

MALORY'S ARTHUR AND THE POLITICS OF CHIVALRY

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The jury is back and the verdict is in. In Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, a major reason the Round Table falls is that its political apparatus and the chivalric ethos in which that apparatus is grounded are inadequate for maintaining a stable kingdom. Many scholars have noted that competing priorities in chivalric culture cause the political collapse of Arthur's kingdom at the end of the *Morte*. Formulations of this position range from competing loyalties in the chivalric code posited by Vida Scudder and Eugène Vinaver around the turn of the last century to analyses of competing conceptions of knighthood offered by Beverly Kennedy in the 1980s and, more recently, competing ideologies of chivalry identified in a valuable book by Hodges.¹ The later work of Charles Moorman suggests that the *Morte Darthur* illustrates the failure of a chivalric system as a model of governance, and Elizabeth Pochoda goes so far as to argue that Malory deliberately designed the *Morte* to expose the faults of a chivalric system of governance.² Hyonjim Kim, in *The Knight Without the Sword*, shows how Malory's *Morte Darthur* reflects the realities of the bastard feudalism of the fifteenth century, in which local affinities looked for their identities to great lords rather than to the crown and nation. Kim demonstrates the paths of loyalties that lead in Malory's narrative (as they did in fifteenth-century England) to internecine strife and civil war.³ In Malory, government whose political system arises from chivalric ideology is doomed to failure.

The purpose of this essay is to add two further propositions to this conclusion. I would argue that that Arthur's government falls not just because the political system is flawed, but because the king's constituents no longer see king and court as embodying cultural ideals of kingship or chivalry. The governors, in other words, no longer exemplify the ideals of the governed. Second, I would argue that Arthur, like historical fifteenth-century English kings, needed political advisors skilled at developing a public royal image that emphasized the close relationship between the ideal and the actual king; when his advisors are removed, he can no longer function effectively as king. To illustrate these arguments, I would like to contrast two parallel episodes in the *Morte Darthur*. In both episodes, attacks come at the weakest

point of Arthur's reputation and honor: the adultery between Arthur's queen, Guenevere, and his most famous knight, Lancelot. One challenge occurs in Vinaver's Tale V, "The Tale of Sir Tristram," when King Mark writes a letter to Arthur recommending that the king should control his wife and his knights and a second letter to Guenevere that speaks "shame" of her and Lancelot (617.6-9; 24). This challenge is successfully deflected and no political destabilization occurs. In the last tale, "The Tale of the Death of Arthur," however, the king's nephews Mordred and Aggravayne also attempt to weaken Arthur's kingship by exposing the adultery. This challenge is not turned aside; the open charge of adultery leads to a failed attempt to capture Lancelot in the Queen's chambers, Guenevere's condemnation without trial, Lancelot's rescue of her, and an ensuing civil war. While many factors may create the difference in outcomes, I would argue that between each challenge, Arthur and his court have suffered a loss of prestige in that they no longer embody a perceived cultural ideal of chivalry; and the blackening of the king's and court's reputation arises in part because certain knights who were highly effective at managing public perceptions are no longer able to help their King.

Many studies have outlined the theory of kingship in later medieval England.⁴ Few medieval governments, however, actually operated in the ways outlined by the theoretical models. Like biological organisms, most political systems have inconsistencies or flaws, since they develop by adapting to changes in the political environment slowly and unsystematically over time. Often systems are driven by underlying principles that conflict. Gerald Harriss, for example, has noted the inconsistency in the English political system in the late Middle Ages, a system based on an uneasy hybrid of Augustine's early theory of sacerdotal kingship, in which the king embodied God's divine authority and ruled absolutely, and the later addition of Aristotle's theory, adapted from the rediscovered *Politics*, holding that rulers derived their authority from the governed. At any time, as Harriss acknowledges, specific "royal policy or political circumstances might . . . upset" the balance of the system (Harriss 3).

In a polity based on conflicted theories, stability often depended on the individual personality of the king, who was responsible for keeping the balance between royal authority and the goodwill of the governed. A highly effective leader might successfully administer even a political system whose underlying principles were contradictory. An illustration might be found in Henry V. Although the English constitution did

change slightly between the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V (the powers of the Commons in Parliament and its speaker expanded somewhat), Henry V inherited more or less the same political system as his father and the same later medieval philosophy of government.⁵ Yet Henry IV, though an efficient enough ruler, experienced constant rebellions. This occurred partly because he did not fully embody the culture's ideal of kingship. He was a usurper and suffered throughout his reign from charges of illegitimate rule; in turn his constant preoccupation with suppressing rebellions prevented him from achieving nationalistic victories elsewhere, notably against the Scots, and drained his resources, weakening his ability to maintain order (Myers 115-18). On the other hand, while Henry V, like his father, maintained a competent governance system, his reign was respected because he inherited the throne in a conventional fashion and was widely worshipped as a national hero for his successful prosecution of wars against the French and the expansion of English territory (Watts 323; Myers 132-33). Success in war was in the fifteenth century a key component of successful kingship, along with management of finances, the maintenance of justice and order, and the suppression of heresy (Harriss 10). Henry V's spectacular success in armed aggression against France, in conjunction with his competence in the other areas important to his subjects, caused him to be considered even in his own day—and Malory's—as one of the greatest of English kings.⁶ He fulfilled the late medieval ideal of a good king: legitimate, able to maintain justice and order, superlative at war.

