

## ABSTRACT

The Changing Arthur: A Comparison of Malory and White

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T.H. White transforms the story of Arthur with his retelling of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Dathur* in his novel *The Once and Future King*. I argue that White's perception as a man of the twentieth century influences his take on the age old story of Arthur causing his work to diverge from Malory's, specifically in his representation of noble values. Through the characters of Arthur, Merlin, and the women in the work I will prove that due to the authors' differing personal experiences, the values upheld by Arthur's story change drastically. Malory, as a knight during the War of the Roses, emphasizes heritage, prowess in battle, and loyalty in his men while treating the women as secondary characters. White's characters, however, present the importance of individuality, pacifism, education, and motherhood. As these authors deviate from those before them, the characters of Arthurian legend reflect the change in what society considers noble.

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THE CHANGING ARTHUR:  
A COMPARISON OF MALORY AND WHITE

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## INTRODUCTION

In his famous work *The Morte Darthur*, Sir Thomas Malory compiles from earlier romances the tales surrounding Arthur and his knights. Malory uses the timeless story of Arthur to emphasize the importance of what he believes makes men noble, namely rank, prowess, and loyalty. In a time of violent division in his nation, Malory uses the story of Arthur to encourage loyalty, a point of national conflict during the Wars of the Roses. Centuries later, T.H. White re-imagines Malory's work from the perspective of a much different war, World War II. In his book *The Once and Future King*, White focuses on the nobility gained through individual will, pacifism, and learning. These authors use essentially the same tales to convey different viewpoints. White does not mean to overturn Malory's work; in fact, he considers his work a tribute to Malory (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 207). Elizabeth Brewer notes that he "ignor[es] what is irrelevant to his own purpose and interest" (*T.H. White's* 209) just as Malory departs from the romances before him.

Malory and White are only two authors in the vast canon of writers involved in what Aaron Isaac Jackson refers to as the "perpetual recycling of Arthurian mythology at moments of cultural crisis throughout English history" (Jackson 45). Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his famous *Historia Regum Britanniae* in the twelfth century to comment on the Norman conquest of England (Jackson 45). Malory likewise writes *The Morte Darthur* with the Wars of the Roses in mind. P.E. Tucker maintains that a comparison of *The Morte Darthur* with earlier romances reveals Malory's "additions and alterations" which show that "his real interest was in the ideal he believed these stories

exemplified” (Tucker 65). White had a similar vision for his work. Although *The Once and Future King* seems to vary widely from Malory’s version, White believed wholeheartedly that he highlighted the ideals emphasized in the earlier work. White said that he “discovered that the central theme of *The Morte Darthur* is to find an antidote to War” (Gallix 283). It seems as though the lens through which White read Malory, that of a 1930s pacifist, affected his interpretation of *The Morte Darthur*. Brewer writes, “White must have been caught between the constraints of the traditional story...and his desire to make it profoundly meaningful for his own time” (“Some Comments” 132). Though well intentioned about recreating Malory’s work to reemphasize the same ideals, White does not present the world of Malory’s fifteenth century values.

The following chapters will argue that White’s vision of individual nobility and pacifism is a drastic remolding of Malory’s original work. A study of Arthur, Merlyn, and the women in Arthur’s life will prove that White’s idea of chivalry, presented in his characters, diverges greatly from Malory’s treatment of the same characters. Malory’s politics and reverence for heritage and prowess is very evident in his work. White believed that he represented the same values as his idol, but he diverges from Malory’s themes in noteworthy ways. Furthermore, Malory’s ideas of nobility and what White considers noble differ due to the background of the authors. Their varying perspectives cause the two to have differing beliefs about nobility. *The Morte Darthur* and White’s reworking of it in *The One and Future King* are both works of their time. The tales of Arthur encourage nobility shaped by contemporary ideals rather than an eternal value of what makes one noble.

### *About the Authors*

Sir Thomas Malory was born sometime between April 25, 1415 and May 22, 1418. Malory's childhood was marked by his father's "involvement in local and national affairs" (Field, *The Life* 65). Malory followed his father's example and became involved in the politics of Warwickshire: he acted as Sheriff, escheator, justice of the peace, and was MP five times (Field 2004). In 1442 he served under his cousin, Philip Chetwynd, in the war at Gascony (Field 2004). Soon after, in 1445, Malory was elected MP for Warwickshire (Field, *The Life* 88). Field claims that the first duke of Buckingham, Humphrey Stafford, may have used his influence to allow Malory to hold his position as he found that Malory's role was helpful to his own political agenda (*The Life* 95). Malory's political life was defined by his loyalties to lords rather than the feuding heirs. His loyalties aligned with two Warwickshire magnates, the duke of Buckingham, and Henry Beauchamp, duke of Warwick (Field 2004). His active political loyalties strongly inform the importance of loyalty in his work.

Malory may have shifted loyalties from one side of the war to the other, but his loyalty remained with Warwickshire and smaller lords. His first allegiance was with Warwick; when the duke's lands passed to his daughter, Malory changed allegiances to favor Buckingham, who supported the Lancastrians (Field, *The Life* 103). Malory's alleged participation in a murderous ambush laid for Buckingham, according to Field, may have been due to a personal quarrel (*The Life* 96). As in *The Morte Darthur*, Malory's own loyalties are proven by physical battle and violence. Field reports that the attack on Buckingham "was followed by eighteen months of well-supported allegations of crime," but he was never brought to trial (Field 2004). His actions caused disfavor

with John Mowbray, third duke of Norfolk, so he turned to Richard, third duke of York, but Field writes that, “in May 1451 York’s efforts collapsed,” and Malory was imprisoned by Buckingham in London to keep him out of reach from his influential friends at Warwick (Field 2004). In prison, Malory made his peace with Norfolk and was even bailed out by Norfolk’s men. After being recaptured in 1454, his imprisonment became political. He was pardoned by York, who was serving as lord protector of England, but the Lancastrian chief justice dismissed his pardon (Field 2004). Malory was in the middle of the political feud. When the Yorkists invaded England, he was eventually freed.

Malory’s loyalty on the national scale shifted again when the new king and his chief supporters, Warwick’s family, became “at odds” with one another (Field 2004). Malory’s true loyalty remained with Warwick rather than with either the Yorkist or the Lancastrian side of the war. He was later imprisoned by the Yorkists for his alleged disloyalty and treasonous plots (Field 2004). Due to his changes in loyalties, Malory had been imprisoned by the Lancastrian side for two years and the Yorkist side for almost ten years (Field, *The Life* 146). It was during Malory’s Yorkist imprisonment that he wrote and completed *The Morte Darthur* by March 3, 1470 (Field 2004).

Along with loyalty, lineage was an important factor in Malory’s life. Field tells us that a man of the fifteenth-century would surely be interested in his ancestry due to disputes over property inheritance (Field, *The Life* 36). We know, too, that lineage was significant to Malory, personally. His grandson, Nicholas, laid claim to a coat of arms granted to Sir Peter Malory in the early fourteenth-century; as Field notes, “That would not have been possible unless the necessary records had been preserved and transmitted

down the generations by successive members of the family, including Sir Thomas” (*The Life* 36). Field even believes that Malory was inspired to write *The Morte Darthur* in part by his uncle Sir Robert Malory who was a magnate and crusader (*The Life* 80).

Ancestry, especially noble ancestry, became an issue on a national scale during the Wars of the Roses. John Richard Green sums up the Wars of the Roses by saying that the “shameless treasons seem all the more terrible from the pure selfishness of the ends for which men fought, the utter want of all nobleness and chivalry” (Green 288). Treason and heritage were major issues for Malory’s peers in fifteenth-century England. When Henry V died, his only remaining heir was an infant whose claim to the throne was through John of Gaunt, son of Edward III. Richard, the third duke of York, contested his right to the crown and advanced a claim of his own through another son of Edward III. The loyalties of the noblemen split for one side or the other. Each member of the English elite chose sides based on who he believed should be the next king of England, but in doing so, they ran the risk of being accused of treason if the other side prevailed. No matter the details of Malory’s personal life, national events provided a background marked by questions of lineage, loyalty, and civil war.

