the best. Furthermore, the Templar knight’s presence in the poem, paired with the presence of the Military Orders in the world outside the poem, reminds the audience that—in the medieval imagination—bloodshed and godliness could go hand in hand. The Templar association thus continues and enhances the interpenetration of religious language with secular, military themes and actions

106. Contra Ritzke-Rutherford, “Formulaic Macrostructure,” 87, 89. As Crofts points out, Arthur’s castration of the giant in *aMA* is the most detailed and violent of the various versions of this scene, and is so due to the “wholly” original additions of the alliterative poet: Crofts, “Perverse and Contrary Deeds,” 127–28.

107. On the literary presentation of the Templars, see Helen J. Nicholson, *Love, War and the Grail* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), throughout.

108. Nicholson, *Love, War and the Grail*, 189.

that we noted in the preceding analysis of Arthur's opening war council, and to which we will return below. The intertwining of secular and sacred is increased by the poet's strategy of lightening the mood of this scene through the joke of the giant being a saint and Arthur's corresponding joke about being on a pilgrimage as he seeks his cannibal foe (*aMA* 1162–71, 937–40). The gruesome details of the giant's crimes also emphasize just how impossible it is for Arthur to become even a minor double of this monstrous enemy—despite literary critics' claims that such doubling occurs.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the heights of Arthur's heroic stature make his later fall all the more lamentable, for the poet takes pains to establish him as a heroic monster-slayer as well as a great conqueror-king.¹¹⁰

The episode at Mont Saint-Michel takes on additional significance because of the ways in which it helps to elucidate character, artistry, and theme, including the theme of Arthur's heroic kingship. Arthur is characterized as a compassionate and civilizing hero, for he seeks out the giant due to pity for his people's suffering (*aMA* 866–75, 1053–54). The giant's villainous character is further emphasized by the poet's use of imagery that recalls Arthur's earlier dream of the dragon and bear (*aMA* 759–831). Now, when Arthur confronts the giant at Mont Saint-Michel, the poet recounts how the giant had “flesche in his fortethe fowly as a bere” (*aMA* 1089). This imagistic flashback to Arthur's dream of the battle of the bear and dragon reveals the poet's artistry, as does the fact that the entire encounter with the giant was forecast not only by this same dream but also by the story's opening war council taking place in “þe Geauntes Toure” back at Arthur's court (*aMA* 245). The poet's artistry is likewise apparent in the mingling of martial and religious registers. This mingling of registers continues during the battle with the giant, during which Arthur takes the giant's club and kirtle as battle trophies and invites Bedwere and Kayous to take whatever spoils they desire (*aMA* 1184–92). Despite Chism's accusations about “Arthur's own hypermasculine desires,”¹¹¹ the taking of trophies is normative in heroic literature. At the same time, a religious element is present in Arthur's attributing the victory to God or Mary “and no gome ells” (*aMA* 1209–11) as well as in the

109. Among the many critics who have made this claim are Armstrong and Hodges, *Mapping Malory*, 119; Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 209–10; and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 153.

110. See also Finlayson, “Arthur and the Giant,” 112, 117–20. Our reasoning is at times very close to Finlayson's, but we disagree with his thesis that Arthur eventually departs from justice.

111. Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 209–10.

battle's taking place at a hill named for Michael, not a saint but the mighty archangel who wielded a sword to cast Satan from Heaven.¹¹² In another mixture of martial magnanimity and orthodox piety, Arthur insists that the giant's treasure be divided up among "comouns of the contré, clergie and oþer . . . "That none pleyn of their parte" (*aMA* 1215–17). He also asks that a church be built (*aMA* 1219–21). By thus providing for the spiritual as well as the material welfare of his people, Arthur ably fulfills two of the primary duties of a good medieval king.

The alliterative-poet reinforces Arthur's status as a good king by repeatedly having other characters look to him as a savior, and having him successfully function as one. Thus, for instance, the Templar knight who first tells him of the giant's depredations urges Arthur "As thow arte ryghtwise kynge, [to] rewe on thy pople" (*aMA* 866), clearly expecting Arthur to take action—as he does by killing the giant. The messengers from the Marshall of France likewise "Bes[eche] hym of sucour . . . fore mendement of [his] pople" after Lucius invades Burgundy (*aMA* 1234–36). The same messengers "[p]rayes [Arthur] for Petyr luffe, þe apostyll of Rome," to fight Lucius's army (*aMA* 1256). Arthur then attacks Lucius and the Romans' allies both to benefit his own glory and honor—as is entirely acceptable within the heroic ethos—and to benefit his commonweal, as is entirely appropriate for and expected of a good medieval king.

Fortune, the Worthies, and Arthur Versus Mordred

Given the preceding argument about Arthur's heroism, it is our contention—contrary to standard interpretations of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*—that Fortune does not act as an agent of divine Providence that punishes Arthur for his sins. Rather, Arthur, before his inevitable natural end, establishes himself as the greatest of the Nine Worthies who is "[b]efore all þe cheftaynes chosen in this erthe!" (*aMA* 3348). Here the poet juxtaposes idyllic and violent imagery, for Arthur in his final dream is lost in the woods, surrounded by "woluez . . . and wykkyde bestez," including "lyouns [that] lykkyde þeire tuskes, / All fore lapyng of blude of [his] lele knyghtez" (*aMA* 3230–35). Nevertheless, the horrors of this scene are followed by the safety of an idyllic meadow,

The meryeste [medowe] of medill-erthe that men myghte beholde!

112. Revelation 12:7.

The close was in compas castyn all abowte
 With clauer and clereworte, clede euen ouer;
 The vale was enuerownde with vynes of siluer,
 All with grapis of golde, gretter ware neuer;
 Enhorilde with arborye and alkyns trees,
 Erberis full honeste, and hyrdez þerevndyre.
 All froytez foddemid was þat florescede in erthe,
 Faire frithed in frawnke appon tha free bowes;
 Whas thare no downkynge of dewe that oghte dere scholde
 With þe drowghte of þe daye, all drye ware þe flores. (aMA 3239–49)

The violence and beauty of Nature in this passage remind readers and listeners of the potential violence and beauty of human life itself, such as how Arthur as noble conqueror-king can kill giants, besiege cities, and fight armies but also establish laws, give gifts, and rule justly. Yet Nature is cyclical and life is finite and even the greatest heroes must inevitably die. The poet of the alliterative *Morte* illustrates this point by creating a unique combination of literary tropes: Fortune's Wheel and the Nine Worthies. Arthur's fall, in other words, is not sinful but natural because it is inevitable. None of the Nine Worthies lived forever.

Given repeated critical interpretations of the Nine Worthies as ironized figures, it is essential to stress their goodness in the eyes of medieval readers. As the alliterative-poet lists them, the Worthies are Alexander the Great, Hector of Troy, and Julius Caesar (the Classical or Pagan Worthies); Judas Maccabeus, Joshua, and David (the Old Law or Jewish Worthies); and (for the New Law or Christian Worthies) Charlemagne, Godfrey of Bouillon, and Arthur himself, worthiest of all (aMA 3406–45). Arthur, therefore, is in elect company. Matthews, however, advancing his thesis about Arthur's supposedly sinful character, argues at length that the poet's view of Alexander was negative and therefore that the praise of the entire group of heroes is deeply ironic; Peck supports this ironic interpretation of the Nine Worthies by advocating that they should be read as a negative exemplum.¹¹³ In contrast, Anke Janssen rightly points out how, prior to the alliterative *Morte*, the Nine Worthies were traditionally perceived as paragons of excellence; nevertheless, Janssen is so influenced by the poem's critical heritage that she then argues that the poet inverts this tradition to show that Arthur and all the other

113. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 33–93; Peck, "Willfulness and Wonders," 172. See also Hamel, "Adventure as Structure," 43–44.

Worthies are slated for destruction because death is the wages of warfare, and no conqueror can be morally good.¹¹⁴ We dispute these scholarly ironizations of the usual Worthy trope by arguing that the alliterative-poet perpetuates the positive view of the Nine that is typical of medieval texts because heroic literature, as a genre, does not judge its characters according to Christian morality, *contemptus mundi*, or modern pacifist ideals. In other words, modern literary critics' imposition of their anti-war or anti-violence ideologies on a poem of the late Middle Ages might make it seem more relevant to today's Western world, but it distorts the poem's meaning. Post-Hitler and post-Vietnam modern audiences are rightfully skeptical of war, just or otherwise; however, such skepticism was not present during the Middle Ages, a period during which religion was intertwined with both chivalric display and valorization of martial endeavor. In Maurice Keen's phrase, "warfare and the warrior ethos were . . . central to the secular history of the middle ages [*sic*], political, social, and cultural."¹¹⁵ Manuscript context, like medieval cultural context, likewise argues against a pacifist reading of the Worthies or the poem. As Finlayson astutely points out, the alliterative *Morte Arthure* "is followed" in the Thornton manuscript "by three works, *Octavian*, *Ysumbras* and *Dioclyan* (*Tolous*), which resolutely glory in the hewing of heathens and general battle"; this manuscript context makes "one wonder whether Thornton himself [or the poets involved] could possibly have seen the *Morte* in quite this [anti-war] light."¹¹⁶

The alliterative *Morte's* historical context further undermines the argument that Alexander and the Worthies were models of iniquity during the medieval period. The whole point of the Worthies in the Middle Ages is, it bears emphasizing, their *worthiness*. Keen elucidates how the three triads making up the Nine comprise the "three champions of chivalry of the Old Law, . . . three champions of the pagan law, . . . and three champions of the

114. Janssen, "Dream of the Wheel," 144–46. Tellingly for our purposes, Janssen (144) admits that the *aMA* would be the "only" fourteenth-century text thus to corrupt the Worthies. Once again, the evidence rather suggests the opposite view.

115. Maurice Keen, "Introduction: Warfare and the Middle Ages," in *Medieval Warfare: A History*, ed. Maurice Keen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8. Cf. Richard W. Kaeuper, "Introduction," in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper (Woodbridge: Boydell Press), 2000, xi: however much "modern sensibilities" might prefer otherwise, "the medieval world was a violent society."

116. John Finlayson, "Review of *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, edited by Karl Heinz Göller," *Medium Ævum* 53 (1984): 127–28. In Thornton, *aMA* occupies folios 53r–98v, *Octavian* folios 98v–109r, *Ysumbras* folios 109r–114v, and *Dioclyan* folios 114v–122r.

new Christian Law[:] . . . Their associated reputations established rapidly their right to occupy the first circle of what we have called the chivalrous pantheon.”¹¹⁷ Because of the innate heroism of the Worthies, medieval historians and chroniclers inevitably used the Worthies to praise their historical subjects. As Chris Given-Wilson observes, “comparison with [the Nine] was *de rigueur* for late medieval authors bent on eulogizing their heroes.”¹¹⁸ The modern pacifist reading of both the alliterative *Morte* and the Nine Worthies is further belied by the impression given by chronicle-writing in general. Although medieval chroniclers might well record that war could cause suffering and that prowess alone was insufficient for victory, they “shared [a belief] with nearly all the great historians of warfare since . . . Homer and Herodotus . . . that war was the ultimate proving-ground of a man’s character.”¹¹⁹

Even in contexts that remind readers of the inevitability of death, medieval images of Alexander and Arthur were positive. The Anglo-Norman genealogical roll of kings of England produced in the 1320s for the Chaworth family, for instance, foregrounds Lady Fortune and mutability using a large roundel-figure of Fortune and her Wheel at the start of the roll, yet it acknowledges the greatness of these two Worthies:

Seignurs, pensez de la mort
 Ou est ore Sampson le fort,
 Salamon li sage rois,
 Alexandre qui ert courtois,
 Arthur li preus, li roy Richart;

[Lords, think of death,
 Where Samson the strong is now,
 Solomon the wise king,
 Alexander who was courtly,
 Arthur the worthy, king Richard (the Lionheart.)]¹²⁰

117. Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 121.

118. Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles* (New York: Hambledon, 2004), 111.

119. Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, 111.

120. *The Chaworth Roll*, ed. Alixe Bovey, transcribed by Olivier de Laborderie, translated by Marigold Anne Norbye (London: Sam Fogg, 2005), 37. For a discussion of the Fortune roundel and verses, see 14–17. The genealogy was extended between 1399 and 1413. See also Jaclyn Rajsic, “Looking for Arthur in Short Histories and Genealogies of England’s Kings,” *Review of English Studies* n.s. 68, no. 285 (2017): 448–77 (especially

Although Alexander is also one of the tragic exemplars “Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee, / And is yfallen out of heigh degree” in Chaucer’s *Monk’s Tale*, nothing in Chaucer’s brief portrait of him indicates that Alexander is destroyed for his sins; on the contrary, he is held up as an epitome of strength in arms and conquest, praised for being “of knyghthod and of fredom flour.”¹²¹ Far from being a model of tyranny or folly, Chaucer’s Alexander is presented as one of those “who fall despite the fact that they are good.”¹²² Indeed, despite the fact that medieval “theological and mystical writers were generally critical of Alexander, the writers of narratives and even of *exempla* regarded him in a favourable light.”¹²³ Other alliterative authors such as the poet of *The Wars of Alexander* also present Alexander in a largely favorable light.¹²⁴ Thus, when this Worthy’s change in Fortune inevitably occurs, it is accompanied by much lamentation on the part of the *Alexander*-narrator.

As in literature, so in life. England’s Edward III and his queen and court were early adherents to and supporters of the growing fourteenth-century cult of the Nine Worthies. Queen Philippa in 1332 gave her husband “a spectacular silver cup and ewer decorated with images of the Worthies,” and Edward himself “commissioned a bed-set that included six pillows decorated with scenes from the [worthy] life of . . . Alexander the Great.”¹²⁵ All of this imagery helped Edward to style himself as an heir to considerable chivalric and heroic precedent, and he would not have modeled himself on the Worthies were they anything other than their name suggests. The Worthies remained exemplary during the reign of Edward IV, for not only did Caxton publish *Godeffroy of Boloyne* in 1481 but he also closed his accompanying Prologue by recommending the text both to Edward IV and to his sons, the

at 466).

121. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Monk’s Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, lines 1975–76 and 2631–70/3860 respectively.

122. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 282. Because *The Monk’s Tale* is interrupted instead of finished, its overall point, according to Pearsall’s witty observation, seems to be nothing other than “the pointlessness of existence” (245). Epic-heroic literature renders life meaningful precisely by valorizing courage and martial display.

123. J[ohn] Finlayson, “Review of *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative ‘Morte Arthure’* by W. Matthews,” *Medium Ævum*, 32, no. 1 (1963): 75. See also George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, ed. D. J. A. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), throughout; Charles Russell Stone, *The Roman de toute chevalerie* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), throughout.

124. Burrow, *Poetry of Praise*, 88–92.

125. W. Mark Ormrod, *Edward III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 15.

princes Edward and Richard, who might read the book and “be encouraged to deserue lawde and honour.”¹²⁶ This recommendation follows a reiteration of the identities and status of the Nine, including an acknowledgment of Godfrey’s status as “the thyrd of the Cristen prynces”; this acknowledgment follows Caxton’s fulsome praise of Arthur as being “in especial, as for the best and worthyest, I fynde fyrst the gloryous / most excellent in his tyme / and fyrst founder of the round table / Kyng Arthur.”¹²⁷ Caxton returned to the theme of Arthur’s status as chief of the Nine Worthies in his Preface to his 1485 edition of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. In this Preface, he notes how it was due to the urging of “dyvers gentylnen of thys royame of Englonde” that he eventually agreed to print “the noble hystorye of the Saynt Greal and of the moost renommed Crysten kyng, fyrst and chyef of the thre best Crysten, and worthy, Kyng Arthur.”¹²⁸ None of this evidence indicates that the Worthies were viewed in Caxton’s day as anything other than worthy, particularly in light of the fact that Caxton was a savvy enough businessperson to survive and prosper as a printer when so many of the other fledgling publishers of his day did not. Nor is there anything in the alliterative *Morte* to suggest that the Nine are used in any way other than approbatively.

Significantly for our interpretation of alliterative-Arthur as heroic, the Worthies comprise a pantheon that he not only equals but also surpasses in success and heroic stature—not in sin. Like Alexander, Joshua, and Charlemagne, Arthur is a great conqueror (*aMA* 12–53), and, like Alexander, Arthur is recognized as a generous ruler (1593–98, 1726–31). David, Judas, and especially Hector of Troy are all great warriors, and Arthur in this poem is a superlative fighter whose rule extends to many of those countries descended from Troy, especially Brutus’s Britain and Charlemagne’s France (itself descended from Troy);¹²⁹ and, like David, Arthur is a champion giant-slayer (*aMA* 900–1177 and 2111–34). Like Caesar and Godfrey, Arthur is a good general who enjoys many military victories. Godfrey and Arthur are further linked by the fact that both, in their day, became lord of Lorraine. Arthur’s position on the Wheel of Fortune, then, might foreshadow his coming tragic fall, but its immediate effect is to emphasize his status as the paragon of heroic and kingly paragons.

126. William Caxton, trans., *Godeffroy of Boloyne, or the Siege and Conquest of Jerusalem*, by William, Archbishop of Tyre, ed. Mary Noyes Colvin, EETS e.s. 64 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893; reprint Millwood: Kraus, 1973), 4.20–5.27.

127. Caxton, trans., *Godeffroy of Boloyne*, 1.1–3.10.

128. “Caxton’s Prologue to *Le Morte Darthur*,” in Field, II: 854–55.

129. Keen, *Chivalry*, 123.

Arthur's status as even doughtier than the doughtiest of the Nine is adumbrated early on in the poem through an intratextual parallel involving Wawayne's encounter with Emperor Lucius's uncle. Wawayne is Arthur's nephew and heroic companion, what Maureen Fries terms "Arthur's second self."¹³⁰ Fries rightly draws attention to the prominence of individual knight-warriors in various scenes in the alliterative *Morte*, including the poet's narrowing of focus to spotlight Wawayne's dominance in the scene with the uncle of the Emperor and Arthur's dominance in the scene with the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel.¹³¹ We would add, however, that the individual combat between the Emperor and Wawayne's uncle Arthur is prepared for—and paralleled by—Wawayne's encounter with, and beheading of, the Emperor's uncle (*aMA* 1346–54). Similarly, Wawayne later fights with Lucius just before Arthur himself does (*aMA* 2218–55). Wawayne and the Britons had the upper hand in their earlier encounter with the Romans, but now Lucius harasses Wawayne's force, injuring or killing Lyonell (with another of the poem's head wounds at 2228–29) before Arthur "þe Conquerour tuke kepe and come with his strenghes / To reschewe þe ryche men of þe Rounde Table"; this rescue he achieves by single-handedly slaying Lucius with a powerful blow that slices from the neck downward, slantwise across the body (*aMA* 2242–54). Arthur thus displays not only his own considerable prowess but also his skills as tactician and leader, surveying the battle and arriving at the right place at precisely the right moment to sway the outcome.¹³² The point of the parallel between uncle and nephew is to emphasize heroics: Wawayne is a great warrior and a great leader; Arthur is even greater. He is an impeccably worthy leader of a worthy host.

Wawayne's encounter with Priamus, despite introducing a romance episode into a predominantly epic-heroic poem, creates another intratextual pairing that enhances Arthur's heroic stature as well as Wawayne's. It does so through ancestry and representation. Wawayne is Arthur's nephew and

130. Maureen Fries, "The Poem in the Tradition of Arthurian Literature," in *Reassessment*, 39. Cf. Ritzke-Rutherford, "Formulaic Macrostructure," 91.

131. Fries, "Poem in the Tradition," 36.

132. In light of this evidence, it is difficult to accept DeMarco's claim that Arthur, like Richard II, prefers peace to war and that the alliterative poet paints Arthur with "an ambiguous relationship to direct, martial violence" (DeMarco, "Arthur for the Ricardian Age," 477; cf. 468). Judging by the action and characterization of his incomplete adaptation of the poem, Tolkien shares our view of Arthur and Wawayne as warrior-heroes whose greatness stems equally from their honor, courage, prowess, and conquest (see J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur*, ed. Christopher Tolkien [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2013]).

“Kydd in his kalander a knyghte of his chambyre / And rolled the richeste of all þe Rounde Table” (aMA 2640–41). Priamus’s ancestors include four of the Nine Worthies: Alexander, Hector, Judas Maccabeus, and Joshua (aMA 2602–5). When Wawayne first defeats Priamus but conceals his identity, Priamus declares that Arthur “will be Alexander ayre, that all þe erthe lowttede, / Abillere þan euer was Sir Ector of Troye!” (aMA 2634–35). Priamus is excited and relieved to learn the true identity of his opponent, but he never rescinds his assessment of Arthur’s stature. The Wawayne–Priamus episode also reinforces the alliterative *Morte’s* intermingling of religious and heroic ideologies, but in a way that enhances Wawayne’s heroism.¹³³ Priamus insists that Wawayne’s wounds will be healed only by magic, if at all (aMA 2575–78), a stock motif in a number of genres, including the epic-heroic genre. However, when Wawayne shows no fear of death, Priamus then qualifies the potency of his sword that inflicts wounds that never stop bleeding by admitting that he can heal the wounds if Wawayne grants him shrift and baptism (aMA 2585–88). By adding a religious aspect to Wawayne’s character, the poet enhances Wawayne’s heroic stature.

The Arthurian legend’s influence on medieval life, including on chivalry and kingship, is well known and much discussed; at times, however, this influence can run the other way. Christopher Berard makes a compelling case for the (supposedly) negative view of Arthur evident in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and other late fourteenth-century texts being a form of spin-doctoring in which a negative image of Edward III corrupted the Arthurian ideal.¹³⁴ By Berard’s account, Arthur’s wars in the alliterative poem correspond to Edward’s more effective but less chivalrous tactics in various campaigns in the Hundred Years’ War; what the poem therefore reflects is not so much direct geopolitical parallels (although these can be located) but rather criticism of unchivalrous war and, especially, of both the legendary and historical kings who employed such tactics. This idea of anti-Edwardian sentiment coloring the portrait of Arthur in the alliterative *Morte* is another critical bugbear originated by Matthews, who justifies what he considered to be the poet’s anti-English sentiment by positing a likely French source for the English poem.¹³⁵ DeMarco departs from this Edwardian reading, highlighting instead Arthur’s supposed affinities with Richard II and the poem’s

133. At the same time, Priamus is presented primarily as a great fighter, not a religious Other; see our discussion of Priamus and Palomydes in Chapter 1, above.

134. Christopher Berard, “Edward III’s Abandoned Order of the Round Table,” *Arthurian Literature* 29 (2012): 19, 37–39.

135. Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 178–92.

excoriation of “the Ricardian crisis over the governance of military affairs.”¹³⁶ For all three critics, albeit in different ways, Arthur’s supposed reflection of an actual historical king undercuts Arthur’s heroic and kingly stature.

Matthews’s persuasiveness and Berard’s and DeMarco’s learning notwithstanding, literary critics have misread Edward III: he was, in fact, a model medieval king. Edward’s image in history is thus considerably better than Berard and Matthews allow. In the authoritative words of Michael Prestwich, “Edward III was one of the greatest English war leaders”; Nigel Saul makes a similar point, noting how “later generations” considered Edward “the perfect king whose example his successors would do well to follow.”¹³⁷ Saul adds that—as with Richard the Lionheart before him—Edward proved to be a very difficult model to emulate. A late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century English audience would consequently have seen nothing negative in Edward’s behavior because, for most of his reign, Edward was remarkably successful. George R. Keiser encapsulates medieval martial ideology when he quotes with approbation May McKisack’s characterization of Edward as understanding “better than his grandson, and better than some of his modern critics, how little a policy of peace, retrenchment, and reform was likely to appeal to the knightly classes.”¹³⁸ This approbative characterization of Edward still holds true today. There is simply insufficient evidence to support the revisionist notion that Edward’s subjects or contemporaries criticized his martial endeavors. On the contrary: “by 1500” Edward had long been regarded as “the greatest king who had ever ruled England,” a reputation based in no small part on his “active policy of war.”¹³⁹ Edward’s supposed failings cannot be used to pinpoint Arthur’s supposed failings because, for a medieval audience, such failings were almost nonexistent. Moreover, any parallels between Arthur and Edward in the alliterative poem are general, not specific: both are great kings in part because they are great warriors, but there is no detectable modeling of Arthur on Edward.¹⁴⁰

Although indisputable one-to-one correspondences between alliterative-

136. DeMarco, “Arthur for the Ricardian Age,” especially 478–82.

137. Michael Prestwich, *The Three Edwards* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 146; Nigel Saul, *For Honour and Fame* (London: Bodley Head, 2011), 93.

138. George R. Keiser, “Edward III and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*,” *Speculum* 48 (1973): 37–51 (especially 47–48); May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307–1399* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 250.

139. D. A. L. Morgan, “The Political After-Life of Edward III,” *English Historical Review* 112 (1997): 858–59.

140. See the convincing analyses of Finlayson, “*Morte Arthure*: The Date and a Source,” 624–38; and Keiser, “Edward III,” 37–51.

Arthur and either Edward III or Richard II are unlikely to emerge, the echoes of near-contemporary kingship that the poet of the alliterative *Morte* incorporates into his poem valorize Arthur rather than undermine him. Just as Edward and other late-medieval kings used Arthur as it suited them for self-aggrandizement and chivalric exemplarity, so the alliterative-poet could capitalize on Edward III's royal image to aggrandize Arthur through a general image of active kingship. Both Arthur and Edward unite England in a common and successful cause. Arthur and his knights seem as keen as Edward and his nobles on pursuing war if pressed, but it is not only the king who might have had a martial outlook. War held considerable financial attractions for the nobility, a fact Catherine Nall affirms when noting that "the evidence of ownership of military treatises points to the widespread interest in the prosecution of war among fifteenth-century English readers."¹⁴¹ Arthur is arguably even greater than Edward III, for he is capable of defeating Rome itself, thereby performing as a good king according to the standards of honor-based violence and conquest found in the chronicle and epic-heroic genres. He could also be said to improve upon Edward's excellent example because he quickly reestablishes chivalric conduct once his enemies surrender. Although criticism of war in general was, we argue, a nonissue for the poet and the majority of his medieval audience, it is worth noting that Arthur adopts a scorched-earth policy when necessary but that he also reverts to more chivalric practices when the brutal necessities of warfare allow. Arthur's response to the widows of Metz (discussed above) is one example of this impeccable conduct.

Significantly, as Phillipa Hardman reveals, the alliterative-poet's celebratory portrait of Arthur as a successful and "powerful earthly ruler" is emphasized by the intended manuscript illustration program in the Thornton manuscript.¹⁴² Although the program is "unexecuted," there are spaces for the intended illustrations, and in two locations there are directions in the margin for some of the *Alexander* pictures. Hardman convincingly demonstrates that the *Alexander* pictures "mark key stages in [Alexander's] rise to power and his conquest of the world." Similarly, in the *Morte Arthure* section of the manuscript (folios 53r–98v), increased use of "large capitals, . . . extensive marginal flourishes and . . . an ornamented border" all "confirm the status of the king as

¹⁴¹. On war and the nobility, see McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century*, 126, 253; K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 19–40; Catherine Nall, *Reading and War in Fifteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 2.

¹⁴². Hardman, "Reading the Spaces," 250–56.

conqueror.” The same is true, we suggest, of the full-page illustration that does preface the *Morte* in the Thornton manuscript (folio 52v; see Fig. 1). Whether this drawing is contemporary with Robert Thornton’s copying of the poem (as Owen and Thompson both suggest) or a later addition (as Thompson and Crofts both suggest), and whether it depicts Arthur and the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel or Arthur and another foe (as Crofts argues), the illustration clearly asks readers to visualize Arthur as a hero facing a gigantic evil.¹⁴³ The codicological evidence thus suggests that the medieval illuminator (or illuminators) intended to celebrate Arthur in images; the existing drawing shows that Thornton (or a later hand) *did* celebrate Arthur as a hero. This celebratory manuscript layout mimics and reinforces the poet’s celebration of the king in words.

There is, therefore, little textual, cultural, or codicological support for labeling alliterative-Arthur as a bad king, let alone for comparing him with the rapist and cannibal Giant of Mont Saint-Michel. Arthur in this poem repeatedly takes counsel, as a good king should, but he is undoubtedly in charge and makes his own informed decisions—also as a good king should; as a result, he combines baronial counsel with his royal will.¹⁴⁴ He is a generous leader who cares for his followers, an outstanding general, and a highly proficient fighter. Nevertheless, so committed are scholars to the notion that Arthur in this poem is a failed ruler and a sinful tyrant that they try to depict Mordred as an alternative and better king. Both Peck and DeMarco make independent claims for the poet’s sympathetic portrait of Mordred.¹⁴⁵ Although it is true that Mordred’s lament over Wawayne is quite a striking and original speech, and that Mordred in this text is a good

143. Owen, Introduction to the *Thornton Manuscript*, xv, and John J. Thompson, “The Compiler in Action,” in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 116, both say that the drawing is by Thornton or his scribe. But later, John J. Thompson, *Robert Thornton and the London Thornton Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 3 and n. 13 and 59–60, and Crofts, “Occasion,” 5–6 and 22, both say that the drawing is a later addition. Crofts, “Occasion,” 12–14 and 22–23 argues that the illustration does relate to the poem and becomes “a proper frontispiece,” but that the giant is Jonatall (*aMA* 2111–30). Crofts is convincing, but it is possible that the drawing is a composite of Arthur’s fights with giants in general. The complexities of the issue are evident in Thompson’s later reversal of his earlier opinion about the illustration’s possible date.

144. On counsel and will as the twin pillars of late-medieval kingship, see Watts, *Henry VI*, throughout.

145. Respectively Peck, “Willfulness and Wonders,” 173–74; DeMarco, “Arthur for the Ricardian Age,” 481–84.



Figure 1. The illustration prefacing *Morte Arthure* in Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91, folio 52v. With the kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral.

enough fighter, and lucky enough, to be able to defeat Wawayne (always a great warrior in the English Arthurian tradition), it does not follow that Mordred is thereby redeemed. The fact that the alliterative-poet's portrait of Mordred is "the most positive . . . to be found in medieval English Arthurian literature" does not mean that Mordred is good or that he would make a better king than Arthur.¹⁴⁶

The only truly sympathetic element to alliterative-Mordred's character stems from the great lament he makes over Wawayne's corpse—and the sympathy here is really for Wawayne, not Mordred. Given critical claims to the contrary, it bears emphasizing that the killer of Wawayne would hardly generate much sympathy in a medieval English audience given the consistent valorization of Arthur's nephew in Middle English Arthurian literature. It thus goes too far to claim that "Mordred might be a more effective ruler than Arthur."¹⁴⁷ Like the complaints about Arthur's (supposed) tyranny, this suggestion flies in the face of considerable textual and intertextual evidence. Mordred is more positive only by comparison to some of his actions in other versions of the Arthurian legend; even in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, as Karen Cherewatuk convincingly argues, the point of the story is that Mordred is the treasonous nephew who stands in marked contrast to the loyal and heroic Wawayne.¹⁴⁸ Admittedly, Arthur leaves Mordred in charge in Britain when he sets out to conquer the Roman threat (*aMA* 640–712), but it is important to stress that Arthur makes Mordred regent (giving him control over Arthur's realm and queen) in part because of Waynor's own praise of Mordred (645–78, 709–12). Far from oppressing Mordred or denying him lofty stature, Arthur gives his nephew a position of considerable honor: hence the use of the words "wyrchipfull" and "wyrchipe" in reference to Mordred's position (*aMA* 650, 652).

We noted above that, notwithstanding the destruction of cities during Arthur's sieges en route to Rome, Arthur is careful to disavow and actively deter the crimes of rape and pillage. Mordred's forces, in sharp contrast, "robbe [Britain's] religeous and ravische [Arthur's] nonnes" (*aMA* 3539). Mordred is allowed to deliver the emotional threnody for Wawayne, but he is

146. Pace Armstrong, "Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition," 88–92.

147. Steven P. W. Bruso, "The Sword and the Scepter," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 2 (2015): 44. Cf. Armstrong, "Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition," 88–92, to whom Bruso is indebted.

148. Karen Cherewatuk, "Dying in Uncle Arthur's Arms and at His Hands," in *The Arthurian Way of Death*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 50–70.

no less a traitor in the alliterative *Morte* than in most other medieval versions of the Arthur story. The alliterative-poet displays his originality and artistry by presenting the most complex portrait of Mordred in medieval literature, but that complexity does not render Mordred good or worthy to be king. He is instead a damned soul who has some remorse for the evil impulses that drive his actions.¹⁴⁹

We likewise observed above the poet's masterful use of diction and formulae to portray the Britons, including Wawayne and Arthur, in a positive light. Significantly, the poet employs these same partisan tactics at the end of his *Morte*, confirming Wawayne's and Arthur's continued heroism while also highlighting Mordred's evil.¹⁵⁰ Thus, during the sea battle and the subsequent fight for a beachhead that leads to Wawayne's death, both he and his sword are given the epithet "gud(e)" (*aMA* 3706, 3724, 3709). Equally significantly, Mordred in this encounter is referred to as "the *traytoure*" and Wawayne's "enmye" whose host comprises "*owtlawede berynns*" arrayed against "*oure excellente knyghttez*" and "*oure men*" (*aMA* 3781–85 [our italics]). The poet-narrator's diction once again manifestly favors Arthur, Wawayne, and their Briton forces against their foes, creating not only suspense but also sympathy for *our* side—a collective *we* that includes the medieval audience but not Mordred. The textual evidence simply does not support the thesis that Mordred is a superior alternative to Arthur who deserves to be king; rather, he is portrayed as evil, sneaky, and treacherous. Further demonstrating Mordred's treachery, the poet emphasizes that his army is made up of Danes, outlaws, pagans, and Saracens (*aMA* 3523–48 and 3749–86). Whether the Saracens in this text are actual Muslims or simply pagans, they are clearly on the wrong side as far as a fourteenth-century English audience is concerned, both in terms of religion and political allegiance.¹⁵¹ In these ways, Mordred's allies are as bad as Lucius's giants and Easterners; it is therefore the usurper Mordred, not the heroic Arthur, who parallels the tyrannical Emperor. Throughout the final battle, moreover, the poet not only draws an effective contrast between Wawayne and Mordred but also manipulates the "overlapping feudal and

149. We are indebted to Edward Donald Kennedy for this description of Mordred.

150. Contra Göller, "Reality versus Romance," 26.

151. "Saracen" could refer to any "non-Christian": *OED*, s.v. "Saracen, n., 2.a." We are indebted to Edward Donald Kennedy for drawing this definition to our attention. In medieval literature, each use of the term *Saracen* must be judged by the context and values of each story: Saracens in *Morte Arthure* are bad because they fight for Lucius and Mordred, not because they are axiomatically racially or religiously Other. On the complexities of the term *Saracen* in the Middle Ages see above, Chapter 1, 29–30.

familial ties” of Wawayne, Mordred, and Arthur to “render the three deaths the more brutal and poignant.”¹⁵²

Much of the alliterative-poet’s supposed sympathy for Mordred is evident, for some critics, in the remarkable threnody that the poet allows him to deliver over the body of the dead Wawayne, slain by Mordred himself (*aMA* 3875–85). Mordred does express sympathy for Wawayne, but however gracious his lament, it does not mitigate Mordred’s mendacity. Indeed, immediately after Mordred has delivered this speech about Wawayne’s many skills and heroic stature, the poet refers to him first as “þat traytour” and then to Mordred’s army as “the traytours men” (*aMA* 3886, 3928). In the prelude to the king’s final battle, the poet repeatedly castigates Mordred by twice calling him “þe traytoure” (*aMA* 4055–56) and twice “the Malebranche” (4062, 4174). Arthur, meanwhile, is hailed as “the royall roy of þe Rownde Table” (*aMA* 4072). Peck is consequently mistaken to claim that Mordred is labeled traitor only “once,” while his claim that this title of “the Malebranche” “reflects as much on Arthur, [Mordred’s] progenitor, as it does upon Mordred” seems—ironically, given Peck’s thesis about Arthur’s willful wrongdoing—willfully to miss the point.¹⁵³ As Hamel justly insists, *Malebranch* is manifestly “a term of abuse that, like others in this section [of the poem], expresses the poet’s contempt for Mordred’s treachery.”¹⁵⁴ This contempt surely extends to what, in this martial poem, must be considered Mordred’s additional crime: of cowardice. In the battle with Lucius, Arthur fights at the forefront of one segment of his army, arriving in time to rescue Wawayne’s contingent and then quickly and easily slaying Lucius in heroic single combat (*aMA* 2242–56). Similarly, at the end of the poem, Arthur’s heroism, generosity, and good kingship are epitomized by his wish that he alone could die if his death would save his people (*aMA* 4157–60). Mordred, in contrast, hides at the back of his sizable army (*aMA* 4174–76) and, before he fights Arthur, changes his armor and heraldic device (4181–82). Someone hearing or reading this poem during the Hundred Years’ War would hardly miss the significance of Mordred’s attempt to hide from his foes, yet the poet drives this point home by labeling Arthur’s treacherous nephew “the churles chekyn” and “cawtelous wriche” (*aMA* 4181, 4185). Arthur, in contrast, remains “the comliche kyng”

152. Cherewatuk, “Dying in Uncle Arthur’s Arms,” 51.

153. Peck, “Willfulness and Wonders,” 173. Even Matthews, pursuing the thesis that Arthur’s fall is a direct consequence of, and punishment for, his many sins, exempts Arthur from crimes of sexual impropriety, adultery, or incest (see *Tragedy of Arthur*, 123).

154. Mary Hamel, “The Dream of a King,” *Chaucer Review* 14, no. 4 (1980): 304. See also Hamel n. to 4062; Cherewatuk, “Dying in Uncle Arthur’s Arms,” 51.

whose wisdom is such that he sees through the traitor's cowardly disguise (4187). Once again, Arthur proves himself to be a good general and a great warrior—one who dies protecting his people.