At the beginning of "The Tale of Sir Tristram," Malory's Arthur possesses this level of royal prestige—and to some degree, even a greater one. Within seven clauses of the tale's opening, Malory presents an exposition of the political geography of his legendary king: "he was hole kyng of Ingelonde, Walys, Scotlonde, and of many othir realmys" (371.10-12). While *hole* could mean "all," as in "king of all England" as G. L. Brook's glossary defines it (1722), the identical form could serve as the adjective *whole*, as in "lacking no part, complete" (*Middle English Dictionary*). Furthermore, used as an adverb, "hole" could mean that Arthur was "wholly" king in the sense of "completely" (Brown 1722; *Middle English Dictionary*). The significance of Arthur's sovereignty as "hole kyng" of England evokes the young king's complete domination of England and its subordinate realms and rulers, a conquest even more complete than that of Henry V. In this passage, which Vinaver believed was Malory's addition to his sources, the

emphasis on Arthur's full sovereignty is strengthened by the narrator, who carefully explains that many kings rule in the island over which Arthur reigns (Vinaver 1456). He lists them, focusing on the Celtic kings: two kings in Wales, many in the north, two in Cornwall and in the west, and "two or three" in Ireland (371.11-17). In case the reader might assume that these kings had political power that challenged Arthur's, however, Malory constructs clauses that elucidate the exact relationship between the "hole kynges" and the subordinate ones: "Howbehit [although] there were many kynges that were lordys of many contreyes, but all they helde their londys of kynges Arthure" (371.12-14). Later in the same sentence, after listing the kingdoms within Britain, he emphasizes that "all were undir the obeysaunce of kynges Arthure" (371.17). The description of Arthur's hegemony ends as Malory delineates the extent of Arthur's sovereignty beyond the borders of the British Isles: "so was the kynges of Fraunce and the kynges of Bretayne, and all the lordshippis unto Roome" (371.18-19).⁷

Like Henry V, Arthur has been unfailingly successful at foreign wars and has expanded England's hegemony into Europe. Although Robert L. Kelly has pointed out that the specifics of Vinaver's claim that Arthur's conquests in France are remarkably similar to Henry V's Norman campaign are exaggerated ("Argument" 113-14; Vinaver xxx-xxxii), the parallels are strong enough for a contemporary scholar such as Felicity Riddy to defend the comparison (68-70). Yet Arthur's success at the height of his reign is even greater than Henry's. After Agincourt, Henry became "virtually king of France," with titular power over half of the medieval kingdom, effective power over more, and the succession settled on his heirs, as Arthur becomes king of France in perpetuity (Vinaver xxxi). However, even Henry V never controlled "all the lordshippis unto Rome." Domestically, too, Arthur has fuller dominion over the British Isles than actual Lancastrian kings. Kelly has argued that the Celtic and northern kings of Malory's narrative may represent the great magnates of the north, the lords of the Neville and Percy families, over whom the kings of the fifteenth century never quite exerted full authority ("Political Geography" 85).⁸ Certainly neither Yorkist nor Lancastrian monarchs ever established full sovereignty over all of Ireland. Wholly dominating the British Isles, Arthur exercises authority in areas the Lancastrian kings never completely subdued.

While there seems to be a hierarchy among the lesser kings—for example, we learn that King Mark of Cornwall pays tribute to King

Angwysse of Ireland (376.1-4)—Arthur’s iron authority over these vassal kings is made clear when King Angwysse is summoned to Arthur’s court. The Irish king was one of the eleven rebellious kings who fought with King Lot against Arthur in Arthur’s early reign (26.11-12)—his name was added by Malory and does not appear in the French sources (Vinaver 1290-91)—and now is troubled by his arbitrary summons, especially by the fact that “or . . . he com at Camelot he wyste nat wherefore he was sente fore.” He goes, however, for if he refuses to comply he risks “forfetur of kyng Arthurs good grace” as well as the loss of all his lands (404.19-21).⁹ The once rebellious king fears his master’s power. Kenneth Hodges has argued that “The Book of Sir Trystram” is not focused on the central court, but on “multiple regional concerns” (85). At its outset, however, Malory is careful to establish the authority of the central court over the regions. Unlike the Lancastrian kings, Arthur is not troubled by overmighty subjects—at least, not at this point in the narrative.

Arthur enjoys the prestige of a great war leader, a king of international power, an overlord whose authority is not questioned. However, he also embodies a cultural ideal, the ideal of chivalry. Vinaver points out the Malory added passages to his source, the French *Prose Tristan*, “stressing the chivalric temper of his characters and insisting on the advantages of being a ‘true knight’” (1446). The thematic centrality of chivalry to the *Tristram*, the middle and longest tale of the *Morte*, has been argued by Vinaver, Thomas Rumble, Donald Schueler, Larry D. Benson, Kevin T. Grimm, and Helen Cooper.¹⁰ It is true that Arthur has been identified with chivalry as early as the first tale: for example, when one knight from the unsettled north meets a knight from Camelot, the southern knight tells his counterpart that at the court of King Arthur “there ys 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” (118.13-16), and shortly before Arthur confronts the five rebel kings the brother of one of the kings tells his compatriots, “Ye knowe well that sir Arthur hath the floure of chevalry of the worlde with hym, and hit preved by the grete batayle he did with the eleven kynges” (127. 28-30). The idea of chivalry presented in the *Tristram*, however, seems to be somewhat different from that in earlier tales. Despite the reference to a “felyship,” in the first example, it is not clear yet whether *chevalry* refers to adherents to the High Order of Knighthood or simply to cavalry, as it does elsewhere in the first tale.¹¹ In “The Noble Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius,” Vinaver,