The Wars of the Roses “can be seen...as a dispute between the heir male and the heir general of Edward III” (Field, *The Life* 36). The issue of heritage and nobility was on many minds at the time, including Malory’s. Field also suggests that Malory’s status as a poor knight might have created some discomfort, especially after parliament created a law establishing a minimum wage for a man to become a knight, claiming that this way a knight would have to be a “noble” knight (*The Life* 90). If Field is correct, perhaps Malory’s reverence for title is rooted in personal motivation as well since he struggled to

live up to the title he lawfully could not meet. Malory was a poor knight clinging to the bottom of the totem pole of nobility.

With a short look into White's life, it is clear why he would insist on reading pacifism into Malory. In 1920, White was sent to Cheltenham College to be prepared for the army. White's time at Cheltenham was marked by constant physical beatings and mistreatment. Brewer suggests that this mistreatment may have led to his later psychological depression and alcoholism. White avoided his loneliness with his studies. His value for scholarly education over military preparation started early. As against war as he was, White did not let his anti-war sentiments get in the way of his love for his country (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 2). Gallix claims that to White, it seemed "as utterly absurd to agree to being used as cannon fodder as to remain on the sidelines without participating in the war" (Gallix 283). White remained in Ireland during World War II and made "many abortive attempts to contribute to the war effort" (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 9). When he finally did follow through with his plans, he was denied his Exit Permit to return to England (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 11). A striking similarity between Malory and White is their respect for the idea of national loyalty. Yet for White, national pride looked much different. He claimed that, "I can do much better than fight for civilization: I can make it" (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 9). White saw his loyalty to England expressed in his writing of *The Once and Future King*. In fact, according to Andrew Hadfield, "he came to see his sequence of novels as a more valuable war effort and a specific means of combating Hitler" (Hadfield 209). While Malory believed in a nobility proven through prowess, White believed learning and scholarly writing was just as noble and as effective a way to demonstrate his loyalty as any act of war.

Malory and White alike write their works to influence the thinking of their readers. Malory writes to his social peers, other knights and upper class Englishmen, in order to encourage loyalty and emphasize the importance of social status and prowess to his contemporaries. White, on the other hand, writes to a more global audience much larger than England. White wishes to impart his beliefs onto the future and to all common men, who hold the political power in his day. Both men write to the key players in political change and as politics change White's ideal audience changes from Malory's, as does his politics and what he believes is noble.

### *Critical Overview*

Many critics debate the nature of chivalry, or noble character, in Malory's work. P.J.C. Field, in *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, asserts that "some have suggested that *The Morte Darthur* is an effect a *roman à clef* giving Malory's views of the politics of the time" (*The Life* 123). Field, however, believes that Malory sympathizes not with a political party, but with individuals acting chivalrously (*The Life* 124). P.E. Tucker takes the same idea a bit further in his article "Chivalry in the Morte." He argues here that chivalry through physical feat is the main theme to Malory's work (Tucker 103). Both critics agree that Malory's idea of chivalry is not based on political factions, but instead it is a quality of an individual that reveals itself in one's actions during war.

On the other hand, Robert Kelly's "Penitence as a Remedy for War in Malory's 'Tale of the Death of Arthur'" argues that the Round Table does not support chivalry through violence, but that *The Morte Darthur* emphasizes "penitence as a remedy for war" (Kelly 112). He argues that the hope in the Round Table lies not in political ideas, but in

religious faith. Elizabeth Brewer disagrees on two counts in *T.H. White's The Once and Future King*. Firstly, Brewer claims that Malory was not a pacifist, although he acknowledged the destructiveness of war (*T.H. White's* 219). Brewer, like Tucker, believes that Malory's "underlying moral concern" is for chivalry and England (*T.H. White's* 212). For Brewer, Malory's chivalry goes hand in hand with the value of nationalism. The two are equally important.

We must also consider T.H. White as a critic of Malory. White's *The Once and Future King* presents pacifism and learning as a form of chivalry. He reads his own pacifist ideas in Malory's work. Chivalry for White is found in the inner personality of the individual characters. He believes that Malory, too, expressed the inner motivations of characters, only in a different way (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 208). Brewer does not agree. She claims that Malory was not interested in the inner personalities of the characters much at all (*T.H. White's* 212). Critics continue to debate whether Malory's chivalry was political or moral, whether the Round Table is a force of chivalric prowess or of religion and pacifism, and whether Malory supports the chivalry of a nation or an individual.

Through his characters, Malory portrays his view of chivalry and nobility, as defined by ancestry, loyalty, and prowess. Malory's work emphasizes the noble values of his time, which are much different from White's. White does not uphold ancestral nobility, but instead he paints a twentieth-century nobility characterized by individuality, pacifism, and learning. The differing ideals which shaped these authors in their lifetimes are made evident in their works.

*The Morte Darthur and The Once and Future King*

Nobility through reputation is a value evident in Malory's life and in his work. For Malory, knighthood is "the outward expression of aristocracy, which he reveres" (Tucker 66). The respect Malory has for his knights is rooted in the status of his characters more than in their individual morality. Tucker explains that Lancelot, Malory's "exemplar of chivalry," is not condemned for his adultery, but rather that his connection with Guinevere heightens his status (Tucker 72). Malory treats with respect the feats that Lancelot accomplishes on behalf of the queen, enhancing his reputation in the process. Brewer claims that for Malory, "in the case of both men and women, honor is also good reputation" (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 216). The noble deeds done by the knights of the Round Table are presented as acts to increase repute. The idea of chivalry in Malory means prowess, as well as the reputation gained through prowess (Tucker 67). Malory writes a very community-oriented work in which he is interested in the chivalry and repute of England and the Round Table over individual accomplishment (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 212).

White, however, emphasizes individual innocence over reputation as demonstrated by his lack of respect for Kay's constant use of his title as a power play (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 217). White stresses morality over reputation when he focuses on Lancelot's affair. Lancelot is not as much betraying Arthur as king as he is betraying God with his immoral actions that have little connection to loyalty to the kingdom. The role of nobility in White can be better understood through the aspirations to gentility in his own life. He claimed he took up "gentility" when he purchased a horse and took up sports such as hunting and fishing (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 6-7). White's light-hearted treatment

of the “nobility” of his day reveals his true feelings towards inherited rather than earned nobility. White became a wealthy gentleman who, much like Arthur’s childhood self, Wart, followed a very different path from Malory’s struggle to earn his title.

Even more prominent than Malory’s reverence for noble status is his emphasis on prowess. As Tucker says, “Prowess is the first quality demanded of a knight, and Malory gives it particular prominence in his stories” (Tucker 65). Prowess, after all, is the means to reputation for a knight (Tucker 67). Malory respects the ability of his knights to joust and gain reputation for themselves and for England (Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 217). Although White claims that Malory’s work calls for an end to war, *The Morte Darthur* reveres acts of physical war as noble; the medieval author portrays war as a terrible occurrence, but one that is necessary (Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 219). Malory’s Round Table is comparatively peaceful since it reveres chivalry as the means to justice and aggression is “held in check” (Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 218). The oath taken by the Knights of the Round Table requires them “never to do outrage nothir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy” (Malory 75). The oath upon which Arthur’s Round Table rests supports mercy and noble rules for battle. This oath might appeal to White as a pacifist. Malory sets up guidelines for the noble use of might, and therefore might provides an opportunity for knights to display their God-given nobility through the conduct of their prowess.

Loyalty, too, is a focus of Malory’s work and undoubtedly a product of his life. Loyalty for Malory presents a “martial loyalty” that differs from his predecessors (Tucker 103). In his work as in his life, Malory exhibited his loyalty in a militaristic way. Malory was, much like the characters in his work, “continually seeking a good lord” (Field, *The*

*Life* 103). Malory's work is concerned with the "fickleness and lack of discernment of his contemporaries" as his nation split loyalties to battle over who was the rightful heir (Brewer, *T.H. White's* 223). Malory very much emphasizes the civil war aspect of the Day of Destiny as a tragedy. As Gawayne dies at the hands of Lancelot Arthur declares, "And now ys my joy gone" (Malory 709). While Arthur mourns the loss of the men who fought with him, especially Gawayne, he also grieves over the loss of Lancelot, since he has become his enemy (709). Many men who had been loyal to Arthur are now fighting their fellow knights to bring Arthur's downfall.