Crucially, this image of Arthur as a great conqueror-king, the worthiest of the Nine Worthies, both opens and closes the poem. We discussed earlier in this chapter how the opening lines of the alliterative *Morte* present Arthur as a victorious king at the height of his powers (aMA 26–51). Because the Philosopher to whom Arthur turns to expound the Dream of Fortune's Wheel that he experiences near the end of the poem mentions Doomsday, however, and especially because scholars have accepted the (inter)critical commonplace that the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is an anti-war, anti-Arthur poem, critics tend to assume that the Philosopher gives voice to this anti-Arthur theme.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, despite critics' repeated claims that the Philosopher's interpretation of the Dream of Fortune's Wheel castigates Arthur, the Philosopher quite explicitly extols him. In fact, the Philosopher asserts that Arthur's status as the ninth of the Nine Worthies

sall *in romance be redde* with ryall knyghttes,
Rekkenede and renownde with ryotous kynges,
 And demyd one Domesdaye for dedis of armes
 For *þe doughtyeste þat euer* was duelland in erthe—
 So many clerkis and kynges sall karpe of ȝoure dedis
 And kepe ȝoure conquestz in cronycle for euer!
 (aMA 3440–45 [our italics])

The Philosopher's linking Arthur with both romance and chronicle in the same passage reminds modern readers that the generic boundaries between chronicle, epic-heroic literature, and romance were quite blurry during the Middle Ages. Yet what is clear is that the Philosopher reinforces the main message of the poem's epic-heroic plot: that men define their identities and win glory on the battlefield, and they respect their enemies as well as their allies if those enemies excel in fighting honorably. Although the majority of criticism on the alliterative *Morte Arthure* concludes that it critiques violence and warfare in general, and Arthur in particular as the most prominent

155. See, for example, Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 124–25; Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 217–30. So entrenched in modern criticism of the poem is the association of the Philosopher with Judgment that *Reassessment* opens not with an introductory essay but instead with a modernization of the Dream of Fortune's Wheel (aMA 3218–455) by Kevin Crossley-Holland (*Reassessment*, 1–6).

embodiment of war, this conclusion would be valid only if the narrator's voice expressed disapproval or outrage. It does not. Instead, as we have shown, the poet's language is consistently partisan, while his plot and themes constantly reinforce Arthur's greatness. The fact that Arthur's fame will live forever as the greatest of the Nine Worthies only cements his reputation as a magnificent warrior and king. Furthermore, the Philosopher—and the poet—bestow upon Arthur the greatest glory that a warrior can receive in an epic-heroic poem: eternal fame recorded in heroic verse.

Ultimately, if the dominant textual interpretation that critics advance consistently fails to adhere to the textual evidence or fully explain the text being studied, then it is past time to develop a new interpretation, one that honors the storyteller's interests and emphases as well as relies for evidence upon the words of the narrative text rather than declares the poet to mean the opposite of what he says. Because critics agree that the poet who wrote the alliterative *Morte Arthure* was a master artist, they should accept that he knew his business and genre. Given that heroic literature accepts fighting and bloodshed as concomitants of heroism, and the poet consistently tells his audience that Arthur is heroic and a good king, modern critics should accept the poet's praise of Arthur as genuine instead of labeling everything they dislike in the poem as irony.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps the greatest flaw in the anti-war, anti-Arthur argument has been articulated by some of its strongest proponents, for the fact of Arthur's greatness in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is hinted at even by those who read the poem as anti-imperialist. Göller, for instance, admits the existence of what he considers to be a curious and unresolved puzzle: that this supposedly pacifist poet *consistently revels* in detailed descriptions of battle.¹⁵⁷ Karl Josef Hölzgen likewise argues for the paradoxical mingling of Christian and heroic elements in the alliterative *Morte*, in which the poet "must condemn Arthur's bloody acts of war" while glorifying Arthur's heroic achievements; "even the Christian point of view," he tellingly concedes, "places a positive value on Arthur's heroic deeds."¹⁵⁸ The poem's ending does just that. In the closing lines of the poem and final portrait of the king, the alliterative-poet again

156. For a detailed account of the problematic modern tendency to discount praise poetry, see Burrow, *Poetry of Praise*, throughout.

157. Göller, "Reality versus Romance," 28.

158. Karl Josef Hölzgen, "König Arthur und Fortuna," *Anglia* 75 (1957): 35-54; translated by Edward Donald Kennedy as "King Arthur and Fortuna," in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy (New York: Garland, 1996), 121-37 (quoting 131-32).

connects Arthur with Ector and Priam of Troy, thereby presenting him as a new Brutus (*aMA* 4342–46)—the last and greatest example of Briton military prowess and a worthy addition to the Nine Worthies.

Malory's King Arthur: From the Alliterative to the Prose *Morte*

The alliterative-poet's presentation of Arthur as heroic conqueror-king greatly influenced Sir Thomas Malory and undergirds the characterization of Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur*. The alliterative *Morte* has long been recognized as Malory's principal source for the Roman War story in his Tale II, but the poem is an even greater influence on Malory than current critical discourse admits. Again and again in his *Arthuriad*, Malory emphasizes Arthur's sense of honor and knightly prowess. Although perfectly willing to rearrange his sources when it suits him, Malory carefully carries over from the alliterative poem Arthur's most important single combat in the early days of his career, his battle with the Giant of Mont Saint-Michel (*MD* 154.6–159.4). Arthur's victory here, as in the poem (discussed above), continues the work of Malory's Tale I: to establish the king's "martial credentials" and heroism.¹⁵⁹ Arthur likewise distinguishes himself in both his joust with Pellynore and his mortal combat with Accolon earlier in *Le Morte Darthur*. Pellynore is a great fighter, described by Merlin as "one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde and the strengyst man of armys" (*MD* 38.27–28; cf. 44.20), and by Malory as "a good man off prouesse as few in tho dayes lvyng" (61.18). Yet, despite Pellynore's considerable martial stature, Arthur matches him. Even the breaking of Arthur's first sword during this combat increases the king's valor to the point that Pellynore fears for his life and suddenly gets the better of Arthur; then Merlin's intervention prevents the king's death (*MD* 40.27–43.4).¹⁶⁰ The mortal battle with Accolon, in contrast, is orchestrated by Morgan le Fay in the hopes of killing Arthur. The plan obviously fails, partly due to the Lady of the Lake's intervention; nevertheless, that intervention itself pays homage to and corroborates the display of courage and knightly skill that reveals Arthur's own stature as "so good a knyght and such a man of worship" (*MD* 107.30–117.27; quoting 113.21–22). Consequently, both of these combats—

159. Elizabeth Archibald, "Beginnings: *The Tale of King Arthur* and *King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius*," in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 148.

160. The importance of the Pellynore encounter is further highlighted by two pointing fingers in the manuscript: see K. S. Whetter, "Inks and Hands and Fingers in the Manuscript of Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Speculum* 92, no. 2 (2017): 441–42.

bookended by acquiring and nearly losing Excalibur—emphasize Arthur’s considerable skills as a fighter. To reinforce Arthur’s heroic stature, Malory introduces Gryfflet’s attempt to face Pellynore in combat by measuring Gryfflet against Arthur: “Gryfflet . . . was but yonge, of the ayge of the kynge[,] Arthure” (*MD* 38.16–17). Gryfflet, however, is severely wounded by Pellynore, so the point of the comparison between king and young knight is to illustrate that, despite his youth, Arthur is already a redoubtable warrior and jousting, a fact commented upon by Pellynore himself (*MD* 41.15–17). These knightly qualities of courage and prowess form the basis of Arthur’s powerful and proficient kingship, qualities he then maintains throughout Malory’s “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17).

The greatness of Arthur attracts great knights to his court, just as Arthur’s greatness is reflected in and magnified by the greatness of those knights. Significantly, even Arthur’s enemies recognize the *worshyppfull* status of Arthur and his Fellowship. Thus, during the early battles to establish Arthur’s kingship, the Northern spies are dismayed to realize that Arthur’s court comprises “such a felyship that they may never be brokyn, and well-nyghe all the world holdith with Arthure, for there ys the floure of chevalry” (*MD* 95.29–31). When Rome sends Senators to demand tribute of England, the cowering messengers return to the Continent to warn Lucius that Arthur “is the royallyst kynge that lyvyth on erthe” (*MD* 150.13–28), one who poses a considerable threat to Lucius’s planned conquest. Indeed, when Morgan le Fay’s earlier attempt to kill Arthur at the hands of Accolon through the means of Arthur’s own sword fails, the dying Accolon reveals that Morgan hates Arthur “because he is *moste of worship and of prouesse* of one of hir blood” (*MD* 114.33–35 [our italics]). In these and other ways, the early episodes and Tales of *Le Morte Darthur* work to establish Arthur as a martial and honorable figure: so much so that Trystram himself will later commend Arthur as the fount from which “all knyghtes may lerne to be a knyght” (*MD* 587.33). The structure of Malory’s Arthuriad reinforces Trystram’s point, for *only after* Arthur establishes himself as worthy king and heroic knight in the opening two Tales does Malory turn to the individual adventures of the knights of Arthur’s court in the Tales of Launcelot, Gareth, Trystram, and the knights of the Grail Quest in the middle sections of “The Hoole Book”; afterward, he places Arthur once again center stage in the final two Tales. Arthur’s own heroic prowess thus introduces, parallels, and explains the great prowess of the Round Table Fellowship, just as Arthur’s heroic stature explains why royal knights of Gawayne’s, Launcelot’s, and Trystram’s stature would wish to join Arthur’s affinity.

Like his alliterative predecessor, then, Malory opens and closes his *Morte* by presenting an Arthur who is a worthy and honorable king. Similarly, although there is less constant focus on conquest in Malory's *Morte* than in the poem, Malory opens his narrative with the battle that leads to Arthur's conception and then recounts Arthur's own battles against Lott and the rebels—battles that establish and maintain his kingship (*MD* 1.3–62.11). Malory also carries over from his English source the epithet “Conquerrouer” for Arthur (as at *MD* 146.3, 148.21, 154.4–5, 154.26, 154.33, 156.4, 186.34), and he closes his “Hoole Book” with Arthur's defeat of Mordred's insurrection and the deaths of all the principal characters either in this civil war or, as in the case of Launcelot and Gwenyvere, in the war's aftermath (915.2–940.16). The entire organization of the plot, as well as Malory's treatment of his sources, bespeaks his originality of vision. The point, for our purposes, is that this original vision of the Arthurian story includes a laudable and heroic King Arthur—a heroic characterization that Malory inherits from, but expands even farther than, that created by the poets of the stanzaic and alliterative *Mortes*.

Arthur's heroic stature is evident in Malory's granting to him communal, paternal, magical, and divine approval for his kingship. A key example of Malory's favorable presentation of Arthur's kingship comes very early in *Le Morte Darthur* when Arthur repeatedly draws the sword-in-the-stone from a setting in the churchyard of “the grettest chirch of London,” after which act he is repeatedly hailed as king by the commons despite the attempts of the more recalcitrant barons and minor kings to draw the sword themselves (*MD* 7.7–11.9). The commons are convinced “that it is Goddes wille that [Arthur] shalle be [their] kyng” (*MD* 10.35), a belief that the joint arrangement of the sword-test by Merlin and the Archbishop of Canterbury (6.29–7.26) justifies. Despite this notable cooperation of magical and divine authority, Ruth Lexton reads the sword-in-the-stone episode as an act of usurpation reflecting the contested monarchy and national crises of the English Wars of the Roses; for Lexton, the commons' support for Arthur symbolizes the uncertainty and illegitimacy of Arthur's reign.¹⁶¹ Such a claim, however, forces the tail to wag the dog; the fact that the rebel kings do not accept Arthur's bloodline and rule hardly proves his illegitimacy. After all, in the face of Uther's imminent death, Merlin assembles “alle the barons . . . tofore the kyng” to confirm Arthur as Uther's rightful son and heir (*MD* 6.10–24), so Arthur's paternally bestowed

161. Ruth Lexton, *Contested Language in Malory's “Morte Darthur”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–26.

right to the throne has been proclaimed to the higher classes. Because “every lord that was myghty . . . wende to have ben kyng,” however, Merlin and the Archbishop then arrange the sword-test, and the Archbishop “truste[s] that God wold make hym knowe that shold wynne the swerd” (*MD* 6.27–7.35). Therefore, both Merlin’s magic and God’s will confirm Arthur’s right to rule. There *are* echoes of fifteenth-century England here, especially in the threat posed to the monarch and the stability of the realm by “overmighty” lords.¹⁶² However, Malory makes clear that Arthur “is rightwys kynge borne of all England” (*MD* 7.15–16). The barons’ collective inability to draw the sword from the stone, Uther’s and the Archbishop’s proclamations of Arthur’s status as heir, and Arthur’s own actions all provide verbal, testimonial, and visual confirmation of Arthur’s right to rule. The textual evidence testifies *repeatedly* to Arthur’s martial and monarchical splendor. Approval for Arthur’s kingship is magnified by Malory’s modifications to the source here (the French *Suite du Merlin*), modifications that increase the degree of Merlin’s cooperation with the Archbishop.¹⁶³

Malory’s Merlin continues his role as helper of and adviser to the king throughout the opening Tale of “King Uther and King Arthur,”¹⁶⁴ a counseling position (as explored below) more extensive than that found in Malory’s French sources. Arthur’s first act as king justifies this supernatural support, for Malory tells his audience that the newly crowned Arthur immediately received numerous complaints about the “grete wronges that were done syn the dethe of Kyng Uther,” all of which wrongs Arthur immediately sets right (*MD* 11.10–17). The Roman War story of “King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius” likewise sees Arthur establish just rule over lands that had been marked by strife, and Malory presents several scenes during this conflict that demonstrate Arthur’s good conduct to friends and foes alike.¹⁶⁵ Malo-

162. The threat posed by “overmighty subjects” to “undermighty ruler[s]” is a crucial element in McFarlane’s classic accounts of the sociopolitical upheaval, often called Bastard feudalism, of the Wars of the Roses: see K. B. McFarlane, “The Wars of the Roses,” in his *England in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Hambledon, 1981), 231–61 (at 238–40). Cf. McFarlane, “Bastard Feudalism,” also in *England in the Fifteenth Century*, 23–43 (at 41–42).

163. On Malory’s treatment of the French source, see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 12.13ff.

164. We use Field’s title. Vinaver titles it “The Tale of King Arthur,” often abbreviated by scholars to “Tale I.”

165. See, for example, *MD* 146.20–147.5, 175.25–26, 185.29–186.11, 188.5–8. Many of these scenes are carried over from the alliterative *Morte* and so have already been discussed above. They are equally approbative here. Malory confusingly provides two

ry's willingness both to modify his French source when presenting Arthur's initial righting of wrongs and to alter it by adding Arthur's being crowned with an oath "unto his lords and the comyns for to be a true kyng" (*MD* 11.7–8) reflects his apparent desire to develop a positive portrait of Arthur.¹⁶⁶ These changes reveal how Malory's treatment of this French source creates an image of Arthur as a martial, just, and caring ruler.

Tellingly, Malory also showcases the extent to which Arthur's justice system extends to women by drawing on an English source, the stanzaic *Morte*. Much has been written about the ways in which the Round Table or Pentecostal Oath, specifically its clause "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes soccour" (*MD* 97.31–32), foregrounds the influence of women in *Le Morte Darthur* and in Arthurian chivalry.¹⁶⁷ Yet the influence of women in Arthurian justice is apparent even earlier in the text, when Ulpuns invokes conventions of trial-by-combat to accuse Igrayne of treachery for disguising Arthur's identity and thereby causing civil war (*MD* 37.3–20). Igrayne's response, original to *Le Morte Darthur*, begins, "I am a woman and I may nat fyght; but rather than I sholde be dishonoured, there wolde som good man take my quarell" (*MD* 37.21–23). The whole issue is happily resolved by Merlin, but Igrayne's response, showing not merely a request but an *expectation* that "som good man" will fight on her behalf, foregrounds the potential for female agency in securing justice.¹⁶⁸ This increased female power in Malory's *Morte* compared to what is present in his French sources is, we contend, an example of the influence that the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* had on Malory's

titles for this second Tale: "The Tale of the Noble Kyng Arthure that was Emperoure Hymself Thorow Dygnyte of His Hondys" at the beginning of its Winchester *explicit*, and "The Noble Tale betwyxt Kyng Arthure and Lucius the Emperour of Rome" in the final lines of the same *explicit* (both on folio 96r). Vinaver uses a standardization of the first title but also uses "The Tale of the Noble King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius." Scholars often abbreviate these two titles to "Tale II." We again use Field's title.

166. On Malory's originality, see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 16.20–23, 16.25–30. Raluca L. Radulescu, *The Gentry Context for Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 97–100, also considers the beginning of Arthur's reign to be one of justice and good kingship.

167. See especially Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 28–44.

168. On Malory's originality, see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 45.28–30. On Igrayne and "greater [female] access to . . . justice," see Amanda D. Taylor, "The Body of Law," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 72–73. As the Igrayne example convincingly demonstrates, we disagree with the accompanying portion of Taylor's thesis, that Malory simultaneously embeds but "problematizes" justice in the *Morte*.

development of his characters—especially his female ones.¹⁶⁹ Malory thus carefully and cleverly interweaves the stanzaic *Morte*'s characterization with that of the alliterative *Morte*, using this insular Arthurian tradition to shape the French sources he frequently and collectively labels as his “Frensshe book” (e.g., *MD* 940.9). Yet what is especially important in terms of narrative and theme, rather than source influence, is that Malory takes considerable care from the outset of his *Arthuriad* to present his Arthur as a just king.¹⁷⁰

Malory's Arthur not only displays a penchant for justice but also shows a laudable concern for his knights, most famously and trenchantly in his “holé togyders” lament for their departure on the eve of the Grail Quest (*MD* 672.25–30).¹⁷¹ It is noteworthy, however, that the king expresses such sentiments on other occasions and for relatively minor knights, including the young Gryfflet, whom Arthur knights with the proviso that the new knight limit his jousting with Pellynore to a single encounter in order to prevent the outmatched Gryfflet's death (*MD* 38.8–39.33). All of these actions belie the claim of some scholars that Malory's praise of Arthur is ironic or at odds with Arthur's actual deeds—a complaint that might well be a subconscious (and intertextual) by-product of the standard critical reading of alliterative-Arthur.¹⁷² Furthermore, Malory's Arthur is also a considerable warrior or knight of *worshyp*. After the defeat of Lott and the rebels, Merlin helps Arthur to construct a tomb that simultaneously acknowledges Lott's greatness and Arthur's even more profound *worshyp*, a reputation that he garnered by defeating the rebels.¹⁷³ The tomb thus includes

twelve images of laton and cooper, overgylte with golde in the sygne
of the twelve kynges, and . . . Kynge Arthure was made in the sygne

169. On the influence of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* on Malory, see above, Chapter Two, and below, Chapter Four.

170. At the start of his reign, Arthur is a young but good king in the Post-Vulgate *Merlin*, a source that Malory follows; however, Malory makes Arthur even more magnanimous and just than in this source.

171. On this lament, see K. S. Whetter, *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 148–50.

172. Contra, for example, Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 6–8; and especially Laura K. Bedwell, “The Failure of Justice, the Failure of Arthur,” *Arthuriana* 21, no. 3 (2011): 3–22. Cf. Taylor's argument, “Body of Law” about problematized justice.

173. On the symbolism of the tomb, see the slightly different readings proposed by Cory James Rushton, “The Tomb of the Kings: Imperial Space in Arthur's Camelot,” *Arthurian Literature* 36 (2011): 175–92; and Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 165–66.

of a fygure stondynge aboven [the rebels] with a swerde drawyn in hys honde, and all the twelve fygures had countenance lyke unto men that were overcome. (*MD* 62.5–11)

The tomb's iconography and public display both announce and memorialize Arthur's undisputed kingship over all of Logres. Given that Malory presents Lott and the rebels as knights of misplaced loyalties and bad politics but considerable prowess (*MD* 27.25–28.11), Arthur's victory helps to foreground his own martial stature. Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman argue that, as king, Arthur cannot participate in the public exchange of chivalric capital attendant upon violent display, but this is not entirely true:¹⁷⁴ repeatedly in Tale I of the *Morte*, Malory aggrandizes Arthur's martial and chivalric worth, including the links between Arthur's knightly *worshyp* and kingly stature. By medieval standards, Arthur is a good fighter and a good king.

Arthur's heroic kingship and the conquests that undergird it are accordingly recalled in several other locations throughout *Le Morte Darthur*. The openings of "The Tale of Balyn," which mentions the "grete warre[s]" Arthur fought to gain control over England (*MD* 47.2–5), and "The Weddyng of Kyng Arthure," which recalls how "yet many kyngis and lordis hylde [Arthur] grete werre for that" kingship (76.5–6), highlight the conquests that make his kingship possible. Malory likewise begins his "Noble Tale betwyxt Kynge Arthure and Lucius the Emperor of Rome" (Tale II) by situating it "aftir [Arthur's] marvelous knyghtis and he had venquyshed the moste party of his enemyes" (*MD* 145.3–5). All of these reminders of Arthur's monarchial achievements appear relatively close together and relatively early in the *Morte*, but a similar reminder opens "The Fyrste Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones," a tale situated during

that tyme Kynge Arthure regned, and he was hole kynge of Ingelonde, Walys, Scotlonde, and of many othir realmys. Howbehit there were many kynges that were lordys of many contreyes, but all they helde theire londys of Kynge Arthure. (*MD* 289.12–16)

Many scholars consider "The Boke off) Syr Trystram de Lyones" to be "the *royaulme aventureux*," the locale in Malory's Arthuriad "where the chival-

174. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, "No Pain, No Gain: Violence as Symbolic Capital in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 119–20.

ric world of quests and tournaments exists in its purest form.”¹⁷⁵ Obviously, Trystram is a prime focus in Tale V, but the length of this Tale is such that it includes the knightly adventures of a good many others, including Trystram’s rival and eventual friend, Palomydes. It is thus all the more noteworthy that Malory—despite some scholarly claims to the contrary—goes out of his way to contextualize the adventures of the Knights of the Round Table against the opening backdrop of Arthur’s own martial and monarchical achievements.

All of the abovementioned images or statements of Arthur as a king of large polity comprising many lands conquered or secured through conflict and battle are original to Malory, although the one with which he begins Tale II is closely modeled on an even longer encomium in praise of Arthur’s conquests at the beginning of his alliterative source.¹⁷⁶ For Raluca Radulescu, passages such as these bespeak Malory’s channeling of gentry concerns with good lordship and the unity of the realm.¹⁷⁷ This is certainly true, but the sociopolitical context matters in an additional way. Malory here reflects both gentry *and* aristocratic views of good kingship, and the foregrounding of the many great wars Arthur had to fight to become king would appeal to English armigerous classes of all ranks, many of whose members had long made or augmented their fortunes through war.¹⁷⁸

Although Malory himself fought at different times for both the Yorkist and Lancastrian factions during the Wars of the Roses, he seems not to have made his fortune doing so given that the charges against him possibly include debt.¹⁷⁹ It is our contention that Malory’s originality in these

175. We quote P. J. C. Field, “Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*,” in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 237.

176. On the originality of these passages, see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 61.1–5, 97.1–7, 185.1–7, and (for the “Trystram” passage) Field, “Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*,” 236 and n. 36. Vinaver cites these passages as evidence for his theory of the independence of each of Malory’s various Tales; however, as Field notes, the echoes connecting the opening passages of “Balyn” and the “Trystram” (and, we would add, those in “The Wedding” and the opening of Tale II) help to create unity across the Arthurian.

177. Radulescu, *Gentry Context*, 99–105 and throughout.

178. Readers need not accept Riddy’s interpretation of Malory’s nostalgic endorsement of English “patriotism” and lost “empire” to see connections between an active and martially successful Round Table and Anglo–French relations in the fifteenth century. For these arguments, see Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 44, and Felicity Riddy, “Contextualizing *Le Morte Darthur*: Empire and Civil War,” in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 55–73.

179. Debt is central to the argument of Anne F. Sutton, “Malory in Newgate,” *The Library* 7th series 1, no. 3 (2000): 243–62; the fullest account of Malory’s life and crimes

passages, passages with which he emphasizes Arthur's kingship, reflect his conscious borrowing from the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. In addition, as we have argued elsewhere, Arthur is a more prominent character and king in the stanzaic *Morte Arthure* than is generally acknowledged; part of this prominence includes being an active and good leader.¹⁸⁰ As noted above, medieval chroniclers present Arthur in an extremely positive light; this is especially true of Hardyng, and Malory's use of Hardyng—especially in the Roman War story—has long been known. Edward Donald Kennedy has made a convincing case for the influence of the chronicles on the stanzaic-poet as well.¹⁸¹ Therefore, because Malory made considerable use of both the stanzaic and the alliterative *Mortes*, we contend that Malory blends the portrait of a good king from the stanzaic poem with the alliterative *Morte's* image of Arthur as a powerful and beneficent conqueror-king. Borrowings from these English poems complement Malory's borrowings from John Hardyng's *Chronicle*, and do so in ways largely unacknowledged by current scholarship with its revisionist emphasis on Arthur's (supposed) failings. The result of this borrowing is a more active and successful King Arthur than the one usually present in Malory's ostensibly authoritative "Frensshe book." As Rosemary Morris observes, "Anglo-French nationalistic rivalry" in the Middle Ages means that the Arthur of the French is rarely depicted as a successful warrior-king.¹⁸² It is therefore telling that Malory takes pains to insert into the story of Trystram's adventures a reminder of Arthur's role as "hole kynge of Ingelonde, Walys, Scotlonde, and of many othir realmys" (*MD* 289.13–14). As Lisa Robeson notes, Malory in fact makes the Arthur of this part of "The Hoole Book" a more powerful and more successful monarch than either the Lancastrians or Yorkists could boast—even more powerful than Henry V.¹⁸³ Malory's fifteenth-century audience would have seen this pattern of the king's success as a good thing. By inserting this and many other reminders of national affairs and monarchical power into the knightly "*royaulme aventureux*" that is the "Boke off Syr Trystram,"¹⁸⁴ Malory does more than create

remains P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

180. Fiona Tolhurst and K. S. Whetter, "Standing Up for the Stanzaic-poet," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 86–113.

181. E. D. Kennedy, "Stanzaic *Morte Arthure*," 91–112.

182. Rosemary Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 59–65 (quoting 151 n. 36).

183. Lisa Robeson, "Malory's Arthur and the Politics of Chivalry," *Enarratio: Publications of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 17 (2010): 107–33 (at 108–11).

184. Quoting Field, "Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*," 237.

a powerful English king; he links Arthur's knightly qualities and *worshyp* to those of his knights.

Malory, moreover, goes well beyond Arthur's successful conquests as outlined in the alliterative *Morte*, for Arthur's Roman War in *Le Morte Darthur* is not interrupted by news of Mordred's rebellion. Instead, as is often remarked, Malory follows Hardyng's *Chronicle* in having his Arthur successfully crowned Emperor of Rome at the end of the war (*MD* 187.22–188.5). The inevitable destruction of both Arthurian kingship and the Round Table Fellowship that traditionally follows the Roman campaign is thereby delayed for hundreds of pages, whether those pages are found in the Winchester manuscript, the Caxton incunabulum, or a modern edition. As with the prominence of fighting in the alliterative *Morte*, conquest in *Le Morte Darthur* thus brings kingly success and honor. Nall is therefore fully justified in arguing that Malory's changes to the Roman War story reveal his support for the attitude, common to many of the fifteenth-century English warrior elite, that foreign war could be good for domestic peace and prosperity.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, at least as much as with the alliterative poem, it must always be remembered that the “technique of fighting, and more particularly of single combat, is Malory's favourite topic,”¹⁸⁶ so all mentions of the capacity to win *worshyp* in combat are laudatory in *Le Morte Darthur*. Not every good fighter is on the side of right, as witness Lott and the rebels; but many of those who possess both prowess and *worshyp* are usually axiomatically good. This is true whether the fighting in question occurs in Arthur's wars to defend his kingship against Lott and the other rebels (in Tale I), in the wars to defend and expand his kingdom when faced with Lucius's threat (in Tale II), or in the practice wars of tournament, joust, and individual knight errantry in the Tales devoted to both Trystram and Isode (Tale V) and Launcelot and Gwenyvere (Tale VII). As opposed to the romances of Chrétien de Troyes or the *Lancelot-Graal* Cycle, where Arthur is frequently a weak ruler, Malory's Arthur is a great warrior and active king whose Round Table mirrors and enhances his own heroism.

Rejecting the Moralized Malory

One of the benefits of source study is the light it sheds on Malory's artistry and originality, specifically the ways in which he handled his sources

185. Nall, *Reading and War*, 139–58. On the financial attractions of war for the upper classes, see McFarlane, *Nobility of Later Medieval England*, 19–40.

186. Vinaver, xxxiii.

to create his own vision of Arthur, his knights, and the ladies and opponents who interact with them. Despite the ways in which Malory moves beyond his sources to emphasize Arthur's greatness as a knight and king, critics have returned to finding fault with Arthur and, often, to linking these faults with his downfall. As with scholarship on alliterative-Arthur, much of the scholarship denigrating Malory's Arthur is couched in moral terms. We say "returned to finding fault" because critiquing Arthur in moral terms has considerable claim to being the once and future mode of Malory studies, a mode evident from Roger Ascham in the sixteenth century, through Victorian moralizing in the nineteenth century, and continuing in the Lumiansky School in the 1960s—and then revived by that School's modern adherents or unconscious imitators in the last two generations.

Although we disagree with the views she summarizes, a useful overview of scholarly responses to Malory's Arthur is offered by Robeson. Robeson begins her compelling account of Arthur's and Mordred's kingships in Malory's *Morte* by noting the

commonplace in late Victorian Malory criticism [that] held that the final confrontation between Arthur and Mordred on Salisbury Plain represented an example of sin coming home to roost. The House of Atreus was invoked by [such important critics and editors as Edward Strachey, F. J. Furnivall, A. C. Swinburne, and Ernest Rhys until] well into the second half of the twentieth century to illustrate the way in which the results of Arthur's incestuous affair with his sister produce the instrument of his own downfall, his son and nephew Mordred.¹⁸⁷

This crime-and-punishment view of Arthur's kingship, together with the idea that the downfall of Arthur's kingdom is a moral tragedy, was echoed and indeed reinforced by most of the contributors to the highly influential 1964 collection *Malory's Originality*.¹⁸⁸ The central thesis of what might be termed this Lumiansky School is that the downfall of the Arthurian kingdom is the consequence of any number of sins, including Arthur's incestuous conception of Mordred, and Launcelot and Gwenyvere's treacherous and

187. Lisa Robeson, "Malory and the Death of Kings," in *The Arthurian Way of Death*, ed. Karen Cherevatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 136. A convenient anthology of commentary on Malory's *Arthuriad* by early authors, editors, and critics, much of it showcasing the recurring moralistic interpretations of nineteenth-century readers, is Marylyn Jackson Parins, ed., *Malory: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

188. See *Originality*. As should be apparent, we dispute this approach.

adulterous affair. Although Lumiansky's team ignores the facts that—unlike the authors of several of his French sources—Malory never so much as hints in the final scenes of his “Hoole Book” that Arthur is being punished for sin, and never places blame on Launcelot and Gwenyvere for the Round Table's destruction,¹⁸⁹ the moralistic reading of *Le Morte Darthur* this group of scholars produced has proved to be both long-lived and influential. One of the contributors to *Originality*, Charles Moorman, published his own book on Malory's Arthurian soon after the Lumiansky collection appeared in print. In this monograph, Moorman argued that the great unifying themes of *Le Morte Darthur*, evident in “the inability of the Round Table to live up to its own proper standards and ideals,” are “The Failure in Love,” “The Failure in Religion,” and “The Failure in Chivalry”; these themes thus double as his chapter titles.¹⁹⁰ For all of her methodological differences from Moorman, Elizabeth Pochoda similarly grounds her account of the failure of Arthurian ideals in the supposed failure of the Round Table to uphold its own “moral demands,” or to recognize that good morals and good government are inter-related.¹⁹¹ Current critics are not always explicitly moralistic, but the long shadow of the Lumiansky School is apparent in the continuing critical insistence on the failures of, or flaws in, one or more of the following: Arthurian knighthood, kingship, or justice.¹⁹² So engrained is this moralistic approach to *Le Morte Darthur* that Paul Rovang concludes his study of Malory's characters by asserting that “moral philosophy” and “moral accountability” undergird Malory's characters and message.¹⁹³

As we have hopefully illustrated through this chapter, scholarship on the alliterative *Morte* is unduly focused on moralistic readings, as is a significant

189. The idea that Arthur's death is a punishment for his sins *is* present in the Post-Vulgate Cycle, for instance, but that does not mean that Malory repeats it. As Kennedy judiciously points out, Malory at the end of his “Hoole Book” downplays any hint of Arthur's sins and emphasizes instead Mordred's faults: see Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory's *Morte Darthur*: A Politically Neutral Adaptation of the Arthurian Story,” *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003): 145–69.

190. Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); we quote 63.

191. Elizabeth T. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 104–40.

192. See, for example, Jacqueline Stuhmiller, “*Iudicium Dei, iudicium fortunae*: Trial by Combat in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,” *Speculum* 81, no. 2 (2006): 427–62; Bedwell, “Failure of Justice”; Taylor, “Body of Law.”

193. Paul R. Rovang, *Malory's Anatomy of Chivalry* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 183.

amount of scholarship on Malory's *Morte Darthur*. This moralizing tendency in criticism on both *Mortes* and the arguments that support it constitute one of the powerful intertexts to which the title of our book refers. Undoubtedly a major intertextual explanation of this moralizing, one especially relevant to late-Victorian critics but still impacting those of the twenty-first century, is the influence of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Tennyson's rigidly moralistic Arthurian message. Although tempered with nostalgia for the Arthurian past, Tennyson's moralism is especially evident in *Idylls of the King*, in which he contrasts Guinevere "the sinful Queen" with Arthur the virtuous king, who was "ever virgin save for [her]."¹⁹⁴ T. H. White's vehemently anti-war *Once and Future King* might also have encouraged such moralistic criticism during the twentieth century.

A key purpose of our intertextual juxtapositioning of the Arthur of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* with the Arthur of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, however, is to suggest that the argument of recent critics that Malory's Arthur is a bad king who "looks like a usurper and proves to be a tyrant"¹⁹⁵ is in part a product of the long-standing critical commonplace that the Arthur of the alliterative *Morte* is an immoral and tyrannical ruler. We hope to have corrected the moral reading of the alliterative *Morte* in the first half of this chapter; Malory's Arthur, we contend, is equally heroic. Certainly Lexton's claim that "the coolheaded and single-minded Mordred may be a better option for the polity" than Arthur is problematic.¹⁹⁶ This proposition not only possibly echoes those critics who think that alliterative-Mordred is a viable candidate for king in *Morte Arthure* (an argument detailed and rebutted above) but also flies in the face of considerable textual and contextual evidence in both the alliterative and prose *Morte*.¹⁹⁷ No one can deny that Mordred at the end of Malory's *Morte Darthur* is, as Naomi Mitchison puts it in her mid-twentieth-

194. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Guinevere," *Idylls of the King*, in *The Poems of Tennyson in Three Volumes: Second Edition Incorporating the Trinity College Manuscripts*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), lines 298, 351, 554. On the complicated moralizing imposed upon Tennyson's women, see Ingrid Ranum, "Tennyson's False Women," *Victorian Newsletter* 117 (2010): 39–57; Marylyn Jackson Parins, "Malory's Expurgators," in *The Arthurian Tradition*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988), 147–48. On Victorian influences on modern interpretation of Malory's Guinevere, see Chapter 4, below.

195. Lexton, *Contested Language*, 18.

196. Contra Lexton, *Contested Language*, 168. Tellingly, Lexton herself acknowledges that Mordred is a traitor.

197. On Mordred's unsuitability for kingship in *Le Morte Darthur*, see Robeson, "Death of Kings," 136–50.

century retelling, “a magnificent fighter . . . fully up to the standard of his family.”¹⁹⁸ Yet the notion that he would make a decent king—let alone “a better option” than Arthur—willfully ignores his treasonous and villainous machinations.

Many Malory scholars acknowledge that Arthur often takes counsel early in his reign, and that such listening to counsel is potentially the mark of a good king. As with interpretation of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, however, many critics complain that Malory’s Arthur becomes more tyrannical, or at least more open to blame, as events move toward the final destruction of the kingdom. Radulescu makes this latter argument at length, insisting on a breakdown in counsel whereby Arthur in *Le Morte Darthur* is led astray by overmighty subjects at the close of his reign; this, in turn, leads to a breakdown in government that leads to civil war and destruction.¹⁹⁹ It is true that Arthur allows Gawayne to lead him toward war against Launcelot in Benwick, and that many critics (as our last note shows) blame both king and nephew for this situation. It is, nevertheless, also true that Malory modifies his sources to emphasize even more than usual the love and bond between Arthur and Gawayne.²⁰⁰ One consequence of these changes, as Edward Donald Kennedy notes, is to present Arthur as “less tyrannical” and less “vengeful” than in the sources, especially the French *Mort Artu*. Equally important, however, is the historical fact that such blood ties and close affinities would have been perfectly acceptable to Malory and his fifteenth-century audience, for they resonate with the factionalism of the Wars of the Roses.²⁰¹ The end result, in both fifteenth-century England and *Le Morte Darthur*, might not always be auspicious, but Malory and his audience would be sympathetic to such favoritism of blood relatives.

Since medieval mirrors for princes warn kings not to grant too much authority to one counselor, Louis Boyle criticizes Malory’s Arthur for entrusting his kingdom and his wife to Mordred when he departs England to pursue civil war against Launcelot in the final tale of *Le Morte Darthur*.²⁰²

198. Naomi Mitchison, *To the Chapel Perilous* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955), 144. For evidence of Mordred’s fighting prowess, see *MD* 923.9–11.

199. Radulescu, *Gentry Context*, 122–46. Lexton, *Contested Language*, throughout, uses “political language” to argue that Arthur is a tyrannical usurper throughout the Arthurian.

200. Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 66–69. For more details of Gawayne’s honor and loyalty in *Morte Darthur* see K. S. Whetter, “Characterization in Malory and Bonnie,” *Arthuriana* 19, no. 3 (2009): 123–35.

201. Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark,” 155–57.

202. Louis J. Boyle, “Ruled by Merlin,” *Arthuriana* 23, no. 2 (2013): 52–66 (at 60).

In this scenario, the king's mismanagement is as much his own fault as it is the fault of his advisers. Radulescu notes this failing but adds a further supposed fault: that Arthur and his knights fall prey to excess emotion and excess violence.²⁰³ Robeson's position is that Arthur's and Mordred's familial "perversion of the normal father-son relationship" extends into a political relationship, with Arthur becoming a malfunctioning king and Mordred a perversion of kingship.²⁰⁴ While these and similar scholarly critiques are grounded in the *historical* contexts of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, they arguably downplay the commonplace factionalism of Malory's day, as well as the ways in which Arthur conforms to medieval expectations of good kingship. Such complaints also ignore the book's *generic* contexts, the ways in which Malory consistently mingles romance with tragedy so that his good characters, including Arthur, constantly try to do the right thing, even as the results of their efforts lead to unhappiness or even tragedy.²⁰⁵ Such tragedy, however, is not the product of immorality, either in Malory's *Morte* or in the alliterative *Morte*. We contend further that, even with historical contextualization, the Arthur of Malory and his English sources is a proficient knight and a great king whose merits secure considerable, albeit finite, success.