who believed that Malory wrote this tale first, identifies traits of both military heroism and knight-errantry in Arthur's chivalry.¹² However, while critics differ in their explanations of the type of chivalry represented in "The Tale of Sir Tristram," they generally agree that the tale explicates key characteristics of the quotidian practice of knighthood in times of peace as well as war.¹³ The association of Arthur's court with the highest practice of chivalry is supported by the text. It is important and prestigious to become a member of Arthur's Round Table, and the low worship of Cornish knighthood is a running joke in the "Tristram."¹⁴ The slurs on the worship of Cornish knights are too numerous to document fully, but a few examples may help illustrate the differences between the reputations of Mark's knights and Arthur's. First, Sir Segwarides pursues sir Bleoberis, one of Lancelot's affinity who has abducted Segwarides' wife, but is defeated and gravely wounded by Bleoberis. Ashamed, King Mark orders Tristram's cousin Andret to waylay two of Arthur's knights, Sir Sagramoure le Desirous and Sir Dodynas le Savyaige. Andret challenges the two knights but is defeated easily. Tristram then undertakes his task (397-98). The Cornishmen hold the Round Table knights in awe; when Tristram finally discovers Sagramoure and Dodynas, his squire Governayle warns him "nat to have ado with them, for they be two proved knyghtes of Arthures courte" (398.11-13). Sagramoure and Dodynas share the same evaluation of the relative worth of Cornish and Round Table knights. They are reluctant to answer Tristram's challenge because, as sir Sagramoure explains, "ye Cornysshe knyghtes bene valyuaunte men in armys, for within thes two owres there mette with us one of you Cornysshe knyghtes, and grete wordys he spake, and anone with lytyll myght he was leyde to the erthe" (398.25-29). Tristram, however, is the rare Cornish knight who is able to defeat Round Table knights. His unexpected combination of qualities—Cornish and worshipful—is also illustrated by Sir Ector's response when he learns that he has been unhorsed by a Cornish knight: "'Alas!' seyde sir Ector, 'now am I ashamed that ever ony Cornysshe knyght sholde overcome me!' And than for dispyte sir Ector put of his armoure fro hym and wente on foot and wolde nat ryde" (404.12-15). In other words, Sir Ector is so shamed by being defeated by a Cornishman he removes his armor and goes on foot—he "unknights" himself. As Sir Lamerok says when he sends Morgan le Fay's enchanted goblet—which exposes all untrue wives—to King Mark's court rather than to King Arthur's, "I

had lever stryff and debate felle in kyng Markys court . . . for the honour of bothe courtes be nat lyke” (443.32-34).

The honor of Arthur’s court, of course, is maintained by his great knights such as Lancelot, but the king too seems to be personally associated with this worship, even though he is not as great a man of prowess as others. His actions show the importance of the ethos of chivalry to his court. For example, the king receives a request from a damsel that has all the hallmarks of the beginning of a chivalric quest. She arrives at his court and asks Arthur to follow her into the Forest Perilous. He does not know she is a sorceress, but immediately responds in the appropriate way for a knight-adventurer by following her. No doubt he has other responsibilities as king—he certainly sponsors many tournaments in “The Tale of Sir Tristram” and successfully brings to a close a war with King Claudus in France (802.22-27)—but as a chivalric king he prioritizes correctly and performs a quest suitable for a knight-errant. Similarly, he asks to meet Isode. As he and Lancelot approach the castle where she is residing at a distance, they see some knights, and Lancelot warns him to proceed cautiously, because the strangers may not be friendly and the king may put himself in jeopardy. Arthur replies in the language of any worshipful knight, replying, “As for that . . . we woll take the adventure” (743.16-26). The king is recognized as the leader of the “most noble knights in the worlde,” as Palomides says (525.1-2); when King Mark asks for news of the central court, Gaheris tells him that “the kynge regnys as a noble knyght, and now but late there was a grete justis and turnemente that ever y saw within thys reallme of Logres, and the moste nobelyste knyghtes were at that justis” (545.10-13). Arthur is a “noble knight” himself and performs a chivalric leader’s function in sponsoring tournaments to draw to his court the best knights in the world. Finally, he seems to inspire men to greater deeds of chivalry. After the first day at the tournament at the Castle of Maidens, Arthur’s side has lost, and when he goes to comfort his men his speech suggests that his presence will inspire them the next day: “My felowys,’ seyde kyng Arthur, ‘loke that ye be of good chere, for to-morn I woll be in the fylde with you and revenge you of youre enemies’” (527.35-37). Also at the Castle of Maidens, Arthur is so moved by Lancelot’s prowess that he joins the fray on the side of Lancelot’s party; when he does so, “many knyghtes cam with kynge Arthur” (533.22-26)—just as when he left the court to pursue the sorceress many of his knights follow him without even being sure of

where he is going or why he is going there. The narrator says, “So whan the kynge was gone with hir, many of hys knyghtes folowed aftir hym whan they myste hym, as Sir Launcelot, sir Brandiles, and many other” (490.14-16). He is not just the center of the court as king, but as the avatar of chivalry.

This is the political context when Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot receive letters from King Mark. Arthur’s prestige is at its height. However, a political enemy like King Mark exploits Arthur’s area of vulnerability. In his letter to Arthur, Mark delivers a “shorte”—abrupt or plain—message suggesting that the king concern himself with ruling his knights and his wife (617.7-9). Arthur recalls a rumor about an affair between Lancelot and Guenevere reported to him by his sister Morgan. He reflects, however, that Morgan has always been an enemy of the court and that Mark, the letter writer, wishes to have revenge on Sir Tristram, who has been taken in by Arthur’s court. Arthur becomes “wrothe” with Mark (617.21), but takes no action and “put[s] that all oute of his thought” (617.16).

The letter implies a threat to a reigning monarch. If Mark can tell Arthur that his queen and the first knight of his court are having an affair, he can tell other people as well. The consequences for the male lover might be either banishment or execution, and the queen might be imprisoned.¹⁵ However, the king also has reason to fear exposure of the adultery. The political consequences could be grave. Karen Cherewatuk has pointed out that the Round Table and its founding one hundred fifty knights comprise Guenevere’s dowry from her father’s kingdom (30-34; Malory 98.7-13); to banish or execute her would be politically destabilizing, to say the least. She also notes that Guenevere’s presence is instrumental in keeping Lancelot, a foreign king, at court (43-45). Hodges observes that Lancelot, whose lands border Rome, has been a key ally of Arthur’s in the Roman Wars. He brought twenty thousand knights to Arthur’s army as they moved against the Roman Emperor Lucius (Malory 189-90) and later he led the “cousyns of my bloode,” a sizeable and prestigious affinity, to the membership in the Round Table (Hodges 71-72; Malory 213.33). Less concretely, however, Arthur risks terrible loss of prestige at the exposure of the adultery. In the culture of Malory’s knights, the shame of exposure could outweigh the private shame of an unfaithful wife. For example, when Sir Segwarydes of Cornwall realizes that his wife is having an affair with Sir Tristram, the Cornish knight is reluctant to “have ado” with Tristram, but chooses instead to let the matter “overslyppe”; after all, the narrator tells us, “he

that hath a prevy hurte is loth to have a shame outwarde” (396.15-16). If Sir Segwarydes, a member of the affinity of a regional king, is reluctant to face the shame caused by the public exposure of his wife’s affair, how much more so Arthur, King and Emperor?