Malory's insistence upon loyalty in his work comes from a time when Englishmen would shift loyalties continuously and militarily support different leaders. The Wars of the Roses was a fight within one nation over loyalties expressed chiefly through military allegiance. Field believes that Malory may have felt guilty for his disloyalty to King Henry VI, which is why "*The Morte Darthur* makes a great deal of loyalty in general" (*The Life* 145). Malory had left Lancaster but, due to guilt, finally returned to his first allegiance (Field, *The Life* 146). At points, some of Malory's characters resemble certain leaders of the time, according to Field; however, he warns against taking the parallels to the extreme of an allegory, suggesting instead that Henry is like Arthur simply because he is a king whose people were unfaithful to him (*The Life* 147). Although Malory was imprisoned by both sides of the fight, the work was written and finished during his Yorkist imprisonment (Field, *The Life* 131). This is a significant point if he felt ashamed for having shifted his loyalties at one point to the men who now imprison him. Loyalty and beliefs about noble heritage changed constantly for people

during the war. The Round Table in *The Morte Darthur* presents the unified government that Malory wished for.

Malory's *The Morte Darthur* reflects in many ways the importance of loyalty to its author. The inner struggle of Lancelot is Malory's creation alone (Tucker 98). The importance of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair lies in the question of disloyalty to Arthur. Even Mordred for Malory is no longer a force of fate as he had been in previous romances, but reviled as a traitor. Disloyalty is the worst sin to Malory, even above immorality.

White's war was quite different. World War II emerged just decades after the war to end all wars, World War I. After a devastating war for all sides, the world was thrust back into violence and chaos. White writes in a time burdened by battle fatigue and already headed toward another world wide war. The massive losses in World War I took the glory out of war. Previously, battle could be heroic and noble, as in Malory's time. In the twentieth century, war was more deadly and fought on a much larger scale. Loyalties were no longer with a nation, but with an alliance of nations. The emphasis was no longer on England, but on the world. It was not a fight for the glory of England as much as a fight for preservation of it. Attacks such as the Battle of Britain meant months of air strikes. England was not fighting for a brighter future but for any future at all. White seemed to take the situation to heart and began to support a pacifist view which did not emphasize loyalties to a nation, but called for the preservation of life. White's work does not claim one warring faction better than the other: "White saw no absolute easy separation between the violence and corruption of power on the Allied side and that of the Axis forces" (Hadfield 214). White teaches against war altogether on all sides. The

war White lived through involved weapons and destruction that Malory could not have imagined. White could not place personal value on the prowess of a soldier in a time where swords were replaced by machines. The direction of the war depended upon who could invent the best weapons rather than which soldiers were more physically skilled. With weapons of such scale, intellectual prowess became a crucial element of war. White, however, does not value intellect as a means to victory in war, but as an antidote to it.

In his life, White was a teacher and a scholar. White had a lonely life; he says, “I have no friends, only acquaintances” (Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 7). Learning was White’s way of struggling against loneliness. Perhaps for this reason along with his pacifist views, White’s work reveres learning as the mark of nobility far more than status and physical skill. He uses the character of Merlin to mock sports which Malory puts on a pedestal as a tribute to one’s nobility. During the joust between Grummore and Pellinore, Merlin’s dialogue makes the scene even more ridiculous than it already is. Amidst the knights humorous joust, Merlin shakes his head calling jousting a “dangerous sport” (White 59). He makes light of the high brow sport when he comments saying, “A splendid fall” (White 59). White includes Arthur’s childhood, which Malory leaves in mystery. Arthur’s story in *The Morte Darthur* begins with physical events: his conception, his ability to pull a sword from an anvil, and his success in war against those who doubt him. By contrast, since childhood is the time when mental development happens most, White devotes a fourth of his book to describing Arthur’s childhood learning. Arthur keeps his childhood education even as king. When Merlin transforms Arthur into a goose, Arthur learns that the geese did not “own things in common.” (White 164). Arthur asks a fellow goose if they are a “fighting people” (White 162). The goose replies horrified, saying,

“What creature could be so low as to go about in bands, to murder others of its own blood?” (White 163). From the geese, Arthur is introduced to the idea that war is not noble, and perhaps possessions have something to do with it. He takes this lesson into his old age and considers the role of possessions in the cause of war (White 640). For White, the formation of Arthur comes from his education and intellectual growth.

The role of the physical versus the intellectual shifts widely between the two works. This change is evident in the character of Merlin. Malory’s Merlin is often a military advisor, while White’s Merlin is much more of a teacher than anything else. The different endings vary in this same vein. In White, the end of the physical life of Arthur is not important enough to include in his work. The work ends before Arthur dies. The fact that a boy called Tom, after Sir Thomas Malory, will carry on the legacy of Arthur to teach later generations is much more valuable. Malory ends with evil stamped out by force, and Arthur’s physical death is left uncertain so that he may return. To the fifteenth-century Malory, physical force is a means to show one’s noble rank and prowess. For White, the physical Arthur is not as important as the ideals he stood for.

White’s title, rather than focusing on the death of Arthur, emphasizes his reign. White does not believe Arthur to be the future king in a physical sense. Instead, he believes that the values that Arthur upholds are those of the future. White is promising that the world of the future will not be ruled by violence and inequality, but that the values of Arthur will reign again. White’s Arthur is a king of right over might. He does not defeat evil through physical force, but through educating the future about the importance of right over might, which White’s Round Table represents. One value that Arthur is supporting here besides peace is education of children. In the eyes of White,

Arthur stands for diplomacy and education. As the work progresses, Arthur states his ideas about righteousness prevailing over physical strength; “‘I have been thinking,’ said Arthur, ‘about Might and Right. I don’t think things ought to be done because you are *able* to do them. I think they should be done because you *ought* to do them’” (White 240). In the end when he tells his story to the child, Tom, his actions reflect the importance of teaching the children of each generation to be better than the one before it. White makes Arthur an advocate for passing on peaceful ideas to children so that the world will not always be shrouded in violence as it was in his time.

To White, Arthur is not as much a historical noble king to be revered as he is an image of peace and compromise for what is morally right. Arthur learns from Merlyn that force should not simply have an outlet in righteousness, but that might should be avoided altogether in human interaction. Just as Arthur asks Thomas Malory to relay his message to anyone who will hear, White relays his message to the reader, so that in the future men will not resort to such massive violence at the expense of goodness. In this way Arthur is both the once and the future king.

Malory and White both wrote in a time of war, and both were shaped by the events occurring in their nation and in their lives, but the values that made one noble were entirely different. Through the works of these men, it is evident just how much England changed in five hundred years, and also how important Arthur can be as he continues to represent the best of nobility in every time, even today.

In the three following chapters, I will use character studies to show how White re-envisioned the Arthurian legend for his own time. He turns Arthur, Malory’s king of war, into a man of peace characterized by his childhood learning instead of by his wartime

victory and death. Malory's Merlyn as a mystical war advisor is also drastically different from his pacifist scholar counterpart in White. His depiction of women shifts toward an emphasis on personal relationships in the characters of Guinevere and Morgause.

Ultimately, White's reworking of Malory produces a tale shaped by White's own time.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Two Arthurs

From the beginning, Malory and White present the nobility of Arthur differently. Malory begins his work with the most important aspect of Arthur as king, his heritage: “Hit befel in the dayes of Uther Pendragon, when he was Kynge of all Englonde and so regned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornewail that helde warre ageynst hym long tyme” (Malory 3). *The Morte Darthur* places Arthur’s birthright at the forefront of the tale. This beginning also reflects the importance of war to the story of Arthur, since he was conceived amidst war, and battle continues to be of the utmost importance to his reign. His reign is defined by the wars that come before him and those he leads. We do not need to understand Arthur as an individual before we respect him as a noble king of war.