It is frequently claimed that the Arthurian Fellowship's failure either to heed the past or to recognize the threatening realities of its own limitations is compounded in *Le Morte Darthur* by Arthur's attempt to function simultaneously as both a king who exerts regnal, public power and a fellow knight and private member of the chivalric community. Pochoda cites Mador's refusal to accept Arthur's word that Gwenyvere is innocent of poisoning Patryse (*MD* 794.33–795.25) as a key piece of evidence that, by Tale VII, Arthur is no longer admired as king and that royal weakness ensures the Round Table's destruction.²⁰⁶ We would argue, on the contrary, that Mador's refusal to accept Gwenyvere's innocence is less important than Malory's reminder to his audi-

Boyle's purpose is to highlight contradictions within the *speculum principis* tradition as much as contradictions within Arthur's behavior as ruler. To our minds, these contradictions in the advice manuals do much to mitigate Arthur's supposed guilt.

203. Raluca L. Radulescu, "Oute of mesure," in *Re-Viewing "Le Morte Darthur,"* ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 119–31.

204. Robeson, "Death of Kings," 137.

205. On the genre of Malory's *Morte*, see Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 367–69, 376–77, 400–403; Fiona Tolhurst, "Why Every Knight Needs His Lady," in *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur*, ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 133–47; and Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 99–159.

206. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda*, 123–24.

ence that Mador accepts Arthur's publicly recognized role as the unbiased dispenser of justice. In other words, Mador's insistence on trying Gwenyvere hinges on not only his devotion to blood (Patryse is his cousin), but also his expectation that Arthur will conduct himself as an honorable knight and proper judge "as [he] beth a ryghteous kynge" (*MD* 795.4–6, 795.17–18).²⁰⁷ Even the treacherous Mellyagaunt requests that his and Launcelot's battle take place eight days after their mutual challenge, "in the fylde besydys Westemynster" (*MD* 854.31–32). When Launcelot is delayed by Mellyagaunt's trickery, the latter then demands that Arthur give him justice (*MD* 857.13–18). As with Mador before him, Mellyagaunt views Arthur as a just ruler—even while attempting to pervert Arthur's justice to his own vicious ends.

Furthermore, if readers understand tyranny as the king's privileging his personal will, greed, and desires above the good of the commonweal—as the Lancastrians implied was the case with Richard II—then the extent to which Arthur repeatedly suppresses his personal will in "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere" is a notable indicator of his praiseworthy kingship.²⁰⁸ In John Watts's detailed account of the terms under which late-medieval kings ruled, the king's will was paramount, yet the concomitant expectation was that this will would adequately reflect "the interests of the subjects."²⁰⁹ It is therefore significant that, on both of the occasions when Arthur is expected to try Gwenyvere, the king sets aside his own desires in order to ensure that justice be done—and be seen to be done. Granted, he does his best to find Gwenyvere a champion who will fight Mador on her behalf (*MD* 794.27–797.21), but since he does not simply dismiss Mador's charge the point is that he places his royal duty *above* his personal conviction that his lady-love and queen is innocent. Consequently, Edward Donald Kennedy's conclusion that "Malory's Arthur has many of the best traits of the medieval ruler: interest in the common good, love of his men, courage, concern for law, [and] a sense of justice" is entirely correct.²¹⁰ Significantly, Arthur's embodiment of many of these traits is a product of Malory's additions to his sources. Therefore, the

207. On the originality of Malory's emphasis on Arthur being a knight as well as king, see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 1049.24–1051.6.

208. The penultimate Tale of the Arthuriad does not have a clear title in the witnesses. We use Field's title rather than Vinaver's editorial title, "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere." Critics often use the shorthand "Tale VII."

209. Watts, *Henry VI*, 16–19.

210. Kennedy, "Malory's King Mark," 149. See also Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 79.

textual and intertextual evidence reveals that Malory's Arthur is not nearly as prone to bad counsel and bad behavior as his critics suggest.

The historical evidence likewise reveals Arthur to be a successful king, for he heeds good counsel. Richard II's deposition was justified in part by his supposedly tyrannical behavior, even if his accusers stopped short of actually labeling him "tyrant."²¹¹ Certainly, the medieval king's taking of counsel was important. *Speculum principis* manuals advocated that kings seek advice, even if they also cautioned that kings not adopt that advice too easily or obviously.²¹² Malory seems to be aware of this political genre or practice because, in the opening Tale of "King Uther and King Arthur," the young king successfully establishes and stabilizes his kingship in part through heeding counsel. One instance of this focus on counsel is Arthur's meeting with Kings Ban and Bors. The significance of Arthur's alliance with Ban and Bors for success in the war against Lott and the rebels is marked in the Winchester manuscript by one *manicula* highlighting the foreign kings' arrival and the joy this creates.²¹³ Even more telling from a thematic viewpoint is the fact that this alliance is further marked by its preponderance of counsel. As Cory James Rushton observes, Malory takes pains to tell his audience how Arthur, Ban, and Bors—after a celebratory tournament—

wente unto *counceyle*, and with hem [many mo]. And aftir they had ben in her *counceyle* they wente unto bedde. And on the morne they harde masse, and to dyner and so to theire *counceyle*, and made many argumentes what were beste to do. (*MD* 18.16–21 [our italics])

"The overall impression," as Rushton points out, "is that of a [lengthy] round of political talks between allies,"²¹⁴ as well as of a king dedicated to forming alliances and ruling both properly and ably. As noted above in our discussion of just war and Arthur's kingship in the alliterative *Morte's* council scene in the Giant's Tower (*aMA* 243–408), Arthur traditionally takes counsel from his knights before responding to the Roman threat of taxation or inva-

211. See Nuttall, *Lancastrian Kingship*, 11–12, 14, 16.

212. See Watts, *Henry VI*, 15, 54–56; Boyle, "Ruled by Merlin," 52–66.

213. See the pointing finger on folio 9v. The seriousness of Lott's threat is marked by another *manicula* at his death (on folio 28v), together with a marginalium (also on 28v) recording "þe dethe of Kynge Lot & of þe xii kyngis."

214. Cory James Rushton, "Talk Is Cheap: Political Discourse in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Disputatio* 5 (2002): 68.

sion. Malory follows the alliterative poem's council scene quite closely (*MD* 146.20–149.5), so his version of it likewise gives the impression of a unified and courageous English polity facing a hostile foe; however, in contrast to the situation during the war against Lott and the rebels, it is now the Round Table Knights and Arthur himself who determine policy, not Merlin.²¹⁵

Another means by which Malory valorizes Arthur and his kingship is the jettisoning of the story of Aurelius's and Uther's reigns, known from Geoffrey of Monmouth onward, in order to begin his *Arthuriad* with the events immediately prior to Arthur's conception and birth; as a result, he can focus more on Arthur's character, deeds, and active rule.²¹⁶ In this choice of focus, he was probably influenced by the poet of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, who similarly ignores the traditional Arthurian prehistory of Aurelius's and Uther's reigns and begins his story well into Arthur's reign, after Arthur has established himself and conquered many lands.²¹⁷ Malory differs from the alliterative-poet, however, in broadening his focus to include female characters. Even in the opening conflict between Uther and Tyntagil, as Armstrong points out, the situation is exacerbated by Uther's love (or lust) for Igrayne: "Martial and marital issues are [thus] linked in a way that they are not in [Malory's] source."²¹⁸ The source for the opening Tale of "King Uther and King Arthur" is primarily the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*, and, although the primacy of women is a stock feature of the romance genre, including in the French Arthurian romances known to Malory, it is notable that women also instigate action in the stanzaic *Morte Arthure*, where there is less focus on women as sinners than in some of the French texts.²¹⁹

Thomas L. Wright notes further that Malory changes Merlin's role in the sources at this point from that of a frequent prognosticator of the Grail to that of a divinely sanctioned counselor and military strategist, one whose

215. Rushton, "Talk Is Cheap," 69–72; *pace* Lexton, *Contested Language*, 54–55.

216. For the effect of this source modification on Arthur's kingship, see Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 71–72. On kingship in Geoffrey's *Historia*, see Fiona Tolhurst, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Siân Echard, "For Mortals are Moved by these Conditions," in *The Fortunes of King Arthur*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 13–28.

217. On the poet's paring down this part of his sources, see further Matthews, *Tragedy of Arthur*, 100–103.

218. Armstrong, *Gender*, 45.

219. See our discussion of the stanzaic-poet's Fair Maid of Ascalot, in Chapter 2, 81–93, and of Gaynour in Chapter 4, 203–4 and 223–42.

advice, as Boyle notes, Arthur is well justified in heeding.²²⁰ If, moreover, the romance protagonist in general is often doing right if he or she accepts advice, how much more appropriate is doing so for a young king? As Watts elucidates in his study of Henry VI, a good king was expected to heed advice or comments from an array of counselors and a wide cross-section of the realm, and then determine an appropriate policy beneficial to the commonweal.²²¹ Pochoda likewise notes the “crucial importance” of good counsel, adding that the “strength of the [late-medieval] state depended on the king’s ability to attract the best councilors”; Rushton cites this observation of Pochoda’s before astutely adding that “Arthur is able to attract excellent councilors at the beginning of his reign.”²²² Although both Pochoda and Rushton ignore the role of the king’s strong will in effective royal government, it is undeniable that the strength of Arthur’s council and counselors early in *Le Morte Darthur* indicates his strong kingship.

A medieval king was expected to reconcile sundry ideals, voices, and actions and then take action himself based on these counseled ideas and his own opinions; however, there were dangers. First, there were the difficulties and possible dangers to a king of having to distinguish good from bad counsel and act for the good of all without being too reliant on any one individual. Second, there was the danger posed by “bastard feudalism,” a term generally attributed to, and influentially elucidated by, K. B. McFarlane. In this scenario, an “undermighty ruler” such as Henry VI opened the way for, and well might soon face threats from, “overmighty subjects.”²²³ As the events of the Wars of the Roses revealed, weak kings, if unchecked, paved the way for what Christine Carpenter calls a “system of alternative kingship” in which powerful magnates such as the dukes of Suffolk or York were able to become *de facto* rulers in their own right, although with an accompanying increase

220. Thomas L. Wright, “The Tale of King Arthur,” in *Originality*, 23–28; Boyle, “Ruled by Merlin,” 53–57.

221. Watts, *Henry VI*, 8–80.

222. Pochoda, *Arthurian Propaganda*, 83; Rushton, “Talk Is Cheap,” 67.

223. McFarlane, “Wars of the Roses,” 238–40; McFarlane, “Bastard Feudalism,” 41–42. The term “bastard feudalism” itself, although considerably nuanced by McFarlane, was actually coined by Charles Plummer in 1885: see McFarlane’s explicit acknowledgment in “Bastard Feudalism,” 23. The idea of “bastard feudalism” remains much used by Malorians as a convenient shorthand for the complex alliances and wars dominating fifteenth-century English politics. It must, however, be acknowledged that the differences in political systems across countries and centuries in the Middle Ages make historians wary of the *feudalism* word: see, for example, Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

in factionalism and decrease in universal authority.²²⁴ In other words, a good, strong king had to take counsel and determine action, whereas a weak king risked turning his counselors and magnates into enemies and rival claimants to the throne.

Yet a complaint of royal weakness is not one that readers can justifiably level against either the Arthur of the alliterative *Morte* or the Arthur of Malory's *Morte*.²²⁵ The Arthur of the French tradition, especially in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes and the Vulgate or *Lancelot-Graal* Cycle, is often quite literally asleep at the wheel, having to be prodded by Keu or Gauvain (or both) into acting according to his royal station. One example of the French king's improper conduct emerges in the prose *Lancelot* when Artus falls into one of his many melancholy reveries. While Artus neglects his honor and his guests, Keu and Gauvain debate the seriousness of the king's neglect and agree he must be woken up. Keu then rouses Artus by blowing a horn, whereupon Gauvain upbraids him for sullyng the honor of the court.²²⁶ Gillian Rogers emphasizes the frequency with which Gawain "throughout his [medieval English] literary career" often corrects as well as protects Arthur, adding that Gawain "is . . . the one knight at court with the licence to do this and emerge unscathed."²²⁷ This sort of prodding, however, is hardly necessary with the Arthurs of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory's "Hoole Book."

Throughout Tales I and II of *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthur behaves as a strong and decisive warrior-king, one who takes the advice and action necessary to quell both internal threats such as the rebellion of King Lott and his companions, and external threats such as that posed by the Roman Embassy and resulting continental war. In the successful pursuit of these wars, the quashing of both internal rebellion and external threat, Malory's Arthur proves himself adept at fulfilling the two main roles of the late-medieval king: defense of the realm from foreign incursion, and the establishment and maintenance of a stable and peaceful polity.²²⁸ In both the alliterative *Morte*

224. Christine Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 107.

225. Pace Radulescu, *Gentry Context*, 137–46, who charges Malory's Arthur with precisely this failing.

226. *Lancelot*, ed. Alexandre Micha, 9 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1978–83), vol. 7, §XXa.9–12, 241–42.

227. Gillian Rogers, "Illuminat vith lawte, and with lufe lasit': Gawain Gives Arthur a Lesson in Magnanimity," in *Romance Reading on the Book*, ed. Jennifer Fellows et al. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 94–111 (at 94–95).

228. On what might be termed "The Art of [medieval] Kingship," see Gillingham,

Arthur and Malory's *Morte Darthur*, moreover, we see Arthur taking counsel, but we also see him making his own policy. This exercise of the king's will is entirely appropriate within a late-medieval context, for although the good king was expected to hear representative counsel, it was also accepted that the king's will was the ultimate authority.

The ideal medieval king was also expected to maintain peace at home, even if that meant fighting wars. Here again we return to the successful model of England's Edward III (who reigned 1327–77). For many of his medieval contemporaries, Edward III was a great king precisely because of his military successes coupled with the fact that, in W. M. Ormrod's words, he "kept England free from baronial rebellion for over forty years."²²⁹ Although the exact timeline of *Le Morte Darthur* is unclear, medieval and modern readers could make the same claim about Malory's Arthur. Granted, Arthur's battles with his opponents are carried over from the sources, but as occurs so often, Malory makes inherited events his own. Indeed, as Robert H. Wilson long ago observed, Malory's most "creative" modifications to his source material in terms of "the greatest originality in characterization" occur within the portrait of Arthur himself; the result, we entirely agree, is a king who is "a just, unselfish, strong ruler."²³⁰ Even Wilson, though, at times considers Malory's Arthur to be, as he is in the French sources, largely "a passive figure."²³¹ We concur with Wilson that Malory's characterization of Arthur is favorable, but we consider him as comparatively passive only in the middle Tales dominated by his knights: those stories devoted primarily to Launcelot, Gareth, Trystram, and the Grail. Even here, however, the focus can shift to Arthur's knights precisely because of Arthur's success as a strong ruler. In the opening and closing Tales, the tales that develop a portrait of Arthur's kingship, Malory presents a just king and proficient warrior. And even in the crucial middle of the *Morte*, Arthur unhorses and then holds his own against Trystram. In their encounter at the Tournament at the Castle of Maidens, "Kynge Arthur with a grete egir harte . . . smote Sir Trystram over hys horse croupe" (*MD* 418.4–6). When Trystram subsequently charges the king, "Arthure boldly abode hym, and with hys swerde he smote a-to [Sir Trystram's] speare. And

"Art of Kingship," 20; Michael Prestwich, "The Art of Kingship: Edward I, 1272–1307," *History Today* 35, no. 5 (1985): 34–40 (at 35); and (for the balance of counsel and royal will) Watts, *Henry VI*, 8–80.

229. W. M. Ormrod, "Edward III," *History Today* 52, no. 6 (2002): 20–26 (at 20). See also Ormrod, *Edward III*, especially 584–603.

230. Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 65–79.

231. Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 65.

therewithall Sir Trystram was astooned" (*MD* 418.26–31). Malory thus subtly reinforces Arthur's own martial prowess even while focusing on Trystram and the other top knights. This active and positive Arthur, we contend, is a product of his basis in both the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

Conclusion: Arthur in the Dock

Malory's modifications of his sources as he develops his King Arthur reveal that he shares his characters' insistence that "all men of worship seyde hit was myrry to be under such a chyffayne that wolde putte hys person in adventure," tournament, and war "as other poure knyghtis ded" (*MD* 45.10–12). Modern and medieval attitudes toward violence and even chivalry, however, are not always the same. For example, Amanda D. Taylor finds fault with Arthur's kingship, claiming that "Malory problematizes the concept of justice . . . even as he institutes it."²³² Lexton goes even further, denouncing Arthur's military action against the twelve rebel kings as "a landgrab" and "wrongful war" inspired by "unjustifiable expansionism."²³³ Such modern complaints completely ignore the considerable signs (discussed above) of the rightness of Arthur's rule, a rightness corroborated by Uther, the archbishop, and Merlin. It is also clear that Lott and the other rebels, although qualifying as good knights on the basis of being worthy fighters, are manifestly in the wrong since they refuse to accept Arthur's kingship on the basis that he is "a berdles boye that was come of lowe blood" (*MD* 12.9–10). Presumably, too, Lott and his fellow rebels are high on the list of those "lord[es] that was myghty" who fancy being High King themselves (*MD* 6.27–29). Despite Lexton's presentation of Malory's Merlin as a belligerent, self-serving, and deliberately warmongering negotiator who stands in marked contrast to the more politic and honest Merlin of the French source (the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*),²³⁴ Malory's Merlin explicitly laments the deaths of Lott and the rebels (*MD* 60.27–32), as does Malory himself as narrator (61.5–13). Lott, however, dismisses Merlin as "a dreme-reder" (*MD* 13.23), again showing his—not Arthur's or Merlin's—aggression.

In her interpretation of Tale I, then, Lexton not only misrepresents the textual evidence but also misinterprets the intertextual relationship between

232. Taylor, "Body of Law," 67.

233. Lexton, *Contested Language*, 39, 60–67; we quote 39.

234. Lexton, *Contested Language*, 59–64.

Malory and his French source. As Vinaver points out, in reworking the *Suite* to his own ends, “Malory shifts the whole emphasis of the [opening] tale from the story of a great magician to that of a great king.”²³⁵ Malory also makes clear that Lott’s continued rebellion is based on very personal, albeit understandable, anger stemming from the fact that Arthur had “lay[n] by his wyff and gate on her Sir Mordred” (*MD* 61.13–15). But it is presumably Lott himself who sends Morgawse to Arthur’s court in the first place as a spy to aid in his initial revolt (*MD* 33.29–32). In light of all of this disloyalty and deception, Lott is hardly the poster king for legitimate monarchical action; nor is he the victim. Historically, the king’s duty was to protect the realm from both external threat and internal strife.²³⁶ Arthur is thus duty-bound to defeat the troublemaking Lott and the rebels as a necessary first step in establishing stable governance. His actions are not tyrannical or avaricious; on the contrary, they are necessary, protective, and righteous.

Malory creates a sharp contrast between the rebels’ recalcitrance and Arthur’s honor, loyalty, and desire to rule justly. Arthur honorably rewards and reverences his foster-father Ector by making Kay seneschal and promising “that never man shalle have that office but he whyle he and I lyve” (*MD* 9.14–10.3). This loyalty is a positive trait, but it is significant that Arthur goes beyond Ector’s request; he not only makes Kay seneschal but also swears to make the office permanent. As Radulescu convincingly argues, Malory’s Arthur provides precisely the sort of good lordship desired by the late-medieval gentry.²³⁷ Not only is Arthur “rightwys kynge borne of all Englonde” (*MD* 7.15–16), but he is also a just and worthy king who listens to the people, dispenses justice, and defends the realm. The entire episode of the sword-in-the-stone signifies Arthur’s sincerity and loyalty, establishing the sort of king he will be throughout *Le Morte Darthur*.

Furthermore, Malory’s medieval audience would have appreciated that Arthur is as capable of exerting his power abroad as he is at home. An international as well as domestic stage for Arthur is important since, as Terence McCarthy justly observes, “rightful kingship and its nature are [two of] Malory’s themes.”²³⁸ Malory establishes Arthur as powerful king of a large polity by repeatedly reminding his audience that Arthur’s sovereignty

235. Vinaver, Commentary-Headnote to “The Tale of King Arthur” (1279). Cf. Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 69–74.

236. On the art of kingship, see above, nn. 63, 228, and 229.

237. Radulescu, *Gentry Context*, especially 96–101.

238. Terence McCarthy, *An Introduction to Malory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 160; see also 16–17.

extended—by “grete warre”—over “Scotlonde, Walys, and Cornuwayle” and that “there were many kynges that were lordys of many contreyes, but all they helde theire londys of Kynge Arthure.”²³⁹ As Robert L. Kelly observes, many of the insular lands Arthur controls were notable hotbeds of trouble for late-medieval English kings: Wales, Cornwall, and the north; in addition, many of the insular lords who cause mayhem in the *Morte* come from these lands. Crucially, then, “Malory’s Arthur . . . confronts the same regional challenges to royal authority as did all late medieval kings, and he deals with them courageously and decisively.”²⁴⁰ Lexton, therefore, fails to note the significance of the various countries and provinces comprising Arthur’s polity: Arthur’s realm is not fragmented, but powerful and vast.²⁴¹ Malory’s English audience—regardless of whether or not any nostalgic nationalism was at work—would have been impressed by Arthur’s ability to maintain a strong realm in which he keeps many sub-kings under his control.²⁴²

Rebels aside, it is significant that Malory presents his King Arthur as having the support of *all* social classes: aristocracy, gentry, and commons. Frequently, such support is Malory’s addition to the sources. We noted above how Lexton reads the sword-in-the-stone episode as an act of usurpation, despite the lack of textual support for such an extreme claim.²⁴³ Contrary to Lexton, the scene’s climax highlights that Arthur “is rightwys kynge borne of all Englund” (*MD* 7.15–16) as well as the savior of a people in a fractious and potentially turbulent political climate. Arthur’s winning of the sword also reveals, as Rushton points out, that Arthur is seen to do right by *all* classes.²⁴⁴ There could be a Chaucerian echo lurking in the background here,

239. See *MD* 11.16–25, 12.30–33, 47.1–5, 289.12–20. As noted above, pp. 170–74 and n. 176, these passages are all original to Malory, so the emphasis on Arthur’s conquering kingship is Malory’s own.

240. Robert L. Kelly, “Malory’s ‘Tale of King Arthur’ and the Political Geography of Fifteenth-Century England,” in *Re-Viewing “Le Morte Darthur,”* ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 79–93 (quoting 93).

241. Contra Lexton, *Contested Language*, 5–6.

242. For an argument in favor of Malory’s endorsement of English “patriotism,” see Riddy, *Thomas Malory*, 44, and Riddy, “Contextualizing *Le Morte Darthur*,” 55–73. Although she does not say so, Riddy was partially anticipated in this line of thought by Ferguson, who explains the continuation of the ideal but unrealistic English chivalric ideology as due in part to its “expression in national policy”: See Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960), especially 134–58.

243. See above, pp. 167–69 and n. 161; contra Lexton, *Contested Language*, 1–26.

244. Cory James Rushton, “Malory’s Idea of the City,” in *Studies in the Role of Cities in Arthurian Literature and in the Value of Arthurian Literature for Civic Identity*, ed. Cora Dietl and Claudia Lauer (Lampeter: Mellen, 2009), 102–4.

for Rushton raises the possibility that Malory is building on Chaucer's reference to Henry IV ruling by the tripartite right of conquest, "lyne and free eleccion." In contrast to Malory, Chaucer proved remarkably adept at avoiding being ensnared in political tribulations; therefore, this reference in "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse" might be disingenuous or politically careful.²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Chaucer's words provide a precedent for a king to rule rightly by a combination of conquest, lineage, and election: strength of arms, aristocratic right and inheritance, and popular support. Malory's Arthur is shaped in these categories.

A. J. Pollard offers a brief remark about Malory's bearing witness to the Wars of the Roses with "a profound skepticism about the whole chivalric ethic and the possibility of there ever being another Henry V."²⁴⁶ Malory, after all, served and had his services sought by both of the sides that fought the Wars of the Roses.²⁴⁷ Regardless of precisely when and why Malory switched allegiance, it is undoubtedly true that Henry VI failed to live up to the heroic image of his father; in terms of character and royal display, Edward IV was much kinglier. We will never know whether or not Malory despaired of there ever being another great English warrior-king in real life, but his *Arthuriad*, he reminds his audience, is set in what might be called "those days": briefly "in the dayes of Uther Pendragon" (*MD* 1.3), but thereafter "in hys [Arthur's] dayes" (47.3); "IN THE BEGYNNYNG OF Arthure" (76.2, where Field's capitalization mimics the rubrication and taller script of this line at W 35r); "WHAN Kyng Arthur had wedded Quene Gwenyvere" (145.2-3, where Field's capitalization partly mimics the rubrication of this line at W 71r); or "IN ARTHURS DAYES" (223.2, where Field's capitalization partly mimics the rubrication of this line at W 113v). In the halcyon era of King Arthur and the Fellowship of Knights of the Round Table, Malory found and then enhanced a great English king—a king, we suggest, that he inherited not from his "Frensshe book" that is "auctorysed" (*MD* 940.9-10),

245. Rushton, "Idea of the City," 102-3; Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), lines 22-23 and n. On Malory's likely knowledge of Chaucer's works, see Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 10, and the pages listed in the index, s.v. "Chaucer."

246. A. J. Pollard, "Introduction," in *The Wars of the Roses*, ed. A. J. Pollard (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 15.

247. For details of Malory's life and politics, see Field, *Life and Times*. On Malory's fighting in various campaigns in the Wars of the Roses and how this informed his portrait of combat, see K. S. Whetter, "The Historicity of Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*," in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P. J. C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 261-70.

nor solely from the English chronicle tradition, but rather from the native chronicle tradition as well as two native poems: the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

Ultimately, Malory effectively emphasizes several aspects of Arthur's character, all of which are laudable and heroic. He likewise emphasizes Arthur's own prowess as a warrior—another positive trait in Malory's Arthuriad. Both Malory's emphasis on the "High Order of Knighthood" and the thousands of instances of the words *knyght* and *knyghtes* across *Le Morte Darthur* emphatically remind Malory's audience that his primary focus is knighthood and the *worshyp* attendant upon it.²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, a crucial aspect of Arthur's own knighthood and *worshyp* is his kingship. Indeed, Malory's version of the Arthuriad is bookended not only by combat, as is suggested elsewhere,²⁴⁹ but also by Arthur's defenses of his kingship: fighting Lott and the rebels in Tale I, fighting Rome and the Giant in Tale II, and ending his kingship in civil war with first Launcelot and then Mordred in Tale VIII, the "Morte Arthur" proper. In this portrait of Arthur as a martial king successful in war, Malory was much influenced by the positive portrait of Arthur as "kyde conquerour" in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (e.g., *aMA* 65, 232, 2261).

Many scholars argue that *Le Morte Darthur* is a romance, with the Roman War being an awkward exception to that generic rule. Others dismiss Arthur's continental adventures as being atypical of the Arthuriad as a whole: Caxton famously (and for many modern scholars, contentiously) cut the Roman War narrative by half when he printed the *Morte* in 1485, and C. S. Lewis equally famously complained that Caxton "might well have used the knife more boldly."²⁵⁰ James Simpson, rightly arguing for the importance of the tragic "civil war" at the close of Malory's *Morte*, wrongly dismisses Arthur's imperial victories as "an irrelevance."²⁵¹ In fact, Malory's version of the Roman War story is a careful and deliberate preparation for later events. It is actually an expansion upon and continuation of the early wars of Arthur, wars that establish him as a great king and highly competent military commander.²⁵² In addition to cementing Arthur's martial and monarchical stature,

248. *Knyght* appears 2,719 times; *knyghtes* appears 1,646 times. See Tomomi Kato, *A Concordance to the Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1974), s.vv.

249. Whetter, "Warfare and Combat," 169–86.

250. C. S. Lewis, "The English Prose *Morte*," in *Essays on Malory*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 26.

251. Simpson, *English Literary History*, 111–12, 114.

252. On Arthur's talents as a leader and fulfillment of medieval military strategy in

the continental wars in Tale II look back to the wars that secured Arthur's kingship in Tale I through a reminder of Arthur's earlier allies, Ban and Bors. As Kelly illustrates, Arthur's distribution of lands after his imperial coronation includes commanding "Sir Launcelot and Sir Bors to take kepe unto their fadyrs landys, that Kyng Ban and Kyng Bors welded and her fadyrs: . . . [and telling] 'the myghty Kyng Claudas londis I gyff you for to parte betwyxte you even, for to mayntene your kynrede'" (*MD* 188.9–16). For Kelly, Malory hereby deliberately reminds his audience of the earlier reciprocal relationship between Arthur and Ban and Bors in which the French kings would aid Arthur in his war against Lott and the rebels, and Arthur would aid the French against the depredations of Claudas.²⁵³ Although Kelly overstates Launcelot's and Bors's status as independent kings rather than vassals of Arthur, and although it is in fact unlikely that Malory was (as Kelly claims) critiquing war, we agree with Kelly that this act of generosity to French allies links early and later events in the *Morte*. It also, crucially, shows Arthur rewarding his allies and followers. Far from being "irrelevant," then, Arthur's conquest of Rome and elevation to Emperor enable Malory to shift the narrative focus in the middle Tales of "The Hoole Book" to the adventures and greatness of Arthur's knights and vassals. Malory's emphasis on Arthur's own prowess and kingship in Tales I and II is a necessary precursor to the later Tales devoted to the prowess and excellence of Arthur's knights. Here again Malory has his narrative finger on the pulse of the age, for one of the givens of fifteenth-century English politics was that "the effective exercise of good lordship . . . depended in part on 'worship.'" ²⁵⁴ Therefore, it is the success of Arthur's imperial campaign, and the consequent rise to further *worshyp* of Arthur's court and knightly fellowship in Tale II, that explain why so many men of worship join the Round Table in subsequent Tales. Arthur's own early greatness also renders the final civil war and the destruction it causes in Tale VIII all the more poignant.

It is, however, not only knights and kings who suffer in Malory's *Morte*

Tale II, see Karen Cherewatuk, "Sir Thomas Malory's 'Grete Booke,'" in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's "Morte Darthur"*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Jessica Gentry Brogdon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 55–57.

253. Robert L. Kelly, "Malory's Argument against War with France," in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's "Morte Darthur"*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Jessica Gentry Brogdon (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 111–33 (at 126). Contra Kelly, it seems more likely that Malory was once again praising chivalric behavior (prowess and loyalty) rather than promoting peace with France.

254. Pollard, "Introduction," 7.

Darthur. Women, too, suffer, and—equally importantly—women, too, can have *worsbyp* and power in Malory's *Arthuriad*. Therefore, we now turn to the most powerful of Malory's women: Gwenyvere and Isode. The next chapter will reveal the extent to which Malory's rounded and sympathetic female characters are a product of the influence of the understudied English *Morte*, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.

Four

Misreading and Rereading
Malory's Gwenyvere

*The Queen and Her Counterparts
in the Three English Mortes*



Although Gwenyvere has received more attention from literary critics—particularly feminist ones—than any other female figure in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, she has been and continues to be the victim of frequent misreading. An indirect cause of this misreading is the critical intertext that brands Arthur a failure, yet the root cause of it is a tendency in much scholarly inquiry either to fault Gwenyvere or to dismiss her.

Harsh judgments of Gwenyvere reveal the need for scholars to investigate more thoroughly “distinctively female forms of exerting influence and achieving goals” in order to “provide a more nuanced and inclusive analysis” of “*how* female agency function[s]” in Malory’s “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17).¹ After all, even literary critics who argue that Malory encourages his audience to have compassion for Gwenyvere by grounding her character and story in sympathy consistently reveal a palpable harshness when assessing Malory’s most famous female figure. Beverly Kennedy, for example, repeatedly faults Arthur’s queen for “sexual jealousy and vindictive anger,” despite concluding that “Malory’s late medieval English readers, especially the women, would have found [such faults] forgivable” and that “Malory encourages his readers

1. Adapted from Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, “Introduction,” in *Gendering the Master Narrative*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowalski (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2. Citations of the *Morte* are by page.line to Field’s edition, as in the Abbreviations list.

to forgive her.”² Kennedy’s focus on the queen’s stereotypically feminine faults works against her earlier conclusion that Malory “is remarkably sympathetic towards women,” a trait most evident when he praises Gwenyvere for being (according to Kennedy) Launcelot’s “true lover.”³ D. Thomas Hanks Jr. interprets Malory as transforming the Lancelot-Guenevere relationship through his “sympathetic account” of the confrontation in the queen’s chamber, yet Hanks faults Gwenyvere for her “imperiousness . . . throughout Malory’s work.”⁴ Elizabeth Edwards, despite her sympathy for female characters and their plight in Malory’s *Morte* as well as her claim that Malory’s Gwenyvere is “sometimes witty,” similarly presents Arthur’s queen as primarily jealous and angry, “imperious [and] impulsive.”⁵ Feminist critic Maureen Fries is likewise sympathetic toward Arthur’s queen yet likewise dismissive of her. Fries focuses on Gwenyvere’s supposedly limited role, concluding that both the stanzaic-poet in *Morte Arthur* and Malory in *Morte Darthur* cast their Guenevere figures “into a heroic mold, but it is a male-inspired one” that enables the queen to be “at best only partially heroic.”⁶ Given this chorus of scholarly dismissal, Gwenyvere is in need of rereading, especially since the chorus is far from finished;⁷ our hope is that reassessing the (inter)textual evidence will lead to a reassessment of her critical reputation.

There are of course some notable exceptions to the critical rule of deriding Gwenyvere, including a very sympathetic reading of Arthur’s queen by Edward Donald Kennedy.⁸ Nevertheless, several strong tendencies in Malory

2. Beverly Kennedy, “Malory’s Guenevere: A ‘Trew Lover,’” in *Arthurian Women*, 19–23, 28–29.

3. Beverly Kennedy, “Love, Freedom, and Marital Fidelity in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *Florilegium* 10 (1988–91): 179, 187. Malory is sympathetic to Gwenyvere (and Isode), but Kennedy’s own argument often undercuts this sympathy.

4. D. Thomas Hanks Jr., “Malory, the *Mort[e]s*, and the Confrontation in Guenevere’s Chamber,” in *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-Views*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. (New York: AMS Press, 1992), 84–85.

5. Elizabeth Edwards, “The Place of Women in the *Morte Darthur*,” in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 38–39 and 50.

6. Maureen Fries, “Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes,” in *Popular Arthurian Traditions*, ed. Sally K. Slocum (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 11.

7. Recently, e.g., Christoph Houswitschka, “Masculinity in Thomas Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” in *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. Stefan Horlacher (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 76, makes the extreme claim that Malory was completely indifferent to all female characters and had “no interest” in individualizing them.

8. Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory’s Guenevere: ‘A Woman Who Had Grown

scholarship continue to perpetuate harsh dismissals of Gwenyvere: the tendencies to evaluate Malorian characters according to Victorian moral standards; to trivialize Gwenyvere as either a love object or an irrational female; to blame Gwenyvere more than Arthur or Lancelot for the destruction of the Arthurian world; to underestimate the scope of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur's* influence on both Malory's characterization and his conception of the Arthurian world; and to insist that Malory's "Boke off Syr Trystram" depicts the failings of Arthurian knighthood despite abundant evidence to the contrary—evidence that contributes to a positive portrait of Gwenyvere in Malory's *Morte*.⁹

Misreading Malory's Gwenyvere: The Influence of Scathing Victorian Intertexts

Consciously or not, the critical tradition of highlighting Gwenyvere's (supposed) faults echoes Victorian sentiments. Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* in particular seems to be influencing some interpretations of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Malory's book is one of the main sources on which the creator of this Victorian Arthuriad drew, and Tennyson's nostalgia for the Arthurian past likens him to Malory himself: Malory chastises the Englishmen of his own day for changing their political allegiance (*MD* 916.34–917.6), and he contrasts the lust-tainted love affairs of his own time with the "vertuose love" of the days of Arthur when "men and women coude love togydys seven yerys" without "lycoures lustis" developing (*MD* 841.21–842.11). Yet approaching Malory's book from the influence of its most famous Victorian reimagining instead of interpreting it through comparison with its medieval sources—especially its English ones—risks causing Victorian morality to contaminate Malory scholarship.

Arguably the section of Tennyson's poem that is the most moralistic and (not coincidentally) the most misogynistic is "Guinevere." In this poem, Tennyson encourages readers' sympathy for Arthur's queen when she mentally contrasts her husband's emotional coldness with Lancelot's emotional depth: "Her journey done, [she] glanced at [Arthur], thought him cold, / High,

a Soul," in *Arthurian Women*, 35–43. Kennedy's position is elaborated upon by Siobhán M. Wyatt, *Women of Words in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 159–61.

9. A considerably abbreviated form of this chapter appeared earlier as Fiona Tolhurst, "Eradicating Victorian Backreading," *Arthurian Literature* 37 (2022): 193–230.

self-contained, and passionless, not like him, / ‘Not like my Lancelot.’”¹⁰ At the same time, the Victorian poet creates a strong contrast of his own, one that seemingly continues to shape some scholarly assessments of Malory’s Guinevere: the contrast between Guinevere’s sinfulness and Arthur’s moral perfection. The Tennysonian narrator refers to Guinevere as a woman whose name “Would be for evermore a name of scorn,” while the novice who keeps the queen company at Almesbury refers to Guinevere as “the sinful Queen.”¹¹ The queen brands herself as more sinful than Lancelot, saying, “Would God that thou couldst hide me from myself! / Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou / Unwedded.”¹² In contrast to his guilt-ridden queen, King Arthur speaks as a moral judge from a godlike height, expounding, “Yet think not that I come to urge thy crimes, / I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere. . . . Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God / Forgives”; however, even as the king forgives her, he contrasts her “polluted” flesh with his own body that “was ever virgin save for [her].”¹³ Just as Eve caused Adam to lose his innocence, Guinevere caused Arthur to lose his.