At this point, the narrator does not indicate that Arthur plans to take any action in response to Mark’s letter. Perhaps he cannot: Hodges argues that Arthur’s behavior toward subsidiary constituencies is more restricted by customary autonomy in regional authority and regional political identities than it is in his own inherited realm (95). Perhaps he thinks he does not need to act yet, since Mark has not made the adultery public. Perhaps, however, he does not act because there are others who will act for him.

Catherine Batt has commented that letters in Malory’s French source, the French *Prose Tristan*, “establish private spaces” for the expression of emotion “in counterpoint to the public arena,” but that in Malory they tend to communicate publicly (113-14). It might be better to say that, in this episode, the letters from Mark are not completely either private or public. Arthur’s letter seems to be read only by the king himself, but the letter from Mark to Guenevere reaches more readers than the addressee. Of the content of Guenevere’s letter, the reader knows only that it “spake shame by her and by sir Launcelot” (617.23-24). More fearful than the king, Guenevere sends her letter to Lancelot. Angry, he falls asleep with the letter in his hand. This is not an uncommon reaction to emotional distress in medieval literature; other examples might include Will the Dreamer, in midst of spiritual distress, who falls asleep in *Piers Plowman*, or the narrator Geoffrey in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*. In this case, Sir Dinadan, one of Lancelot’s intimates, takes the letter while he is sleeping and reads it (617.25-31). On waking, Lancelot deems Dinadan “a trusty knight,” a safe repository for his confidence (618.4-6). Although the narrative does not make their deliberations explicit, they seem to decide to take action to counteract a rumor that could affect public perceptions of the king, the queen, and the court and its first knight. Dinadan tells Sir Lancelot that because King Mark is so “vylaunch” a knight that speaking to him directly won’t effect a solution (618.8-9). Instead, he counsels Lancelot to let Dinadan “make a lay for hym”—a song about Mark—and then arrange for a harper to sing it before him (618.10-12). With the permission of Arthur, who seems to have been consulted, and Lancelot, he composes “the worste lay that ever harper songe with harp or with any other instrument” (618.18-19). He not only teaches one harper to

sing it, but has the harper teach many so that it is sung not just at Mark's court but throughout Cornwall (618.13-15).

The lay itself is not presented in the narrative, but the narrator tells us that it presents the “moste vylany by kyngge Marke and of his treson that ever man herde” (626.34-35). It would be interesting to know whether the lay simply describes the examples of unknighthly deeds Mark has actually performed, which are bad enough, or whether it invents more horrible villainies than those the reader knows he actually commits. Whatever the case, it seems to stop Mark's challenge to the court cold, even if it doesn't stop his attempts against Sir Tristram's life.¹⁶ If one may be permitted a contemporary analogy, Dinadan “swiftboats” King Mark—and the strategy works because King Mark already has a poor reputation and because King Arthur and the knights of Camelot are known far and wide as the flowers of chivalry. Ironically, in his letter, Mark is telling the truth about the love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere—but people believe Dinadan's lay because it confirms what they already believe about King Mark and what they believe about the ideals represented for them by Lancelot and Arthur's court, and because Dinadan, as Tristram comments, is a very good creator of lays.¹⁷

Batt points out that in the Prose *Tristan* the lay is solely conceived and executed by Dinadan—neither Lancelot nor Arthur are involved (115). In addition, according to Vinaver's notes, the minstrel's political allegiances are highlighted in Malory's version in contrast to his source. In the French version, Mark is furious after hearing the lay, and to avoid retribution the harper claims that he should be spared because he is a “fool” (*fol*) of the court (1496). Malory's Elyas, however, asserts that the lay's purpose is political but that he should not be harmed because he is a noncombatant: “‘Sir,’ seyde Elyas, ‘wyte thou well I am a mynstrell, and I muste do as I am commaunded of thos lordis that I beare the armys of’” (627.3-5). According to V. J. Scattergood, in the fifteenth century household minstrels were commonly employed by noble patrons to spread political messages through verse and song (15). Scattergood describes the use of verse ballads to blacken the reputations of prominent political figures such as William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, the unpopular chief advisor to Henry VI in the 1440s (158-68). Batt comments that in Malory's French source, the author re-makes the lai tradition, which conventionally treats its subject as a paragon of courtly or chivalric characteristics, by using the form to

blacken the focal figure. Malory extends the French author's innovation in the lai tradition by politicizing it (115).

In "The Tale of Sir Tristram," with the help of Dinadan and Lancelot, Arthur deflects public exposure of the adultery between Lancelot and Guenevere, and his honor remains intact. Much later in the *Morte*, however, the political stability of Arthur's kingdom is threatened again by the potential exposure of the adultery, and the king has less success against the second challenge. Moreover, as Lancelot and Dinadan used a common fifteenth-century tool of political propaganda, the political ballad, to manipulate public opinion, the king's nephews Mordred and Aggravayne utilize another: a concentrated rumor campaign.¹⁸ The brothers "ever wacched upon sir Launcelot," spying on his and Guenevere's movements (1161.14). While many in the court speak of the relationship between Lancelot and Guenevere, the narrator tells us that Sir Aggravayne did so "in especiall ... for he was ever opynne-mowthed" (1045.20-21). He and his brother Mordred begin to speak of an affair between the two "opynly, and nat in no counceyle" (1161.17).

The narrator does not provide much insight into their motivations. It is reported that the two knights "had ever a prevy hate unto the quene, dame Gwenyver, and to sir Launcelot" (1161.12-13). Hodges notes that elsewhere Aggravayne implies that the king's favoritism for Lancelot over his own "syster sunnes" may also cause the intense hatred the two express (Hodges 147; Malory 1163.8-11). However, another of Aggravayne's speeches suggests that the brothers might also be reacting to the shame the affair creates for the king—and by extension, to the family and the court. He says,

'I mervayle that we all be nat ashamed bothe to se and to know how sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene. And all we know well that hit ys so, and hit ys shamefully suffird of us all that we shulde suffir so noble a kynge as kynge Arthur ys to be shamed.' (1161.19-23)

In Middle English, *suffir* could mean "to put up with (an exhortation, a situation of injustice, the faults of another, what one is given, a state of affairs which one cannot prevent or hinder, etc.);" as well as to endure pain (*Middle English Dictionary*). The passage repeats forms of the word *shame* three times and of *suffir* twice. The shame to the family and fellowship is an affliction too great to be borne.