T.H. White’s story is not so much about Arthur’s inheritance of England as it is about his upbringing during his youth. Not only is Arthur’s heritage omitted from the first sentence of the story, but White holds back Arthur’s true identity until later in the first book. White allows the reader to get to know him as the Wart without the expectations attached to his lineage. In fact, White contrasts the privileges claimed by Kay because of his rank with the seeming insignificance of the Wart. At first, we are forced to think of Arthur as an underdog with no noble rank whatsoever. Instead of ancestral nobility, White focuses on the importance of his education, even from the first line: “On MONDAYS, WEDNESDAYS and Fridays it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was the Organon, Repetition and Astrology” (White 3). The

education of Wart allows the reader to understand what truly makes Arthur into the person he becomes. While Malory's Arthur is defined by physical events and actions, the education of White's Arthur develops his character and leads him to his new ideas about might and right. Thinking about the world in which he lives makes him nobler than his title alone.

White excludes Malory's emphasis on heritage in the beginning of his work and even seems to mock the idea of ancestral nobility. Kay is a foil to Wart throughout the beginning of the novel, starting with his lack of a nickname: "he was too dignified to have a nickname and would have flown into a passion if anybody had tried to give him one" (White 3). Ironically, when the Wart becomes King, he raises Kay's position. Not only is the Wart in reality above Kay's station, but Kay's highest position does not come from his lineage, but from Wart's mercy, which Kay had not given to him before. In this way, Arthur is placed above Kay because of his character and mercy rather than simply his heritage.

Kay represents the unearned nobility given by birth alone, and he is averse to anything new or different. He treats Wart as inferior because of his birth, ironically, and "Kay had taught him that being different was wrong" (White 8). Kay comes across as spoiled, arrogant, and violent as a child. For example, while the Wart undertakes avian studies, Kay is late to his lesson because he was killing birds (White 153). He embodies much of what White despises: his violent tendencies are directly opposed to the education that White affirms. Much like Kay, during World War II the Nazi party supported the idea of superior birth. They, too, were against what they considered to be different from themselves and expressed this belief in a violent and murderous manner. For White,

asserting a superior heritage determined by birth held more negative connotations than it would have in Malory's time. Kay is certainly not a direct image of the Nazi party for White, but he does give Kay the same flawed way of thinking that caused such destruction in White's time.

Different attitudes toward Arthur's own nobility can be seen when he pulls the sword from the anvil: Malory's Arthur accepts his new title in a kingly fashion. He is shocked at learning that Ector is not his father, but nonetheless he accepts it, "And yf ever hit be Goddes will that I be kynge as ye say, ye shall desyre of me what I may doo and I shalle not faille yow" (Malory 9). Arthur's first action as king is to promise ardently that he will not fail Ector and that he will put Kay over all his lands. He understands his new power and treats it seriously. This Arthur focuses on his kingdom without showing concern for how his new position affects his personal life. Malory does not give us much of Arthur's interior thoughts; instead, his focus is on physical action and external responses. When Arthur takes the sword, he is physically taking up his sword for his country. The sword is the physical weapon of the king to fight for the land, symbolized by the rock. The churchyard, in which the rock resides, symbolizes the Christian land which Arthur now rules. Removing the sword from the anvil represents a religious rite. Arthur, by blood, is recognized as king by divine law. His kingly nobility is proven when he takes up the sword to fight for his country and his birth right is proven through battle. We are to respect him for what he does for the country; his inner struggles and personal feelings are not the focus.

Even after pulling the sword from the stone, Arthur must prove his noble birth when the knights refuse his gifts to them as their feudal lord (Malory 11). Pulling the

sword from the stone is both a physical manifestation of lineage and a divine sign, but knights reject the divine miracle and insist on war. Raluca L. Radulescu claims that, “Although Arthur’s right to the throne is revealed to be justified through his royal ancestry, his initial presentation is that of a candidate supported by the commoners, and one of the ‘poure knights’” (Radulescu 97). Arthur only secures his title after he proves his nobility through action, with the support of the common people. Initially, the knights do not accept Arthur’s authority and he uses battle prowess, along with those knights loyal to him, to gain his position as he promises to his enemies when he “said he wold make them to bowe” (Malory 12). Malory’s Arthur starts taking advice and willingly fighting his enemies off soon after he gains his position.

White’s Wart does not accept his fate as gracefully. He treats Ector’s request as a trivial favor. He does not seem to understand the significance of such a promise as Malory’s Arthur does. The Wart simply responds, “Of course he can be seneschal, if I have got to be this king” (White 200). Not only does Wart not fully understand his new position, but he wishes to reject it completely, saying, “I wish I had never seen that filthy sword at all,” and then he begins to cry (White 200). Wart is a completely different character from Malory’s Arthur. His thoughts at this point are for himself rather than his country. The battle for Wart is not to gain the support of his people, but of himself. Wart is a demonstration of the more modern ideal that inner acceptance of the self is more important than acceptance by others. White focuses on Wart’s interior emotional response to his calling. Elizabeth Brewer says that “while Malory presents his characters simply and directly through event and speech, White as narrator speculates in an entirely modern way about their motivation and their emotions,” a difference that White himself

acknowledged (*T.H. White's* 208). White employs a modern way of thinking as well as this modern style of literature that emphasizes the psyche. As a hero of the twentieth century, Arthur must earn his own self-worth by overcoming his flaws.

Arthur's meeting with Pellinore in each work illustrates the authors' different beliefs about nobility. In Malory, Arthur is already king and uses his position to aid King Pellinore in his quest for the beast. The king considers this quest a noble one and views the beast as "the mervallist syght that ever" he had seen (Malory 29). Pellinore's family quest is portrayed as noble even to the point that Malory includes the name of Pellinore's successor, "Palomydes," who inherits the quest (Malory 28). Deeds such as this are recounted throughout the work as noble knights and kings prove their nobility through their actions. Pellinore's quest is a sign of his noble blood, which Arthur respects. White paints this pursuit in a much different light. King Pellinore himself describes the quest as "Boring, very" (White 16). Young Arthur, or Wart, agrees with him. Wart goes on to asking questions about the quest, not out of marvel, but in order to cheer up the pitiful King Pellinore. The physical event is not as important to Wart as the emotions and psychology of Pellinore as a person. Wart does not respond to Pellinore's dilemma with a physical action, but supports his new acquaintance intellectually with his words and perception of what Pellinore must want to hear. The capture of the beast is not as important as the mental and emotional well-being of Pellinore.

Furthermore, Wart's questions represent an inquisitive mind that tests the events around him rather than accepting them. Pellinore is pitiable in White's novel in part because he does not question why he follows this beast. The Wart, on the other hand, does not accept the edicts of tradition; he learns through trial and error during his

decidedly unconventional education. The way White deals with the situation of Pellinore's quest makes light of ancestral nobility and quests to prove one's rank. He seeks to replace mindless tradition with new ways of questioning.

Arthur's reign, in both works, is marked by his downfall at the hands of his son Mordred. Malory does not deal with Mordred's conception for very long. All that we know about Morgause and Arthur is that, "the kyng caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her" (Malory 27). Malory excludes any insight into motivations for the incest that leads to Arthur's fall. Mordred's conception is a surface level physical plot detail.

Arthur's reasons are not important, only the action and its consequences. Merlin foretells Arthur's downfall saying, "hit ys Goddis wylle that youre body sholde be punysshed for your fowle dedis" (Malory 29). No matter Arthur's motivation, his deed is ignoble and his fall is a divine punishment. Nobility must be reflected in actions, regardless of one's intentions. Similarly, when Arthur sends for the May Day children to be killed, Malory does not dwell upon signs of psychological regret by Arthur (Malory 37). He does show regret concerning Guinevere and Lancelot's fate, but he does not act according to his personal desires, but according to the honor of the kingdom. The important details to Malory lie in Arthur's concern for his nation, and the king's physical actions reflect that, not necessarily his intentions or personal desires.