These examples from Tennyson’s *Arthuriad* are representative of the whole, for, as James Noble convincingly attests, “woman’s role” in the *Idylls*

is to support and sustain her husband by subordinating herself to him to the point of self-erasure. Women like Enid and Elaine who . . . take on this role are extolled by Tennyson as “true” women whose virtue is witnessed in their capacity to help good knights become better knights. Women like Vivien and Guinevere, on the other hand . . . are invariably denounced as “false” women who pose a danger to knight-hood . . . [that results] in destruction.¹⁴

Readers who recall the scene in Tennyson’s “Guinevere” in which Guinevere’s sitting between Enid and Vivien suggests that she is a mean between the

10. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Guinevere,” *Idylls of the King*, in *The Poems of Tennyson in Three Volumes: Second Edition Incorporating the Trinity College Manuscripts*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), lines 402–4.

11. Tennyson, “Guinevere,” line 60, line 268 and again at line 351.

12. Tennyson, “Guinevere,” lines 117–19.

13. Tennyson, “Guinevere,” lines 529–30, 541–42, and 552–54.

14. James Noble, “Woman as Agent of Death in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*,” in *The Arthurian Way of Death*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and K. S. Whetter (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 194.

extreme virtue of Enid and the extreme wickedness of Vivien will want to nuance Noble's interpretation of Guinevere.¹⁵ Noble is, nevertheless, correct in asserting that Tennyson's version of the queen embodies sin and is the moral root of the king's destruction. The Victorian Poet Laureate's focus on Guinevere's sinfulness encourages some modern readers of Malory's book not only to judge the fifteenth-century Gwenyvere harshly but also to impose upon a late-medieval text inappropriate Victorian concepts of the role of women in English society.

Perhaps the most prominent example of this Victorian critical stance is the often-cited work of Beverly Kennedy. In an article about adultery in *Le Morte Darthur*, Kennedy asserts that Launcelot and Gwenyvere have sex only once and that this betrayal (in "The Knight of the Cart" section) is both "unpremeditated" and an act that the hero "immediately and heartily repents."¹⁶ According to Kennedy, Launcelot is the primary exemplar of Malory's "True Knight" for whom "any sexual act which is sinful is also dishonorable, because it is a betrayal of God."¹⁷ Elsewhere, Kennedy repeats this claim about Launcelot and Gwenyvere having sex only once and presents the queen as a "trew" (ideal) lover; supposedly, she is an embodiment (although an imperfect one) of true, chaste love, and—like her lover—soon repents their one sexual lapse.¹⁸ Kennedy is not alone in this misreading, for Hanks similarly argues that Malory is successful in "removing the fleshly element" from the scene in which the lovers get caught in the queen's room, going so far as to claim that the episode becomes "virtually sacramental."¹⁹ Hanks also precedes Kennedy in asserting that, while French prose romances in the Arthurian tradition present many sexual encounters of Lancelot and Guenevere, "only one actually appears in Malory."²⁰ Although such interpretations of the Launcelot-Gwenyvere affair can be appealing to modern readers who want to believe that Malory's lovers are "vertuose," to claim that Launcelot and Gwenyvere are almost unfailingly chaste requires interpreting what Malory calls his "*Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and His Noble Knyghtes*

15. Tennyson, "Guinevere," lines 21–29.

16. Beverly Kennedy, "Adultery in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*," *Arthuriana* 7, no. 4 (1997): 65.

17. Kennedy, "Adultery," 71.

18. Kennedy, "A 'Trew Lover,'" 11, 17–18, 24–25.

19. Hanks, "Malory, the *Mort[e]s*, and the Confrontation," 84–85.

20. D. Thomas Hanks Jr., "Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram*: Focusing *Le Morte Darthur*," *Quondam et Futurus* 3, no. 1 (1993): 24.

of the Rounde Table” (*MD* 940.17–18 [our italics]) extremely selectively—essentially reading Malory as if he were Tennyson; such selectivity includes ignoring several indications of consummated sex or at least illicit love.

In reality, there are several key moments in Malory’s “Hoole Book” that imply or acknowledge that Arthur’s wife and best knight engage in a passionate love affair both before and after “The Sankgreal.” During the Grail Quest, Launcelot confesses to a hermit “how he had loved a queene unmesurably and oute of mesure longe” (*MD* 696.18–19), a confession that acknowledges both the adulterous nature of his love for Gwennyvere and the long-term passion of this love. When Malory narrates the events that follow Launcelot’s return from the Quest in a Tale many modern editors name for Launcelot and Gwennyvere,²¹ his starting point is the clear statement that the lovers “loved togydirs more hotter than they dud toforehonde” (*MD* 790.15–17): Malory’s remark certainly suggests consummation of their relationship by this point in the narrative, even if it does not precisely answer the question of exactly how physical their pre-Grail love was.

Admittedly, scholars cannot definitively determine when Gwennyvere and Launcelot consummate—or even wish to consummate—their love. Rumors of the affair appear as early as Tale III when Morgan le Fay Queen of Gore, the Queen of Northe Galys, the Queen of Estlonde, and the Queen of the Oute Iles try to force Launcelot to be untrue to his lady by choosing one of them as his “paramour” (*MD* 194.8–21). The four queens confront both the hero and Malory’s audience with the fact that they “know well [that] there can be no lady have [his] love but one, and that is Quene Gwennyvere” (*MD* 194.14–15). Launcelot’s denying these rumors of an affair by claiming that the queen is “the treweste lady unto hir lorde lvyngge” (*MD* 194.28) does not constitute proof that the rumors are untrue, for a knight was expected to demonstrate discretion and honor in his conduct; therefore, he would never ruin his lady’s reputation by admitting to their relationship. Of course, Launcelot could be telling the truth at this early stage of the Arthuriad; later, however, in front of Arthur and all the troops assembled at Joyous Garde (*MD* 890.20–29), he denies the affair even after Malory reports their sexual relations in the Knight of the Cart episode (*MD* 852.21–26). This denial makes clear that Launcelot embodies chivalric values so completely that he protects his lady’s honor even when he is clearly in the wrong.²²

21. Field’s title for this penultimate Tale is “Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenivere”; Vinaver’s title is “The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere”; Cooper’s title is “The Tale of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenivere.”

22. D. S. Brewer, Introduction to *The Morte Darthur: Parts Seven and Eight*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Arnold, 1968), 28–30.

Tellingly, Launcelot defends the queen on this later occasion in the same terms as the earlier one, asserting that “Quene Gwenyvere ys as trew a lady unto [Arthur’s] person as ys ony lady lyvyng unto her lorde” (*MD* 890.27–28). The similarity of the phrasing of these two denials reveals the extent to which Launcelot is willing to lie to protect his beloved. This is a moral wrong, but one more forgivable to both men and women among Malory’s armigerous audience than lying to protect himself.

Several episodes in “The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones” strongly suggest that the Launcelot–Gwenyvere affair is an ongoing concern by the midpoint of “The Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17). Given the physical nature of Trystram and Isode’s love, Isode’s sending a message to Gwenyvere (via Palomydes) affirming “that there be within this londe but foure lovers, and that is Sir Launcelot and Dame Gwenyvere, and Sir Trystrames and Quene Isode” (*MD* 340.3–5) indicates that Launcelot and Gwenyvere’s love is like that of Trystram and Isode: that it is physical as well as emotional. Although Morgan’s sending of the shield depicting a knight standing overtop a king and queen is due to her jealousy that Launcelot will not love her (*MD* 437.3–22), and so cannot in itself be taken as proof of a consummated love affair between Launcelot and Gwenyvere, the queen’s response to the shield is telling. Unlike Trystram, who bears the shield in ignorance of what its iconography means (*MD* 436.27–437.25), and unlike Arthur, who sees Trystram wield the shield but who cannot discern its meaning (439.27–31), Gwenyvere instantly understands Morgan’s intentions in sending it to Arthur: “thys shyld was made . . . in the dispite of me and of Sir Launcelot” (439.31–440.11). The fact that the queen realizes Morgan’s purpose and feels great fear that the shield will destroy her (*MD* 440.11) indicates that she and Launcelot are indeed the same as Trystram and Isode: they are now guilty of a secret and adulterous love. Launcelot’s desire for bodily union with the queen is even more obvious at the end of Tale V, for Elayne of Corbyn and Dame Bruzen’s plot to have Launcelot impregnate Elayne with Galahad depends for its success upon Launcelot’s drug-induced belief that he is in the arms of his beloved.²³ Whether this would be yet another occasion when Launcelot had sex with Gwenyvere (as he thinks), or whether this were merely the initial consummation of a long and devoutly-to-be-wished desire remains unclear. Malory, however, makes Launcelot’s passion evident by noting that “he wente that mayden Elayne had bene Quene Gwenyvere. And wyte you well that Sir Launcelot was glad” (*MD* 623.34–624.1). The implication of all of these

23. In Chapter 2, above, we discuss how this scene sheds light on Malory’s characterization of the two Elaynes.

mid-*Morte* textual details is that Launcelot and Gwennyvere are now lovers in deed as well as rumor.

Beverly Kennedy's and Hanks's claims that the lovers have sex only once thus ignores numerous strong indicators in the text of a long-term affair. Crucially, Launcelot's begetting of Galahad occurs because the knight believes he has gotten into bed with Gwennyvere, not Elayne of Corbyn (*MD* 623.15–624.4). This belief is possible only if Launcelot and the queen are already engaged in—or at the very least are awaiting an opportunity to engage in—a sexual relationship, and nowhere in this episode does Malory suggest that going to bed with the queen is a new experience for the knight. In fact, the narration makes them seem like long-term lovers. When Dame Brusen's man brings a ring to Launcelot “frome Quene Gwennyvere lyke as hit had cam frome her” (*MD* 623.16–17), the implication is that this is not the first time that the queen has used such a signal to summon her lover. The fact that the deliverer of the ring is someone “Launcelot . . . knew well” suggests not only that Launcelot has received such signals before but also that this messenger might have functioned as a go-between in the past (*MD* 623.16). Reinforcing the audience's impression that Launcelot's intimacy with the queen is routine is the uncomplicated nature of his emotional response to getting into bed with a woman he believes to be Gwennyvere: he is simply “glad” (*MD* 624.1; cf. 623.17–18). In marked contrast to the source-scene in the prose *Tristan* (itself based on the prose *Lancelot*), in which Lancelot can barely believe Brisenne's message that the queen is nearby and is so excited that he “tressaut tout maintenant [trembled all over],”²⁴ Malory's lover-knight experiences neither anxiety about violating his king's trust nor excitement about achieving intimacy with the queen. For Launcelot, this does not seem to be a new experience.

As problematic as her claiming that the lovers consummate their relationship just once is Beverly Kennedy's chastising of Gwennyvere for not only “sexual jealousy and vindictive anger” but also “lack of trust in Lancelot.”²⁵ For one thing, the emotional force of Gwennyvere's response to Launcelot's unfaithfulness with Elayne suggests that the queen's feelings are not nearly as chaste as Kennedy's thesis requires. When Gwennyvere hears that her lover has begotten Galahad on Elayne, the queen is “wrothe”; as a result, she gives him “many rebukes” and “call[s] hym false knyght” (*MD* 630.12–15). When he gets

24. *Le Roman de Tristan en Prose*, gen. ed. Philippe Ménard (Geneva: Droz, 1993), vol. 6, §33.19–29, pp. 120–21; our translation.

25. Kennedy, “A ‘Trew Lover,’” 21, 23.

tricked into sleeping with Elayne a second time, the queen's reaction reflects her passionate love for Launcelot. She exclaims, "Alas!" in reaction to his falseness, then writhes about "as a madde woman" and cannot sleep "a foure or a fyve owres" (*MD* 632.24–32). When Launcelot sleep-talks in Elayne's bed, the queen coughs loudly and then banishes him from her "courte," "chamber," and "syght" (*MD* 633.2–14). Two key details—that Gwenyvere recognizes not merely Launcelot's voice but his habit of talking in his sleep, and that he awakens because he in turn recognizes "her hemyng" (*MD* 632.33–633.9)—subtly confirm their sexual intimacy.²⁶ The same argument can be made regarding Malory's description of Launcelot's second encounter with Elayne, in which his "kysynge and clyppyng" of the woman he believes to be Gwenyvere is described as "a *kyndely* thyng"—that is, "natural" (*MD* 632.24–25 [our italics]). The naturalness of Launcelot's encounter with a woman he believes to be the queen suggests that, in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, it is entirely appropriate that Launcelot and Gwenyvere (given their status as lovers) would be kissing and embracing, as well as that (although adultery is a sinful act) sex between true lovers is neither unnatural nor sinful.²⁷ Kennedy's finding fault with Gwenyvere's reaction to her beloved's having intercourse with another woman also belittles Malory's artistry, for Kennedy overlooks the verisimilitude of Gwenyvere's reaction: precisely because of the love she and Launcelot have for each other, her jealous anger is entirely human. It is also, under the circumstances, entirely natural. Part of the empathy Malory shows for Gwenyvere is evident in her very human and believable response to Launcelot's betrayal—a response that also testifies to Malory's talent for characterization.

The political situation at the beginning of the "Morte Arthur" section of "The Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17) also necessitates that Malory's audience assume a long-term love affair between Launcelot and Gwenyvere. Aggravayne claims—in the hearing of not only Gawayne and his brothers but also "manye knyghtis"—that he is amazed that all of these knights "be nat ashamed bothe to se and to know how Sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene," thereby allowing the "noble" King Arthur "to be shamed" through this affair (*MD* 870.19–23). Although Aggravayne is a liar and cad who is out for his own gain, the success of his denunciation rests upon the

26. See further, Amy S. Kaufman, "Guenevere Burning," *Arthuriana* 20, no. 1 (2010): 82, who notes the way in which these details, juxtaposed with Elaine's attempt to secure Launcelot's love, highlight the "suffocatingly familiar details of their intimacy."

27. Cf. K. S. Whetter, *The Manuscript and Meaning of Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 144–45.

inherent credibility of his accusation. Thus this passage, too, contradicts Kennedy's claim that Arthur's greatest knight and his wife have consummated their relationship only once and that, as soon as they did so, they repented their passion. The fact that "the kynge had a demyng of [their love], but he wold nat here thereof" confirms that Arthur himself suspects an affair, but he resists acknowledging it because he loves Launcelot "passyngly well" (*MD* 872.22–26). Both Arthur's suspicion and his desire to avoid confirming it are appropriate to the triangular love between each of Arthur, Gwenyvere, and Launcelot, and Malory as narrator tries to skirt around the adultery issue. He famously declares that he prefers not to say whether the lovers "were abed other at other maner of disportis" when they are at last caught together, and he adds that "love that tyme was nat as love ys nowadayes" (*MD* 874.8–10). Malory's audience can easily imagine what "disportis" might have already occurred when Aggravayne and his followers catch the lovers in a compromising situation, but it is important to remember that a key component of the complex tragedy of Malory's *Arthuriad* is precisely the fact that, at the corresponding point in the French *Mort Artu*, Lancelot enters Guenievere's chamber, undresses, and gets into bed with the queen.²⁸ As a result, the French lovers get caught in the act. Not so in Malory's *Morte*. In Malory's version of the scene, much of the poignancy and effectiveness of Arthur's "demyng" lies in the fact that, at least by the final Tales of Malory's "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17), Launcelot and Gwenyvere's love is as physical as it is emotional. They *are* guilty of adultery but do not necessarily commit that sin on the night they get surprised together in the queen's chamber. Although Malory's evasion about the lovers' actions in the queen's chamber raises suspicion, it is possible that the meeting for which they are finally denounced is, ironically, innocent. Gawayne's insistence that Launcelot could have been in the queen's chamber "for none evyll" might thus be entirely accurate (*MD* 882.25–27). Equally, the power of the scene rests precisely on its uncertainties, and Gawayne (like Launcelot earlier) might simply be defending the queen's honor as a knight should. Malory's famous—and original—praise of Gwenyvere for being "a trew lover" is consequently as poignant as it is powerful precisely because of the ways in which it forces Malory's audience to juxtapose Gwenyvere's love of Arthur with her adulterous love of Launcelot (*MD* 842.11). It is this adulterous love that Malory, in contrast to many modern scholars, consistently and sympathetically presents as honorable and natural.

28. *La Mort le Roi Artu*, ed. Jean Frappier, 3rd ed. (Geneva: Droz, 1964), §90.3–4, p. 115; Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot–Grail* (New York: Garland, 1993–96), vol. 4, 121.

Beverly Kennedy's unduly moralistic interpretation of the queen's love affair also requires modern readers to assume that Malory's fifteenth-century audience knew little or nothing of the Lancelot-Guenevere affair, a position shared (independently) by Helen Cooper. Cooper contends that most late-medieval English readers of Malory's *Arthuriad* would have been ignorant of the story of Lancelot and Guenevere's adulterous love, and that those readers who did know of the affair would have considered such a tale of adultery to be a "slandrous French" fabrication.²⁹ Cooper concludes that the number of readers likely to be cognizant of the affair was low primarily because the first literary work in English to present Lancelot and Guenevere as lovers is the stanzaic *Morte* itself and the stanzaic *Morte* "seems to have been little known."³⁰ Cooper bases her thesis on the fact that the insular Arthurian tradition prior to Malory focuses principally upon the history of Britain and Arthur's active kingship and death. Cooper, however, overstates her case by exaggerating the subtle generic distinctions between French and English romance through two claims about the latter: that, in English romance, "[a]dultery is rare," and "more practical" approaches to relationships and adventure substitute for affected emotion.³¹ Beverly Kennedy makes a similar claim when she concludes that "Malory's representation of Guenevere is embedded in late medieval English culture, and so adapted to appeal to an audience of prosperous English men and women proud of their nation and its history, including the reign of the great King Arthur."³² Like Cooper, Kennedy asserts that Malory's English audience would have been largely ignorant of the details of Lancelot and Guenevere's adultery, and "would have found the lovers' repeated acts of treasonable adultery, as recounted in the French version of Arthur's reign, extremely offensive."³³

This claim that Malory's audience knew little of the Lancelot-Guenevere affair, however, is untenable. Elizabeth Archibald makes the convincing case that much of the power and suspense of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* depends upon its English audience having at least some knowledge of the affair of Arthur's wife with his best knight.³⁴ Archibald accepts Cooper's claim that

29. Helen Cooper, "The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* in England," in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. Carol Dover (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 148, 153.

30. Cooper, "*Lancelot-Grail Cycle*," 152.

31. Cooper, "*Lancelot-Grail Cycle*," 148.

32. Kennedy, "A 'Trew Lover,'" 27.

33. Kennedy, "A 'Trew Lover,'" 27.

34. Elizabeth Archibald, "Lancelot as Lover in the English Tradition before Malory," in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P. J. C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge:

the Lancelot–Guenevere affair might not have been *widely* known, but she judiciously insists that the stanzaic-poet’s explanation of Launcelot remaining with Gaynour at the start of his *Morte Arthur* “For loue þat was theym by-twene” (sMA 55) “is a remarkably terse summary of [the lovers’] previous history and delicate situation.”³⁵ Given the poet’s acknowledgment and use of the affair, we agree with Archibald’s conclusion: “The poem would surely have been incomprehensible to an audience who did not already know the [Lancelot–Guenevere] story.”³⁶ Malory, of course, goes even further than the stanzaic-poet in foregrounding the love affair between Arthur’s queen and his greatest knight; but he is carefully building on the intertextual foundations laid by his English predecessor.³⁷

One means through which Malory foregrounds the affair is revising the account of the Roman War he borrowed primarily from the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, a text that pairs the queen with Mordred as a lover. It is a commonplace in scholarship on *Le Morte Darthur* that Malory’s two greatest changes to the Roman War episode are his (i) moving the campaign from late in Arthur’s career to an earlier moment, thereby making it a complete success, and (ii) going out of his way to increase Launcelot’s presence and role in the war. The obvious inference, according to many scholars, is that these adjustments pave the way for Launcelot’s greatness in the Tales that follow, particularly in the noble Tale of “Sir Launcelot du Lake” that immediately follows the Roman War and (as noted above) repeatedly raises the question of Launcelot’s love for Gwennyvere.³⁸ Although the Lancelot–Guenevere affair could have been adapted from the queen’s affair with Modred in the chronicle tradition, it is indisputably an innovation of French romance: as Derek Brewer aptly remarks, in “the development of Arthurian story [the character of] Lancelot seems as it were to spring fully-formed from the mind of Chrétien de Troyes in the late twelfth century.”³⁹

As Brewer’s witty literary history indicates, the earliest extant version of

D. S. Brewer, 2004), 199–216; see also Elizabeth Archibald, “Malory’s Lancelot and Guenevere,” in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 311–14.

35. Archibald, “Lancelot as Lover,” 212, 200.

36. Archibald, “Lancelot as Lover,” 200.

37. Robert Henry Wilson, *Characterization in Malory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1934), 17: “It appears therefore that Malory knew and remembered, if he did not constantly consult, the English poem MH [stanzaic *Morte Arthur*].”

38. See, for example, Mary E. Dichmann, “The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius,” in *Originality*, 67–90.

39. Derek Brewer, “The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot,” *Arthurian Literature* 3 (1981): 26.

the Lancelot-Guenevere love story is Chrétien de Troyes's *Chevalier de la Charette* (also called *Knight of the Cart*; 1177–78); Chrétien is almost certainly the love story's point of origin.⁴⁰ During the early thirteenth century, this story was adopted and augmented by the author of the non-cyclic prose *Lancelot* before being further expanded when this *Lancelot* was incorporated into the Vulgate or *Lancelot-Graal* Cycle. Despite its French origins, the Lancelot-Guenevere love story was undoubtedly known in England by the fourteenth century, for the author of the stanzaic *Morte* builds his poem around this love circa 1400. Even the author of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (circa 1377–1402), despite writing in the Galfridian chronicle tradition in which the queen commits adultery with Mordred rather than Lancelot, seems to have felt that an English audience expected to hear of Lancelot. As a result, the alliterative-poet adds Launcelott to Arthur's war council near the beginning of his *Morte Arthure* (aMA 368–81), just as he allows Launcelott a first attempt at killing Emperor Lucius later in the narrative (aMA 2073–80). Notwithstanding this sop to any fans of the French romance tradition, Launcelott is not the hero of the alliterative poem but rather a minor supporting knight; as such, it is the poem's hero Arthur, not Launcelott, who kills Lucius in single combat (aMA 2251–55). Editors of the poem tend to explain away the problem that—despite seemingly life-threatening injuries inflicted by Launcelott—Lucius not only survives but also fights well until Arthur kills him nearly two hundred lines later: John Finlayson attributes this fact to “carelessness on the part of the author or scribe,” and Mary Hamel posits “a convention of the poem” whereby “formidable fighters” are temporarily able to endure mortal injury.⁴¹ However, we contend that the alliterative-poet might have created Launcelott's grand battle with Lucius to please those members of his audience with sufficient education (or social contacts) to have familiarity with the French Arthurian tradition. As Hamel judiciously insists regarding the poem's opening war council, Launcelott's “self-description as one of the ‘lesse men’ of Arthur's court [aMA line 370] . . . is . . . the poet's deliberate signal” to those audience members familiar with the French tradition “that *this* [English] text will not be concerned with the romantic adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere.”⁴² Once again, Malory builds upon his English

40. As in earlier chapters, we distinguish between each textual tradition by using the spelling of characters' names found in each text. In this paragraph (and elsewhere), “Lancelot-Guenevere” indicates a generic reference to the characters in general; “Launcelott” is the character in the aMA; “Launcelot” is the spelling in both sMA and MD.

41. See, for example, John Finlayson, ed., *Morte Arthure* (London: Arnold, 1967), n. to line 2074; Hamel, n. to lines 2073–80.

42. Hamel, 53 and nn. to lines 368–70 and 3638.

sources' modifications of the French literary tradition in order to create his own unique version of the highly intertextual Arthurian legend.

Although Malory's Tale of "Sir Launcelot du Lake" (Tale III) is based upon a careful selection, conflation, and rearrangement of several episodes from the French romance tradition, especially the so-called Agravain section from late in the prose *Lancelot*, the Tale begins with a passage entirely of Malory's invention that encourages his audience to assume that the queen's love affair is not yet sexual. This passage focuses on Launcelot's superior fighting ability and close bond with his queen:

And som there were that were but knyghtes whiche encesred in armys and worshyp that they passed all other of her felowys in prouesse and noble dedys, and that was well proved on many. 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. . . . So this Sir Launcelot encesred so mervaylously in worship and honoure, therefore . . . 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 frome the fyre thorow his noble chevalry. (*MD* 190.4–18)

As noted above, precisely when this love becomes physical is one of the most frequently recurring, yet still unanswered, questions in Malory scholarship. What is certain, however, is that Malory here creates what Robert H. Wilson describes as "a character sketch of Lancelot, and the two traits it emphasizes—surpassing prowess, and loyal love for Guenevere—appear prominently both in [this Tale] and elsewhere in the *Morte Darthur*."⁴³ Whether Malory's audience (medieval or modern) interprets the love between Arthur's queen and best knight as sexual or chaste, and whether the sex starts sooner or later are details less relevant to our defense of the queen than the ways in which Gwenyvere makes Launcelot's knightly career possible.

Trivializing and Blaming Gwenyvere

Perhaps because they misinterpret as a dismissal of his queen King Arthur's infamous lament that he could replace Gwenyvere easily enough but will

43. Wilson, *Characterization in Malory*, 21.

never again have a “company” of “good knyghtes” to match the Fellowship of the Round Table (*MD* 886.28–887.1), many literary critics treat Gwenyvere as a secondary figure compared to Arthur and Launcelot. Sarah J. Hill notes that scholars tend “to trivialize the role of Guenevere in Malory’s work” yet “condemn her” as the cause of Launcelot’s moral downfall.⁴⁴ Sadly, Hill’s documenting this trend over a quarter century ago has not put an end to the critical denunciation of the queen. In his study of Malory’s characters, for instance, Paul R. Rovang praises Gwenyvere’s insight, importance, and humanity only to reinforce this old interpretive chestnut by reducing the queen to an irrational and “ruinous” female who imposes “extreme demands” on Launcelot; these demands, it is claimed, result in her lover’s rejection of a possible “happy marriage” to Elayne of Corbyn, the death of Elayne of Ascolat, Launcelot’s “suffering through” the queen’s bouts of irrational or “causeless” anger (*MD* 830.28–30), and his having to be “untrue to both himself and his king in order to be true to her.”⁴⁵ According to Rovang, Gwenyvere causes both her lover’s unhappiness and his moral corruption. By such accounts as this, Gwenyvere has power—but her power destroys.

From the vantage point of the tragic end of *Le Morte Darthur*, the queen could conceivably be accused of causing the downfall of two great men: Launcelot, who fails to obtain the Holy Grail because of his love for the queen, and Arthur, who eventually loses a stable kingdom because he pursues a war against Launcelot—a war sparked by Aggravayne and Mordred’s public declaration that Launcelot is having relations with the queen on a daily basis (*MD* 870.16–23). As Hill rightly notes, the tendency of literary critics “to condemn [Gwenyvere] as the object which prevents Lancelot from achieving the Grail” remains surprisingly prevalent.⁴⁶ Such condemnation results when critics are “eager to distort the characterization of Guenevere, presenting an imperious and clinging temptress in the place of Malory’s strong and just queen.”⁴⁷ Critics who engage in this dismissal of Arthur’s queen represent several generations of scholarship: from the 1960s to the 2000s.⁴⁸ The critical

44. Sarah J. Hill, “Recovering Malory’s Guenevere,” *Enarratio: Publications of the Medieval Association of the Midwest* 1 (1991): 131.

45. Paul R. Rovang, *Malory’s Anatomy of Chivalry* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 140–41. Cf. Donald L. Hoffman, “Guenevere the Enchantress,” *Arthuriana* 9, no. 2 (1999): 32.

46. Hill, “Recovering Malory’s Guenevere,” 131.

47. Hill, “Recovering Malory’s Guenevere,” 131.

48. In addition to the critics cited already, see Charles Moorman, “Courtly Love in Malory,” *ELH* 27, no. 3 (1960): 163–76; Mary Etta Scott, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” *Mid-Hudson Language Studies* 5 (1982): 21–29; John Michael Walsh, “Malory’s

tendency to belittle Gwendivere is, however, illogical because she cannot be both unimportant and the main cause of the book's tragic ending.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule of interpreting Gwendivere negatively, but on the whole, the blame game continues. These exceptions include nuanced studies by Amy Kaufman, who argues that the queen's "new identity emerges, burning with passionate subjectivity"; Molly Martin, who demonstrates that Gwendivere's visual presence enables Launcelot to prove "his masculine identity"; Edward Donald Kennedy, who documents how Gwendivere "succeeds where Galahad has failed" by leading Launcelot "to salvation"; and Dorsey Armstrong, who documents the queen's "critical yet marginal" role as the woman who at times "models the ideal of feminine chivalric behavior."⁴⁹ Nevertheless, most scholarship on Malory's *Morte Darthur* continues to excoriate Gwendivere despite exculpatory textual and critical evidence. Rovang labels Gwendivere as "Arthur's fatal attraction" despite two factors that mitigate the queen's responsibility for her problematic marriage. First, Arthur chooses to marry her after Merlin warns him that she will love Launcelot, so the king knowingly risks that the Launcelot-Gwendivere affair will happen (*MD* 76.8–27). Second, Arthur "institut[es] . . . the Pentecostal Oath" at the end of their wedding feast (*MD* 97.27–98.3), an action that makes the queen his partner in regulating Arthurian chivalry, even if it is not yet clear whether or not the king and queen will be companionate romantic partners.⁵⁰ Similarly, Hill herself reduces Gwendivere and Isode to the level of "rewarder and . . . reward" for their respective lover-knights,⁵¹ a statement that undermines both queens' considerable agency. In an otherwise sensitive account of the close of the *Morte*, C. David Benson insists that "Lancelot and Guinevere are Malory's two greatest characters," but he then chastises Gwendivere as temperamental, "unjust," and "moody and fickle."⁵² Siobhán M. Wyatt likewise highlights the ways in which Malory emphasizes Gwendiv-

'Very Mater of La Chevaler du Charyot,'" in *Studies in Malory*, ed. James W. Spisak (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1985), 199–206; Alan Gaylord, "Back from the *Queste*," *Arthuriana* 16, no. 2 (2006): 78–83.

49. Kaufman, "Guenevere Burning," 85; Molly Martin, *Vision and Gender in Malory's "Morte Darthur"* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 61; E. D. Kennedy, "Malory's Guenevere," 40, 42; Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 58.

50. Rovang, *Malory's Anatomy of Chivalry*, 133–34, 138 (quoting Armstrong, *Gender*, 19).

51. Hill, "Recovering Malory's Guenevere," 137.

52. C. David Benson, "The Ending of the *Morte Darthur*," in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 222–24.

vere's role in the closing episodes of the *Morte*; Wyatt astutely argues for a sympathetic portrait of the queen, yet she, too, blames Gwenyvere for her "significant flaws" of "jealousy and pride."⁵³

Such critical condemnation of Gwenyvere mirrors the queen's harsh self-assessment of her degree of responsibility for Arthur's downfall; yet this self-reproach must be balanced against the broader intratextual contexts of Malory's "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17). Speaking to all the women who surround her at the nunnery, Gwenyvere blames both herself and Launcelot for the deaths of Arthur and his knights, lamenting that "Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste noblest knyghtes of the worlde, for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my most noble lorde slayne" (*MD* 932.29–32). Yet this self-accusation should not be taken as the only truth. As Mark Lambert noted over four decades ago, causation in the final Tales of Malory's *Morte* "is multiple and complex": Gwenyvere, Launcelot, Arthur, and Gawayne are all to blame yet (we would add) remain noble and heroic.⁵⁴ Given this complexity of causation, it is worth emphasizing two key facts. First, the queen blames her love affair—not herself as a temptress—for Arthur's downfall: this is an important distinction. Second, the words of both other characters and Malory himself reveal several causes of the end of Arthur's kingdom, all of which establish that no single character deserves all the blame.

Foremost among these other characters and causes are Gawayne and Launcelot, each of whom utters a self-accusation that mirrors and complicates that of Gwenyvere. Gawayne blames himself for his uncle's war against Mordred, saying to Arthur, "thorow me and *my pryde* ye have all thys shame and disease" (*MD* 918.10–15 [our italics]); Gawayne blames himself because, had Launcelot not been exiled, Arthur's civil war against Mordred would not have begun. Launcelot, in turn, similarly blames himself, telling the hermit-bishop that he is responsible for the deaths of his king and queen: "by my defaute and *myn orgule and my pryde* . . . they were bothe layed ful lowe" (*MD* 936.35–937.1 [our italics]). The similar words of these two knights highlight the poignant fact that honor, loyalty, and love are definite goods in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, yet they contribute to the final destruction of the Arthurian world.

The complexity of the situation, the nobility of the principal characters, and the resulting tragedy all receive emphasis not only through the issue of

53. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 139–63 (quoting 134).

54. Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 160. See also K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 132–42.

knightly pride but also through a striking refrain that puts Arthur's nephew and wife on equal footing—both with each other and with Launcelot. As Lambert points out, at the moments at which Gawayne and Gwenyvere blame themselves for the destruction of Arthur's kingdom (when Gawayne is writing to Launcelot and Gwenyvere is speaking to him), they each urge Launcelot to heed their pleas using the same phrase: “for all the love that ever was betwyxte us” (*MD* 919.3–4, 933.4).⁵⁵ Given this echo in language, it is not surprising that the character besides the queen to whom critics assign overmuch blame for the final destruction of the Arthurian world is Gawayne.⁵⁶ The focus on Gawayne, however, ignores Malory's clear denunciation of Aggravayne in both the *explicit* of Tale VII and the opening lines of Tale VIII (*MD* 869.12–13, 870.7–15). The fact that, in modern criticism of *Le Morte Darthur*, Arthur's nephew shares with Gwenyvere the burden of blame reflects Malory's own artful plot construction whereby *both* Launcelot's affair with Gwenyvere *and* his friendship with Gawayne contribute to their society's destruction. The fact that Malory has both Arthur's queen and his nephew speak a modified version of the stanzaic *Morte's* line “The loue þat hathe be vs by-twene” (*sMA* 742) reveals how powerfully this English poem influenced his account of Arthur's rise and fall.⁵⁷

Another means through which Malory suggests shared responsibility for the end of the Arthurian world is the similar emotional reactions of Gwenyvere and Arthur to certain key events. As the Quest of the Holy Grail—the event that signals the beginning of the end of Malory's Arthurian world—begins, Gwenyvere mirrors Arthur's mourning. First, Arthur laments the end of “the fayryst felyshyp” to have ever existed as well as the future deaths of many of his knights (*MD* 674.28–675.2). Then, “aboven all othir [women] Quene Gwenyvere made grete sorow” (*MD* 675.18). The royals' mourning continues as the Round Table Knights set off on the Quest, for the queen withdraws to her room to mourn in private while the king reacts to viewing his men's departure with grief that robs him of the power to speak: “the kynge turned away and myght nat speke for wepyng” (*MD* 677.4–18). These moments of mourning prepare the audience or readers for the tragic outcome

55. Lambert, *Style and Vision*, 158–60. Significantly for our purposes, this is a phrase that Malory builds from several lines of the stanzaic poem: see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 1252.8–1253.27; Lambert, 158–60; and below.

56. For a defense of Gawayne that provides examples of his detractors, see K. S. Whetter, “Characterization in Malory and Bonnie,” *Arthuriana* 19, no. 3 (2009): 123–35.

57. This line appears, with some variation, several more times in the *sMA*: lines 72, 799, 1661, 1804, 1818, 2937.

of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a tragedy for which both the queen and king take responsibility. For instance, Gwenyvere laments that she and "thys same man" Launcelot, through their love, caused the deaths of both Arthur and many of his knights (*MD* 932.29–32), just as Arthur earlier lamented first his impending separation from the dying Gawayne and then his failure to have Launcelot by his side in his battle against Mordred (*MD* 917.30–918.4 and 924.26–29). Crucially, the dying Arthur takes some responsibility for Launcelot's absence from the final battle—an absence that prevents Arthur from winning a solid victory. The king calls out to his best knight and confesses that, by choosing to fight Launcelot, he caused his own death: "thys day have I sore myssed the! And alas, that ever I was ayenste the; for now have I my dethe" (*MD* 924.26–28).

Arthur's statement of self-blame as well as his assertion that his war with Launcelot has caused his own death echo Gawayne's similar statements on his deathbed. Arthur's nephew first tells the king that his "deth-dayes be com" because of "[his] owne hastynes and [his] wylfulness"; then he tells Launcelot in a letter both that he "soughte [his] dethe" by fighting Launcelot and that the cause of his death is the head-wound he received from Launcelot, a wound reopened in battle (*MD* 918.5–31). This admission of wrongdoing by Gawayne, like the similar admissions of both Arthur and Gwenyvere, makes it clear that the queen is not the only blameworthy party in the final destruction of the Round Table. The multiple admissions of blame emphasize the complex causation at work in the Round Table's collapse; this complexity includes strong bonds of affection among the principal characters: not only Gwenyvere and Launcelot but also Launcelot and Gawayne, Gawayne and Arthur, and Arthur and Gwenyvere. Arthur's and Gwenyvere's similar sense of guilt, and especially their mutual grief for the sundering of the Round Table Fellowship at the beginning of the Grail Quest, are consistent with the obligation of shared stewardship for the Round Table Fellowship created by the Pentecostal Oath at their wedding (*MD* 97.27–98.3). Their similar grief also reflects their similar feelings as the Fellowship begins to unravel, complicating critical assumptions that their marriage is loveless.

Malory further spreads the blame for the end of the Arthurian world by placing much, if not all, of the responsibility for the tragedy of Camelot's destruction on Aggravayne and Mordred. As much as there can be a single cause for the tragedy, it is the combined mendacity of these two villainous brothers. Malory explicitly asserts that the destruction of "the floure of chyvalry of alle the worlde . . . *all was longe uppon* too unhappy knyghtis whych were named Sir Aggravayne and Sir Mordred" (*MD* 870.9–11 [our

italics]). Arthur's own words subsequently confirm Malory's assignment of blame when Arthur cries out, "A, Aggravayne Aggravayne! . . . Jesu forgyff hit thy soule, *for thyne evyll wyll* that thou haddist *and Sir Mordred* thy brothir unto Sir Launcelot *hath caused all this sorow*" (*MD* 887.5–7 [our italics]). Just before their single combat, Arthur likewise accuses Mordred of being the "traytoure . . . that *hath caused all thys myschyff*" (*MD* 923.7–8 [our italics]). According to both Malory and Arthur, then, the blame falls more on the revealers of the love affair than on the lovers themselves. Malory's audience and readers must therefore conclude that several characters are to blame for Arthur's downfall. Certainly, the broader context of the destruction of the Arthurian world includes variegated contributing factors, among them the disastrous decisions of three of *Le Morte Darthur's* male protagonists: Arthur, Launcelot, and Mordred.