In this case, the political challenge is not deflected and the government eventually dissolves into civil war. How do Aggravayne's and Mordred's challenge and Arthur's response differ from the earlier test by King Mark?

One difference is the reputation and status of the accusers. Mark is not part of the court and has a reputation as a destroyer of good knights; Morgan le Fay, who has also sent a coded message about the adultery to the court in the form of a device on a shield, is also an outsider and a known enemy of the court (555.5-14). When the king receives Mark's letter, he remembers what his sister has told him about Guenevere and Lancelot, but then "he bethought hym agayne how his owne sistir was his enemy, and that she hated the quene and sir Launcelot to the deth," and dismisses the accusation (617.14-16). Aggravayne and Mordred are insiders, however, Arthur's nephews and knights of the Round Table. Even though their older brother Gawain, head of their branch of the family, advises them to keep silent, he cannot force them to; they have enough status to persist until they gain Arthur's ear (1161-63). Moreover, they have a political base at court; they are connected to influential affinities, several of which share their detestation of Lancelot. Kim shows that the knights who accompany Aggravayne and Mordred to trap Lancelot in the queen's chambers come primarily from Gawain's family affinity or from those of regional neighbors (84-90). With these affinities, Mordred's and Aggravayne's word has enough weight to move a sizable faction to dangerous action.

A second difference, however, is that the reputation of the king and court are more vulnerable to challenge than in "The Book of Sir Tristram." Mordred and Aggravayne may be motivated by a "prevy hate to the quene . . . and to Sir Launcelot" (1161.12-13), but indications of that hatred (for Lancelot, at least) have already appeared in "The Book of Sir Tristram," as when, for example, Mordred leaves a party of knights as soon as Lancelot joins it (467.22-27) and cooperates with his brothers in killing Sir Lamerok, a knight whom Lancelot admires (699.21-27). However, their attempts to undermine the court's honor are more effective than Mark's in part because the timing is right. The reputation of Arthur's court is weaker than in "The Tale of Sir Tristram." The major reason is that the affair seems to have become a more frequent topic of gossip and public knowledge. The reader knows that rumors about the affair have long circulated throughout the court from the episode in "The Tale of Sir Launcelot" in which four queens from four parts of Britain entrap Lancelot (257.24-29), but

when Lancelot returns from the Quest of the Holy Grail he forgets his promise to forgo his love for the queen. The narrator comments that they “loved togydiris more hotter than they dud toforehonde.” They share many “prevy draughtis,” or walks, together, suggesting that their devotion to each other is more obvious than it had been (1045.16-19).¹⁹ The result is that the whole court speaks of it (1045.19-20). Politically astute as always, Lancelot, in his reaction to the gossip, demonstrates his sense that the rumors are dangerous. He leaves court to escape the “shame and sclaundir” (1046.15-17, 26). However, his departure leads to a series of public relations disasters. At a dinner the queen holds for Gawayne, another knight eats a piece of poisoned fruit intended for Gawain and dies, and most of the guests believe that Guenevere was guilty of murder (1049.31-32); when she is accused of murder, she can find none to fight for her but a reluctant Bors until Lancelot himself returns (1050.25-27). The fact that only one knight—Lancelot’s cousin—responds to her need for a champion to prove her innocence demonstrates the degree to which her support at court has sunk. This episode is followed by the death of Elaine of Ascolat, who dies for love of Sir Lancelot. Like the queen at Gawain’s dinner, Lancelot has committed no wrongdoing, but the letter that accompanies Elaine’s body to Camelot forces Lancelot to make an uncomfortable public statement that he has not been Elaine’s lover (1097.16-22).

Finally, the queen, along with ten of the “Queen’s Knights,” is abducted by Mellyagaunt (1120-22). When Lancelot comes to the queen’s rescue, she persuades him not to kill the cowardly Mellyagaunt to allay “every shameful noyse,” or rumor (1129.10-11). However, Lancelot plans to meet the queen at night and climbs up a window to slip into the chamber where she lies with her ten knights, who have been wounded during the abduction. He cuts his hand on the window bars and his hand bleeds on Guenevere’s sheets; when Mellyagaunt arrives in the morning, he sees the bloody sheets and accuses the queen of adultery with one of the knights sleeping in her chamber (1130-32). She asserts her innocence—technically she is innocent because she has not slept with one of the wounded knights of her affinity but with Lancelot—and when Lancelot arrives he attempts to repel the accusation by charging Mellyagaunt with discourteous behavior for opening the queen’s bed curtains without permission (1133.10-17). Eventually her innocence is “proved” when Lancelot fights with Mellyagaunt and defeats him. But the accusation was made publicly in front of the Queen’s Knights, who were “sore ashamed when they saw

that bloode" (1133.1-2). Unfortunately, Aggravayne is one of the Queen's Knights (1120.26-27); the incident cannot have helped Guenevere's reputation or lessened Aggravayne's sense of the justice of his rumor campaign.