For White, Arthur's fall has more to do with personal morality over national pride. This Arthur is not divinely punished, and the narrator instead finds excuses for Arthur's actions: "Perhaps the Spancel had a strength in it...Perhaps it was because Arthur was always a simple fellow...Perhaps it was because he had never known a mother of his own" (White 307). White entertains excuses ranging from the spancel, or the strip of skin

which Morgause enchanted to the psychology of Arthur. White's seemingly exhaustive explanations indicate that the fault lay with Morgause. Adderley argues that Arthur's childhood innocence stays with him throughout the work (Adderley 60). White's Arthur is clearly meant to seem innocent, but as White explains, "innocence is not enough" (White 308). The villain is clearly Morgause even though her physical deed is the same as Arthur's. For White, intention holds more weight than actions. This is demonstrated again through Arthur's regret over the murder of the May Day children. Arthur speaks about it as a decision "which has haunted" him, while at the same time disassociating himself from instigating the idea, saying, "I let them make a proclamation" (White 553). White's Arthur has such innocent motives that he feels regret for a wrong that he allowed to happen. Arthur's trusting nature makes him vulnerable to less noble characters, such as Morgause and advisors in his court. Arthur's naiveté reflects his pure heart as he does not anticipate the bad intentions of others.

Through his Round Table ideology, Arthur redefines justice and noble action in both books. Malory's Arthur decrees for the Knights of the Round Table "allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy" and "allwayes to do ladyes....socour: strenthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe," as mentioned before, and "...also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarrel for no love ne for no worldis goodis" (Malory 75). Arthur represents the pinnacle of justice: he believes the strong should protect the weak and fight only for what is good and right. This oath, in part, is Malory's commentary on the Wars of the Roses. The war was fought to decide who was rightfully king, and it would be won by the leader who had the most might. Arthur's idea about fighting for right was Malory's way of encouraging his fellow

countrymen to think about their use of power. Arthur's Round Table calls for men to fight only for what is noble, rather than engaging in senseless battle. Malory surely wanted his readers to consider the division of their country and the tragedy of the violence. Like Arthur, Malory would have wanted his countrymen to flee treason and unite for their own good. The narrator directly addresses Malory's intended audience on this subject when he discusses the dissent in England as Arthur's men turn to Mordred's side, "Lo ye all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was?...Alas! thy sys a greate defaughte of us Englysshemen, for there may no thyng us please no terme" (Malory 708). Malory takes the problem of loyalty directly to the English reading his work and calls for more loyalty to one king. This does not mean Malory is against war altogether. Brewer writes that while he considers the effects of war to be tragic, "Malory does not puzzle over why men should want to war against each other and kill their own kind, or how an antidote can be found...He presents these facts of life and death with a sober acceptance" (*T.H. White's* 224). Malory accepts the reality of war and shows how battle can reveal the inner nobility of men in the right circumstances.

White's Arthur sounds very much like Malory's Arthur in this regard. In *The Once and Future King*, Arthur decides that he will rule the country for its own good and that he will "make the oath of the order that Might is only to be used for Right," the same as in Malory (White 241). This Arthur admits that Might is an evil thing, but believes that it can be directed. Like Malory's Arthur, he wants to use his power to do good. Later in White's work, Arthur learns that this, too, is not sufficient. He realizes that "two wrongs did not make a right" (White 637). He begins to rely on laws, but these lead to a

“collective might” which causes war, too, and Arthur concludes that man is too limited to make his ideals a reality (White 638).

While Malory upholds a system of innate nobility represented through battle, White’s Arthur considers a very different way of government. Arthur proposes many possibilities to explain this phenomenon, one being the idea that “the great cause of war was possessions” (White 640). Arthur has been learning about these more socialist principles since the beginning from the ants and the geese. Although Arthur leans toward accepting this view of a society without personal possessions, he admits “there was something in the old white head which could not accept the godly view” (White 641). With respect to socialism, Francois Gallix believes that “this solution surely could not suit the profound individualism of White” (Gallix 285). He believes that this is why Arthur cannot settle for a passionless society as his remedy for war. It is, however, not only White’s individualistic convictions that deter Arthur from accepting a society without ownership, but rather the point which Arthur emphasizes that humanity is too flawed to make it a reality. Nonetheless, not only does Arthur ponder a remedy for the battle which is so vital in Malory, but he considers social ideals that directly oppose the system which Malory’s Arthur reveres. White leans toward a society without possessions as an answer, if only it were possible for a wicked earth. In the end, Arthur “could not see the solution” (White 642). Just before Arthur passes his story on to Tom of Newbold Revell, he still ponders the true remedy for war.

As an author writing during the dawn of WWII, White cannot concede entirely to Malory’s support of a more unified country taken over for its own good. With Germany using might for its ideas of right, White leaned away from absolute rule and unity, which

Malory desired in response to the civil war of his own time. While Malory's country was a nation in civil turmoil, he had a desire for stability. Arthur's unified nation embodies the stable leadership Malory desired. With a country attempting to take over Europe, however, White could see the evils of domination on a large scale. Yet because socialist ideals are seemingly too holy for a wicked earth and "advising heaven to earth was useless," White's Arthur does not discover the solution to the problem of violence (White 641). He considers the remedy for war in a way that Hadfield refers to as naïve (Hadfield 222). Ironically, Arthur's justice leads to more violence, and Guinevere's just punishment leads to more war. Arthur passes on his search for the key to justice and peace, which he did not find in its entirety. This is what Tom passes on according to White, not a perfect ideal, but the hope of one.

The two Arthurs leave varying legacies. The end of Malory's Arthur implies the possibility of a miraculous immortality: "som men say in many partys of Inglonde that kynge Arthure ys nat dede, but had by the wyll of oure Lorde Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agyne" (Malory 717). In *The Morte Darthur*, the rumors claim the writing on Arthur's tombstone reads, "Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus," (Malory 717). While Malory leaves the truth of the matter ambiguous for the reader to decide, he leaves room for the hope of a physical return for Arthur. Arthur's physical wound and possible death indicates that the legacy of Arthur is connected with a man, specifically, rather than an idea alone. The carving on Arthur's sword and the engraving on his tomb frame his reign that began and ended by physical means. Malory's Arthur, if dead, dies in battle. Arthur leaves the world the same way he came into it, through warfare. Arthur's life is marked by battle in Malory, and he is made noble through war.

White, as a pacifist, does not allow battle to seem as glorious as Malory does. We leave White's Arthur before his fatal battle. We are told that he is fated to die, but this event is not the focus for White. The Arthur of *The Once and Future King* is an ideal more than a physical man. Not only does White omit the battle, but Arthur rises with a "peaceful heart" on that day (White 647). On the one hand, his heart is at peace with his fate. On the other, he is a man of peace, even in battle. Although in *The Morte Darthur* the king's death is the end of him, White's Arthur lives on through the child, Tom. Wart's story, too, ends the way it began, not with war, but with education. Tom learns the important lessons that Arthur wishes him to carry on. In the end, we are reminded of the hope for a beginning. Unlike physical things which pass away, White's ending shows us that ideas can pass on to the next generation. Like Arthur, Malory, and White, we, too, as learners of these philosophies, have the potential to carry on their legacy.