First Arthur causes his own mortal wounding by choosing to seek revenge instead of accepting his pyrrhic victory over Mordred, and then he fails to comfort Bedwere. In light of the destruction at Salisbury Plain, Lucan urges Arthur to leave Mordred alone, for the king has won the field (*MD* 923.15–23). Yet Arthur chooses to attack Mordred in order to seek revenge upon the man he now blames for causing such "myschyff" (*MD* 923.7–8). The king also attacks his son, not caring whether he himself lives or dies, and therefore could be guilty of prioritizing (heroic) revenge over (continuing) responsible rule (*MD* 923.24–26). Despite suffering the consequences of violence in the form of a mortal wound from Mordred (*MD* 923.34–924.4), and despite witnessing the horrifying results of violence in the form of Lucan's "guttis" bursting out of his body because he tried to help his king (*MD* 924.30–35), Arthur fails to let go of his violent instincts when interacting with the grieving Bedwere. On the contrary, just before departing for Avalon Arthur must threaten to kill Bedwere for twice failing to obey his king's command to return Excalibur to the water: "And but if thou do now as I bydde the, if ever I may se the, I shall sle the myne owne hondis" (*MD* 926.8–9).

Nevertheless, as several scholars have argued, Arthur's desire for revenge is justified: as Cooper observes, "there is no indication of authorial dissent" from Arthur's judgment that "Mordred is 'the *traytoure* that all thys woo hath wrought'" (*MD* 923.13–14 [our italics]).⁵⁸ Indeed, considering the king wishes, just before seeing and fighting Mordred, that he might "wyste now where

58. Helen Cooper, "Counter-Romance," in *The Long Fifteenth Century*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 154–55; see also Thomas H. Crofts, "Malory's Death Poem," *Arthuriana* 29, no. 1 (2019): 109–23.

were that *traytoure* Sir Mordred that hath caused all thys myscheff" (923.7–8 [our italics]), Malory allows Arthur to repeat this sentiment about Mordred's culpability. Even the threat against Bedwere is understandable given Arthur's personal injury and grief, Bedwere's own refusal to obey his dying king's last command, and the destruction of all that Arthur has worked to create, including the all-important Round Table Fellowship that he and Gwenyvere brought into being. So calamitous is the final tragedy that Arthur—because he is nearly dead himself—cannot offer his last living knight any consolation. He tells Bedwere, "Comforte thyselff," for Bedwere cannot now rely on his dying king for aid (*MD* 923.9–11, 927.4–5). This king's final interaction with one of his subjects ends with Arthur's request that Bedwere pray for his soul, a request typical of a dying man and of the epic-heroic warrior's concern to be memorialized. Concomitantly, Arthur's focus on himself both during and after his single combat with Mordred (*MD* 927.4–7) indicates how far he now is from placing his kingly duties over his personal desires. We argued in the previous chapter that Arthur is an effective and successful monarch throughout Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and this is still the case at the conclusion of the "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17). Once the Round Table is irrevocably "disparbeled" (*MD* 872.3), however, so too is Arthur's kingship and reason for living. Hence the necessity and symbolism of properly discarding Excalibur. None of this makes Arthur a failure—but it does reveal the extent to which Gwenyvere can hardly be said to bear primary responsibility for the tragic *disparbelling*.

Although Launcelot is often hailed by critics as Malory's favorite knight, he is similar to Arthur in that he makes a disastrous decision that becomes an indirect cause of Arthur's death. In Launcelot's case, of course, he pursues a romantic relationship with the queen not only before the Grail Quest but also after it—and more passionately after than before. This fact is evident in Malory's narration of how Launcelot failed on the Quest because "ever his thoughtis prevyly were on the quene" and, after Launcelot returned to Arthur's court, how he and the queen "loved togydiris more hotter than they dud toforehonde" and took so many "prevy draughtis togydir" that the court was rife with chatter—especially that of Aggravayne (*MD* 790.15–19). Beverly Kennedy cites the *Middle English Dictionary* to claim that what Malory means by "draught" is that Launcelot and Gwenyvere's "hotter" love causes them "to take private walks" in plain sight of the court, thereby starting rumors.⁵⁹ Kennedy's interpretation of this passage, however, is selective: the

59. Kennedy, "Adultery," 76; *MED*, s.v. "draught" (n.), definition 3(a).

relevant *MED* entry for “draught” has a question mark before the meaning that Kennedy cites: “haven a ~ [draught], ? to take a walk.” Therefore, there is some doubt as to what “draught” means in Malory’s passage. Furthermore, “draught” has meanings other than “a walk” that better fit the context of this passage’s acknowledgment of “hotter” love. For example, definition 4 includes “(f) desire,” while definition 7 includes the ideas of both a figurative drink—“(b) *fig.* a draught of love, pleasure, misfortune, understanding, etc.”—and an actual one taken in private, as in “(a) a drink of water, wine, potion, etc.”⁶⁰ Both private desires and private drinking, whether of wine or pleasures, are consonant with Malory’s description of “hotter” love (*MD* 790.16–17). Significantly, the plurality of the word’s meanings suggests that Malory chooses not to brand the couple as sinful here. Equally significantly and more famously, he certainly disclaims any knowledge of whether Launcelot and Gwenyvere are “abed other at other maner of disportis” (*MD* 874.5–10) when Aggravayne and Mordred trap them in the queen’s chamber. All told, Malory seems remarkably sympathetic to the lovers; nonetheless, his use of the term “hotter” suggests that this love affair has been consummated often. Despite critical emphasis to the contrary, Launcelot must be at least equally as guilty as Gwenyvere for this consummation and its consequences.

A final factor mitigating Gwenyvere’s supposed guilt for the ruin of the Round Table is Mordred’s disastrous and self-seeking decision to betray his uncle-father’s trust and usurp the throne; this decision triggers the “unhappy” civil war that kills thousands of men (*MD* 922.17–34). Mordred commits high treason using forged letters to make it seem that Arthur is dead, whereupon he “made a parlemente, and called the lordys togydir, and . . . made them to chose hym kynge” (*MD* 915.2–7). This treason results in the final “dolefulle[ste] batyle” during which “an hondred thousande [ar] leyde dede uppon the downe,” including Mordred and—arguably, in Malory’s version of events—in which Arthur too is mortally wounded (*MD* 922.22–924.7).⁶¹ Certainly the king’s death is indicated when the ladies on the barge who take Arthur’s body away for healing soon after his wounding subsequently leave his corpse with the hermit in order that he pray for “a dede corse” that Bedwere instantly identifies as “my lorde Kynge Arthur” (*MD* 926.22–927.27). The point, again, is that Gwenyvere is not only not the main agent of Camelot’s destruction; she is far from being the destructive force her detractors insist.

Another contributing factor to Arthur’s downfall and death that operates

60. *MED*, s.v. “draught” (n.); definition 3(e) actually includes “trick,” including in the sense of “engag[ing] in a deceitful or sinful activity.” Entry accessed 16 September 2019.

61. On the likely finality of Arthur’s end in Malory, see Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 204–9.

on the societal level is the ethos of the Round Table Fellowship itself. As K. S. Whetter has argued elsewhere, it is the knights' essential nobility that causes the Fellowship's destruction, not their sinfulness.⁶² Arthur, for instance, loves both the Fellowship of the Round Table and Gwenyvere; Gwenyvere loves both Arthur and Launcelot; Gawayne refuses to have anything to do with his evil brothers' plot to capture the lovers, but is incapable of forgiving Launcelot for the death of Gareth because he loves his brother so deeply; Launcelot is loyal to both his king and queen. As Armstrong notes, "the gender model upheld as an ideal *produces* Lancelot and Guenevere's relationship, Gawain's thirst for vengeance, and the treasonous Mordred himself. The Arthurian community could only ever destroy itself."⁶³ If, however, the seeds of Camelot's destruction are inherent in its very ideology and central characters, the tragedy of that destruction is all the greater precisely because, in our reading of the *Morte*, Arthurian society is not a failure.

Given the fact that, in Malory's "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17), the destruction of the Arthurian world results as much from the noble rather than the sinful nature of its main characters (including the queen), critics must revise their interpretations of Gwenyvere's function. Malory's Guenevere-figure is neither the destroyer of Launcelot and the Round Table Fellowship that many critics claim she is, nor the means for Malory to reveal "the brutality and self-destructiveness" undergirding Arthurian chivalric society that Hill claims she is.⁶⁴ The complexity of causation in *Le Morte Darthur* documented above makes it impossible to conclude that the queen is the primary cause of Arthur's loss of power. Furthermore, the complex and conflicting claims of honor, loyalty, and love that cause the tragic end of the Arthurian world also hint that Malory's male and female characters are inherently similar. Specifically, both genders are equally ennobled and constrained by the complexities of the Arthurian way of life. Recognition of the similarities between male and female positions in *Le Morte Darthur* enables a better appreciation of the examples of female power Malory creates. The most obvious and crucial of these powerful females is Gwenyvere.

Rereading Malory's Gwenyvere

Gwenyvere's significance is evident from quite early on in the narrative. Her entrance into married life is marked by her dowry: not only the Round Table

62. Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 99–159; Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 105–214.

63. Armstrong, *Gender*, 26.

64. Contra Hill, "Recovering Malory's Guenevere," 131.

itself but also 100 of its 150 knights (*MD* 77.7–11). In light of the importance of this dowry to both Arthur and his court, Armstrong rightly insists that Gwenyvere has a positive impact on “knightly identity” in much of Malory’s *Arthuriad*, partly because she helps issue judgments upon Gawayne (*MD* 87.1–6) and Pellynore (*MD* 96.32–97.6). These judgments “correspond with Arthur’s own desires,” and her language throughout aligns with Merlin’s and the knights’, thereby preparing for the Pentecostal Oath.⁶⁵ The most prominent example of this role as judge is the queen’s “sett[ing] a queste of ladyes uppon Sir Gawayne” (*MD* 87.1–6) after he unintentionally decapitates a woman who tries to protect a knight from his attack (84.30–33). Because this quest imposed by Gwenyvere requires Gawayne to be a good knight who fights on behalf of ladies, behaves courteously, and “never . . . refuse[s] mercy to hym that askith mercy” (*MD* 87.4–6), the queen ensures that her nephew sets a good example for other Round Table Knights and thereby helps to establish the chivalric basis of the Fellowship. The queen’s success in reforming her nephew is evident in his blessed state at the end of Malory’s “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17), for Gawayne is able to appear to Arthur in a dream due to his outstanding service to ladies—not (as in Malory’s French source) because he has helped many of the poor (*MD* 920.30–921.18).⁶⁶

In this same set of wedding quests, Gwenyvere and Arthur together welcome Torre home and hear his account of his adventure (*MD* 91.23–31). The queen also continues to discipline knights who fail to behave appropriately. She sharply criticizes Pellynore for failing to save a lady’s life (*MD* 97.1–2), and she sends the cowardly Pedyvere to Rome to atone for murdering his wife, despite Launcelot’s attempts to save her life (*MD* 220.31–221.2). The queen’s specific instructions that Pedyvere must carry the corpse on his horse, and have the corpse in any bed in which he chooses to rest before reaching Rome (*MD* 220.34–221.2), reinforce her image as a source of knightly discipline early on in Malory’s *Morte*. Her actions encourage knights to conform to the Round Table code of conduct Arthur articulates immediately after Gwenyvere takes Pellynore to task: to do no “outrage” or “mourthir,” always to avoid treason, to give mercy to those who ask for it, to aid and protect the rights of all women and never to rape (“enforce”) them, and never to fight in “a wrongefull quarell” neither for “love” nor “no worldis goodis” (*MD* 97.27–35). The queen’s love later motivates Launcelot to violate the “wrongefull quarell” clause by pledging to defend her from the charge

65. Armstrong, *Gender*, 57–58. See also Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery, and Inheritance in Malory’s Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 24–36.

66. *Mort le Roi Artu*, §176, p. 225, lines 8–12; *Lancelot-Grail*, vol. 4, 149.

of adultery when he himself has recently slept with her in Mellyagaunt's castle (*MD* 852.21–854.27). There seems, however, to be no true sin or failure here. Although Launcelot confesses while on the Grail Quest that his love of “a quene” is so strong that he “wolde . . . do batayle were hit ryght other wronge” (*MD* 696.19–22), and although Mellyagaunt invokes the idea of trial by combat overseen by God (*MD* 854.13–17), Launcelot cleaves Mellyagaunt's skull in two despite having one arm literally tied behind his back (*MD* 858.10–859.32). The extent of Launcelot's victory seems to be Malory's method of showing support for both Launcelot and Gwenyvere; as such, Launcelot's victory is partly Gwenyvere's victory—and vice versa. Similarly, Gwenyvere's working with Arthur to establish a code of chivalric ethics—the Round Table Oath—reveals one aspect of her noble nature: a clear understanding of what constitutes proper knightly conduct. In depicting Gwenyvere as a queen who cares deeply about the honor of Arthur, his knights, and his court, Malory follows the example of the stanzaic-poet, who begins his poem with the queen urging her husband to host a tournament in order to repair his “honour” (*sMA* 25–38).

One of Gwenyvere's noble qualities for which literary critics seldom give her credit is her “knightly” willingness to hazard her body. This willingness to put herself in jeopardy for her husband and his knights is evident in the episode of the war with the five kings. Arthur underscores Gwenyvere's importance to him when he tells her to accompany him as he battles against his enemies, saying, “I may nat longe mysse you” and “Ye shall cause me to be the more hardy” (*MD* 101.14–15). Despite the danger involved, Gwenyvere agrees to enter a war zone (*MD* 101.18–19). Then, when the king, queen, Kay, Gawayne, and Gryflet are ambushed and trapped between the enemy army and a raging river, Gwenyvere speaks with a knight's bravery. She boldly declares to Arthur that she “were . . . lever to dey in this watir than to falle in youre enemyes handis . . . and there to be slayne” (*MD* 102.20–21). Evident in these words are both the queen's bravery in being willing to hazard the water, and her political and tactical wisdom in knowing what her fate would be should she be captured. Happily for Arthur and most readers, Kay's prowess and courage save the day (*MD* 102.22–103.16), and again Arthur and Gwenyvere make similar comments on their knight's performance (103.8–16). This episode that appears so early in the *Morte Darthur* and that so aptly showcases Gwenyvere's wisdom and bravery should have a major impact on her critical reputation. Unfortunately, it does not.⁶⁷

67. In his recent defense of Gwenyvere, for instance, Hanks argues that the “agency” she exerts against Mellyagaunt and Launcelot is confined to the last two Tales and is

Significantly, the queen's willingness to put herself in harm's way to protect the men she loves remains evident near the end of Malory's book. After Mordred and Aggravayne trap the queen and Launcelot in her chamber, Launcelot plans to die fighting the conspirators. However, Gwenyvere would rather die so that he can live (*MD* 875.28–29). Although her lover exclaims that he hopes God will protect him from such “a shame” (*MD* 875.31), the queen's gesture here is honorable and knightly. Later, Gwenyvere's agency and intelligence in leading troops as she resists Mordred's plan to marry her make her seem even more admirable. Emulating the tactically minded Launcelot, who managed to escape the ambush outside the queen's chamber, Gwenyvere dissembles in order not to “discover her harte” and thereby wins Mordred's trust (*MD* 915.3–17). Once she gets to London for her supposed shopping trip, however, the queen behaves like a general determined not to lose territory to the enemy. She stocks the Tower of London with all necessary supplies and, because she has “well garnysshed hit with men,” is able to defend it from Mordred despite his besieging her with the power of both “engynnes” and “grete gunnes” (*MD* 915.17–24).⁶⁸ The queen's refusal to allow herself to be “in hys hondis” suggests that she defends Arthur's and her own honor by keeping herself undefiled (*MD* 915.25–26). When Mordred tries every possible stratagem to get her out of the Tower, she declares to him “shortely, opynly and pryvayly” that she would rather kill herself than marry him (*MD* 916.19–23). This is her most dramatic moment of hazarding her body to protect a man she loves, but here (as Mordred's rebellion indicates) that man is her husband. Despite what is frequently said about Gwenyvere's loveless marriage, her actions even at this late stage in “The Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17) testify that she still loves Arthur and remains loyal to him even if she also loves Launcelot. The queen's “trew lover” (*MD* 842.11) status is one of the great tragic paradoxes of Malory's *Morte*.

In addition to protecting her own honor, Gwenyvere exhibits a selfless willingness to protect her knights from danger. This is especially evident in the Knight of the Cart episode in which Mellyagaunt poses an imminent threat to both Gwenyvere and the ten unarmed Knights of the Round Table who accompany her.⁶⁹ Knowing that Gwenyvere's escort wears only green

“not fully seen earlier in the *Morte*”: D. Thomas Hanks Jr., “Guenevere's *Raptus-Sanctus* Triumphs in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*,” *Arthuriana* 33, no. 4 (2023): 4 and 7.

68. Mordred's “grete gunnes” are cannon: see Kelly DeVries, “French and English Acceptance of Medieval Gunpowder Weaponry,” *Journal of Medieval Military History* 11 (2013): 259–70 (especially 262).

69. Hanks, “Guenevere's *Raptus-Sanctus* Triumphs,” 7–11, also notes Gwenyvere's

clothes appropriate for going “on-mayynge,” Mellyagaunt cowardly seizes his moment and attacks with a force consisting of “twenty men of armys and an hondred archars” (*MD* 842.12–843.26). In response, the queen uses noble words, first to take Mellyagaunt to task for shaming himself, the “noble kyng” who knighted him, and “all knyghthode,” and then to protect her honor by declaring that she will cut her throat rather than allow him to “dishonoure” her. She then takes noble action to prevent the deaths of these ten knights who are willing to fight on her behalf despite their lack of armor (*MD* 843.34–844.31). She agrees to surrender herself to Mellyagaunt on two conditions: that her knights suffer no further injury and that they remain in her “presence” (*MD* 844.32–845.2). Having thus ensured her knights’ safety, Gwenyvere boldly seizes the opportunity to send a child messenger to Launcelot (*MD* 845.17–846.23). Her rescuer’s imminent arrival prevents Mellyagaunt from dishonoring her, but Gwenyvere is equally concerned with Launcelot’s honor and the welfare of the kingdom. Once again using significant speech, the queen protects Launcelot’s reputation by “rebuk[ing] that lady that lykened Sir Launcelot to ryde in a charyote to hangynge,” emphasizing instead his status as “the moste noble knyght of the worlde” (*MD* 848.27–30). Equally politic is her action of making peace with Mellyagaunt just before Launcelot challenges him, an intelligent act that prevents both the violence her lover wants to enact and the “shameful noyse” that a kidnapping scandal would bring (*MD* 848.33–850.13).⁷⁰ The nobility of the queen’s conduct throughout this episode is evident in the loyalty that the ten knights continue to show to her. They are all willing to ignore their injuries in order to defend her against Mellyagaunt’s charge that she has slept with one of them (*MD* 853.7–22). Of course, Launcelot champions her instead, yet this willingness of the Queen’s Knights to attempt her defense, spoken in one collective voice, should affect how critics assess Gwenyvere. All in all, Malory’s Gwenyvere has many heroic qualities that make her worthy of Arthur’s claim that she is not merely the “fayryst” woman of her day but “the moste valyaunte” (*MD* 76.17–18).

control of her conversations with Mellyagaunt. The full extent of Gwenyvere’s quick thinking, bravery, and leadership in this episode were first noted by Tolhurst, “Eradicating Victorian Backreading,” 228–29.

70. Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 147–51, goes too far in claiming that Launcelot concludes from this attempt at peace that Gwenyvere “has been unfaithful . . . with Mellyagaunt.” A classic and even more negative example of Gwenyvere-bashing is Walsh’s argument that the queen agrees to peace only further to manipulate Launcelot and satisfy her own insecurity: Walsh, “Malory’s ‘Very Mater,’” 206–7.

Intertextual Queens: Gwenyvere and Waynour

Although our analysis of *Le Morte Darthur* supports Hill's conclusion that Malory's Gwenyvere "is a complex and pivotal character," it does not support her assertion that Malory's Arthurian world is both brutal and self-destructive because males and females in the *Morte* embody two different sets of values.⁷¹ Instead, our analysis indicates that Malory's men and women are not opposites, but interwoven companions or foils of one another: *both* genders are equally ennobled and constrained by the contradictions inherent in the Arthurian brand of chivalry that the Pentecostal Oath codifies. Jerome Mandel observes that Malory's characters "behave as they do" due to various motivations for and constraints on their behavior.⁷² The often-mentioned tragedy of Malory's Arthuriad occurs because of—not despite—the efforts of both male and female characters to behave nobly. Recognition of the fundamental similarity between male and female values in Malory's *Morte* enables better appreciation of female power within the text—or at least the power of certain females. Gwenyvere, as noted above, is the most obvious and crucial of these figures. Intertextual comparison again helps to illustrate our point.

Detailed analysis of Gwenyvere's intertextual counterparts in the alliterative and stanzaic *Mortes* not only refutes E. Talbot Donaldson's disparaging claims about the stanzaic poem's Gaynour but also reveals that Waynor, in the alliterative poem, is the truly weak character. Donaldson dismisses Gaynour in the stanzaic *Morte* as weepy, weak, "and inarticulate"; he further asserts that—unlike Malory, who gives his Gwenyvere "a force and dignity"—the stanzaic-poet presents only a "wishy-washy clinging vine."⁷³ Donaldson's claims portray Gaynour as lacking dignity and assertiveness, and they stereotype her as a desperate, needy female; yet the stanzaic poem actually portrays her in ways that make her not only an inspiration for, but also a positive counterpart to, Malory's queen. We argue further, building upon the scholarship of Maureen Fries, that the labels "wishy-washy" and lacking "force" more accurately describe Waynor in the alliterative *Morte*. Readers interested in locating the roots of Malory's Gwenyvere will find little of interest in the alliterative *Morte* because Waynor is indeed a weak and dull character.

The alliterative-poet's Waynor has only two significant appearances in the

71. Hill, "Recovering Malory's Guenevere," 131.

72. Jerome Mandel, "Constraint and Motivation in Malory's 'Lancelot and Elaine,'" *Papers on Language and Literature* 20 (1984): 246.

73. E. Talbot Donaldson, "Malory and the Stanzaic *Le Morte Arthur*," *Studies in Philology* 47, no. 3 (1950): 462.

Morte Arthure, so she can truly be said to begin and end without empowerment. Admittedly this martial poem gives Arthur's queen limited opportunities for action, for in its first half her only roles are to dine with her husband's knights and to weep at Arthur's departure to fight Rome (aMA 82–84, 697–98). Fries astutely notes that, in the Arthurian legend as a whole, the Guenevere-figure received development in the French Vulgate Cycle and then became "further individualised in the stanzaic *Morte Arthure* and Malory's *Morte*," yet the poet of the alliterative *Morte* "diminished" her.⁷⁴ Waynor's first significant appearance in the English alliterative poem occurs just before Arthur departs to fight Lucius. Here the queen expresses overwhelming grief, grief that suggests the loving nature of the royal marriage; however, her words and actions in this scene reveal that she clings to her husband as her source of honor and identity. The poem's audience or readers are encouraged to interpret the royal marriage as loving because of several factors: the king's choice of going to his wife's chamber "to comfurthe" her in her "care," the queen's actions of kissing and speaking "tenderly" to Arthur while weeping, and the queen's passionate expression of distress at his impending departure, including her insistence that "[a]ll [her] lykyng of lyfe" depends on her husband as well as her question about why she cannot die in his arms (aMA 695–703). Arthur's response, that her "wonrydez and . . . wepyng woundez [his] herte," reinforces the impression that the king loves his queen as much as she loves him (aMA 707).

Nevertheless, the king reacts to his queen's grief as if her attachment to him is annoyingly clingy. When she says that she could curse the man who started this war and thereby denies her the "wyrchippe" she gains from her husband, Arthur responds testily with "Grefe þe noghte, . . . for Goddes lufe of hewen" and "Ne gruche noghte my ganggyng" (aMA 699–706). Essentially, he dismisses her womanly objection to his decision to engage in the manly activity of warfare. He also says he "may noghte wit of þis woo" for all the world, offers her the supposedly comforting information that Mordred will do her will in his absence, and then departs after kissing goodbye and commending to Christ not his wife but "ladys in chambyre" (aMA 708–14). The queen's last action in this scene is to swoon "full swythe" after seeing Arthur's sword, a physical reaction that could indicate her fear for and anticipatory grief over her husband's possible death in battle, as well as her realization that her feminine feelings will not alter his decision in the least (aMA 715–16). Of course, medieval and modern audiences who know that

74. Maureen Fries, "The Poem in the Tradition of Arthurian Literature," in *Reassessment*, 40.

the queen will later betray Arthur by becoming Mordred's accomplice might interpret this display of grief as an act, but the narration in *this* scene provides no evidence that would support a cynical reading of the alliterative queen. It is not until the end of the poem and retrospective hindsight that her loving innocence takes on a more suspect appearance.

Waynor's second and final significant appearance in the alliterative *Morte Arture* marks her as complicit in Mordred's betrayal of his uncle and king. Although the report the king receives that Mordred has both "weddede Waynore" and "wroghte hire with childe" (*aMA* 3550–52) does not clarify the issue of whether the queen was forced by her nephew to marry him, subsequent details condemn her as a traitor to Arthur and possible long-term mistress to Mordred. First, Mordred sends word to Waynor that Arthur has arrived with troops, urging her to "flee with hir childre" (*aMA* 3903–7). The fact that there are (plural) children suggests that she has at least two, and Cradoke's news of Mordred's rebellion includes the information that Waynor is pregnant (*aMA* 3550–2), thereby announcing that another child is on the way. The presence of these children after her long absence from the narrative suggests that they are Mordred's, not Arthur's, and Mordred's warning that she "flee" presents her as his willing accomplice rather than victim. Waynor's response to this warning is similarly suspicious: she "[g]ronys full gryselly with gretand teres" and then "[d]yghte hir ewyn for to dye" (*aMA* 3912–15)—a line that could be translated as "dressed herself (in black?) as if she would die" or "prepared herself even to die." Such actions could situate her as a tragic heroine fleeing because of fear for her life, but the queen's departure from "þe palesse" at York (*aMA* 3911–13) hints that she knows she has lost her position as rightful queen. These impressions of falsehood are confirmed by her subsequently putting on a nun's "habite . . . all for falsede and frawde and fere of hir louerde" (*aMA* 3916–18), thereby marking her as an adulteress and a traitor who does not deserve the audience's sympathy.

Both Waynor's committing adulterous incest with her nephew-by-marriage Mordred and her carrying on this relationship long enough to conceive more than one child are actions that position her as the stereotypically dependent but adulterous wife.⁷⁵ Arthur's characterization of Waynor's chil-

75. Hamel, n. to line 3743, rightly observes that "nowhere" in the alliterative *Morte* "is there any implication that Arthur might have been Mordred's father" rather than his uncle. Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), xiv–xv, 11, 203–19, explains how much broader the medieval definition of incest was than the modern one and discusses the Mordred incest plot in Arthurian literature.

dren with Mordred as “wykkyde wede” in the garden of royal power that his rightful heir Constantine must kill works against his less-than-convincing forgiveness of his queen: “*Ȝife Waynor hafe wele wroghte, wele hir bety-dde*” (a*MA* 4316–25 [our italics]). The poet’s language, characterization, and plot indicate the extent to which Waynor has acted immorally and weakly. Therefore, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*’s Waynor deserves Donaldson’s label of the “wishy-washy clinging vine” far more than does the stanzaic *Morte*’s thoughtful and intelligent Gaynour.⁷⁶

Rereading Gaynour Through Rereading the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*

The textual and intertextual evidence thus suggests that critics have consistently misread the stanzaic-poet’s Gaynour for two main reasons. One is that they have dismissed her as a character due to what might be called a misogynistic bias against the romance genre, a bias that causes them to underestimate the artistry of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.⁷⁷ The other reason is that they have not yet recognized that the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* influences both Malory’s characterization and his conception of the Arthurian world *throughout* his “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17). Literary critics’ bias against romance, as opposed to epic, was considerable in the first half of the twentieth century, a bias evidenced in George Kane’s influential mid-century study of Middle English literature.⁷⁸ Although the often disparaging attitude toward romance expressed by Kane has been much disputed by subsequent scholarship, Kane’s critical assessments of both the stanzaic poem as a whole and its Guenevere-figure in particular seem to continue to influence modern scholarship, particularly in the strong favoring of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* over the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*.⁷⁹ (If critics are not actively echoing Kane, they are certainly reiterating the interpretative groundwork he estab-

76. Donaldson, “Malory and the Stanzaic,” 462.

77. In Johnson’s inimitable phrase, the *sMA* was long considered “the neglected, redheaded stepchild of Middle English romance”: David F. Johnson, “Black Waters, Dragons, and Fiends: Arthur’s Dream in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 15.

78. George Kane, *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, Piers Plowman* (London: Methuen, 1951).

79. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, 65–70. Kane’s influence is evident in the extent to which his book “quickly . . . command[ed] a wide undergraduate audience, both in Britain and North America,” an authority reinforced by repeated reprintings of this book from 1970 to as recently as 2000 (Jane Roberts, “George Kane: 1916–2008,” *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* 11 [2012]: 428–29).

lished.) Kane complains that the stanzaic *Morte* lacks “strength” because it is a “romantic and melancholy” poem whose author “see[s] his subject in half-tones”; in contrast, the alliterative *Morte* is extolled as “heroic, not romantic” and possessing “high seriousness and dignity” because “[i]t is written with the robust mentality of strong men who look back upon another age which was also strong.”⁸⁰ Although literary critics no longer use misogynistic terminology such as “manly” epic and “unmanly” romance, Kane’s positioning of the alliterative *Morte* as praiseworthy and the stanzaic *Morte* as inferior continues to impact the current state of scholarship. There are, of course, notable exceptions to the rule of this poem’s critical neglect. Generous evaluations of the poem include those of Dieter Mehl, Edward Donald Kennedy, Carole Weinberg, Elizabeth Archibald, and Marco Nievergelt.⁸¹ Nevertheless, much of what has been written about the stanzaic *Morte* has continued to echo Kane’s and Donaldson’s claims that this poem lacks both real literary merit and effective characterization.

Overcoming the critical bias against the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* requires countering the fundamental judgment that Kane imposed and that subsequent critics have enforced: that “[n]ever once in its four thousand lines does [the stanzaic *Morte*] attain to brilliance,” and therefore it differs from the alliterative *Morte* in achieving success through mere “sober competence.”⁸² The most commonly cited complaint used to illustrate this minimal competence is that the poet’s problematic use of the ballad stanza and repetition, particularly concatenation, makes him a minstrel-like hack.⁸³ Approaching

80. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, 68–69.

81. Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1968), 186–93; Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory and His English Sources,” in *Aspects of Malory*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 27–55 and Edward Donald Kennedy, “The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: The Adaptation of a French Romance for an English Audience,” in *Culture and the King*, ed. Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 91–112; Carole Weinberg, “The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 100–111; Archibald, “Lancelot as Lover,” 199–216; and Marco Nievergelt, “The Place of Emotion,” *Arthurian Literature* 32 (2015): 31–57.

82. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, 65–66. Prominent critics who continue this negative interpretation include Roger Sherman Loomis, *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), 139, 181, 184; Richard A. Wertime, “The Theme and Structure of the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” *PMLA* 87, no. 5 (1972): 1075; and Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 70–75.

83. See, e.g., Bruce, xxix, who criticizes the stanzaic-poet for the “inexactness” and repetition of his rhymes; Robert W. Ackerman, “English Rimed and Prose Romances,”

the poem on its own merits, though, without prejudice from its (inter)critical history, supplies abundant evidence of its creator's artistry in its form, narrative style and structure, and characterization; consequently, it does prove itself to "attain to brilliance." Indeed, almost all of the scholars who lament the poet's skill also concede the poem's effectiveness as a story.

In point of fact, the stanzaic-poet's use of concatenation, the repetition with variation of the final line of one stanza in the opening line of the next, is neither as prominent nor as problematic a feature as critics have suggested. Concatenation is absent from the poem's opening stanzas, where the poet establishes the parameters of his plot. The first example of repeating a line with variation to create an effective bridge between stanzas occurs between stanzas 39 and 40 (*sMA* 312–13). The next example of such repetition does not appear until stanzas 64 and 65, and even here the repeated idea does not occur in successive lines (*sMA* 505, 512). Therefore, the stanzaic-poet neither constantly nor mechanically uses concatenation despite a relatively restrictive stanza form. Even if modern readers come to this poem assuming that concatenation in and of itself is incompatible with literary artistry, they can disabuse themselves of that notion by recalling the structure of one of the universally recognized masterpieces of Middle English literature, the *Gawain*-poet's *Pearl*. *Pearl* uses concatenation throughout its 101 stanzas, not only employing linking words to join the end of one stanza with the beginning of the next, but also regularly repeating (or varying) the same line at the end of consecutive stanzas to create five-stanza units.⁸⁴ The stanzaic-poet may not be the equal of the *Gawain*-poet, but neither is he an incompetent minstrel: far from it.

Repetition is a tool that enhances rather than ruins the effect of particular scenes in the stanzaic *Morte*. Jenifer Sutherland, building upon the work of Marie Borroff, notes some artful uses of repetition in the Middle English tradition. She explains that "repetitious rhyme pairs 'can be thought of

in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 489, who laments the poet's "minstrel style"; Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Legends," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), Fascicle I: 52, who makes a similar critique; Wertime, "Theme and Structure," 1075, 1081–82, who belittles the poet's artistry and "awkward, unvarying use of the ballad stanza"; and Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 72–74. Wertime's complaint about the ballad stanza is actually invalid given that a ballad stanza is a quatrain (not an octave as in the *sMA*) rhyming abcb or abab with alternating four-stress and three-stress lines.

84. *Pearl*, ed. E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953). We are grateful to Edward Donald Kennedy for drawing our attention to this example of artful concatenation.

as . . . formulas” that the skillful poet can employ “to create meaning.”⁸⁵ The stanzaic-poet demonstrates such skill when he uses a rhyme scheme particular to one of his stanzas to draw attention to the Maid of Ascalot’s strategy of invoking the reputations of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in order to manipulate these men emotionally. The *-able* refrain of “Round Table . . . trew and stable, . . . helpinge & profitable” drives toward the stanza’s final rhyme “with-outhe fable,” thereby encouraging Arthur’s court to side with her against Launcelot, whom she accuses of “churlysshe” rejection of her (*sMA* 1049–55, 1078, 1083 [our italics]).⁸⁶ The poet’s artful use of repetition in the form of concatenation is likewise evident in the scene that virtually every critic who has written about the stanzaic *Morte* praises, that of Launcelot and Gaynour’s final parting. Attentive reading of this scene that occupies lines 3622 to 3737 reveals a high concentration of concatenation: Gaynour’s wishing Launcelot and his future wife joy links stanzas 460 and 461 (*sMA* 3669–71), the idea of pleasing God links stanzas 463 and 464 (3689–91), and Launcelot’s declaration that he will lead a life of penance links stanzas 465 and 466 (3705–6). Based on the examples just discussed, the stanzaic-poet’s use of repetition—especially stanza-linking repetition in closing and opening lines—is a storytelling aid rather than a stylistic flaw. Artful use of repetition helps to make the characters and their actions vividly memorable for readers and listeners alike.

Another type of repetition that contributes to the emotional impact of the stanzaic *Morte* is the repetition of words and plot motifs. A number of scholars have noted that such repetition is used quite carefully and skillfully in the stanzaic *Morte*.⁸⁷ For example, Sharon L. Jansen Jaech comments on the effectiveness of repetition in the scene of the lovers’ parting.⁸⁸ Building upon Jansen Jaech’s work, we interpret the repetition of the idea that Launcelot will submit “All blyve to penance” as emphasizing his devotion to the queen, devotion that causes both lovers’ emotions to overflow; this is a situation the poet-narrator’s remark accentuates: “The sorow that the tone to

85. Jenifer Sutherland, “Rhyming Patterns and Structures of Meaning in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” *Arthuriana* 12, no. 4 (2002): 1; citing Marie Borroff, “Chaucer’s English Rhymes,” in *Words and Works*, ed. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 231.

86. Sutherland, “Rhyming Patterns,” 4.

87. See Ackerman, “English Rimed and Prose Romances,” 490; Sherron E. Knopp, “Artistic Design in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” *ELH* 45, no. 4 (1978): 563–82; and Weinberg, “Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*,” 101.

88. Sharon L. Jansen Jaech, “The Parting of Lancelot and Gaynor,” *Arthurian Interpretations* 15, no. 2 (1984): 59–69.

the tother gan make / myght none erthely man se hytte' (sMA 3705–6, 3710–11). Although the sorrow of lovers at the moment of parting is a common cliché in medieval romances, modern readers are likely to agree with Robert W. Ackerman who (while promulgating the idea of the stanzaic-poet's supposed "humbler" and "minstrel" failings) justly insists that this poet's "common romance clichés . . . generally advance the action rather than serve as mere line-fillers."⁸⁹ Other scholars who, like Ackerman, speak of the stanzaic *Morte* condescendingly likewise provide additional evidence of its excellence.

One mark of this excellence is the intricacy of the *Morte Arthur's* stanza form, upon which several critics have commented. Despite criticizing the stanzaic-poet's rhymes, J. Douglas Bruce notes that this poet's stanza form is one he cannot find in other medieval romances (making it rare), and he indirectly praises it by speculating that this particular "stanza was perhaps too exacting for the writers of romances."⁹⁰ This stanza form's complexity is evident not only in the abovementioned artful stanza-linking concatenation, but also in its combination of eight-line stanzas of alternating rhyme (for the most part *abababab*) and frequent alliteration. Given that the stanzaic-poet shares with Geoffrey Chaucer a tendency to use alliteration prominently in descriptions of battle, it is appropriate to credit the former with literary talent. Among the many examples of alliteration in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur's* descriptions are lines 269, 272, 277, 300–303, 311–12, 1579–87, 1857, 1883, 1955–65, 2105–9, 2171, 2214–23, 2738–52, 3039–121, 3158–79, 3248–78, 3360–73, and 3393–99. In both *The Knight's Tale* and the stanzaic *Morte*, the alliteration gives battle scenes greater energy and emotional power; this is true even of the short scene in which "Gaheriet and Gaheries bothe were slayne, / Wythe many a doufull dethes wounde" (sMA 1962–63). In both works, too, the effectiveness of the alliteration helps to display their makers' artistry. Chaucer's artistry is universally acknowledged, but given the stanzaic *Morte's* complex verse form, we advocate a wider acceptance of Dieter Mehl's evaluation of a half-century ago: "we should credit the author with a considerable degree of independence and artistic refinement"; "this is no naïve story-telling, but . . . a conscious stylist who tried to give some shape to his poem."⁹¹ As Bruce, Larry D. Benson, and Helen Cooper have noted, the stanzaic-poet's verse form is not actually unique.⁹² However, his artistry positions him far above

89. Ackerman, "English Rimed and Prose Romances," 489–91.

90. Bruce, xxv–xxix.

91. Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, 186.