Radulescu points out that the attempts by almost all of those with a stake in the success of the Round Table—Arthur, Guenevere, Lancelot, and later Gawain—to silence the growing rumors comprise attempts to ensure "stability and unity in King Arthur's kingdom and within the Round Table fellowship" (132).²⁰ Unfortunately, the government is undergoing a very bad "news cycle"; Guenevere's reputation has been questioned to a point at which it is becoming harder and harder to reclaim it. Moreover, the course of events has provided more and more opportunities to renew the gossip. In this context, the rumor campaign produces fruit. The whole court speaks of the affair when Lancelot returns from the Quest of the Sankgreal; surely that must further undermine the queen's reputation. The hatred projected toward Guenevere, at least by some members of the Round Table, is almost palpable in the last two sections of the *Morte*. Would the knights at Guenevere's dinner for Gawain, for example, have so quickly and easily believed their queen a murderess if she had an unimpeachable reputation and were greatly admired? It is likely that the court believes the accusation because it confirms previous assumptions about Guenevere and because enough people don't respect her—as they believe easily whatever Dinadan says about King Mark because it reinforces whatever they already think about him. Furthermore, whether Aggravayne is acting out of malevolence, hatred, or shame—or a combination of all three—he has the confidence to circulate the rumors publicly—"opynly, and nat in no counceyle" (1161.17)—rather than simply privately. As his brother Gawain points out, Aggravayne risks bringing on "warre and wrake betwyxte sir Launcelot and us"—and Lancelot's enmity is not to be taken lightly—but he persists (1162.4). Finally, while Aggravayne's and Mordred's influential brothers Gawain, Gaheris, and Gareth refuse to have anything to do with his plots, it is significant that the two troublemakers are not thoroughly isolated. They are able to muster twelve knights of the Round Table to support them in entrapping Lancelot in the Queen's chamber (1164.8-14).

The court's reaction to the adultery may likely have been similar to Morgan Le Fay's interpretation of the cognizance on a shield that she sends to court with Sir Tristram. The device depicts a king and a queen

with a knight standing over them, a foot on each royal's head, because the knight "holdith them bothe in bondage and in servage" (554.31-32). Arthur would be seen not to be master of his own court or of his own wife. As Radulescu points out, "a medieval king's worship was a matter of state, and it was politically vital to maintain his worship at all costs" (127); Cherewatuk asserts that Malory's fifteenth-century audience would have understood the "irreparable damage" Guenevere has caused her husband politically (50). Judging by the degree to which at least some accept the gossip that Aggravayne is spreading, the damage has been done.

Finally, the king may have been more successful at deflecting the political threat of the rumors had he not been bereft of Lancelot and Dinadan, his most two important managers of political message after Merlin disappears. When King Mark's letter is received, we don't know what, if anything, King Arthur would have done. Arthur dismisses the accusation of the queen's adultery: "he put that all [i.e., completely] oute of his thought" (617.16; Brook 1704). Arthur reacts not to the accusation of adultery but to the last sentence of Mark's letter, which expresses his eternal hatred of Tristram and his intent to have revenge on him; what enrages Arthur is the threat to a worshipful knight, not the news of the affair (617.17-21). It is Dinadan and Lancelot who are enraged by the accusation of adultery, which seems to comprise the main content of the queen's letter (617.23-24). More importantly, they perceive its threat: the text says that it is the "entente," or purpose, of the letter that enrages Lancelot (617.26; Brook 1715). As Dinadan counsels Lancelot, he reassures him, saying, "sette you ryght naught by *thes thretenynges*" (618.7-8; emphasis mine). As Cooper notes, Dinadan is unlike most of Arthur's knights in that "he operates by intelligence and sympathy rather than brute force" (194). It is the intelligent Dinadan who comes up with the plan to discredit Mark, and Lancelot who seems to secure permission to proceed from King Arthur: "And so by the wyll of kynge Arthure *and of sir Launcelot* the harpers wente into Walys and into Cornwayle to syng the lay that sir Dynadan made by kynge Marke" (618.15-18; emphasis mine).

Like his co-conspirator Dinadan, Lancelot as well is good at political "spin." Illustrations of his skill are not absent elsewhere in the *Morte*. John F. Plummer highlights the brilliance of Lancelot's moving but equivocal speech to the king and Gawain when he returns the queen after the first stage of the civil war (163). It asserts that the queen is "a

trew lady” to her husband (1197.10). While it may be true, as several scholars have recently pointed out, that Guenevere remains committed to supporting her husband politically until his death, it seems unlikely that she was “trew” in the sense of sexually faithful (Cherewatuk 43-48; Hodges 131-146). Lancelot’s speech succeeds, at least partially, in fulfilling its object: even though it does not placate Gawain, it reduces most of the listening knights, including the king, to tears, and ensures that the king will accept the queen back into his court (1200.10-12; 1202.22-28). Radulescu has also presented comprehensive evidence from the last tale showing that Lancelot, and not Arthur, follows fifteenth-century ideals of leadership in the politically and chivalric management of the men of his affinity (126-37).

In the case of Mark’s letters, Dinadan and Lancelot manage the political threat with King Arthur’s compliance. But by the time Aggravayne insists on trying to entrap Lancelot, neither Dinadan nor Lancelot is in a position to help. Dinadan is dead—killed “cowardly and feloniously” during the Quest of the Sankgreal, ironically, by Mordred and Aggravayne (615.6). But Lancelot also is not in a position to respond to the crisis: he is the target of the trap, accused of treason.²¹ He tries to stop Aggravayne and Mordred and their knights by promising that he will stand trial if the knights will allow him to leave the chamber peaceably. In such a trial, however, he could defend himself both with his fair words and “wyth my hondys” (1168. 3-10). Whether because they are too enraged to listen or because they have no confidence in a victory (either verbal or physical) over Lancelot, they will not listen, and insist on trying to take the great knight by force (1168.11-14). The resulting murder of knights by Lancelot results in the great knight’s flight from court—and the cessation of his role as political advisor to King Arthur.

The diffusion of the rumors puts Arthur in a terrible position, a position quite unlike the one he held during the episode of King Mark’s letters. Those attacking Lancelot and the queen are not outsiders who can be dismissed as enemies: they are members of the court and Arthur’s family. The queen’s and Lancelot’s indiscretion (as well as a series of unlucky events such as Mellyagaunt’s abduction of Guenevere and the murder of Sir Patrise) has sullied the reputations of the queen and the knight, and indirectly undermined that of the king and husband their adultery shames. Aggravayne and Mordred will not be stopped; indeed, perhaps Mordred urges his brother on in part because he senses opportunity in this father’s weakness. The king’s most skillful and

trusted “message managers” since the disappearance of Merlin are no longer available to help him. What is Arthur to do?