The two titles reflect this difference. *The Morte Darthur* leads up to the death of Arthur. The work is largely about Arthur's fall and his inevitable end as well as the demise of the key figures in his kingdom. Malory leaves hope for his return for those with faith, but for now, Arthur is a memory. His death is the end of his physical self and at the end of the book Malory writes, "AND HERE IS THE ENDE OF THE *DETH OF ARTHUR*" (Malory 726). White's book is not about Arthur's death. White's work is *The Once and Future King*. These words, written on his tombstone, capture the life of the deceased rather than his death. Arthur is the once and future king; once during his life and in the future as his legacy is carried by Thomas Malory. Arthur is not the actual future king for White, but his ideas are those of the future. White "knew that...the time had not yet come to establish on earth this world without war which he had dreamed with

Merlyn and King Arthur” (Gallix 293-294). Arthur is the king of the future, because his ideas could not be realized in White’s day. His search for a cure for war and his quest for true justice were things of the future in the mind of White, which is why at the end of his work White writes, “THE BEGINNING” (White 647). White believes that the end of reading his work is the true beginning. Only after reading about Arthur’s search for justice can the reader take up the torch of Arthur and continue his quest. While White does want his readers to remember the life of Arthur, he stresses the importance of his philosophies over his physical life.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Merlin: A Cleric and a Scholar

Throughout the works of Malory and White, Merlin remains the pinnacle of wisdom and noble character. As Arthur's mentor, Merlin provides the knowledge necessary for a noble king, but this knowledge varies from Malory to White. Carol E. Harding claims that Merlin is "a creature of his time and place, reflecting the concerns of his authors" (Harding 155). Just as the character of Merlin changes from Malory to White, so does Malory's Merlin diverge from earlier characterizations in which he is the son of a Roman Emperor (Harding 51). His family and his birth grant him his social status. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's version, we meet Merlin as a child who is quickly revealed to be the son of a nun and a demon (Geoffrey 134). Geoffrey depicts Merlin as a mystical figure with knowledge far beyond his faculties as a child. His mysterious prophecy of beasts, along with his birth, marks him as an ambiguous figure with questionable intentions: "Merlin is no Christian saint here. If anything, his birth reeks of demonic origins" (Harding 51). For Geoffrey, the importance of Merlin's birth lies in the compilation of good and evil that conceived him, and therefore his own nature is all the more mysterious.

Although Malory does mention Merlin's demonic parentage, "for cause he was a devils son," he does not focus on this aspect of Merlin (Malory 77). In Malory, Merlin is a mouthpiece for God's prophecy and judgment. He professes many of God's ordained punishments Malory skims over Merlin's demonic heritage as to avoid connecting him as

closely with the demonic as Geoffrey had. Instead of aligning Merlin with the demonic, Malory connects Merlin with heavenly power.

Malory also omits the transfer of Stonehenge to England, during which Merlin uses engineering to move the impossibly heavy stones (Geoffrey 166). This early version of Merlin demonstrates his earthly knowledge with his use of science. White resurrects Merlin's connection to earthly science, but for Malory, Merlin is significant as God's instrument in the life of Arthur, rather than as a character of earthly importance.

In *The Morte Darthur*, we meet Merlin not as a child, but with respect to the conception of Arthur. Merlin enters the story as an advisor to King Uther, and highlights his significance as a political guide. His social status is partly political, stemming from his connection with Arthur and Uther before him. He holds much power because of their trust in him.

Wendy Tibbets Greene believes that Merlin holds power over Arthur's decisions and that he "stage-manage[s]" events (Tibbets Greene 58). Merlin uses his political influence to orchestrate many elements of the story, both military and domestic, but his power does have a limit. Despite his warnings, Arthur marries Guinevere, and Merlin must sit back and accept it as fate. As Harding explains, for Malory "Arthur is pictured as politically, martially, and personally independent of Merlin, taking or leaving advice as it suits him" (Harding 145). As a member of Arthur's court, Merlin cannot control the actions of his king.

White makes Merlin into a hermit living outside of the societal hierarchy. His initial position is that of a tutor hired by Sir Ector. Social nobility is not an important part of Merlin's character; in fact, he does not seem to revere social nobility at all: "What is

all this chivalry, anyway? It simply means being rich enough to have a castle and a suit of armour, and then, when you have them, you make the Saxon people do what you like” (White 218). White’s Merlin, on the other hand, does uphold modern Christian humility and encourages Arthur to “consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt” (White 229). Malory’s Merlin focuses mainly on the fate of Britain, but White’s Merlin is much more interested in the common individual.

Even when Malory’s Merlin advises against violence, he is motivated by the triumph of Arthur’s kingdom rather than the individual safety of his knights. Merlin advises Arthur against fighting Pellinore because, “he woll nat lyghtly be macched of one knyght lyvyng” and “he shall do you good servyse in shorte tyme” (Malory 35-37). Pacifist ideals do not motivate Merlin’s call for peace here, but instead he considers the safety of his king and the future alliance of Pellinore. Merlin interrupts Arthur’s first military campaign as king when the bloodshed becomes too excessive, chiefly to avoid God’s displeasure (Malory 25). Malory’s Merlin is a war advisor with God’s will and Arthur’s victory in mind. Soon after Arthur takes the throne, Merlin advises him to ally with Ban and Bors, and to promise aid in their war against Claudas so that “they wil come and see kynge Arthur and his courte to helpe hym in hys warrys” (Malory 13). Malory’s Merlin does not shy away from battle, but he considers Arthur’s victory, the fate of his kingdom, and the will of God as being of foremost importance.

White’s Merlin has a pacifist approach to his views on war: “Life is too bitter already, without territories and wars and noble feuds” (White 225). As D. Thomas Hanks explains, White’s Merlin is indeed a military advisor; however, this Merlin is open about his pacifist views and clear that war in general is immoral (“T.H. White’s Merlyn” 110).

In *The Once and Future King* Merlin teaches Arthur that “wars are a wickedness, perhaps the greatest wickedness of a wicked species. They are so wicked that they must not be allowed”; however, he provides one exception: “when you can be perfectly certain that the other man started them, then is the time when you might have a sort of duty to stop him” (White 226). Merlin believes men should not initiate war for the physical benefit of a nation, but due to moral obligations. At other times he does not agree with Arthur’s use of might such as when he says that “Arthur is fighting the present war...to impose his ideas on King Lot” (White 261). Merlin claimed that Jesus “made it clear that the business of the philosopher was to make ideas available, and not to impose them on people” (White 261). Merlin therefore disagrees with Arthur’s war and reveals the unholy nature of it, even if the ideas being imposed are Christian. Critics argue over Merlin’s inconsistency on his view of war. Hadfield argues that Merlin’s changing beliefs reflect the debate structure of the work (Hadfield 209). Brewer believes that “he had to try out different positions” (“Some Comments” 131). Merlin seems unsure of his stance of war, just as White is unsure. Brewer writes that at the end of World War II, White believed that England must be defended (“Some Comments” 134). White’s change of heart may reflect uncertainty similar to that of Merlin’s wavering tolerance for war. Merlin, like White, leans toward accepting war as a means of defense. Malory’s Merlin, however, accepts war as necessary for the benefit of Arthur’s kingdom.

Harding examines how Merlin represents the religious views of each of his authors (Harding 151). In Malory, Merlin is a figure of religious prophecy. His magic has a ritualistic nature. When Balyn dies Merlin makes a prophecy over his sword saying, “there shall never man handyll thys swerde but the beste knyght of the worlde” (Malory

58). He then places the sword in marble hovering above the water (Malory 58). Here, as in many cases, he uses his magic as a ritual to solidify prophecies from God. Merlin performs a miraculous act rather than a magical feat. Merlin has no supernatural wisdom of his own, but he is a prophet meant to reveal God's providence. Rachel Kapelle discusses the prophecy of Merlin by saying that "destiny, fate, chance, and God are all involved" (Kapelle 59). Many times Merlin's prophecies reveal an inescapable fate brought on by God's justice. For example, he predicts Pellinore's fate by declaring: "ye shall se youre best frende fayle you whan ye be in the grettist distresse...And that penaunce God hath ordayned you for that dede" (Malory 75). Merlin gives out God's penance with religious authority. Malory's Merlin uses his miraculous abilities to display God's power and providence in a physical way.

Merlin transforms his physical form to reveal prophetic truths, such as when he comes to Arthur as a child and as an old man to reveal "Goddis wylle" that the king will be punished for his deeds (Malory 29). Mark Lambert claims that before Malory, Merlin's appearance in alternative guises had been part of his characterization as a trickster (Lambert 116). Malory's unwillingness to portray Merlin in this manner leads to an ambiguous character with no clear motive. Merlin's transformations seem to place him above the events of the plot. Merlin uses his varying forms to relay messages from God rather than advice from his own mouth. Merlin's role as prophet gives him a noble position higher than earthly existence.

White's Merlin does not disguise himself to present prophecies, but he changes Arthur's form to provide him with natural knowledge of the world. In *The Once and Future King*, Merlin is a scholar much like White. Rather than prophesying about beasts

that represent men, as in Geoffrey of Monmouth's version, White's Merlin transforms men into beasts to demonstrate societal truth. White explains that Merlin's foreknowledge comes from living backwards in time. Merlin's knowledge is not prophetic, but an outcome of his irregular placement in space and time.