92. See Bruce, xxv–xxvi; Larry D. Benson, ed., *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, rev. Edward E. Foster (India-

the producers of the dragging tail-rhyme so common in many romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—a clunky verse form that Chaucer mercilessly burlesques in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*.⁹³ Overall, then, the form of the stanzaic *Morte* is not only more carefully crafted but also more worthy of praise than earlier criticism has allowed. The same claim, however, can be made for the narrative structure and style of the poem.

The stanzaic *Morte*'s plot is also artfully balanced. Mehl has observed that “[t]here is . . . a rare balance in the structure of the plot, a strict subordination of details to the theme of the poem, and a notable lack of any digressions which could slow down the tempo of narration.”⁹⁴ The poet’s talent for introducing the main themes he will explore using just a few details is especially striking in his opening lines. Lines 1 through 16 introduce the theme of chivalric excellence in the Arthurian world, presenting Arthur as “that noble kinge” (*sMA* 5) and his Round Table Knights as successful Grail questers and warriors:

The knightis of the Table Round,
The sangrayle whan they had sought,
Aunturs that they by-fore them found
Fynisshid and to ende brought;
Their enemyes they bette & bound,
For gold on lyff they lefte them noght. (*sMA* 9–14)

By asserting that the Grail Quest has been “Fynisshid and to ende brought,” the poet provides his audience with a succinct but clear account of the success of Arthur’s court in this holy endeavor. This description of success contrasts sharply with the French *Mort Artu*’s description of what seems like failure: the deaths of Galaad, Perceval, and thirty-two Quest participants as well as Gauvain’s catastrophic killing of eighteen of these men.⁹⁵ In addition,

napolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974; Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), 4–5; and Helen Cooper, “Romance after 1400,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 709. We are indebted to Edward Donald Kennedy for bringing this part of Cooper’s argument to our attention.

93. *The Tale of Sir Thopas* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 212–17. On Chaucer’s mocking of tail-rhyme, see Edward Donald Kennedy’s discussion in “Malory, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and Chaucer,” *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 51–65.

94. Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, 186.

95. *Mort le Roi Artu*, §2, p. 1, line 3–§3, p. 3, line 35; *Lancelot-Grail*, vol. 4, 91.

stanzaic-Arthur and his knights have subdued any threats to the individual and collective good, for “Their enemyes they bette & bound.” These lines about chivalric quest, knightly adventure, and warfare depend upon and foreground masculine martial activities and knightly fellowship as well as position this court at its pinnacle of success.

Concomitantly, lines 17–56 complicate this portrait of success while introducing a theme commonly linked with that of male achievement in medieval romance: how female characters, and love of them, inspire male achievement. Like his fellow romancers, the stanzaic-poet subtly but successfully uses his poem’s opening lines to foreground women and love. Departing from his French source, he has Gaynour—not Arthur—suggest a tournament to restore Arthurian greatness (something she does in the intimate setting of the royal bed), and it is this tournament that Launcelot initially avoids in order to visit the queen (*sMA* 21–56). This deception on Launcelot’s part in order to meet with his lover is entirely the English poet’s creation: in the French Vulgate version of this episode, Artus himself conceives of the tournament, and (so the narrator tells us), while Lancelot’s love for the queen is more ardent and indiscreet than ever, his express purpose in feigning illness is to enable and enhance his disguise at the tournament.⁹⁶

Additional examples illustrate the stanzaic-poet’s artful construction of plot to create elegant thematic parallels both within and across sections of his work. In the stanzaic *Morte’s* closing lines, the poet first describes Launcelot’s death and burial, and then Gaynour’s funeral. This plot sequence creates a parallel within the final section between the lovers’ deaths as well as a parallel across sections: the lovers’ appearances together, first in the opening lines and then in the closing lines, create a contrast between earthly love and salvation. After Launcelot’s passing, his body is carried to Joyous Garde and interred in a chapel (*sMA* 3898–903). The archbishop’s dream in which Launcelot receives an angelic escort to heaven confirms that the first of the lovers has achieved salvation (*sMA* 3866–81). The knights then find Gaynour’s corpse at Amesbury, along with tangible evidence of her salvation in her “roddys feyre and rede as chery”—a healthy complexion indicative of a body that remains incorrupt because the queen has also achieved salvation (*sMA* 3954–56). Furthermore, the earthly love of Launcelot and Gaynour is recalled one last time by the fact that the same phrase is repeated, with variation, to describe their

96. Compare and contrast *Mort le Roi Artu*, pp. 3–4, §§3–5 with *Morte Arthur*, 31–56. Such modifications of the source are pointless if the stanzaic-poet did not expect at least some of his audience to recognize what he was doing.

corpses: Launcelot's "Rede and fayer" and Gaynour's "feyre and rede" (*sMA* 3888, 3956). Another plot parallel that links sections of this English poem is the one between the tournament in the first half in which Launcelot fights against his fellows to win renown and the tragic civil war in the second half that Launcelot fights against Arthur and Gawayne to protect himself. In retrospect, both the celebration of martial prowess and knightly camaraderie in the first half of the poem and the tragic disintegration of that fellowship into civil war and death in the second half are rendered all the more effective and emphatic as a direct result of the structural parallels.⁹⁷ Finally, as Marco Nievergelt and Andrew Lynch reveal, the stanzaic *Morte's* plot is carefully structured so as repeatedly to elicit audience response.⁹⁸

As noted above in our analysis of the stanzaic-poet's artistry, the scene of greatest poetic achievement in his *Morte Arthur* is that of the final meeting between the lovers (*sMA* 3622–737); however, this scene is also the one with the greatest thematic coherence. The thematic coherence of Launcelot and Gaynour's farewell derives from two parallel moments. The first occurs when the queen confesses her guilt-ridden awareness of the responsibility that she shares with her former lover for the destruction of Arthur and his knights:

Abbes, to you I knowlache here
 That throw thys ylke man and me,
 For we to-gedyr han loved vs dere,
 All thys sorowfull werre hathe be;
 My lord is slayne, that had no pere,
 And many a doughty knyght and free;
 There-fore for sorowe I dyed nere,
 As sone as I euyr hym gan see. (*sMA* 3638–45)

The second moment that creates this scene's thematic coherence, along with its pathos, is Launcelot's indirect admission of guilt (and fairly direct acknowledgment of passionate love) as he pledges to serve God by becoming a monk and praying especially for Gaynour (*sMA* 3678–713). Especially striking is this sentiment:

97. For discussions of the poem's careful construction, see Knopp, "Artistic Design," 566–81, and K. S. Whetter, "The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Medieval Tragedy," *Reading Medieval Studies* 28 (2002): 87–111.

98. Nievergelt, "The Place of Emotion," 31–57; Andrew Lynch, "Making Joy / Seeing Sorrow," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 33–50. Jansen Jaech, "Parting," 63–64, offers further evidence of the poem's artful construction: the stanzaic-poet frequently uses "stanza-linking to emphasize" scenes of "strong emotion."

Syne we to-gedyr vpon thys mold
Haue led owre lyffe by day and nyght!
Vnto God I yiffe a heste to holde,
The same desteny that yow is dyghte
I will resseyve in som house bolde,
To plesse here-after God All-myght;

To please God all that I maye,
I shall here-after do myne entente,
And euyr for yow specyally pray,
While God wyll me lyffe lente. (sMA 3684-93)

As Jansen Jaech perspicaciously insists, this scene is the culmination of all of the stanzaic *Morte's* strengths that we have discussed so far, for the emotional power and thematic coherence of the lovers' final meeting and tragic parting are created in no small part by the poet's use of concatenation, verbal repetition, and variation of phrases about love and death; these techniques subtly emphasize both the joyous and tragic consequences of Launcelot and Gynour's love.⁹⁹ Launcelot, of course, seems not to notice the theological problem inherent in attempting to please God by continuing to serve his earthly lady above all others. Moreover, as Edward Donald Kennedy notes, Gynour's awareness of her guilt considerably mitigates Arthur's responsibility for his downfall, rendering the overall effect of the poem both more complex and more tragic.¹⁰⁰ This complexity was picked up and rendered even more difficult and pathetic (in the sense of increasing tragic pathos) by Malory.

The core strength of the stanzaic-poet's narrative style is what sets him apart from the author of *La Mort le Roi Artu*: concision. Comparison of this French prose romance to the stanzaic-poet's retelling makes clear that, while both authors use an interlacing narrative structure that is a defining characteristic of French prose romance, the stanzaic-poet abbreviates and streamlines his French source, cutting away excess details and thereby capturing the essence of key moments in the plot.¹⁰¹ A prominent example of this concision is the English author's retelling of the story of the maiden of Escalot, whose love at first sight for Lancelot results in her death. In the French text, the maiden's story occupies nearly one hundred pages in the critical edition.¹⁰²

99. Jansen Jaech, "Parting," 59-69.

100. Kennedy, "Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*," 102-4.

101. For a discussion of interlace, see Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 68-98.

102. *Mort Artu*, p. 9, §13.1-p. 107, §85.20.

In the English one, the story of the Maid of Ascalot's ultimately fatal love for Launcelot, together with Gaynour's trial, occupies just forty-two pages in Bruce's edition (*sMA* 177–1647). Within this structural concision and thematic, interlaced parallels, the scene of the Maid of Ascalot's death interrupts and is interwoven with the trial of Gaynour after the poisoned-apple dinner (*sMA* 960–1127). The stanzaic-poet's concise style is powerful because his storytelling is cinematic, a fact that Archibald ably documents in relation to sequences of dialogue.¹⁰³

The stanzaic-poet's concise, cinematic style when presenting the love affair of Launcelot and Gaynour has earned him some harsh criticism; however, the following example of his concision reveals the originality of this poet's retelling of the Arthurian world's collapse. Although Sherron E. Knopp argues that the poem is not truly concerned with the Launcelot-Gaynour love story and that, as a result, their first meeting prior to the opening tournament is "abrupt and confusing,"¹⁰⁴ Archibald offers a more convincing interpretation. Archibald insightfully argues that much of the power of the stanzaic *Morte* derives from the poet's reliance upon the audience's familiarity with the love between Launcelot and Gaynour to flesh out his spare narrative descriptions and character interactions.¹⁰⁵ The stanzaic-poet's account of Launcelot's motives here is certainly brief:

Launcelot lefte withe the quene
 And seke he lay that ylke tyde;
 For loue þat was theym by-twene
 He made inchessoun for to abyde. (*sMA* 53–56)

Nevertheless, the queen's reaction, expressing alarm lest Agrawayne be successful in his attempt to discover "the loue is [them] by-twene" (*sMA* 69–74), confirms that Launcelot and Gaynour are lovers in this story, however unusual that situation would have been in a late-medieval *English* Arthurian narrative (circa 1400).¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, it is precisely the brevity of the situation's description that corroborates Archibald's thesis that, to understand the

103. Elizabeth Archibald, "Some Uses of Direct Speech in the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and Malory," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 66–85.

104. Knopp, "Artistic Design," 564–66.

105. Archibald, "Lancelot as Lover," 199–216.

106. There is general but not universal agreement about this date. For details of the main dating proponents and their options, see our "Introduction: Re-Evaluating the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*: Content and Contexts," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 4 and n. 3.

poem, the audience would have to “already know the story of their love.”¹⁰⁷

The stanzaic-poet's spare narration does not preclude an original and rich approach to retelling the Arthurian legend. Knopp ignores this richness when claiming that the poem privileges Arthurian chivalric fellowship and the knightly ethos in order to highlight the Round Table's destruction, just as many critics ignore this richness when claiming that the stanzaic-poet's main focus is Launcelot.¹⁰⁸ Rather—as Malory does later and more famously—the stanzaic-poet demonstrates his brilliance by combining the love story with the story of Arthurian knighthood's greatness on the eve of its collapse. The poet's narrative style is complex, for he includes not only Launcelot and Gaynour but also Gawayne and Arthur and all the rest of his characters in his celebration of, and mourning for, the destruction of Arthurian chivalry—a narrative style that works as well as it does because of the presence of several distinct characters.

Based on our analysis, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is a carefully crafted poem that displays all the subtlety of form, structure, narrative style, and theme typically accepted as hallmarks of great literary talent when critics evaluate literature.

Defending Gaynour by Defending Characterization in the Stanzaic *Morte*

If the stanzaic-poet is a better artist, and thus the stanzaic *Morte* a better poem, than their reputations allow, then the poet may also be better at creating characters than has hitherto been accepted. Such a view is far from common. Kane dismissed all of the characters in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* as “unsubstantial, shadowy figures,” while Donaldson branded Gaynour as weak and “wishy-washy.”¹⁰⁹ Roger Sherman Loomis reinforced this norm by attributing the scene in the poem most praised by literary critics, that of the final meeting between Launcelot and Gaynour, to the stanzaic-poet's reliance upon a now-lost French source.¹¹⁰ Because these and other prominent scholars either dismissed or doubted the stanzaic-poet's ability to develop characters, assessments of this poem's characterization continue to suffer from what might be termed an intercritical hangover of negativity. Recent work on the poem has begun to combat this trend, but Gaynour has yet to be

107. Archibald, “Lancelot as Lover,” 199–200.

108. Knopp, “Artistic Design,” 564–66.

109. Kane, *Middle English Literature*, 67; Donaldson, “Malory and the Stanzaic,” 462.

110. Loomis, *Development of Arthurian Romance*, 183.

fully recuperated.¹¹¹ Careful attention to the poem's content reveals that Gaynour's behavior in the stanzaic *Morte* gives her both substance and a strong, assertive character. Furthermore, an accurate understanding of Gaynour's portrayal in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* helps to combat the historic underestimating of the scope of this poem's influence on Malory's portraits of his major characters, including Arthur's queen. We contend, therefore, that the stanzaic-poet's positive presentation of the queen as a good counselor concerned with honor—not only her own but also that of her husband, her lover, and the entire Arthurian court—encourages Malory to present her positively throughout his “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17), not just in his final two Tales.¹¹²

Admittedly, Gaynour can justly be accused of reacting hastily and vengefully when she feels she has been wronged, yet her reasons for behaving this way are grounded in honor. When Gawayne generously takes responsibility for unknowingly having “gabbyd” on Launcelot by reporting that he has taken the Maid of Ascalot as his lover, the queen banishes Gawayne by declaring, “devoyede my companye” (*sMA* 1138, 1167).¹¹³ Even this harsh action, however, has honorable reasons behind it, for the queen explains to Gawayne that it was both “vnkynde” and a failure of “curtesy” to speak without knowing the truth (*sMA* 1146–51). Additionally, she explains that Gawayne has his “worshippe . . . vn-dediste gretlyche” by wronging Launcelot in this way, and behind his back, when Launcelot has never wronged him in like manner (*sMA* 1152–57). Finally, she reminds Gawayne of the harm he has caused and could still cause through his loose talk, accusing him of being unstable and untrue as well as making sport of knights by lying about them out of envy (*sMA* 1159–65). The queen's causing Launcelot's departure from court is one aspect of the harm Gawayne unwittingly does, harm that mitigates the blame readers can assign to her (*sMA* 752–71). Yet the queen's blaming and punish-

111. For several recent and approbative articles on the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, see *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018).

112. Contra Guerin and Wyatt. Any influence of the stanzaic-poet's characterization on Malory is denied by Guerin, despite the attention Guerin gives to Malory's considerable indebtedness to the plot of the poem: Wilfred L. Guerin, “The Tale of the Death of Arthur,” in *Originality*, 233–74 (at 244). Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 125, 129–39, 142–63, does much to elucidate the ways in which Malory's Gwenvere is stronger and more sympathetic than her counterpart in the *Lancelot-Graal* Cycle, but she too tends to downplay any comparable degree of characterization from the stanzaic-poet.

113. The verb “gabbyd” here, with its denotations of “to tell lies” and “to talk indiscreetly,” nicely captures the ambiguity of Gawayne's unwittingly speaking an untruth: for these definitions, see *MED*, s.v. “gabben” (v.), definitions 1.(a) and 2.(c); entry accessed 16 September 2019.

ing Gawayne harshly for speaking what he believed (at the time) to be true opens her up to charges of distorting the truth.

Gaynour's motives for criticizing her lover, however, are not unreasonable. The queen expresses disappointment at not only Launcelot's reported affair with the Maid but also, as in Gawayne's case, his apparent loss of honor. She has heard that Launcelot "leviste for [the Maid's] sake / Alle [his] dede of armys bold"; consequently, she declares that she could weep for this loss for the rest of her life (*sMA* 740–51). Certainly, she weeps for the loss of "The loue þat hath be [them] by-twene," yet the depth of her sorrow for his loss of honor seems equally great (*sMA* 742, 748–51). What the queen does *not* do is banish Launcelot. Her plea that her lover not speak anymore of their love shocks him, for he has no idea what she is talking about when she claims he loves another, and her accusations cause him to absent himself permanently from her company because he interprets her words as meaning that "A-way [she] wold þat [he] ware" (*sMA* 752–71). He leaves court out of emotional confusion and (as always) a desire to please his lady. Gaynour's swooning three times and then nearly killing herself after he departs (*sMA* 774–75) are behaviors that prevent an audience from assigning to her all the blame for Launcelot's absence from court—although Bors and Lionel do so, and harshly (1348–55, 1380–87). All in all, then, even Gaynour's extreme reactions have noble motives, and she does not banish Launcelot; he departs because he believes that she wishes him gone.

Modern readers familiar with the common critical stance that the medieval Guenevere (beginning with Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot*) is self-centered and irrational will find the opposite traits in the stanzaic-poet's Gaynour: she is a queen who puts the good of others first and has greater political wisdom than either her husband or her lover. The queen's first appearance in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* is, significantly, in the poem's opening scene, and it establishes her as both selfless and rational. Immediately after the poet-narrator identifies his topic (the end of King Arthur's adventures) and defines the time frame of his story (after Arthur's Knights of the Round Table have completed the adventures of the Holy Grail and spent four years at home), he takes readers straight to the royal bedroom (*sMA* 1–20). There Arthur and Gaynour lie in bed while the queen, not the king, speaks the first words of dialogue in the poem—words that express concern for her husband's loss of honor as his court's reputation declines:

Sir, yif that it were youre wille,
Of a wondir thinge I wold you mene,

How *your courte by-gynnyth to spill*
 Off duoghty knightis all by-dene;

Syr, *your honour by-gynnys to falle,*
 That wount was wide in world to sprede,
 Off Launcelott and of other all
 That eyur so doughty were in dede. (sMA 21–28 [our italics])

Gaynour demonstrates her political wisdom both by making Arthur aware of a threat to his power, one that he seems to have ignored or failed to notice, and by offering a means of eliminating this threat. The great tournament she proposes will encourage adventure and knightly “worship” and thereby restore the king’s “honoure” as well as that of his court (sMA 31–38). That Arthur construes her words as wise constructive criticism, not womanly gossip, is clear from his respectful request for her advice: “Dame, there-to thy counsell I calle: / What were best for suche a nede?” (sMA 29–30). Gaynour’s prominence in the poem’s opening scene is all the more noteworthy because (as noted in a different context above) it is the invention of the stanzaic-poet. In the French *Mort le Roi Artu*, the tournament is entirely Arthur’s idea.¹¹⁴ The stanzaic-queen’s opening speech thus establishes her as the voice of political wisdom: significantly for our purposes, she uses her position as queen consort to provide political advice that will benefit both the king and the kingdom.

Gaynour remains a positive figure throughout the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, both when subsequently advising Launcelot and when getting good news to Arthur. Gaynour reprises the role of wise political adviser when she chastises Launcelot for visiting her in her chamber despite Agrawayne’s readiness to catch them together (sMA 69–72). The contrast between Gaynour’s political wisdom and Launcelot’s political naivety is striking. In response to the queen’s warning that Agrawayne remains “at home” in order to reveal their love, Launcelot asserts, “I ne thinke not it shall be so” (sMA 73–76). The advice given to both Arthur and Launcelot in the poem’s opening scenes indicates that the stanzaic-poet presents the queen prominently and positively at the outset of his narrative; significantly, he continues to do so throughout his poem. For example, when Bors, Lionel, and Ector bring to court the news that Launcelot is recovering well from the wound he received at the tournament and will soon return, they are able to take advantage of Arthur’s

114. *Mort le Roi Artu*, §3, p. 3, lines 38–43; *Lancelot-Grail*, vol. 4, 91.

being out hunting to communicate to the queen Launcelot's wish that she not "longe" for him "sore" (*sMA* 514–27). Despite the personal element of the message, Gaynour continues to function as a supportive queen and wife: she wants Arthur to know the news that Launcelot is alive as quickly as possible, exclaiming, "Why ne wiste my lord it also swithe!" (*sMA* 531). Given that the three knights ride to Arthur immediately after the queen speaks, perhaps they interpret her desire to share the joyful news with the king as a command and then obey it.

Although some literary critics interpret Gaynour negatively and brand her as sinful, the stanzaic-poet presents her with consistent sympathy. Lee C. Ramsey argues that the Arthurian kingdom in the stanzaic *Morte* is like a family, and therefore Launcelot's affair with Gaynour is symbolically "illicit" and "incestuous as well."¹¹⁵ The claim of symbolic incest, however, is one for which the textual evidence provides no support. Ramsey makes a further claim that the textual evidence again flatly contradicts: that Gaynour "wants to get [Arthur] out of the castle so that she can have a meeting with Lancelot."¹¹⁶ As we have explained above, Gaynour actually wishes to get *Launcelot* out of her chamber to avoid political danger for them both. Furthermore, the stanzaic-poet does not present the affair as illicit. Gaynour's joy at learning that Launcelot will soon see her again gives readers a positive impression of the affair, while the fact that Launcelot's male kin share the good news with her when there is no "prese" around marks them as "wise of lere" (*sMA* 518–29); the knights' behavior does not mark the affair as illicit or sinful. After Gawayne reports that Launcelot has taken the Maid of Ascalot as his lover, the poet's narration presents Gaynour as an emotionally overwrought figure but one who deserves sympathy due to her suffering. The queen's falling onto her bed, bemoaning losing "[t]he beste body," and nearly losing her mental faculties (*sMA* 648–55) certainly encourage sympathy by underscoring how her feelings of love and loss overwhelm her. In addition, the ladies who surround her in her chamber further encourage the poet's audience to sympathize with the queen through their response to her plight: although they caution her not to let others "se" her grief, they have "full grete pite" for her (*sMA* 656–63). The queen's becoming sick with grief (*sMA* 664–65) further reinforces her sympathetic portrait in this scene by demonstrating the intensity of her love for Launcelot.

115. Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 127–30.

116. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, 128.

Using repetition, the stanzaic-poet continues to portray the queen sympathetically before, during, and after the scene in which Launcelot decides to leave court. When Launcelot first encounters the Maid as he travels to the tournament, the narration describes the Maid as having a “rode . . . rede as blossom on brere” and asserts that “[w]epinge was hyr moste chere” (*sMA* 179–84). Later, in the build-up to the lovers’ meeting after Launcelot’s return from the tournament, the queen is described in exactly the same terms: she is “bright as blossom on brere,” and “[w]epinge” is now “hyr moste chere” (*sMA* 724–26). These verbal echoes suggest that the queen’s love is as sweet and innocent as the Maid’s—but also, given the history of her relationship with Launcelot that the poet takes for granted, more justified and more realistic.¹¹⁷ In addition, both the queen’s longing “[s]ore . . . to sene” her love and her tears (*sMA* 725–27) encourage sympathy, despite the fact that the queen must keep her desire secret. Because the ladies who are present at the lovers’ reunion weep for joy, the audience is likewise encouraged to identify with the queen’s joy at Launcelot’s return; certainly the queen’s pain at what she believes is her lover’s betrayal (*sMA* 736–51) creates an emotional bond with anyone in the audience who has experienced the pleasures and pains of love. The queen’s swooning three times and then nearly committing suicide (*sMA* 774–75) highlight her emotional suffering, suffering that furthers this emotional and affective connection with her audience.

The (medieval and modern) audience is all the more likely to respond generously to Gaynour’s suffering in love when the queen takes to her bed, sick and naked (*sMA* 812–13). As Mehl has noted, the stanzaic-poet “never passes a moral judgement on the Queen’s adultery.”¹¹⁸ Rather, he creates a parallel between the queen’s mental anguish here and the more famous psychological suffering of male lovers such as Lancelot, Tristram, and Yvain in other medieval romances. The mental suffering of these male lovers signals that, when they temporarily lose their ladies’ affections, they lose their knightly identities and then live naked in the woods. Although it was normal for a medieval woman to go to bed naked except for a head covering that supposedly prevented illness by retaining body heat,¹¹⁹ the queen’s taking to

117. On problems with the Maid’s claims to love Launcelot, see Chapter 2, above.

118. Mehl, *Middle English Romances*, 188.

119. Manuscript illuminations depicting ladies naked in bed include visual details suggesting that nakedness was the norm. For example, the fourteenth-century Manesse Codex depicts a lady naked, except for a veil, whom her lover begs for favor; the presence of her chambermaid during this encounter suggests that there was nothing unusual about the lady’s nakedness in bed: *Codex Manesse*, Heidelberg historic literature—digitized, Heidelberg University Library, Cod. Pal. Germ. 848, fol. 28 rv.

her bed functions like knightly loss of mental self in the woods: Gaynour is sick with grief due to her erroneous belief that Launcelot has been unfaithful to her, and she has temporarily lost her identity as a queen or lover who can function at court.

Even when Gaynour is accused of poisoning the Scottish knight, the stanzaic-poet presents her as a victim of unjust circumstance: “Lord, suche syttes me haue sought! / Why ne may I nevir be blithe!” (*sMA* 870–71). The stanzaic-poet is careful to emphasize that the queen “agilte had no wight” (*sMA* 915, 1377). Gaynour’s falling on her knees in front of four of Arthur’s knights (Bors, Gawayne, Lionel, and Ector), first together and then individually, and her asking them to save her from the fire (*sMA* 1330, 1342, 1358, 1374, 1391) encourage the audience to share her feeling of desperation. Although all four knights either declare or imply in this scene that she is worthy to burn (*sMA* 1351, 1387, 1402–3), the anger of Bors, Lionel, and Ector is a function of their missing Launcelot, not of her guilt; consequently, as soon as they have Launcelot’s company again, they try to gladden the queen “with all theyre myght” (*sMA* 1498–1500). Just before she faces the fire, both Gaynour’s “wanne and wete” cheeks and her inability to eat or drink due to fear elicit audience sympathy (*sMA* 1506–11). Her nearly swooning with joy after Launcelot defeats Mador has the same effect (*sMA* 1632–35). After Arthur and “all hys knyghtis” condemn Gaynour to be “for-brent” as an adulteress, she becomes the object of pity because Gaheryet and Gaheryes “Off hyr . . . had grete pyte”—pity that causes them to refuse, at first, to attend her execution (*sMA* 1921–25, 1931–33). Even when Gaynour banishes Gawayne in anger, the audience might be able to feel with and for her. Immediately after commanding her nephew to “devoiede [her] companye,” the queen reveals the pain that causes her to punish Gawayne so harshly (*sMA* 1167). She chastises herself for being “wode” enough to believe that Launcelot would betray her when her lover would not have caused her to suffer pain “for alle thys worldis goode” (*sMA* 1176–81).

When turning, in the second half of his poem, to the subject of Arthur’s downfall, the stanzaic-poet could have demonized Gaynour, yet he associates both Launcelot and Mordred rather than the queen with immoral actions. Agrawayne accuses Launcelot—not both lovers—of committing the crime of “treson” as he “lyes by the quene” (*sMA* 1678–83). Arthur’s response to Agrawayne’s report of the years-long affair is grief that Launcelot has “any treson” in him; Arthur also asks how Agrawayne plans to catch “hym [Launcelot] with the dede”—not catching both lovers in the act (*sMA* 1743–47). Even the phrasing of the lovers’ near-encounter in the queen’s chamber makes Launcelot the primary offender: “To bede *he* gothe with the quene /

And there *he* thoughte to dwelle alle nyght” (*sMA* 1806–9 [our italics]). Later in the poem, Arthur reinforces this impression that Launcelot is more at fault than the queen when he refers to Launcelot as having “wroght thys woo” (*sMA* 2391). Even more than in Malory, though, the primary villain in the poem is Mordred. Agrawayne takes action first by ignoring the objections of Gawayne, Gaheriet, and Gaheries and denouncing the affair (*sMA* 1672–731), but Mordred is the greater agent—one condemned by the poet’s remark that he “mykelle couthe of wrake” (*sMA* 1675). The stanzaic-poet subsequently develops a portrait of Mordred as his narrative’s chief villain, a man who acts upon incestuous desire. Twice the poet-narrator states that Mordred wants to marry Arthur’s wife, adding the second time that Mordred wants to “hyr hold” and “hyr brynge as byrd to bedde” (*sMA* 2954–60, 2987–89).

Although one of his characters disparages women, the stanzaic-poet ensures that Gaynour remains a sympathetic and assertive character. The bishop makes a misogynistic generalization that women are not worth destroying England for: “Wemen ar frele of hyr entayle; / Syr, lettes not Ynglande go to noght” (*sMA* 2300–301). Overall, though, Gaynour benefits from several narrative strategies that present her positively. One such device might be termed the true-love excuse. Although Gaynour does send for her lover when Arthur goes hunting, the poet’s explanation that “So mykylle loue was hem by-twene / That they noght de-parte myght” (*sMA* 1770–71, 1804–5) mitigates their sin and treason by emphasizing not the criminal nature of the affair but its basis in true love. Nowhere does the poet condemn the queen for her passionate love of Launcelot. On the contrary, the considerable sympathy granted to the queen (and discussed above) encourages readers to view her as a tragic but noble figure. Thus, when Agrawayne and Mordred trap Launcelot in the queen’s chamber, she plays the role of tragic heroine by bemoaning that their love has come “To suche endyngge” (*sMA* 1819).

Later, when Mordred makes clear that he intends to marry and bed her, Gaynour’s response enables her heroically to assert herself. As in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (discussed above), the queen first obtains a reprieve from the wedding by asking for a fortnight to obtain the appropriate clothes for herself and her maidens (*sMA* 2990–93). Then, “With knyghtis fele of her kynne, / She went to London to the towre / And speryde the gates and dwellyd therin” (*sMA* 2995–97). By protecting herself from sexual violation, the queen protects her bodily integrity, thereby appropriating a role usually played by knights. Mordred’s failure to breach the Tower’s walls—despite a long siege—only enhances the queen’s heroic image (*sMA* 3001, 3034–37). The poet’s referring to Gaynour as “whyte as lyly floure” as she travels to the Tower and

then bars its gates against Mordred (sMA 2994–97) creates further sympathy for her—however one interprets this detail. If, for instance, this whiteness is interpreted as the paleness of fear, the queen becomes a sympathetic woman in danger. If her color is interpreted as a sign of her innocence in contrast to Mordred's guilt (both of treason and intended incest), a guilt announced by the detail that “Mordred changed than hys colour” (sMA 2998), she becomes a sympathetic woman who is caught in a complex situation.

Even as the Arthurian world is falling apart, then, the stanzaic-poet presents Gaynour as a woman who retains her value to King Arthur, her honor, and (at least in contrast to Mordred) the appearance of innocence; consequently, she remains a sympathetic figure. When the Pope declares that King Arthur must both live with his queen again and make peace with Launcelot, it is clear that Arthur still values her highly, for he “[b]lythely a-yeyne to haue the quene” (sMA 2264–65, 2272). It is likewise clear that the queen retains her honor, for Launcelot refuses to return the queen to Arthur until he has assurance from the bishop that she will be “holden in welle more honoure / Than euyr she was by day or nyght” (sMA 2316–17). When Launcelot returns Gaynour to Arthur, the queen's white samite robes (sMA 2356–58) give her an outward appearance of innocence that prefigures her turn to religion and wearing “clothys whyte and blake” at the story's end (sMA 3566–73). More specifically, the queen's status as a tragic figure who, despite entering monastic life, “neuyr after . . . cowde be blythe” but rather “[m]yche had levyd in sorow and care” (sMA 3572, 3600–601), encourages the audience to pity rather than demonize her. Her role as sympathetic tragic heroine is evident when she swoons in response to both Launcelot's arrival at, and departure from, the nunnery (sMA 3626, 3728). The poet further encourages an emotional connection with the lovers by emphasizing how the “sorow that the tone to the tother gan make / myght none erthely man se hytte” (sMA 3710–11). Gaynour's refusal of a final kiss with her lover because the earthly world “is nought / But warre and stryffe and batayle sore” causes them both to “yelle” in emotional pain, making that refusal the ultimate tragic gesture (sMA 3720–27). Clearly, although the queen has given up earthly love, she suffers much as a result.

Gaynour is thus an entirely positive figure at the end of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* for two reasons. Her final meeting with Launcelot shows that she remains selfless; and her achieving her own salvation (along with inspiring Launcelot's) shows that she obtains spiritual wisdom to match the political wisdom she displays at the poem's beginning. Just as Gaynour puts the needs of Arthur and his knights first when she advises her husband in the poem's

opening lines, Gaynour puts the loss of Arthur and his knights first when she mourns equally as much for them as for her own lost love in the poem's final lines. By blaming the deaths of her "lord" and many knights on her love affair with Launcelot, the queen shows her contrite selflessness: "throw thys ylke man and me, / For we to-gedyr han loved vs dere, / All thys sorowfull werre hath be" (*sMA* 3639–41). The stanzaic-poet—like Malory after him—presents the love of Launcelot and the queen as true, but Gaynour's reaction to the consequences of that love shows her willingness to deny herself the happiness of true love and mourn a loss of greater value. Her realization of the consequences of her love is especially evident in her lament, "Oure wylle hath be to sore bought sold" (*sMA* 3651). The care for others that she has displayed since the beginning of the poem continues in the role she plays in securing Launcelot's salvation. Faced with the queen's ascetic example, her lover declares that, because they lived their earthly lives together, he will take "[t]he same desteny" that she has (*sMA* 3682–90). In fact, given that Launcelot's conversion spurs seven other knights to join him in the contemplative life (*sMA* 3818–25), the queen is the catalyst for the salvation of many men. The culmination of the poet's sympathetic portrait of Gaynour as a wise, loving, yet tragic queen comes when the knights find her dead "[w]ith roddy feyre and rede as chery" (*sMA* 3956).

From his opening lines to his closing ones, the stanzaic-poet present Gaynour as a major figure. The penultimate stanza reports that the queen receives a funeral "masse full merry" as well as an honorable burial next to Arthur (*sMA* 3954–61). In addition, because her death is the last one reported (*sMA* 3953–56), it gains prominence. Finally, because the poet-narrator ends his *Morte Arthur* by mentioning first Launcelot (about whom the poet can say "no more"), then Arthur (who is "beryed thore"), and lastly Queen Gaynour (*sMA* 3962–65), she maintains her status as one of the three main characters. The stanzaic poem's ending leaves little room for blaming Gaynour for either the downfall of Arthur or the destruction of his kingdom.

Misreading and Rereading Gwenyvere in Malory's "Boke off Syr Trystram"

T. H. White praised Malory's Gwenyvere as "one of the realest *women* in literature," praise that highlights the effectiveness of Malory's characterization of this powerful and poignant queen.¹²⁰ Both George Saintsbury and D. S.

120. *Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence between T. H. White and L. J. Potts*, ed.

Brewer likewise link Malory's artistry to his characterization of *Gwenyvere*, lauding Malory's writing style in Tales VII and VIII when he reworks the stanzaic-poet's final meeting between the lovers.¹²¹ Saintsbury argues further that Malory greatly improves upon what Saintsbury considers to be Malory's supposedly lackluster verse romance source.¹²² In contrast, we contend that part of Malory's literary greatness comes precisely when he *emulates* the stanzaic poem: Malory develops the poet's wise yet tragic *Guenevere*-figure into a multifaceted, assertive, and positive female character, and he develops the poet's emotionally intense portrayal of the lovers' interactions into some of the most powerful moments in his "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17), including the lovers' parting. We began this chapter by highlighting the more positive aspects of Malory's *Gwenyvere* and argued that *Gwenyvere*'s strengths become even clearer by contrasting her with *Waynour* in the alliterative *Morte* and *Gaynour* in the stanzaic *Morte*. We next tried to indicate the extent to which Malory builds on the stanzaic-poet's characterization of *Gaynour* as a sympathetic hero-queen. If, however, there are long-standing critical traditions of unfairly maligning *Gwenyvere* that need reassessing, so too is there a long tradition of maligning the middle section of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. It turns out that these traditions interact with one another.

A major cause of misreading Malory's *Gwenyvere* is the influence of the critical intertext attached to "The Boke off Syr Trystram." As with *Gwenyvere*'s critical reception, Tale V's critical intertext generally ranges from harshly dismissive to only cautiously positive. A foundational figure in this tradition is E. K. Chambers, who caustically remarked that Malory "would have done better to have left the *Tristan* alone" instead of "bungl[ing] his structural problem."¹²³ Vida Scudder was equally dismissive, and both she and Eugène Vinaver maintained that Malory's narrative faults here were inherited from his source: the French prose *Tristan*.¹²⁴ Thomas C. Rumble agreed with Vinaver that "The Boke off Syr Trystram" has merit but is too

François Gallix (New York: Putnam, 1982), 115 (White's italics). Louis J. Boyle cites White's response to *Gwenyvere* in "T. H. White's Representation of Malory's Camelot," *Arthurian Literature* 33 (2016): 140.

121. George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prose Rhythm* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 83–85; Brewer, ed., *Morte Darthur*, 15.

122. Saintsbury, *English Prose Rhythm*, 83–85.

123. E. K. Chambers, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 4–5.

124. Vida D. Scudder, "*Le Morte Darthur*" of *Sir Thomas Malory* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1921), 229–33; Vinaver, lxxxv–lxxxvi and the Headnote to "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones," 1445–46.