In comparison with his sources, the king does not react to the situation emotionally. While the Arthur of the French *Mort Artu* is so angry that he threatens his nephew with a sword to make him explain what he was saying to others (Lacy IV: 119), and the king of the English *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* is “for wrath . . . nighe wode [nearly mad],” when Aggravayne accuses Lancelot (l.1716), Malory’s Arthur registers sadness:

For, as the Freynshe booke seyth, the kyng was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be uppon sir Launcelot and his quene; for the kyng had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the queen so many tymes that wyte you well the kyng loved hym passyngly well. (1163.20-25)

Vinaver notes that this passage does not exist in either of the sources (1629-30). Although he has a “demyng”—a suspicion—of the affair, he has not acted because of his love for Lancelot. Perhaps also, as Terence McCarthy has suggested, he is behaving as a king, putting the political stability of his kingdom before private vengeance (121-22). But he is short of spin masters, so he makes a strategic decision instead. He agrees to the plan of entrapment. After all, because of Lancelot’s prowess, it is likely that the plan will not work. As the king says, “if he be takyn with the dede he woll fyght with hym that bryngith up the noyse, and I know no knyght that ys able to macch hym” (1163.16-18). Indeed, the king is quite right: the plan does not work. Although Aggravayne and Mordred and their compatriots trap Lancelot in the queen’s chamber, they do not take them in the act. Capturing Lancelot and the queen *in flagrante delicto* would have allowed summary judgment, thereby avoiding a public trial that would even more greatly upset the kingdom (Kelly, “Common Law” 114). Unlike the queen and knight of the French source, Malory’s Lancelot and Guenevere are fully dressed and not in bed together. In a sourceless passage Malory’s narrator specifically disavows any knowledge of what they were doing together (Lacy 4: 121; 1165.10-13). In addition, as the king has predicted, Lancelot’s strength and prowess are too great for even fourteen knights. He admits one knight to the chamber, kills him,

removes the dead man's armor, and, now armed, kills all the other knights except for Mordred (1165-66).

Robert Kelly posits that it is the king's unconventional and unexpected decision summarily to execute the queen after this episode that causes the subsequent disasters that culminate in Arthur's and Mordred's deaths and the destruction of Camelot: Lancelot rescues the queen, killing Gawain's brothers Gareth and Gaheris in the process; Gawain's desire for vengeance is so great that he refuses to let Arthur make peace with Lancelot and pursues a civil war; the disruption gives the deceitful Mordred an opportunity to usurp his father's throne; in a final battle Mordred and most of the knights of the Round Table are killed and the mortally wounded King Arthur is removed to Avalon ("Common Law" 128-31). But the king's punishment of the queen results in turn from his decision to allow Aggravayne to attempt to take Lancelot and Guenevere in the act. Because the reputation of the court has been so damaged—because faith in the queen, Lancelot and the court has been undermined—and because the political message managers on whom he formerly depended are now absent, he cannot rely simply on political spin to extricate himself from scandal. Instead, he takes a strategic risk, hoping that Mordred's plan will not work. But its unintended consequences destroy Camelot.

Terence McCarthy has written that "Malory's Arthur is the portrait of a king," albeit a character who is inconsistent and not "psychologically convincing" (122). Inconsistencies in the behavior of Malory's Arthur may occur, however, not simply because the character is developed inconsistently. They may also arise because a king is a political leader, and different political circumstances may warrant different actions. Inconsistency in Arthur's portrayal may emerge not just because there are conflicts in the code of chivalry, or conflicting types of knighthood in the *Morte*, but because different ideals of kingship are layered in Malory's narrative in the same way that, according to Harriss, the embedding of contradictory political theories made English polity a palimpsest of political values. The chivalric king whose court is the locus and the flower of chivalry accepts the role of love—even adulterous love—in inspiring a knight's prowess. The worship of a court such as Arthur's as it is constructed in the "Tale of Sir Tristram" is founded on the worship of great knights such as Lancelot and Tristram, but the prowess and prestige of knights such as Lancelot come at the price of potential shame caused by courtly adultery. The Arthur of the last tale is a fifteenth-century king, faced, as

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were the competing kings of Malory's own day, with vicious factionalism, magnates with royal ambitions, civil war, and popular unrest. In a politically unstable situation, charges of the queen's adultery could humiliate a weakened king. In the end, Arthur cannot live up to the ideals of chivalric kingship and remain a politically effective king. Neither Malory's Arthur nor Malory can hold the inherent tension between chivalric kingship and political kingship in balance forever.

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Notes

¹ In 1917 Scudder argued that the Round Table fell because of conflicting priorities—religion, love, and loyalty to family and king—and its protagonists' failure to reconcile these (352-53). Subsequently Vinaver agreed that the Round Table fell because of a "tragic clash of loyalties," although he focused on loyalty to one's love and loyalty to lord and fellowship ("Notes," 773). Kennedy has argued that Gawain, Arthur, and Lancelot are motivated by three different "typologies" of knighthood, the "Heroic," the "Worshipful," and the "True," with different ethical codes, and that the decisions that lead to the civil wars at the end of the *Morte* are driven by these codes (331-35); Kenneth Hodges has argued that there are multiple ideologies of chivalry in the *Morte*, with contradictions arising in part because of the clash of local and national interests (1-3).

² In his 1965 monograph *The Book of Kyng Arthur: The Unity of Malory's Morte Darthur*, Moorman argues that the disintegration of the Round Table was caused not so much by conflicts among the codes of chivalry, love, and religion but by the court's inability to choose the highest expression of ideals in each area: eventually an older, feud-driven chivalry triumphs over the newer form of chivalry codified by the Pentecostal Oath (50-63); the adultery of courtly love is privileged over love in marriage; and secular chivalry rather than religious chivalry is practiced (13-48). Pochoda, on the other hand, argues that Malory offered his version of chivalry as a political design to solve the governance problems of his day, but did so in a way intended "not to alleviate but to disguise and repress . . . conflicts" (28-29).

³ Kim's work outlines the ways in which competing loyalties between king and magnates and among magnates create political division both in the real "bastard feudalism" of the fifteenth-century and in Malory's version of Arthurian legend (55-99).