Merlin's teachings are not otherworldly in the way his prophecies are in Malory. White, instead, brings Merlin back to the tradition of earlier romances and makes his character comedic, though no fool. Through humor Merlin becomes more likable and relatable in the eyes of the reader. With his initial appearance he is described as being "streaked with droppings over his shoulders" (White 23). Although the character of Merlin is earnest with his views, he presents his ideals in humorous ways such as when he says, "I always say that stupidity is the Sin against the Holy Ghost" (White 216). White respects Merlin's views, but his character is farcical at times and, therefore, likable.

Merlin's foreknowledge in *The Morte Darthur* enhances his authority and gives him power over the plot at times. Since the birth of Arthur, Merlin plays a part in orchestrating Arthur's destiny. While Merlin seems to have the ability to see the future, and uses it to shape events, Greene calls into question Merlin's motives for keeping certain truths to himself: "Arthur might reproach Merlin for not telling him of this half-sister," for instance (Tibbets Greene 58). Greene suggests "either his knowledge of coming events is incomplete...or he believes that he can change the pattern of events to come" (Tibbets Greene 59). Kapelle tells us that while in some cases Merlin's prophecy encourages the listener to change the future, other times the future is not meant to be changed (Kapelle 60). In the case of the war with the eleven kings, his prophecy provokes action: Merlin stops battle to deflect God's anger (Kapelle 62). In other

situations, such as in the fates of Balin and Pellinore, Kapelle tells us these characters are not meant to prevent their fates, since these are punishments dealt from God (Kapelle 63). While Merlin warns of unfortunate actions when he can, his acceptance of God's will is not meant to be criticized, as it might be by a modern reader such as Greene. Malory portrays Merlin's resignation to fate as noble. Other characters, as Kapelle points out, are not as noble in their acceptance of God's punishment (Kapelle 73). When Arthur learns of his destiny, he reacts by calling for the killing of the May Day children (Malory 37). The people put the blame for Arthur's actions on Merlin because of his prophecy; as Kapelle writes, "this prediction was not intended to provoke action, but Arthur automatically sought to use the information" (Kapelle 76). Merlin is a foil to the other characters that deny their fates and respond with futile actions. He accepts his own fate and does not make any vain attempts to escape imprisonment by Nimue. His surrender to God's providence and to fate makes him much nobler than the prideful characters who believe they may escape fate.

White's Merlin is not so much a noble prophet, but a forgetful old man. He frequently mixes up time periods and forgets which events have occurred, as any man would if he were made to live backwards. In particular, Hadfield discusses Merlin's lapse of memory when he forgets to warn Arthur about Morgause. Hadfield claims that this implies that Merlin's warning could have changed Arthur's fate (Hadfield 216). Adderley offers a persuasive argument when he claims rather that "Merlyn knew what would happen, but his efforts were not supposed to reverse fate: that the dream is to be kept alive is the fate" (Adderley 57). Knowing Arthur's inevitable fate, Merlin teaches him for the purpose of passing on his legacy to the future. Perhaps, too, Merlin fears the damage

he may cause to the space-time continuum. Nonetheless, for all his knowledge, White's Merlin remains just as affected by the events of the plot as any other character. For the twentieth-century reader, Merlin's lapses make him a more sympathetic character.

Much like Malory's Merlin, however, this imperfect Merlin looks the other way at times. When Arthur is working through his new idea that might is not right, he looks to Merlin to confirm that he must use his might to enforce right and he childishly asks, "Have I guessed it?", to which Merlin does not respond (White 240). Here, Merlin obviously recognizes Arthur's mistake but does not correct it. This is not a lesson in God's will, but in the nature of learning. White's Merlin allows Arthur to fail for the sake of Arthur's education.

As Hanks argues, White's Merlin is connected with Christianity, and the character implies within the story that he was "sent" as if he were an agent of God ("T.H. White's Merlyn" 105). White portrays Merlin as a theologian with modern Christian beliefs. Merlin does not emphasize God's judgment and purification from sin, but he presents ideas and stresses the importance of learning: "pure science, the only purity there is" (White 177). Merlin's religion is not based on physical rituals or prophecies from God, but instead he emphasizes intellectual philosophy, which he imparts to Arthur. This twentieth-century Merlin is a representative of a more contemporary Christianity, which stresses mercy and love of fellow man over ritual and penance. White's Merlin is not less connected with Christianity, but he portrays a different form of religion than the older tradition of Malory. As flawed as Merlin may seem, White portrays him as a well-intentioned man. The war advisor in Malory's account becomes a teacher of peace consistent with White's own beliefs.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Arthurian Queens

Through Guinevere and Morgause, Malory and White convey differing ideas of what makes a woman noble. Malory depicts the characters of these women through their relationship to men and their knightly quests. White, however, gives his female characters more complex personalities. The women of *The Once and Future King* have identities that are more personal with worth even beyond their relationship to men or religious vocation. Through the characters of Guinevere and Morgause, both authors reveal the noble and ignoble qualities of women, in their own personal views.

Maureen Fries writes that “Arthurian women are essentially ancillary” and “must therefore be considered in relation to the male heroic roles they complement or defy” (Fries 61). They do not necessarily have the option to go on adventures to gain nobility through quests or displays of prowess; as Fries explains, men are the “agents” while women are the “instruments” for the heroes’ deeds (Fries 63). Women are the means by which Arthurian men triumph or fail and, at times, women help define the relationships between men. Although Malory’s women are secondary, White makes his female heroines and villainesses more three dimensional. He considers their motives and provides them with complex personalities. Even so, Elizabeth Brewer writes that White found it hard to understand women and his female characters. White’s personal journal reflects his struggle to understand the character of Guinevere especially. Brewer claims his difficulty to understand women is linked to his schooling which allowed little contact with females in any form. She attributes his difficulty with the Arthurian love

relationships to the fact that he never found a happy relationship himself (*T.H. White's* 79, 87). Nonetheless, White presents a strong opinion of feminine nobility. White writes a century after the emergence of the cult of domesticity, a school of thought which emphasizes women as the moral guide and heart of the home, therefore, his views on women are influenced by this thought. Women obtained new political rights in the eighteenth and early twentieth century, and they were no longer considered possessions, but able to own their own property without a husband. While the early twentieth century acknowledged that women had their own identities and beliefs, it also created a standard for women as the heart of the home. Women were not seen as political leaders, but foremost as mothers.

Malory presents his high-born women with political status inherited from fathers and gained through marriage to their husbands. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, Guinevere's marriage to Arthur signifies political achievement for the king; Malory follows the tradition that Arthur's marriage to Guinevere is political when Arthur reveals his motives for marriage: "My barownes woll let me have no reste but nedis I must take a wyff" (Malory 59). One of Guinevere's purposes as Arthur's wife is to continue his royal line. Due to her barrenness, Arthur has no other heir besides Mordred, leading to broken loyalties. Guinevere's childlessness, for Malory, is a political issue for the whole kingdom more than a personal dilemma. Just as their marriage is a political alliance, so, too, is her adultery political treason (Edwards 48). Guinevere's dowry of the Round Table brought Arthur's knights together, symbolically, yet she plays a part in Arthur's political downfall as well.

As queen, Guinevere carries the authority to judge knights by their actions, especially when women are involved. Gawain's penance for beheading a lady is given by Guinevere rather than Arthur: "there by ordynaunce of the queene there was sette a queste of ladyes upon Sir Gawaine, and they judged hym" (Malory 67). Malory gives Guinevere credibility as a female role model and as a just queen. On a more personal level, Lancelot is made more chivalrous because of her love. Many of Lancelot's chivalrous quests are rooted in his love for her, for "he loved the queen agayne aboven all other ladyes dayes of his lyff, and for hir he dud many dedys of armys" (Malory 149). Marriages were for political alliances, rather than for love's sake. Guinevere's love for Lancelot is true; when the lovers are ambushed she says "I wolde that they wolde take me and sle me and suffir you to ascape" (Malory 677). She cares more for Lancelot's escape than for her own freedom. Rather than making Guinevere into the villain, Malory places the blame for Arthur's downfall on Mordred and Agravaine for trapping Guinevere and Lancelot. Malory presents Guinevere's relationship with Lancelot as noble in a different sense than her marriage, and the reader does not necessarily condemn their adulterous love, but pities their downfall along with Arthur's.