“long and rambling”; Rumble’s influential thesis, though, is that the parallels between the Trystram-Isode-Mark and Launcelot-Gwenyvere-Arthur love triangles are important for revealing “the essential inadequacies” and “moral degeneration . . . of this whole chivalric system of social and sexual relationships.”¹²⁵ Although approaching the *Morte* from a different perspective, Maureen Fries advocates a similar conclusion: that Trystram functions as a “counter-hero” symbolizing “that immoderation in sex and arms destined to overwhelm the Arthurian world.”¹²⁶ For Hanks, “The Boke off Syr Trystram” “develops the theme of the anti-knight” through both Brewyns sans Pit e and Gawayne, and it reveals the weakening of Arthur’s “power” and prestige.¹²⁷ By the close of the twentieth century, then, critics agreed that Tale V was, as Dorsey Armstrong put it, “critically important to” Malory’s “Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table” (*MD* 940.17–18); the Tale’s importance, however, lies in what Danielle Morgan MacBain terms the “Tristramization” of Launcelot and the Round Table, the ways in which Trystram’s failings foreshadow and reflect Launcelot’s failings.¹²⁸ By this intercritical reading, which remains the standard today, Trystram’s and Launcelot’s failings reflect and are reflected in the failings of both Isode’s and Gwenyvere’s sexuality.

Although we agree with those critics who argue that Malory’s “Boke off Syr Trystram” is an integral part of *Le Morte Darthur*, we find problematic the critical commonplace that its primary function is to depict the failings or devolution of Arthurian knighthood. The text contains abundant evidence to the contrary, and since, as Edward Donald Kennedy astutely observes, “no one has been able to argue that Malory created a narrator whose words are to be interpreted ironically,”¹²⁹ we contend that readers should interpret “The Boke off Syr Trystram” as Malory presents it—a celebration of knightly

125. Thomas C. Rumble, “The Tale of Tristram,” in *Originality*, 121, 180–83. Cf. Charles Moorman, *The Book of Kyng Arthur* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 22–24, 76–77.

126. Maureen Fries, “Malory’s Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte Darthur*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 613. Cf. Elizabeth S. Sklar, “The Undoing of Romance in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*,” *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1993): 321, 318.

127. Hanks, “Malory’s *Book of Sir Tristram*,” 14, 20–21, citing Ginger Thornton, “The Weakening of the King,” in *Sir Thomas Malory: Views and Re-Views*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. (New York: AMS Press, 1992), 3–16.

128. Armstrong, *Gender*, 25; Danielle Morgan MacBain, “The Tristramization of Malory’s Lancelot,” *English Studies* 1 (1993): 57–58, 65.

129. Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark and King Arthur,” in *King Arthur: A Casebook*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy (New York: Garland, 1996), 139.

prowess. Furthermore, the celebration of chivalry inherent in the "Trystram" contributes to a positive portrait of Gwenyvere.

In making this argument, we are building upon the work of several scholars. Nancy H. Owen and Lewis J. Owen argue not only that Malory's *Arthurian* has "structural unity" but also that "Malory's apparent purpose" in "The Boke off Syr Trystram" is "to celebrate the glory of the Round Table" through presenting Trystram as both "the ideal chivalric warrior" and "the ideal chivalric lover."¹³⁰ Dhira B. Mahoney perspicaciously acknowledges "the elegiac note" in Malory's "Trystram," a Tale that presents a "narrow inevitability of action"; however, she makes clear that the "essence" of the Tale is "its portrayal of the heroic world, with all its energy and tension, joy of brotherhood and rich memories."¹³¹ Kevin T. Grimm evaluates the "Trystram" much like Mahoney (and as we would do), concluding that "critics have missed Malory's central point" in this narrative: "It is the noble fellowship emanating outward from Tristram and Launcelot that embodies the idealism of the tale."¹³² Building upon the work of Owen and Owen, Mahoney, and Grimm, we will make the admirable qualities of Gwenyvere evident by rereading her in connection with her Malorian intratextual partners: Trystram and Launcelot as competitors and would-be companions; Trystram and Isode as lovers; the contrasting courts of King Mark and King Arthur; and Gwenyvere's counterpart and pen pal in "The Boke off Syr Trystram," Isode.

Rereading Malory's Trystram and Launcelot as Heroic Counterparts

Despite the standard scholarly view that Trystram is a lesser hero than Launcelot, Malory actually presents the Cornish knight as virtually interchangeable with the Arthurian world's greatest knight. One piece of evidence critics use to support a negative reading of Trystram is his most shocking action, lopping off the head of Brewnor's lady (*MD* 330.15–16). However, as argued in Chapter 1, Trystram's reluctant action here is justified by the rules of Brewnor's so-called game, and the hero says as much: "And bycause of thyne owne jugemente thou woldist have done to my lady if that she had bene fowler, and bycause of the *evyll custom*, gyff me thy lady" (*MD* 330.12–

130. Nancy H. Owen and Lewis J. Owen, "The *Tristram* in the *Morte Darthur*," *Tristania* 3, no. 2 (1978): 4, 13.

131. Dhira B. Mahoney, "Malory's 'Tale of Sir Tristram,'" *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 9 (1979): 194–95.

132. Kevin T. Grimm, "Fellowship and Envy," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1993): 94.

14 [our italics]). Trystram's position as Launcelot's potential equal is evident very early in Malory's "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17), for Merlin links the two knights and treats them as peers by writing their names on Launceor and Columbe's tomb, forecasting "with lettirs of golde" the "grettist bateyle betwuxte too knyghtes that ever was or ever shall be" (56.35–57.5). When this prophecy is recalled much later, Trystram and Launcelot are referred to as equals: they are "too the beste knyghtes that ever were in Kynge Arthurs dayes, and too of the beste lovers" (*MD* 449.33–35). Back at the beginning of the "Hoole Book," Trystram's next mention after Merlin's prophecy again positions him as Launcelot's equal or near-equal, for he appears second (after Launcelot) in the list of six knights who defeat Gawayne (*MD* 126.18–22). This defeat is possible despite the fact that Gawayne's physical strength increases between nine in the morning and noon (*MD* 125.21–26). In "The Boke off Syr Trystram" itself, both Trystram's desire to be in fellowship with Launcelot above all other knights (*MD* 333.3–6) and each hero's admiration for the other's knightly deeds (601.18–20, 595.2–10, 600.15–16) reinforce Trystram's position as co-hero with Launcelot. As his Tale continues, Trystram becomes virtually interchangeable with Launcelot through Malory's words, Trystram's deeds, and the thoughts and words of other characters.

Although there are a couple of moments at which a character states that Trystram is a close second to Launcelot but not his equal, and although Trystram himself defers to Launcelot's greatness,¹³³ Malory presents both Trystram and Launcelot as members of the chivalric elite. The *explicit* to the Tale of "King Uther and King Arthur" refers readers to other works that tell of the adventures of Arthur, Launcelot, and Trystram without positioning Launcelot as Trystram's superior: "*Who that woll make ony more lette hym seke other bookis of Kynge Arthure or of Sir Launcelot or Sir Trystrams*" (*MD* 144.1–2 [Field's italics]). As noted in Chapter 1, Sir Persaunte lists the *Morte's* chivalric trinity as "Sir Launcelot du Lake, Sir Trystrams de Lyones, and Sir Lamerok de Galys," but since he introduces his ranking by noting that "all the worlde seythe that *betwuxt thre knyghtes* is departed clerely knyghthode" (*MD* 245.13–15 [our italics]), the implication is that this list is nonhierarchical. Malory also labels Trystram "one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde"

133. Kay flatters Trystram as being "the man called now moste of proues excepte Sir Launcelot" (*MD* 384.7–8); Sir Hermynde ranks the top knights as Launcelot first, Trystram second, Lamerok third, and Palomydes fourth (564.16–21). Trystram himself says that he lacks Launcelot's prowess, but God can "make [him] as good a knyght as . . . Sir Launcelot is" (*MD* 305.32–34); Trystram also calls Launcelot "a knyght pyerles" (584.25–26) and says "of all knyghtes . . . he bearyth the floure" (587.24–26).

even before he joins the Round Table (*MD* 270.24–26), and asserts that “every astate loved hym where that he wente” (293.31–32). Famously breaking the narrative frame when stating how terrible it is to be ill in prison, Malory expresses sympathy for an imprisoned Trystram (*MD* 427.10–17)—and thereby encourages his audience to feel sympathy for author and character alike. The outcome of the Tournament of Lonezep causes Malory to report that “all kynges and lordis and knyghtes seyde of clyere knyghthode and of pure strengthe and of bounté and of curtesy Sir Launcelot and Sir Trystram bare the pryce of all knyghtes that ever were in Kyng Arthurs dayes, and there were no knyghtes in Kyng Arthurs dayes that ded halff so many dedis of armys as they too ded” (*MD* 585.6–10). Here and elsewhere, Trystram and Launcelot function as heroic equals.

Trystram's knightly deeds provide constant reminders of his greatness, greatness that rivals that of Launcelot and draws much admiration. Most obviously, Trystram routinely defeats his rival Palomydes (beginning with his first defeat of Palomydes, in Ireland [*MD* 304.15–24]), but he also regularly defeats other prominent knights. He smites Bedwere to the ground (*MD* 273.14–16), defeats both Dodynas and Sagramoure in a similar fashion and one after the other (314.10–315.21), and smites to the ground both Ector and Morganoure with a single spear (319.31–34); furthermore, these last four are all defeated in a single day. Also in a single day, he overthrows forty knights at the tournament celebrating Gareth and Lyonesse's marriage (*MD* 287.23–24). After he kills over a hundred enemy knights for King Howell, Howell offers Trystram his kingdom (*MD* 347.31–35). At the Tournament of the Castle of Maidens, Launcelot is so impressed that Trystram can both defeat all of his opponents and endure great exertion that he refuses to fight Trystram at that time (*MD* 413.10–414.4). King Arthur marvels at Trystram's deeds after the knight smites Gaheris and Bleoberis from their horses and hits Dynadan so hard that Dynadan swoons on his horse (*MD* 411.26–412.13). Expressing his admiration for Trystram indirectly, Arthur is sadder about not being able to meet with Trystram than he is for all the wounds that all of his knights have suffered at the tournament (*MD* 421.30–32). In the tournament just before Trystram and Isode move to Joyous Garde, Trystram “overthrewe fourteen knyghtes of the Rounde Table” (*MD* 537.16–19). At the Tournament of Lonezep, Trystram again inspires Arthur's admiration, along with that of all the other knights present, when he smites many knights in his attempt to re-horse two kings (*MD* 577.27–34) before continuing to fight marvelously “strongly” (583.23–24). Still in the early action at Lonezep, Trystram smites down thirty knights while Palomydes smites down only twenty (*MD* 578.13–

17). Trystram's great deeds not only make Launcelot regret unhorsing him (*MD* 579.8–10 and 580.18–22) but also cause Arthur to say that he “sawe never a bettir knyght” (590.6–8).

The words and thoughts of many characters in Malory's *Morte Darthur* reveal that they consider Trystram to be one of the best knights in the Arthurian world; moreover, some of them take action based on such an assessment. When Sir Raynolde encounters a super-strong knight, he assumes that the knight must be Launcelot, Trystram, or Pelleas—the point being that Raynolde would rather avoid having ado with any of these select knights were it not that he is honor-bound to avenge his fallen brother (*MD* 211.4–23). In Raynolde's case, his unknown opponent is actually Launcelot, but throughout “The Boke off Syr Trystram” other characters routinely group Trystram with Launcelot and other top knights such as Lamorak and Gawayne (e.g., *MD* 237.23–26, 507.7–11, 244.27–33). Launcelot himself values Trystram so highly that he would not have hurt Trystram for all the lands his father left him (*MD* 422.13–15). King Arthur says in the company of Launcelot and other knights that “now may we all, kyngis and knyghtes and men of worship, sey that Sir Trystram may be called a noble knyght and one of the beste knyghtes that ever Y saw dayes of my lyff” (*MD* 422.3–5).¹³⁴ Arthur also takes action based on his assessment of Trystram, for he publicly welcomes Trystram into the Round Table Fellowship as “one of the beste knyghtes and the jentlyllyst of the worlde and the man of moste worship” (*MD* 452.32–35). Morgan le Fay likewise takes action, treating both Trystram and Launcelot as her enemies because she views them as equally threatening to her (e.g., *MD* 403.24–31).

Malory does more than liken Trystram to Launcelot, however; he makes it difficult (presumably intentionally) for readers to keep track of who is the best knight in the Arthurian world. As we argued in Chapter 1, Malory praises Lamorak, Trystram, and Launcelot as the three best knights in the world, with Palomydes occupying a position that is sometimes a close fourth place and sometimes overlapping with Trystram. As a result, Trystram—along with Launcelot—functions as a measure of knightly excellence. Recounting the outcome of the Winchester Tournament, Bors measures Gareth's prowess by likening him to Launcelot, Trystram, and Lamorak (*MD* 825.7–10); at Westminster, Launcelot measures the disguised Gareth's prowess against the standards of Trystram and Lamorak (837.34–838.2). Although Malory finally validates Launcelot as the Arthurian world's best knight, Trystram and Lamorak share his position at the top of the knightly hierarchy while they

134. We modify Field's text here by silently capitalizing the first-person pronoun Y.

are alive: Malory tells his audience that, when Trystram and Lamorak were treasonously murdered, "there was never none so bewayled as was Sir Trystram and Sir Lamerok" (*MD* 865.6–12). Trystram's death generates even more pathos than Lamorak's because at the end of "The Boke off Syr Trystram" it looks like Trystram and Isode will live happily ever after in Joyous Garde, whereas Lamorak's death is repeatedly forecast. But another significant chivalric doubling in the "Hoole Book" is that Lamorak's death, like Trystram's and Isode's, is reported secondhand rather than being shown directly.¹³⁵ In addition, Launcelot himself vows when returning Gwenyvere to Arthur after Gareth's and Gaherys's deaths that he has been "macched" only by the "good knyghtes" Trystram and Lamorak (*MD* 899.21–23). Clearly, there is very little to distinguish between Launcelot's and Trystram's degrees of chivalric greatness. The real difference is not of *worshyp* or morality or prowess, but longevity: Trystram is killed sooner than Launcelot dies.

Although Launcelot is generally considered to be Arthur's, if not also Malory's, favorite knight, Trystram has specific and laudable talents of his own. Trystram's martial greatness is complemented by his skill as a hunter, skill Malory emphasizes with three original additions to his source.¹³⁶ Near the beginning of "The Boke off Syr Trystram" and again about two-thirds of the way through, Malory praises Trystram for his superior knowledge of hunting and hawking and for being the fount of hunting terminology. On the first occasion, Malory labels "the booke of venery, of hawkyng and huntynge . . . *The Booke of Sir Trystrams*" (*MD* 293.12–25); on the second occasion, he famously inserts one of his rare asides in the narrative, enjoining "all maner jantylmen . . . to prayse Sir Trystram and to pray for his soule" (538.31–539.9). Significantly, when Trystram is at last made a Knight of the Round Table, Malory has Arthur welcome him in terms that equate Trystram's knighthood and *worshyp* with his unparalleled skills as a hunter and harper (*MD* 452.32–453.2). Trystram's unique skills give him a value equal to that of Launcelot.

Furthermore, at various points in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, characters

135. Lamorak's death is recounted after the fact by Trystram himself (*MD* 547.6–10), and especially by Trystram, Gareth, Dynadan, and Palomydes (553.15–554.23). Malory delays the news, and effect, of Trystram's and Isode's deaths by waiting till near the end of the *Morte* before revealing their demise in the Urry catalog (*MD* 865.6–15), a report that immediately compares the sorrowful deaths of "Sir Trystram and Sir Lamerok." We are indebted to one of the Press's anonymous readers for bringing this parallel of the two great knights' offstage deaths to our attention.

136. On the originality of these statements see Vinaver, *Commentary on Works*, 375.12–29, 571.25–34, and 682.26–683.4.

speak of Trystram and Launcelot as if they were interchangeable. After several knights see La Cote Male Tayle slay a dozen of their best men, they measure him against a Launcelot-Trystram yardstick by saying he would have “bene to muche for Sir Trystramys de Lyones othir for Sir Launcelot de Lake” (*MD* 366.7–14). A damsel says to Launcelot that he and Trystram “depart hit even between [them]”—“hit” being “all knyghthode of the worlde” (*MD* 370.25–30)—while Lamorak declares to Launcelot that Launcelot is the knight he is “moste lothyst” to fight “excepte Sir Trystramys” (*MD* 381.32–35). Dynadan likewise speaks of these two knights as coequals when he praises an unknown knight (it turns out to be Lamorak) by saying, “he is as good as ever was Sir Launcelot othir Sir Trystram” (*MD* 474.8–9). Rescuing King Mark, a knight errant (it turns out to be Palomydes) treats the two knights as interchangeable when he says he could defeat anyone except Launcelot or Trystram (*MD* 464.28–465.3), just as Ector does when he tells Palomydes that he will find his match in Launcelot or Trystram (543.10–14). For Palomydes, Trystram is in fact the mightiest opponent he has faced “but yf hit were Sir Launcelot du Laake” (*MD* 663.17–19). Yet Palomydes treats the two knights as equals, announcing that, should he be killed on his quest of the Red City, he is certain “one of the beste knyghtis of the worlde . . . [will] revenge [his] dethe, and that is Sir Trystram de Lyones, othir ellis Sir Launcelot de Lake” (*MD* 563.17–19).¹³⁷ Gareth and Dynadan encourage readers to think of Launcelot and Trystram as interchangeable coequals when they choose to help Trystram during the Tournament of Lonzep, smiting down Launcelot because they do not want Trystram to be shamed (*MD* 593.25–33). The fact that the noblemen who see a disguised Trystram fight at the great tournament in Cornwall believe he *is* Launcelot likewise encourages Malory’s audience (medieval or modern) to equate the two heroes (*MD* 532.15–18).

At key moments in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, moreover, Trystram rivals or surpasses Launcelot. At the end of the first subsection of “The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones,”¹³⁸ Dynas the Seneschal asserts that Trystram’s greatness rivals Launcelot’s: “Trystrames ys called peereles and makeles of ony Crysten knyght, and of his myght and hardynes we know none so good a knyght but yf hit be Sir Launcelot du Lake” (*MD* 341.5–11). Trystram also rivals Launcelot in pledging to serve his lady “in ryght and in wronge” (cf. Trystram at *MD* 308.19–22 with Launcelot at 802.21–23). The equal status of

137. As noted in Chapter 1, it is during this Red City adventure that Palomydes introduces himself as “a knyght of Kyng Arthurs and of the Table Rounde” (*MD* 564.13–15), a statement that should belie the scholarly insistence that Palomydes never truly belongs to the Arthurian Fellowship.

138. That is, Vinaver’s “Isode the Fair”; Field’s “Sir Tristram and La Beall Isode.”

the two is made explicit in the debate over who should be judged victor at the Tournament at Lonezep: “many” of the knights present feel that Trystram deserves the prize although “many mo” favor Launcelot; then Trystram asks that the prize be given to Launcelot; and Launcelot insists that the two of them share that prize (*MD* 602.12–19). In fact, Trystram’s reputation is such that, near the end of Tale V, Launcelot’s “bretherne and his kynnysmen wolde have slayne Sir Trystram bycause of his fame,” fame so great that it has eclipsed Launcelot’s (*MD* 618.33–619.1–2). Launcelot himself bears no such ill-will, threatening his kinsmen with death should they murder his friend and heroic equal, and lamenting the very idea that Trystram might ever “be destroyed wyth treson” (*MD* 619.3–10). Launcelot’s sentiments validate Trystram not merely as his heroic companion but as his legitimate heroic counterpart. The sentiments—and Trystram’s heroic reputation—are reinforced when Launcelot later expresses grief at Trystram’s actual murder by saying, “all the worlde may nat fynde such another knyght” (*MD* 881.9–17). By the end of Tale V, even Ector validates Trystram as Launcelot’s match, urging his brother’s return to Camelot from Joyous Ile on the basis of Launcelot’s renown and the fact that none but Launcelot and Trystram “beryth the name now” (*MD* 656.17–20). Malory reinforces Trystram’s position as Launcelot’s compeer when he explains that, while Launcelot is absent for two years during his psychic trauma, Trystram “bare the brewte and renowne thorow all the realme of Logrys” and “full well and worshypfully” completed many adventures (*MD* 658.1–7).

All told, the only real distinction between Launcelot and Trystram is that, despite Malory’s statements at the end of Tale I and beginning of Tale II about the two knights arriving at Camelot at the same time (*MD* 143.31–32, 145.1–6), Trystram seems to be a late addition to the Round Table Fellowship. Otherwise, by any measurement of the all-important Malorian yardsticks of prowess and honor, they stand in heroic parity, the difference between them being one of relative strengths, not moral stature: “Sir Trystrames . . . was called bygger than Sir Launcelot, but Sir Launcelot was bettir brethid” (*MD* 330.34–331.1). Accordingly, just as all worshipful knights desire Launcelot’s company, Trystram is the knight whose company all the Knights of the Round Table most desire: “the knyght in the worlde that the noble felyship of the Rounde Table desyryth moste to the company off” (*MD* 384.1–2). We hope that the argument offered here, together with the work of Owen and Owen, Mahoney, and Grimm,¹³⁹ puts an end to the long-standing scholarly

139. Owen and Owen, “The *Tristram*,” 3–21; Mahoney, “Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Tristram,’” 175–98; and Grimm, “Fellowship and Envy,” 77–98.

habit of considering either Trystram or his Tale as epitomizing the sinful failures that destroy the Round Table. Moreover, given that Trystram functions as Launcelot's heroic equal throughout "The Boke off Syr Trystram," it is equally untenable to read Gwenyvere as morally tainted based on the supposed moral contagion that Trystram and his lover Isode are said to embody.

Rereading Trystram and Isode as Heroic Lovers

Because of the "Tristramization" intertext outlined earlier, literary critics usually regard Trystram as a morally tainted character whose love affair with La Beale Isode is equally morally corrupt. Exponents of the "Tristramization" intertext further maintain that the adulterous loves of Trystram and Isode highlight the equally corrupt nature of Launcelot and Gwenyvere's love and that all of this corruption destroys the Arthurian world.¹⁴⁰ In contrast to these scholars, we contend that Malory's "Boke off Syr Trystram" provides abundant evidence illustrating that the love of Trystram and Isode is true love. Their love is justified partly because Malory's King Mark is a despicable villain who is unworthy of Isode's (or Trystram's) loyalty, and partly because both Malory and Arthur's court approve of and validate this relationship so thoroughly that it becomes more like a marriage than an adulterous or treasonous affair.

Crucially, the true love between Trystram and Isode is present in Malory's "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17) before they consume the love potion. Indeed, the impact of this true love is mentioned long before "The Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones," for at the outset of the Roman War Malory relates how Sir Trystram remains with King Mark "for the love of La Beale Isode, wherefore Sir Launcelot was passyng wrothe" (*MD* 152.15–17). Whether Launcelot is angry because Arthur's campaign would benefit from Trystram's martial skills, because he already fears Mark's treacherous intentions toward Trystram, or because Launcelot is already looking for opportunities to be alone with Gwenyvere is uncertain; what is certain, however, is that Trystram loves Isode. When "The Boke off Syr Trystram" begins, as is often remarked, it does so as a narrative flashback; but Malory is able to use this early—and original—introduction of Trystram and Isode's love in the Roman War of Tale II to adumbrate his originality in the Trystram and Isode love story of Tale V. In contrast to his sources, Malory is unequivocal that Trystram and

140. See the studies in notes 125–28, above.

Isode fall in love with each other *before* they drink the potion.¹⁴¹ As soon as he arrives in Ireland and is healed by Isode, “Sir Tramtryste kyste grete love to La Beale Isode, for she was at that tyme the fayrest lady and maydyn of the worlde. And there Tramtryste lerned hir to harpe and she began to have a grete fantasy unto hym” (*MD* 302.10–13). Once Isode suspects that Trystram (known to her as Tramtryste) is a “man of worshyp preved,” she “kyste more love unto hym” (*MD* 304.11–14). When the Irish queen realizes that Tramtryste is in fact the same knight who slew her brother Marhalte, she desires revenge—but La Beale Isode is worried because how “passynge well she loved Tramtryste” (*MD* 306.27). The lovers’ first parting confirms their status as true lovers, for he pledges to be her knight for the rest of his life, while she declares that, for the next seven years, she will not marry without his consent (*MD* 309.1–6). Both their exchanging rings and their weeping when they must separate confirm their status as true lovers (*MD* 308.31–309.10). Although Trystram subsequently has a short-lived relationship with Segwarydes’s wife because of their “grete love” (*MD* 310.1–3, 313.12–14), that affair ends abruptly when she forsakes Trystram for failing to rescue her in a timely fashion because he allowed Segwarydes to try to rescue her first (313.18–25, 317.28–35). As a result, Trystram says he will now “beware what maner of lady I shall love or truste,” and he loves Isode truly thereafter (*MD* 318.24–25). Trystram’s subsequent service to King Anguish of Ireland both reinforces the prominence of this love relationship and provides validation of it. When Isode hears of Trystram’s success in reconciling Anguish with Launcelot’s kin, her joy is so great that of it “myght no tunge telle, for of all men erthely she loved hym moste” (*MD* 326.28–30). King Anguish then unwittingly validates his daughter’s relationship with Trystram when he tells Trystram that he would prefer that Trystram—rather than Trystram’s uncle Mark—marry Isode (*MD* 327.3–12).

The love potion temporarily confuses the issue of when this true love begins, yet it also confirms this true love’s existence. The confusion arises because Malory includes, immediately after the lovers drink the potion, two details that make the potion seem to be the sole cause of Trystram and Isode’s love. The first detail is that “by that drynke” the lovers loved each other regardless of circumstance; the second is that “thus [by the potion] hit happed *fyrst*, the love betwyxte Sir Trystrames and La Beale Isode” (*MD* 327.34–328.3 [our italics]), suggesting that they did not love each other before they drank. Yet

141. On Malory’s downplaying of the potion, see further Rumble, “The Tale of Tristram,” 136–51; Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 126–27.

the potion also validates that their love is true, for from this moment onward “they loved aythir other so well that never hir love departed” (*MD* 327.34–35). Despite the fact that Isode and King Mark get married, “Sir Trystrames and La Beale Isode loved ever togedyrs” (*MD* 334.13–14). More importantly, the abovementioned evidence of pre-potion love far outweighs this one moment of presenting the potion as the love affair’s point of origin, especially because the power of the potion is a plot element inherited from the French sources, whereas Malory’s emphasis on the love starting before the potion is original.¹⁴² Trystram and Isode’s non-magical love receives considerable justification, both from Trystram’s public vow of service to Isode before departing Ireland (*MD* 308.19–23) and from the private leave-taking in which the lovers exchange rings (*MD* 308.26–309.9); these acts arguably make the lovers married as well as make them objects of sympathy. When Isode later explains in no uncertain terms to Dynadan that to be “a knyght and . . . no lovear” brings “grete shame” to a knight (*MD* 549.1–3), she justifies love as an essential part of knightly identity. The preponderance of evidence of true love grows greater when placed in context of “The Boke off Syr Trystram” as a whole.

Malory’s La Beale Isode is a model of loyal love to Trystram throughout “The Boke off Syr Trystram.” Of course, she is famously not loyal to her husband, but Mark’s villainy makes her adultery understandable, even natural. Near the conclusion of the first narrative subsection of Tale V (Vinaver’s “Isode the Fair”; Field’s “Sir Tristram and La Beall Isode”), Isode’s rejection of Palomydes’s love proves her loyalty to Trystram. Forced by her own foolish promise and Mark’s foolish enforcement of that promise to accompany Palomydes on adventure, she runs away from Palomydes as soon as possible, plans to drown herself, and then shuts the gates of Sir Adtherpe’s castle against her would-be lover (*MD* 335.12–337.34); then, after Trystram defeats Palomydes, she sends her unwanted lover out of the country (339.1–35). Significantly, Isode asserts that she is a true lover by sending Palomydes to Arthur’s court to tell Gwenyvere that there are only four lovers in England: Launcelot and Gwenyvere, and Trystram and herself (*MD* 340.1–5).¹⁴³ Later, Isode’s loyalty

142. Malory’s principal source here is some form of the prose *Tristan*, but the potion is ubiquitous in French tradition. The most detailed account of Malory’s relation to the potion tradition is Rumble, “The Tale of Tristram,” 136–51. For Malory’s originality in the early scenes between the lovers, see Vinaver, Commentary on *Works*, 365.6–8 and 389.32; Field, Commentary on 308.35–309.1 and 309.8–9.

143. On the generic and narrative importance of this correspondence, see further Fiona Tolhurst, “Why Every Knight Needs His Lady,” in *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur*, ed. K. S. Whetter and Raluca L. Radulescu (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 139–44.

to Trystram is still evident when she responds to the news that Trystram has married Isode le Blaunche Maynys with both the most “pyteuous lettirs” and an invitation to Trystram to bring his wife to Mark’s court, where they will receive the same reception as she does (*MD* 376.1–9). When Trystram returns both to Cornwall and Isode (just before he temporarily loses his sanity), the intensity of Isode’s love is evident both in her swooning “for verry pure joy” upon learning that he is near, and in her plea that she must speak with Trystram “othir [her] harte woll braste!” (*MD* 386.26–31). Although Trystram’s psychological trauma provides strong evidence of his love, the sincerity and intensity of Isode’s love are evident in her falling sick with grief after Trystram accuses her of betraying him through a supposed affair with Kayhydins (*MD* 387.22–389.11): the same event causes both Trystram’s mental suffering and Isode’s “makyngge the grettyste dole that ever ony ertly woman made” (389.10–11). In the same vein, when a false report of Trystram’s death sends her “nyghe oute of hir mynde” with grief, she prepares to commit suicide by driving a sword into her chest, declaring, “I may nat lyve aftir the deth of Sir Trystram de Lyones, for he was my firste love and shall be the laste!” (*MD* 392.15–35). In all of these ways, Malory emphasizes that Isode’s status as a true lover is unimpeachable.

Isode’s love and loyalty remain unimpeachable in subsequent episodes. When Isode’s “lytyll brachett,” a gift from Trystram, reveals that “the madde man” brought from the forest to the castle (and thus cured) is actually her true love, she swoons and remains in that state “a grete whyle” (*MD* 394.9–395.17).¹⁴⁴ Again, the intensity of Isode’s response reveals her love for Trystram—and vice versa. Unfortunately, the lovers are immediately separated due to Mark’s banishment of Trystram (*MD* 395.32–396.14), but Isode’s letters of “pyteous complaynte” please Trystram because they, too, prove her love (*MD* 405.26–30). At the great Tournament of Lonezep, Isode’s love for Trystram causes her to “lowghe and ma[k]e good chere” when Trystram does well against his opponents (*MD* 580.15–33); her love also causes her “to wepe . . . hertely” when Palomydes deceives Trystram (592.31–593.3). The unwavering loyalty that Isode’s love inspires is particularly evident when she protects Trystram’s reputation as a knight. After Trystram declares that he will not attend the feast at Arthur’s court if Isode is not there, Isode asserts that Trystram must not invite criticism as a man who “cowryth wythin a castell wyth hys lady, and

144. On ways in which the brachet symbolizes both Trystram’s and Isode’s love and the tragic pathos of their situation, see Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 86–87 and 90–91.

forsakyth [court]" (*MD* 658.27–659.6). Trystram acknowledges her counsel as proof of her love and then acts upon it (*MD* 659.7–16). Trystram, in turn, not only functions as the voice of knightly honor when berating Gawayne's brothers for murdering "good knyghtes" (*MD* 547.1–13) but also provides a model of how to love truly.

Like his lady-love, Trystram asserts that "a knyght may never be of proues but yf he be a lovear" (*MD* 544.19–20), and his behavior proves him to be a true and loyal lover to Isode—despite his relationship with the second Isode. Some critics dismiss Trystram as untrue because King Howell and his son's use of "grete meanes" causes to "gr[o]we grete love betwyxte Isode [le Blaunche Maynys] and Sir Trystrames," and then Trystram marries her (*MD* 348.3–10).¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Malory defends the knight as having "*almoste* . . . forsakyn La Beale Isode" (as opposed to actually forsaking her), and as feeling "all dysmayde" as soon as he remembers "his olde lady" and thereafter doing no more than "kyssynge and clyppyng" Isode le Blaunche Maynys (*MD* 348.6–17 [our italics]). Trystram can be further excused since his visit to the second Isode is instigated by La Beale Isode herself, who cannot heal her beloved because they were recently caught *in flagrante* by Mark's men, so Mark has her under constant watch (*MD* 345.1–346.33). Trystram is suffering from a second poisoned wound, and, creating a parallel with the first meeting between the lovers, La Beale Isode tells the injured Trystram to seek out her namesake in order to be healed (*MD* 346.22–347.11). Thus, he does not willingly visit Isode le Blaunche Maynys, and the doubling of names—Isode and Isode—and circumstances—Trystram needs special medical care—foregrounds the priority of La Beale Isode. Trystram can thus assert that he has remained true to La Beale Isode when he later writes to Launcelot to assure him "he had never ado fleyshly with Isode le Blaunche Maynys" (*MD* 367.30–33). Gwenyvere likewise defends Trystram when she assures La Beale Isode that "joy" will follow "aftir sorow," for Trystram will "hate" his wife and love her "bettir than ever he dud" (*MD* 349.7–15). Therefore, Trystram's marriage does not disqualify him as a true lover any more than Launcelot's twice sleeping with Elayne of Corbyn disqualifies him.

The hero's behavior throughout "The Boke off Syr Trystram" proves him to be a true lover and loyal to La Beale Isode. When Trystram believes that his beloved has been untrue to him with Keyhydins because she has written

145. Critics who castigate Trystram's marriage include Fries, "Tristram as Counter-Hero," 608–9; Rovang, *Malory's Anatomy of Chivalry*, 150–51 and n. 2; and Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 167–68.

a letter “to comforte” Keyhydins (*MD* 387.3–11), the knight goes “allmoste oute of hys mynde” from sorrow (*MD* 387.17–389.7). Immediately hereafter he does lose his mental abilities and identity, deserting horse and armor and running into the wilderness, where he lives naked for many months (*MD* 389.12–390.25). It is a subtle touch on Malory’s part that it is Palomydes—who knows something of unrequited love—who is the character who understands that this mental anguish is the result of “the love of a lady” (*MD* 390.28–29). Trystram confirms this understanding when he informs Isode that “much angur and daunger have I assayed for youre love” (*MD* 395.29–30). Trystram’s persistent need to be with Isode regardless of the danger provides more evidence of the sincerity of his devotion. Malory confirms that, no matter the threat from Mark, “without the syghte of her Sir Tristram myght not endure” (*MD* 483.5–484.29) and “evir he wolde be thereas La Beale Isode was” (*MD* 499.3–7). True love gives Trystram the physical strength to overcome Elyas, despite Elyas’s matching Trystram as well as all knights except Launcelot. When Trystram remembers Isode and how unlikely it is that he will ever again be in her presence, he gives twenty strokes for every one of his opponent’s and thereby causes Elyas’s death (*MD* 498.16–26). Crucially, Trystram is a true lover because he suffers as much for Isode as she does for him (*MD* 490.3–4); he also experiences joy beyond description when reunited with his beloved: “And to telle the joyes that were betwyxte La Beall Isode and Sir Trystramys, there ys no maker can make hit, nother no harte can thynke hit, nother no penne can wryte it, nother no mowth can speke hit” (386.34–387.2). Thus, although the basic plot affords Malory opportunities to criticize the love affair of Trystram and Isode, he chooses instead repeatedly to valorize their love.

A number of pivotal moments in Malory’s “Boke off Syr Trystram” make evident that he presents the Trystram-Isode relationship so matter-of-factly as to imply approval of it. When Trystram (unlike Launcelot) gets caught “nakyd a-bed” with his lover, Malory could confirm Andret’s claim that Trystram is a “false traytur” (*MD* 345.7–8, 24). Instead, he simply relates without comment how Trystram goes “dayly and nyghtly . . . to Quene Isode evir whan he myght,” allotting more detail to Trystram’s verbal defense of himself as having served Cornwall well than to the moment of his getting caught with the queen (*MD* 345.1–23). Significantly, Trystram’s speech here resembles Launcelot’s later one in which Launcelot enumerates all he has done for Logres just before being exiled after he and Gwenyvere are caught in her chamber (*MD* 899.9–900.8). The parallels enhance Trystram’s heroic image by once again likening him to Launcelot. Trystram and Isode’s love affair

is further valorized in this scene of Trystram's capture because Andret is so dishonest and King Mark is both cowardly and treacherous. In keeping with this nonjudgmental presentation of the affair itself is Malory's laconic presentation of Trystram's rescue of Isode from the "lazar-cote"—a rescue that happens so swiftly as to seem entirely appropriate (*MD* 346.14–20). Much later, Malory presents as equally appropriate the lovers' enlisting aid so that Trystram receives release from prison when he is rescued by Percyvale, who complains that Mark is guilty of "grete shame for to preson Sir Trystram so, 'for he is now the knyght of moste reverence in the worlde'" and Isode "one of the fayryst ladyes of the worlde" (*MD* 535.23–536.11). Mark, of course, breaks his oath to Percyvale and promptly imprisons Trystram again, whereupon Isode secures Dynas's aid in imprisoning Mark while she and her beloved escape (*MD* 536.12–537.7). Malory says of the lovers' departure from Cornwall simply, "so they toke wyth them what them lysteste beste, and so they departed" (*MD* 536.22–537.10). This matter-of-fact description refutes Hanks's claim that "the Tristram-book dwells upon the adulterous affair of Tristram and Isode" in ways that constitute the supposed "forestaining" of the Launcelot-Gwenyvere relationship.¹⁴⁶

Following the lovers' escape from Cornwall, Malory could have criticized their adulterous affair; instead, he legitimizes it by making them welcome guests in England, celebrating Trystram's talents, and having them function like a married lord and lady. Mark, in contrast, is repeatedly called "a traytoure" (e.g., *MD* 431.34, 459.19, 534.31, 534.34) who is guilty of "treson" (e.g., 430.27–28, 467.30–31, 536.13, 536.24): judgments made by both Malory and other characters. As for Trystram and Isode, almost as soon as the lovers arrive in England, Launcelot puts them up in Joyous Garde, "to welde hit for their owne"; Launcelot's action expresses affection for and approval of the lovers, as does Malory's explanation that "that castell was garnyshed and furnysshed for a kynge and a quene" (*MD* 537.28–32). So pleased are Arthur and Gwenyvere with the lovers' safely living together that Arthur organizes the great Tournament at Lonzep precisely because Lonzep "was faste by Joyous Garde" (*MD* 538.4–10). Malory himself then makes one of his rare intrusions into the narrative in order (as noted above) to celebrate Trystram's knowledge of hunting and hawking, going so far as to join the chorus of praise

146. Hanks, "Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram*," 25. As Wyatt, *Women of Words*, 139, notes, Malory instead presents both sets of lovers with considerable sympathy, including the fact that he never describes their love as adulterous.

and affection he imagines all gentlemen shower upon the Cornish knight: “all maner jantylmen hath cause to the worldes ende to prayse Sir Trystram and to pray for his soule. Amen, sayde Sir Thomas Malleorre” (*MD* 538.33–539.9). This encomium hardly qualifies as censure of a tainted love. Furthermore, as residents of Arthur’s kingdom, Trystram and Isode gain legitimacy because they function as if they were a married lord and lady.¹⁴⁷ Such marital optics and behavior recall and justify the lovers’ earlier exchange of vows and rings (*MD* 308.34–309.8 [discussed above]).