⁴ The classic study of kingship in the Middle Ages remains that by Ernst H. Kantorowicz. In his *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, John Watts has provided a detailed explanation of political theory current in England in the early fifteenth century (13-80). Most recently, Harriss summarizes theories of governance in England in the later Middle Ages with particular attention to relationships between the king, magnates, and parliament (3-5).

⁵ A. R. Myers outlines the gradual increase in the practice of submitting the crown's requests for funds beyond the income of the royal household to Parliament during the reign of Henry IV (136-37).

⁶ Nellie Slayton Aurner saw Arthur in "The Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius" as a model of Henry V (370-73), as did Vinaver (xxx). Certainly William Caxton saw Arthur and Henry V as parallel, if not identical figures: in his epilogue to *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, probably published in 1484, Caxton implores the "knyghtes of Englonde" to stop going to bordellos and gambling dens but rather to emulate the great knights of Arthur's court along with kings Richard I, Edward I, Edward III, and "noble kyng Harry the fyfthe" (Caxton 122-23). For more on the relationship between Caxton's view of chivalry and Arthur as a model, see Arthur Ferguson (34-36).

⁷ Robert L. Kelly and Kenneth Hodges point out that "The Tale of Sir Tristram" presents chronological anomalies. The Tale begins with the birth of Sir Tristram who is a "grown knight" when Arthur undertakes the Roman Wars. Kelly speculates that in this section Malory used a different source for Arthurian history ("Argument," 131-32), while Hodges holds that anomaly arises from variation between regional and national perspectives: "[t]he political logic of the provinces is not the political logic of the national center" (85). Whatever the reason for the inconsistency, however, Malory has added material that establishes Arthur as being at the height of his political hegemony at this point in the narrative.

⁸ In "The Noble Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius," Sir Cadur tells Arthur that "All the worshyp in the worlde ye welde!" (217.7). Vinaver interprets this line to mean that Arthur holds the lands he conquers in Europe in perpetuity, to be inherited by his heirs (xxx).

⁹ Vinaver speculates that Malory includes this episode to "place the king of Ireland under an obligation to Tristram," who agrees to defend the Angwysse against charges of treason ("Commentary" 1462).

¹⁰ Rumble (183), P. E. Tucker (75), Benson (109), Dhira Mahoney (179), Schueler (55), Grimm (77), Cooper (183).

¹¹ At times in the early tales *chevalry* seems simply to refer to cavalry. For example, after Arthur has survived his first rebellion, Merlin warns Arthur and his barons that their enemies have too many men, and "onlesse that our kyng have more chyvalry with hym than he may make within the boundys of his own reame, and he fyghte with hem in batail, he shal be overcome and slayn" (20.7-10). When Kings

Arthur, Ban, and Bors observe their knights during the Battle of Bedgrayne, “they preyed them much for their noble chere [expression] of chevalry, for the hardyeste fyghters that ever they herde other sawe” (35.36-36.2).

¹² Vinaver notes that Arthur’s chivalry is embedded not only in the fact that he is a “‘Conqueror’, an English counterpart of Charlemagne,” but also in the fact that he is an upholder of justice (Introduction xxx).

¹³ Vinaver argues that even the love affair with Isode is part and parcel of Tristram’s devotion to knighthood (1447). Elizabeth Archibald emphasizes the practice of knighthood in knightly fellowship, whose ideal is firmly connected to the Round Table in contrast to the inferior court of King Mark (320). Benson sees the central focus as the “attainment of full knighthood” on the part of an individual knight (116). Andrew Lynch rejects chivalric conduct as too narrow a theme, but identifies four themes closely connected to knightly practice: the economic and political aspects of combat, handling defeat and victory, appropriate negotiation with superiors and inferiors, and finally “the power of knightly ‘means’ in many contexts—military, political and social—and the power of fellowship and good will” (84). Hodges points out that there is a difference, in “The Book of Sir Tristram,” between the kind of chivalry practiced by knights who are regionally based and the kind of chivalry necessary for King Arthur, as a national leader, to exhibit, and that the book explicates this difference (97-102).

¹⁴ Hodges points out that this regional prejudice was apparently deeply embedded in English society; Henry the V had to ban regional infighting in his “Ordinances of War,” and even Elizabeth I made fun of the speech of Sir Walter Raleigh, a Devonshire man (89).

¹⁵ Although King Arthur later condemns Guenevere to summary execution, Robert Kelly points out that adultery on the part of a queen did not comprise treason under the Statute of Treasons of 1352 (III Edward 25) and suggests that she is being condemned as an accessory to Lancelot in the killing of Aggravayne and the knights who accompany him to the queen’s bedchamber (“Common Law” 123-24). Ernest York points out that the word “treason” is not used when Andret catches Tristram and Isode in the act of adultery; Mark imprisons Isode in a “lazar-cote” when she is caught in the bed with Tristram by Sir Andret (16; Malory 432.18). When the horn designed to spill drink when sipped by an adulterous lady is sent to Mark’s court by Lamerok, Isode’s spilled wine spurs Mark to condemn her to burning, but he is

quickly overruled by his barons (430.18-23). In England, the Treason Statute of 1352 was not applied to a queen charged with adultery or fornication before marriage until the reign of Henry VIII (Kelly, "Common Law" 129-30).

¹⁶ King Mark wants to condemn Tristram to death for his adulterous affair with Mark's wife Isode (602.34-503.4); he takes two knights with him into England to kill Tristram, but they refuse (575-77); he drugs and imprisons Tristram (675-76); Mark finally runs Tristram through with a sword while he is harping in front of Isode (1149.278-35).

¹⁷ On hearing Dinadan's lay for the first time, Tristram comments, "'O Lord Jesu! That sir Dynadan can make wondrously well and yll. There he sholde make evyll!'" (626.25-26).

¹⁸ For the importance of rumor campaigns to English kings during the Wars of the Roses, see Charles Ross (15-16; 19-23).

¹⁹ Hodges points out that Aggravayne's and Mordred's jealousy may arise in part because that the queen has too publicly favored Lancelot over her other knights (134-35).

²⁰ Gawain also tries to silence his brothers' rumor campaign against the queen and Lancelot (1161-62).

²¹ While an adulterous queen would not be guilty of treason, her "male violator" would (Kelly, "Common Law" 124).

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