Guinevere's religious transformation develops her male counterpart. In *The Morte Darthur*, Guinevere's transformation may not be a conversion to the faith, but she does reveal to Lancelot, after she becomes a nun, that she has taken her vows to get her "soule hele" (Malory 720). Guinevere's decision leads Lancelot to follow her in her vows. The queen's renewed faith makes her a more noble character, but more significantly, her path leads Lancelot through his character arc from his failure to achieve the grail quest to a newly redeemed soul.

White, on the other hand, describes Guinevere as “a ‘real’ person” (White 475). He explains that she is neither wholly good nor bad, but contains noble qualities as well as ignoble ones. Elizabeth Brewer believes that Guinevere’s bad qualities originate from White’s own mother (*T.H. White’s* 91). Guinevere is no longer as noble a queen as in Malory’s version, and she loves jealously (Brewer, *T.H. White’s* 78). White says that “sometimes she was loyal and sometimes she was disloyal” (White 475). His language implies a reluctance to praise her, “there must have been something in this self...or she would not have held two people like Arthur and Lancelot” (White 475). White’s faith in Guinevere’s goodness stems from his trust in the goodness of Arthur and Lancelot rather than in her character. White could not reconcile Guinevere’s actions of adultery with the nobility Malory allows her and, therefore, his queen is not initially religious. With a new revelation of God after the search for the grail, Lancelot explains that he cannot go back to his adulterous ways. With this news, Guinevere reflects on her ideas of religion: “Holiness? Selfishness, she cried to herself -- selfish to abandon another soul so as to save your own” (White 479). Guinevere places humanity above religious purity, which in White’s mind must have explained how she committed adultery. Although he claims that she “felt everything except passion of romance” for Arthur, for a man of the twentieth-century, taking the personal betrayal out of adultery would not have been easy (White 359).

White’s Guinevere does, however, have nobility of her own accord in her intelligence. White respects education in his characters and he presents all women, especially Guinevere, as having “knowledge of the world” (White 375). She understands Merlin’s lesson in a way that Arthur misses and reveals to Arthur his own mistake: “You

fight all the time and conquer countries and win battles, and then you say that fighting is a bad thing” (White 360). Her perceptiveness allows her to understand that Agravaire’s hate stems from envy, which she explains to Lancelot. White places Guinevere above the men in her ability to understand situations in a way they cannot. Apart from her men, she has a noble quality of her own. Perhaps because of her intelligence, Guinevere encompasses some of White’s pacifist philosophies. When she is taken from Lancelot by decree of the Pope, she discusses the problem of war with her handmaiden Agnes, saying, “War is like a fire...it spreads all over” (White 614). Guinevere views war as a destructive act and realizes, more than Arthur, that violence only spreads more violence. Her personal understanding makes her into a different queen from Malory’s.

Guinevere’s struggle is independent of her male counterparts. White considers her barrenness as a personal psychological struggle rather than a political failure. He reflects on Guinevere as a character when he writes, “Guinevere’s central tragedy was that she was childless” (White 476). He even claims that her love for Lancelot may have been filling that psychological need for a son (White 476). White enters into Guinevere’s psyche and considers her personal battle as she fights her age. When she puts on her make-up, she declares to herself, “I will defy the enormous army of age” (White 462). Conversely, Malory disregards his characters’ aging as the tale progresses: his Guinevere remains the youthful beauty that Arthur married. White makes Guinevere into a more realistic character with quarrels of her own. Guinevere passes the age of having children and the pain brought on by this tragedy is felt by her alone. White explains that she did not have the ability to search for the grail or have any repute through quests and, therefore, she is personally unsatisfied (White 476). As a twentieth-century writer, White

reflects on Guinevere's own desires outside of men. Her inability to have children becomes a personal failure. She tragically cannot be the noble mother that women were meant to be in White's eyes.

Conversely, Morgause as a villainess portrays ignoble qualities through her unmotherly actions. Carolyne Larrington tells us that in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, Morgause is "irreproachable" and only becomes sexually immoral in other twelfth-century and early thirteenth-century works (Larrington 123). While Morgause provides Arthur with a means to commit the incest which leads to his downfall, Malory does not place blame on Morgause. In fact, Malory does not spend much time on Morgause personally. Her significance comes as the mother of Gawayne, Aggravayne, Gaheris, and Gareth. She does not have much of a self in Malory's story outside of these relationships.

Unlike in Malory, Morgause shoulders much of the blame for the tragedy in *The Once and Future King*. Morgause is condemned for her actions by White. Brewer believes that White provides no further motivation for Morgause than her evil nature (*T.H. White's* 68). White's opinion of Morgause is evident in his description of her as "an insatiable Carnivore who lived on the affections of her dogs, her children and her lovers" (White 529). Brewer argues that White's treatment of Morgause is due to the "overwhelming compulsion that he felt to revenge himself on his mother, caricatured in the figure of Morgause" (*T.H. White's* 50). She has an evil character even outside of her political role, revealed through her role as a bad mother.

Arthur blames Morgause for the ignoble actions of her sons: "The real matter with them is Morgause...she brought them up with so little love...they find it difficult to understand warm-hearted people" (White 327). Her sons are not responsible for their evil

nature, but in a manner consistent with Freudian psychology, White blames the lack of motherly love for the evil in these characters. White transformed a character who had been a plot instrument in Malory to one of the primary antagonists. Even more than Mordred, White blames Morgause for Arthur's fall. She is the reason for the tragedy both in a theological sense, due to the incest she initiated intentionally, and also through the actions of her sons.

White also adds a magical element to Morgause. She creates an enchanted spancel in preparation for her advances on Arthur. Malory's account of the affair places Arthur in the role of the active character, "the kynge caste grete love unto hir and desired to ly by her", but White turns the event into a scheme of Morgause (White 27). White does not consider this an act of fate, but rather a malicious act intentionally done by a woman much like his own mother.

In Malory, Morgause's affair is punished by her death at the hands of Gaheris. Gaheris's motives are based on the honor of his family. In *The Once and Future King*, Agravaine kills Morgause in anger and jealousy. He has a romantic attachment to his mother that his other brothers do not have. This event is foreshadowed by their hunt for the unicorn. Brewer argues that the unicorn represents innocence and the qualities of childhood; when Morgause feigns virginity, she reveals her deceitful nature, but more importantly she rejects her role as a mother (*T.H. White's* 68). Her treatment of her sons, when she shows no interest in their achievement, reflects her rejection of motherly responsibility.

These women portray both feminine nobility and the lack of it. Malory's women hold political nobility due to their fathers and husbands, and the queen holds a moral

responsibility to the kingdom. For White, these qualities do not define a woman as noble. As a twentieth-century writer, he portrays these women outside of their men and judges them based on intellect, loyalty, and most of all, maternity.

### *Conclusion*

The tale of Arthur has been told and retold through many generations and by differing cultures. Even to this day, authors use the story of Arthur and his reign to reflect noble values. T.H. White transformed Malory's telling of Arthur's rise and fall just as Malory had done with the work of his predecessors. The events of their war-stricken time periods, coupled with their personal lives, influenced both authors' perceptions. Through the eyes of a poor knight during the War of the Roses, Arthur stands for class, prowess, and loyalty. For a twentieth-century pacifist with a scarred personal life, Arthur's kingdom upholds individuality, peace, and education. To these authors, Arthur's story provides expectations for women, as well as men, and emphasizes very different roles in society for both genders. With the introduction of philosophical ideas and the progression of Christian belief, the story of Arthur changes, and continues to do so. As the legend of Arthur is carried on and again brought to life in books, film, and television, the values of our society are reflected in Arthur's reign. The details may change with the philosophy, but the legend of Arthur remains a model of all that society considers noble.

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