When Palomydes later arrives at the lovers’ residence of Joyous Garde, Trystram functions as the castle’s lord by ordering Dynadan to bring Palomydes to him (*MD* 568.8–12). Trystram and Isode likewise function as lord and lady when Trystram has two pavilions set up at Lonezep, one for himself and the other for “the quene . . . Isode,” who loses none of her social status by living with her lover (*MD* 570.12–14). Indeed, Trystram and Isode ride together to Lonezep, he with an entourage of three squires and she with three gentlewomen; their traveling publicly together as a proper lord and lady further legitimizes their relationship (*MD* 571.1–4). The lovers again function like a married lord and lady when Isode and the three damsels who accompany her wear the same green as Trystram and the four knights who accompany him, and then those knights escort her to a window where she can see the jousting (*MD* 576.4–9; cf. 583.30–32, 588.3–4). The lovers receive further validation as a legitimate lord and lady when Bleoberys, Ector, Gareth, and Dynadan accompany Trystram in order to escort Isode to Joyous Garde and then remain to enjoy the couple’s company for a full week (*MD* 603.12–17). All told, the lovers “made joy togydrys dayly with all maner of myrthis that they coude devyse” (*MD* 538.28–30). Finally, Malory presents their life together with apparent approval by giving the lovers an (admittedly temporary) happy ending that validates their love as legitimate and good: “And ever . . . Sir Trystram resorted unto Joyous Garde whereas La Beall Isode was, that lovid hym ever” (*MD* 619.15–16, but see also 664.7). Significantly, Malory closes his “Boke off Syr Trystram de Lyones” by leaving his lovers in this life of respectable marital bliss at Joyous Garde; their deaths do not occur until

147. Whether Malory knowingly echoes or coincidentally parallels Marie de France’s exploration of the love tribulations of an unhappily married woman (the *mal mariée*) is worth exploring, but we do not have space to do so here. For an authoritative overview of love in Marie’s *lais*, with a wide range of critical references, see Roberta L. Kreuger, “The Wound, the Knot, and the Book,” in *A Companion to Marie de France*, ed. Logan E. Whalen (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 55–87.

much later.¹⁴⁸ As a result, when King Mark eventually destroys this happy ending by murdering Trystram as he plays the harp for his lady, an event that occurs offstage and is recounted only in the Urry catalog (*MD* 881.9–17), the contrast between their true love and Mark’s treachery creates one final validation of their relationship and reminds readers of the fundamental difference between Mark’s court and Arthur’s.

The Contrasting Courts of King Mark and King Arthur

Edward Donald Kennedy has argued persuasively that Malory revised the King Arthur he found in the French *Mort Artu*—an Arthur shaped by the portrayal of King Mark “found in some versions of the Tristan story”—so that he contrasts strongly with Mark.¹⁴⁹ Because Malory’s Mark is a tyrant and a cowardly knight, while Arthur is a just king and an admirable knight, their courts contrast as strongly as do their characters and actions. As we noted briefly in Chapter 1, Mark is not taken seriously as a knight by the men around him. However, due to his tyrannical and murderous behavior, Mark is not taken seriously as a king either. Lamorak labels Mark “the shamfullist knyght of a kynge that is now lyvyng” (*MD* 456.23–26), while Palomydes labels him “the falsyst knyght and kynge of the worlde . . . and the moste cowarde and full of treson” (467.30–32). After both Trystram and Mark fall in love with Segwarydes’s wife and Trystram consummates his relationship with her, Mark never again feels love for Trystram and tries to bring about, sometimes indirectly and sometimes by his own hand, his nephew’s death (*MD* 312.18–20). In short, Mark shows his tyrannical tendencies in his constant plots against Trystram. First he sends his nephew to Ireland in the hope that Trystram will be murdered while trying to arrange La Beale Isode’s marriage to Mark, a marriage that the king plans only to spite Trystram (*MD* 319.5–11). Then he calls for his nephew’s murder at his own court after failing to strike Trystram with his sword (*MD* 340.16–24). Later he banishes Trystram (*MD* 396.9–10, 454.2–7) before attempting to murder him in England (454.17–455.12) and finally resorting to imprisoning him (532.30–533.11). Mark’s repeated plotting finally meets with success when he kills Trystram “as he sate harpyng afore hys lady, La Beall Isode” (*MD* 865.6–12). Malory’s choice of reporting—rather than showing—this moment to his audience

148. On the significance of this ending, see also Whetter, *Manuscript and Meaning*, 126–27.

149. Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark,” 139–40.

makes the shameful and treacherous nature of King Mark's behavior all the more evident.

Because Mark is so obviously Arthur's inferior in terms of honor, prowess, and kingship, Mark's court functions as a dark inversion of Arthur's. The two kings differ fundamentally: Arthur has never broken his word while Mark routinely breaks his (*MD* 881.18–22). Arthur's court has a noble social foundation in the Pentecostal or Round Table Oath that requires knights never to murder, commit treason, or fight “in a wrongfull quarell,” as well as always to be merciful and serve (rather than “enforce”) women (*MD* 97.27–35). In contrast, Mark's court is full of knights whom the members of the Round Table consider to be vastly inferior to them: Cornish knights receive consistent scorn.¹⁵⁰ In addition, almost all of the women at Mark's court prove themselves to be unfaithful to their husbands. Only four out of a hundred women are able to drink without spilling from the magic drinking horn that Morgan le Fay sends to shame Arthur's court but that Lamorak diverts to Mark's court (*MD* 344.3–22)! For Mark, the moral corruption of these women is personally shameful since Isode is one of the many women who cannot drink cleanly from the horn; as a result, he “sw[ears] a grete othe that she sholde be brente and the other ladyes also” (*MD* 344.23–24). Although Mark's and Arthur's courts become juxtaposed because each land's best knight is having an affair with his queen, the members of Mark's court are inferior to those of Arthur's. Trystram is the exception that proves the rule.

There is also a fundamental difference between the sociopolitical affinities of the two courts—the ways in which each king and his respective knights interact. Arthur consistently inspires respect and loyal service from his knights, with Trystram himself observing how “all knyghtes may lerne to be a knyght of . . . my lorde Kyng Arthure” (*MD* 587.32–33; cf. 45.10–12 and see Chapter 3). Mark's treacherous plots consistently inspire his knights to abandon his service. Mark's reactions to his knights' rebellions, moreover, prove his knights to be his moral superiors. When Bersules refuses to participate in the attempted murder of Trystram and declares that he will forsake Mark and serve instead “the knyght of worshyp moste” Trystram, the king again reveals his lack of *worshyp* by cleaving Bersules's head (*MD* 455.13–20). When Amant accuses Mark of treason at Arthur's court because he has witnessed Mark's

150. Statements that imply or assert Cornish knights' inferiority appear at *MD* 314.27–28, 382.26–27, 397.29–31, 398.23–26, 437.32–34, 458.3–10. See further Kevin J. Harty, “Malory and the Cowardly Cornish Knights—‘The stranger races [that] dwell next door,’” *Études Anglaises* 66, no. 3 (2013): 379–87. In Chapter 1, above, we show that this scorn is not applicable to Trystram.

murder of Bersules, Mark manages to wound Amant mortally in single combat, despite the fact that Amant is “in the ryghtuous quarell” (*MD* 468.7–14). Mark’s victory, though, is ascribed to “mysadventure” (*MD* 468.10): ill luck or bad fate. Overall, Mark is a perversion of Arthur’s model of good kingship.

Undoubtedly, the problems of incest and adultery cause Mark’s court to function as a mirror for Arthur’s; however, these themes reinforce the audience’s understanding that the Arthurian court is superior to the Cornish one. Trystram’s committing what is technically incest by having a sexual affair with his uncle’s wife Isode foreshadows Mordred’s attempted incest with his aunt Gwenyvere, yet the Trystram-Isode incest does not remove Mark from power.¹⁵¹ One explanation of this fact is plot-based: if Malory is attempting to build tension in his “Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17) gradually, then the incest plot involving Mark’s family cannot have catastrophic consequences, at least not immediately. Another explanation is character-based: because Mark is a king who lacks any sense of honor and reigns only over Cornwall, his power is not as great as Arthur’s and therefore Mark does not have as far to fall as his counterpart does. There is a huge status difference between Mark as the king of Cornwall and Arthur as the king of England, Wales, Scotland, and many other lands; Malory, moreover, has Launcelot nickname Mark “Kynge Foxe” (*MD* 489.28), whereas Malory repeatedly emphasizes the extent of Arthur’s rule, including that he is possessor of “all the londys frome Rome unto Fraunce” (*MD* 188.1–8).¹⁵² As a dishonest coward and a lesser king, Mark does not warrant Malory’s attention in the form of dramatic consequences of incest, while the merits of Trystram and Isode justify an incestuous relationship the immoral nature of which Malory never comments upon. Certainly, Mark suffers humiliation as a result of Isode’s failure to drink cleanly from Morgan le Fay’s drinking horn (*MD* 344.18–22), but adultery itself is insufficient to destroy either Mark’s or Arthur’s power. In Arthur’s case, it is not Gwenyvere’s adultery per se that causes Arthur’s loss of political power to Mordred; it is the making public of her adultery and Gawayne’s obsession with avenging his brothers’ deaths that cause Arthur to become vulnerable to Mordred’s attack, and that combination of factors destroys Arthur.¹⁵³ Malory

151. On the range of what counted as incest in medieval culture, including examples from Arthurian literature, see Archibald, *Incest*, *passim*.

152. For further reminders on Malory’s part of the extent of Arthur’s rule, see *MD* 11.16–25, 12.30–33, 47.1–5, 289.12–20. On the significance of the power, prestige, and extent of Arthur’s polity, see Chapter 3, pp. 170–74 and 186–91, above.

153. On the complex causation underlying the destruction of the Round Table in Malory’s *Arthuriad*, see especially Lambert, *Style and Vision*, 158–76; Benson, “Ending,”

suggests that only when adultery becomes linked with clan-based revenge and a complex interrelation of Fate, free will, good and bad characters, and good and bad choices does it become an unsolvable political problem. In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the public revelation of Launcelot and Gwenyvere's affair, the Pope has the battle over Gwenyvere settled via his bishop-messenger, and Arthur is content to have his queen back despite her affair with Launcelot (*MD* 896.1-15). Notwithstanding Gawayne's earlier spirited defense of Launcelot (*MD* 882.22-884.21), the obstacle now is that Gawayne cannot forgive his friend's accidental slaying of Gareth (*MD* 885.4-11, 887.9-889.4, 900.9-901.35). A key piece of corroborating evidence of the fact that adultery alone cannot destroy a kingdom in *Le Morte Darthur* is that Segwarydes, Mark, and Trystram all (by her own choice) seem temporarily to be in a relationship with Segwarydes's wife, and that situation has no impact on Mark's political power. It is Mark's villainy and cowardice, not his own adultery or cuckoldry, that undermine his authority.

Perhaps the most fundamental contrast between the courts of Arthur and Mark is the weaker social bonds present in the latter. In contrast to the Fellowship of the Round Table that creates a community bond so strong that only God's initiation of the Quest of the Holy Grail can break it (*MD* 672.25-30), there is little sense of fellowship at Mark's court.¹⁵⁴ As already mentioned, knights such as Bersules and Amant abandon Mark's service due to his treacherous behavior; because Cornish knights view Trystram as nobler than their king, their loyalties are inherently divided and their community bond weak. After Trystram kills one of Mark's knights and mortally wounds another, Mark's request for his barons' advice regarding "what were beste to do with Sir Trystrames" yields an answer indicative of the divided nature of the Cornish court (*MD* 340.30-341.4). Mark's barons, especially his seneschal Sir Dynas, advise Mark to send for Trystram because "many men woll holde with Sir Trystrames and he were harde bestadde" (*MD* 341.5-8). The marked lack of any loyalty at Mark's court is a sharp contrast to the strong clan-based and affinity loyalties that define the Round Table Fellowship—even if, paradoxically, those same loyalties eventually contribute to the tragic destruction

221-38; Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003): 145-69; Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 128-42.

154. For two thoughtful accounts of the secular and spiritual chivalric bonds among Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, see Richard Sève, "Malory's 'Chivalric Cliques,'" *Arthurian Literature* 32 (2015): 105-22; and Richard Sève, "Galahad, Percival, and Bors," *Arthuriana* 25, no. 3 (2015): 49-65.

of Arthur's court.¹⁵⁵ Thus, in Cornwall, Trystram's close cousin Andret plots to catch Trystram and Isode together (*MD* 340.13–15) and later tries to acquire Trystram's realm of Lyonesse by getting his own lover to claim that she was with Trystram when he died (*MD* 392.15–22). Love bonds are likewise weaker at Mark's court. Trystram himself briefly falls in love with Segwarydes's wife *after* he has fallen in love with—and exchanged rings with—Isode (*MD* 309.3–310.5), while Isode's marriage to Mark does not inhibit her from continuing her affair with Trystram (*MD* 334.12–14). As Mark's own seneschal points out, Trystram belongs at Arthur's court because he is a better knight than his Cornish countrymen: he “ys called peereles and makeles of ony Crystyn knyght” (*MD* 341.9–10). Dynas strengthens this argument by noting that Arthur's court will quickly become Trystram's community, for once there “he woll so frende hym . . . that he woll nat sette by [Mark's] malyce” (*MD* 341.11–14). Trystram also belongs at Arthur's court because his love for Isode links him with Malory's other true lovers: Launcelot and Gwenyvere.

Gwenyvere and Isode as Counterparts in Malory's “Boke off Syr Trystram”

Although Gwenyvere is not a prominent character in the action of Malory's “Boke off Syr Trystram,” both she and Isode have an important symbolic function because they are the female members of an elite group: the four best lovers in the Arthurian world. The central premise of “The Boke off Syr Trystram” is that Arthur and Gwenyvere preside over an ideal court at which justice is done, ideal knighthood is repeatedly demonstrated at tournaments, and the courtly love of Trystram and Isode receives repeated validation. The assertion that “there be within this londe but foure lovers, and that is Sir Launcelot and Dame Gwenyvere, and Sir Trystrames and Quene Isode” (*MD* 340.1–5), is important not only because it positions these two couples as true love's elite but also because it is the message Isode requires Palomydes to deliver to Gwenyvere on her behalf. Through this message, Isode announces her role as Gwenyvere's companion and equal as well as asserts that her extramarital love relationship is as noble as Gwenyvere's. Isode's message also confirms what we argued at the beginning of this chapter: that, given the abundant evidence in Malory's *Morte Darthur* of a passionate love affair between Launcelot and Gwenyvere both before and after the Grail

¹⁵⁵ The fullest account of the tragic threads of Malory's *Morte* is Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 99–159.

Quest, the Launcelot-Gwenyvere relationship is essentially the same as the Trystram-Isode one and is therefore a sexual relationship—at least by the vast middle Tale of “The Hoole Book” (*MD* 940.17).

Gwenyvere and Isode are friends because each has sympathy for the other as a lover, and each validates the other's pursuit of her true love. As noted above, Gwenyvere makes her sympathy for Isode evident when she answers a letter from Isode. In response to Isode's complaint that Trystram has been disloyal to her by marrying Isode le Blaunche Maynys, Arthur's queen sends a letter in which she “bade [La Beale Isode] be of good comferte, for she sholde have joy aftir sorow” because, finally, “he shall hate [Isode le Blaunche Maynys] and love [La Beale Isode] bettir than ever he dud” (*MD* 349.7–15). Gwenyvere again makes her sympathy for her fellow lover evident when she asks Bleoberys and Ector how Trystram and Isode are, and then asserts that “all folkys that hath sene her and spokyn wyth her” praise Isode highly (*MD* 603.32–604.4). Gwenyvere then validates Isode's pursuit of her affair with Trystram by saying “God wolde . . . that I had parte of her condycions!” (*MD* 604.4–5). In turn, Isode's sympathy for Gwenyvere as Launcelot's lover is evident in her conversation with Trystram about Launcelot's mental trauma that has lasted “too yere and more” (*MD* 658.4). Isode tells Trystram that Gwenyvere sent her a letter telling her “all how hyt [the psychological distress] was done” (*MD* 658.15–18), thereby suggesting that Arthur's queen has explained to Isode just how her argument with Launcelot triggered his loss of sanity. Isode then validates Gwenyvere's ongoing pursuit of her true love by saying, “blessyd be God . . . [Launcelot] ys hole and sounde and comyn ayen to the courte” (*MD* 658.17–18). Isode's implication seems to be that now normalcy—that is, the Launcelot-Gwenyvere affair—can return.

The two queens are counterparts not only in pursuing true love but also in resisting the advances of an unwanted lover. Just as Gwenyvere resists Mordred's attempt to force her to marry him by taking possession of and defending the Tower of London (*MD* 915.20–24), Isode resists Mark's granting to Palomydes temporary custody of her by escaping from her would-be lover and then shutting the gates of Sir Adtherpe's castle against the Saracen knight (337.16–34). Even the love-skeptic Dynadan treats these two queens as equals of the noblest sort, telling Palomydes that he will “have grete worship now at this grete turnemente, for there shall be Quene Gwenyvere and La Beale Isode of Cornwayle” (*MD* 471.35–472.2). In this way, “The Boke off Syr Trystram” celebrates both queens as inspirers of knightly deeds.

The letters that link not only Isode to Gwenyvere but also Trystram to Launcelot and Trystram to Isode enable Malory finally to present these two

couples as equally heroic lovers. Françoise Le Saux notes that, in *Le Morte Darthur*, all of the “[p]rivate letters, where writing is used to express the subjectivity or the limited concerns of the individual,” appear in “The Boke off Syr Trystram.”¹⁵⁶ This fact reveals that the letters of the four lovers are a key means of both expressing and fulfilling their desires. The ways in which private letters both express and maintain the lovers’ bonds are evident in Mark’s trying to prevent his wife from either writing or sending letters (*MD* 346.32–33). Just as Gwenyvere comforts Isode with her assertion that Trystram will love Isode better in the future (*MD* 349.7–15), thereby affirming that the two women are in a mutually supportive community of true lovers, Trystram affirms that he and Launcelot are in that same community. When Launcelot is furious with Trystram for supposedly betraying La Beale Isode by marrying Isode le Blaunche Maynys, Trystram sends his fellow true lover a letter of assurance. In it, Trystram excuses his marriage by asserting that he is “a trew knyght [who] had never ado fleyshly with Isode le Blaunche Maynys” (*MD* 367.30–33). Trystram’s letter also begs Launcelot to be a “good frende” to both himself and La Beale Isode, and it assures Launcelot that Trystram will soon speak with both him and Isode (*MD* 368.1–5). Launcelot’s writing a reply not only suggests that he accepts Trystram’s explanation but also confirms their continued connection as true lovers, especially since Launcelot must temporarily leave off his supervision of La Cote Male Tayle in order to write to Trystram (*MD* 368.6–21). Later, a letter sent from Trystram to Isode confirms their status as true lovers and enables them to escape to England. In response to her beloved’s letter from prison in which he asks her “to be his good lady” and prepare a ship in which they can escape, Isode replies with a letter of her own in which she assures him that she will prepare everything for their journey (*MD* 536.27–35). She then keeps her promise by sending a letter to Dynas the Seneschal informing him of Mark’s treason and requesting that Dynas imprison Mark, a request the seneschal obeys (*MD* 536.35–537.7). Having established the four lovers as members a noble community of mutual support for true love, Malory has Bors cite Trystram and Isode’s residence at Joyous Garde as a precedent for the future residence of Gwenyvere and Launcelot there. Bors recommends Trystram’s model of chivalry to Launcelot, asking, “for how ded the moste noble knyght Sir Trystram? By youre good wyll, kept nat he with hym La Beall Isode nere thre yere in Joyous

¹⁵⁶ Françoise Le Saux, “Pryvayly and Secretely,” *Études de Lettres* 3 (1993): 21. Le Saux does note a possible exception to this rule in the letters Mordred sends attempting to convince Gwenyvere to leave the Tower of London and marry him (21 n. 1 referring to *MD* 916.19–23).

Garde, the whych was done by youre althers avyce?" (*MD* 880.33–881.1). The fact that first Trystram and Isode and then Launcelot and Gwenyvere live together at Launcelot's castle is one of many parallels between the two pairs of lovers, parallels designed to highlight their essential nobility.

While many literary critics interpret "The Boke off Syr Trystram" as a large step toward moral corruption and political destruction, our analysis of this essential Tale reveals that it is the characters' strengths and virtues that lead to the Arthuriad's poignant ending. Such virtues are evident throughout this prolix middle Tale of the *Morte*, structured as it is around the chivalric greatness of Trystram, Palomydes, Lamorak, and Launcelot, and the amorous greatness of Trystram and Isode and Launcelot and Gwenyvere. Sir Thomas Malory, therefore, is not a moralist who uses the stories of two pairs of lovers to show how corruption and adultery destroy two royal courts.¹⁵⁷ He neither brands Gwenyvere a temptress nor has Trystram and Isode suffer any form of punishment for their affair until King Mark murders Trystram offstage from the book's action (*MD* 865.5–17). Crucially, however, Malory presents this deed not as the lovers' punishment for adultery but rather as a dishonorable and abhorrent crime that confirms Mark's complete lack of *worshyp* and (in contrast to Arthur) complete failure as a king.

Given his compassion for, rather than condemnation of, adulterers, Malory can be considered a humanist who situates imperfect yet noble characters in a politically fraught world in which Arthur's reign ends because the true love of Launcelot and Gwenyvere is revealed, Gawayne refuses to allow his uncle to make peace with his best knight, and factionalism ultimately supersedes loyalty to a Round Table Fellowship already weakened by the losses inflicted by the Quest of the Holy Grail. The complex web of causation at work in Malory's *Morte* makes the case of Gwenyvere complicated. She is difficult to categorize or judge in part because Malory attempts to shield her from the charge of adultery using two different but potentially contradictory tactics. First, he refuses to say whether Launcelot and Gwenyvere have sex in the queen's chamber when they are denounced by Aggravayne and Mordred (*MD* 874.3–10). Second, he celebrates their earthly love as inherently good (*MD* 841.2–28). The first tactic *could* suggest that earthly love outside of marriage is shameful because it is immoral; the second tactic suggests that such love is axiomatically good. Some critics consider that earthly love actually

157. Contra Rumble, "The Tale of Tristram," 145–47, 180–83; Moorman, *Book of Kyng Arthur*, 22–24, 76–77; Fries, "Malory's Tristram," 613; Hanks, "Malory's *Book of Sir Tristram*," 25–27; and MacBain, "Tristramization," 57–58, 65.

leads to, or at least contributes to, salvation in the *Morte*, but central to this salvific approach is the idea that Launcelot and Gwenvyvere's love is "adulterous" and "sinful."¹⁵⁸ Malory, however, nowhere suggests that earthly love is a sin. He is in fact adamant that "Quene Gwenvyvere . . . was a trew lover" (*MD* 842.9–11). Although this seeming contradiction is not easily resolved by literary analysis, it is telling that only the villainous characters denounce Launcelot and Gwenvyvere's or Trystram and Isode's loves. Far from chastising her, Malory consistently characterizes Queen Gwenvyvere as intelligent, powerful, brave, and deserving of sympathy. And she displays these laudable characteristics *throughout* the *Morte*.

Ultimately, then, Malory's Gwenvyvere is neither the main cause of her husband's downfall nor the primary cause of moral corruption at Arthur's court. Like Launcelot, like Gawayne, and like Arthur himself, she is and is not at fault. More importantly, her leading Launcelot to salvation through her own conversion and subsequent refusal to kiss him one last time (*MD* 933.16–934.4) are consistent with the strength of character she shows throughout Malory's "Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table" (*MD* 940.17–18). Notably, she resists a forced marriage to Mordred through military action and demonstrates astute and honorable leadership at Arthur's court through disciplining erring knights. Malory's Gwenvyvere, therefore, merits careful rereading of the sort provided here. Such rereading of Gwenvyvere and her counterparts in the stanzaic and alliterative *Mortes* could free Malory studies from the critical intertexts that have produced persistent misreadings of all three English *Mortes*, especially of the stanzaic-poet's Gaynour and Malory's Gwenvyvere.

158. Gwenvyvere's love of Launcelot as a step toward love of God is argued by Hanks, "Guenevere's *Raptus-Sanctus* Triumphs," 17–21; and again in D. Thomas Hanks Jr., "All maner of good love comyth of God," in *Malory and Christianity*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013), 15–16 and 22 (quoting 22).

Epilogue

Intertextual Arthurian Memories



This book is about literary and critical memories as much as it is about literary and critical intertexts. To clarify, we are not concerned with the modern theorization of memory or with charting the practice of medieval *ars memoria*, a practice superbly demonstrated by Mary Carruthers.¹ Rather, our focus is with the tangible written evidence of literary memories and intertextual relations, the ways in which authors remember and adopt or adapt or rebut the literature of earlier authors; again, whether one approaches the traditions, influences, and adaptations of intertextuality from the perspective of T. S. Eliot or Julia Kristeva or Fredric Jameson is less important from our perspective than the traditional literary fact of authors remembering and responding to other authors and texts and traditions.² Concomitantly, we are concerned as well with what might be termed *intercritical* memories, the continuation of certain critical practices, some of which are helpful (i.e., source-study or gender study) and some of which are more restrictive (i.e., the tradition of

1. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On specifically literary memories, see also the classic study by M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 3rd ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

2. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in his *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), 47–59; Julia Kristeva, "The Bounded Text" and "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," both in her *Desire in Language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36–63 and 64–91 respectively; Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 13–29.

disparaging the unknown poet of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* or judging the warfare of the alliterative *Morte* by presentist attitudes).

Literary memories are often long-lasting. Homer—frequently cited as the foundational author of Western literature—was remembered by, and the inspiration for, poets as diverse as Sophocles and Virgil, Chapman and Keats, Auden and Walcott. Similarly, scholars as diverse as Robert Wood in 1775, Matthew Arnold in 1860 and 1861, and Martin Mueller in 1970 all remembered the story of the dying Lord Granville rousing himself to hear a draft of the 1763 Treaty of Paris by reciting Homer’s famous speech by Sarpedon to Glaukos about the heroic ethos involving—for Sarpedon at least—a combination of fighting for glory and a sense of duty:³

Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle,
 would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,
 so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost
 nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory.
 But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us
 in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,
 let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.⁴

Mueller cites this story about Granville to illustrate the powerful “effect of Homer’s poetry.”⁵ We cite it to illustrate the powerful effect of literary memories—and to draw attention to the positive and negative aspects of those memories. On the one hand, we are concerned with Sir Thomas Malory’s memory of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, including the presumably prominent place these two English poems held in his memory given their marked influence on his own *Morte Darthur*. On the other hand, we are equally concerned with the intercritical memory of modern literary scholars, especially when their memories of what has been said about these two English poems threaten to prevent the field from interpreting the poems in new ways. Malory, so the textual-critical and literary-critical evidence suggests, viewed both the alliterative and stanzaic *Mortes* favorably

3. Robert Wood’s recollection of Granville was notably popularized by Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1896), 17–18, and recounted again by Martin Mueller, “Knowledge and Delusion in the *Iliad*,” *Mosaic* 3, no. 2 (1970): 86–88.

4. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), XII.322–28.

5. Mueller, “Knowledge and Delusion,” 86.

and their major characters as noble and heroic. Modern scholars frequently tend to do the opposite.

Partly due to Malory's own valorization of the authority of "the Frenshe book" (*MD* 940.9–10) and partly due to the critical path authoritatively established by Eugène Vinaver, much modern Arthurian scholarship decries the two English Arthurian poems that most influenced Malory. The attention paid by modern scholars to the many sources that constitute Malory's French Book (Malory treats the term like a proper noun) is only natural. In terms of proportion of content, there is no doubt that Malory made far more use of French Arthuriana than of English. His major sources, as has long been known, are dominated by French works: the prose Vulgate and Post-Vulgate *Merlin* and *Suite du Merlin*, the prose *Lancelot*, the prose *Tristan*, the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal*, and the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artu*.⁶ As P. J. C. Field observes, the French influence is especially strong in Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal," in which Malory follows the French *Queste del Saint Graal* "from beginning to end," sometimes translating "word for word."⁷ This is an extreme case, but a telling one. Furthermore, Vinaver's source-study and Commentary, laying bare Malory's relationship to his sources, privileged French romance over English, thereby obscuring Malory's memory of—and considerable intertextual use of—English Arthuriana. Vinaver's priorities are particularly evident in his complaint, cited in our Introduction, that Malory's Trystram story runs amok because it is a poor imitation of the prose *Tristan*; the *Tristan* itself, lamented Vinaver, is a confused but expansive retelling of the more artful and more powerful verse *Tristans*.⁸ By this account, Malo-

6. The scholarship on Malory's sources is immense, but see especially Wilson, Vinaver, Field, and Norris; highlights include Robert Henry Wilson, *Characterization in Malory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1934); Robert H. Wilson, "The Fair Unknown in Malory," *PMLA* 58 (1943): 1–21; Wilson, "Malory's 'French Book' Again," *Comparative Literature* 2 (1950): 172–81; and Wilson, "Addenda on Malory's Minor Characters," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55 (1956): 263–87; Vinaver (as in our Abbreviations list); Field's collected papers in P. J. C. Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998); Field, "Malory's Source-Manuscript for the First Tale of *Le Morte Darthur*," *Arthurian Literature* 29 (2012): 111–19; Ralph Norris, *Malory's Library* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008); and Norris, "Malory and His Sources," in *A New Companion to Malory*, ed. Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 32–52.

7. Field, Headnote to "The Sankgreal," II: 549. Cf. Vinaver, Headnote to "The Quest of the Holy Grail," 1534.

8. Vinaver, lxxxv–lxxxvi and the Headnote to "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones," 1445–46. Malory's failure to understand the French romances is an even more prominent theme in Eugène Vinaver, *Malory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), 32–34, 53–54, 100,

ry's "Boke off Syr Trystram" is the inevitably poor result of a long-standing degradation of the original poetic versions, further proof that Malory failed to understand what, for Vinaver, were the always superior French romances comprising Malory's "French Book."

As this attitude illustrates, notwithstanding the positive memories that both specialists and general readers have of Malory's *Arthuriad*, literary critics for decades tended not to praise his artistry with any great enthusiasm. Twenty-first-century criticism advocates a more skillful and artistic Malory than does Vinaver, but the memory of Malory's supposed inadequacies as an author is still firmly entrenched.⁹ This tendency to disparage Malory's artistry is especially evident in analyses of "The Boke off Syr Trystram," but it shapes responses to *Le Morte Darthur* as a whole. Our contention is that such dismissive misreading of the alliterative *Morte*, the stanzaic *Morte*, and Malory's *Morte*, especially the "Trystram," is not supported by the (inter)textual evidence.

As Helen Cooper observes, while Malory is not the only medieval English author to transform the French Vulgate or *Lancelot-Graal* Cycle into English, he is the most original: Malory's reading, memory, and distinct adaptation of his French sources "is indeed strikingly innovative," with the resulting "*sens* [being] radically different from that of the *Lancelot-Grail*."¹⁰ Part of this difference is no doubt due to Malory's unique vision of the Arthurian tradition, a vision that impacted his translation and adaptation of his varied French sources. Yet Malory's shaping vision, we maintain, is partially a function of his intertextual literary memory, particularly his reading, adoption, and adap-

109–10. Although Vinaver ultimately had a far greater influence on Malory criticism as a whole than did Scudder, it is telling that these two pioneering scholars share the same attitude about the Tristan stories and about the priority of Malory's French over his English sources: Vida D. Scudder, *Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1921), especially 178–82, 229–33.

9. Cf. Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton, "Introduction," in *A New Companion to Malory*, ed. Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 2–8. For defenses of Malory's art, see particularly K. S. Whetter, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), especially 155–59; Cory James Rushton, "Malory and Form," in *A New Companion to Malory*, 135–42; Joyce Coleman, "Malory and the Stock Phrase," *Arthurian Literature* 37 (2022): 7–21; Megan G. Leitch, "The Artistry of Malory's Mercantile Metaphors," *Arthurian Literature* 37 (2022): 23–48.

10. Helen Cooper, "The *Lancelot-Grail* Cycle in England," in *A Companion to the Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, ed. Carol Dover (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 147.

tation of plots and themes and characterization borrowed from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*. We disagree with Vinaver that Malory wrote his second Tale, the Roman War story, first,¹¹ yet it does seem that Malory was influenced early on by his reading of the alliterative *Morte* and that the alliterative poem considerably shaped his making of *Le Morte Darthur* in its entirety.¹² Likewise, as Edward Donald Kennedy argues, Malory was equally influenced by the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* from early in his career and adopted both the favorable portrait of Arthur and the more impersonal and nonjudgmental portrait of Fortune from this English poem.¹³

As we have hopefully established throughout this study of *Arthurian Intertextualities*, these English influences are useful not only for detecting intertextual parallels of narrative and theme and characterization between Malory's *Morte* and his major English sources, but also for elucidating the poems themselves. Lord Granville, in the story with which we began this Epilogue, quoted Homer from memory, did so accurately, and (naturally, given the time period) quoted the great epic poet in Greek.¹⁴ Malory seems to have created his "Hoole Book" (*MD* 940.17) sometimes by translating and adapting with the source open in front of him, and at other times working from memory. These *literary* memories were helpful to the author. There are, however, two long-standing *critical* memories that we hope to have countered in our book. The first is the idea that the anonymous fourteenth-century *Morte Arthure*, often referred to as "the alliterative *Morte*," is an anti-war poem whose pacifism its author uses to critique Arthur and Gawayne as much as warfare itself. We counter this common but ahistorical reading of the alliterative *Morte* by asserting that this poem is dominated by warfare because it is a martial poem. Like Homer, the unknown poet of the allitera-

11. Vinaver, li–lxiv. Most scholars disagree with Vinaver on this point.

12. Here we are in complete agreement with McCarthy that the *aMA* had a greater "influence" on Malory than most critics allow: Terence McCarthy, "Malory and His Sources," in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), 75, 84, and 94. As noted in Chapter 3, we posit further that the current scholarly trend for finding fault with Arthur's kingship in Malory's *Morte* probably owes much to the standard critical reading of the alliterative *Morte*.

13. On the stanzaic poem's early influence, see Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory and His English Sources," in *Aspects of Malory*, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 48. On Fortune, see Edward Donald Kennedy, "Malory, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and Chaucer," *Arthuriana* 28, no. 3 (2018): 52–53.

14. Mueller, "Knowledge and Delusion," 87 n. 1.

tive *Morte* celebrates the winning of glory in battle, even if the ultimate cost of such a martial and heroic life is death. But death in such circumstances is not due to moral failure. The second literary memory we dispute is the remarkably long-lived idea that *Le Morte Arthur*, commonly known as “the stanzaic *Morte*,” is an inferior poem. That Malory drew upon the (circa 1400) stanzaic *Morte* has long been known, but we have tried to establish some of the *reasons* for this influence, simultaneously rejecting the well-worn critical standby that the stanzaic-poet is little more than a hack minstrel.

The alliterative *Morte Arthure* was likely written before the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, but whatever the exact dates of these two poems, together they help to explain the generic blending present in Malory’s *Morte Darthur* (completed 1469–70).¹⁵ The alliterative *Morte* valorizes war and warrior-kings when martial conflict is both morally justified and conducted honorably. It does not, however, concern itself overmuch with female characters. The stanzaic *Morte*, in contrast, contains more rounded and sympathetic female characters than are present in either its alliterative counterpart or Malory’s thirteenth-century French sources, including the Vulgate *Mort le Roi Artu* that is a source for both Malory and the stanzaic-poet. In addition, many late-medieval writings show a concern with knights or warriors being overly idle and thus degenerating into sin.¹⁶ By this account, the martial action in both the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory’s *Morte Darthur* is good. Nevertheless, no matter how good a warrior and king the Arthur of the alliterative *Morte*, the stanzaic *Morte*, and Malory’s *Morte* is, he and his Round Table Fellowship, including the female figures who interact with the knights and who, in the stanzaic *Morte* and parts of Malory, considerably influence the men around them, are still ultimately destroyed. What is distinctive about the *Mortes* that Malory and his English predecessors produced is that, in their accounts, what destroys Arthur is not his sinfulness but rather the complex interplay of noble but flawed characters subject to chance and Fortune. It is the complex and sympathetic portrait of these characters in each of the

15. The *aMA* is dated everywhere from the 1360s to the early 1400s, but we accept Field’s dating of the late 1370s (P. J. C. Field, “*Morte Arthure*, the Montagus, and Milan,” *Medium Ævum* 78 [2009]: 98–117). The *sMA* is commonly dated circa 1400. For the *tragic-romance* hybrid resulting from Malory’s blending of romance and epic-heroic registers in *MD*, see Whetter, *Understanding Genre*, 99–149.

16. See V. J. Scattergood, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ and the Sins of the Flesh,” *Traditio* 37 (1981): 368–70. Scattergood’s examples include Cador’s reaction to the Roman challenge in Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, lines 10741–52: see Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, ed. and trans. Judith Weiss, rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 270–71.

English *Mortes* that makes these Arthurian tales so memorable more than five hundred years after they were composed. We hope, in *Arthurian Intertextualities*, to have offered some memorable new readings of the structure, themes, and characterization of each of the alliterative *Morte*, the stanzaic *Morte*, and Malory's *Morte*. In the process of making these new readings, we further hope to elucidate why Malory interacted with these poems in such memorable and intertextual ways.

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