

Fifteenth Century King Arthur: The Significance of Sir Thomas Malory's Rendition of the Life of
King Arthur

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by

Megan MacDonald

The Ohio State University

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Project Advisor: Professor Karen Winstead, Department of English

INTRODUCTION

Fictional tales about the legendary king Arthur have been popular for over a millennium.¹ These tales, although fiction, do have roots in a historical figure. In the Welshman Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, believed to be compiled about the year 800CE, mentions an Arthur as an earlier military leader and shows how the beginnings of legends about Arthur were starting to take form.² If there was a historical king Arthur, it was surely not as medieval as the Arthur consistently depicted in Arthurian legends. One particular tale of Arthur, *Le Morte Darthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory, is very reminiscent of what was happening in England during Malory's life.

The longest period of civil war in post-conquest England took place between 1455 and 1485,³ and has since been dubbed "The Wars of the Roses."⁴ This civil war saw the deposition of Henry VI/ascension of Edward IV, "the Readeption" of Henry VI, the second deposition of Henry VI/ascension of Edward IV, the ascension of Edward V, the disappearance of Edward V/ascension of Richard III, and finally, the death of Richard III and ascension of Henry VII.⁵ Although the popular name, *Wars of the Roses*, implies a dynastic dispute between the white rose of York and the red rose of Lancaster, Edward Hicks explains that *The First War* (1459-

¹ Richard M. Loomis, "Culhwch and Olwen" *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, edited by Norris J. Lacy and James L. Wilhelm, Routledge, 2013, 28-57. p. 28.

² James J. Wilhelm, "Arthur in Latin Chronicle," *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, edited by Norris J. Lacy and James L. Wilhelm, Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-8. p. 3.

³ Michael A. Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 3. Hicks argues that the Wars end roughly around 1509, but arguing an exact end date is outside the scope of this paper. With either end date, the Wars of the Roses are still the longest civil war in England.

⁴ David Grummitt, *A Short History of the Wars of the Roses*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. p. xii

⁵ Stephen H. A. Shepherd, "Criticism," *Le Morte Darthur, Or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, Stephen H. A. Shepherd, New York: Norton, 2004, pp. xi-lii. pp. xxi-xxiv.

1461) and the *Second War* (1469-1471) were both brought on because of issues relating to government.⁶ The Yorkists, however, found it easier to explain the *First War* in terms of a dynastic dispute and after the *First War*, the Lancastrians also found it easier to explain Henry VI's right to rule in terms of a dispute over dynastic legitimacy, as well.⁷ Hicks claims this means that, although the propaganda was based on issues surrounding proper lineage, what really caused these wars is something less obvious.⁸

In the beginning of the 1470's, Sir John Fortescue wrote *The Governance of England*, a political treatise on what had gone wrong under Henry VI and also what he thought were the best ways to run a successful government.⁹ To this contemporary of both Henry VI and Edward IV, who the king surrounded himself with as advisors could make or break a government and he strongly criticized councilors too concerned with their own interests and not concerned enough with the affairs of the realm.¹⁰ This is evidence which supports Hicks' claim that the wars were started because of issues relating to counsel.

Henry VI came to the throne at only 9 months old.¹¹ Henry spent his entire childhood relying on the advice of others so it is not shocking that he would continue to do so when he came into his majority. It was under Henry that the 100 Years War came to a close, with a loss of many lands for England thanks to the misguided advice of his leading advisor, William de la

⁶ Hicks, p. 14

⁷ Hicks, p. 14

⁸ The idea of a dynastic dispute is based on the issue of Edward III having multiple sons. The Yorkists claimed that the wrong grandson of Edward III took over after the deposition of Richard II and it should have been the son that the Yorks came from. For more on the family relations, see Hicks p. xvii-xviii.

⁹ Keith Dockray, *Edward IV: From Contemporary Chronicles, Letters & Records* (Croydon: Fontill Media LLC, 2015). pp. 199-200.

¹⁰ Dockray, p. 200.

¹¹ Grummitt, p. xxx.

Pole, Duke of Suffolk.¹² In 1450, Suffolk was sent into exile but murdered on his way there.¹³ Shortly after, a man who called himself “Jack Cade” rebelled and attempted to sack London in June.¹⁴ Cade and his followers came to protest the king’s “evil counsellors”¹⁵ and the exclusion of “trewe blode of the Reame” from the king’s counsels. Cade and his followers viewed Richard, Duke of York, as a “hye and mighty prince,” who would restore good government.¹⁶ Later that year, York took up this call of the people and published a bill using the same rhetoric as Cade.¹⁷ In another bill, York attributed the loss of territory in France to “the greed and evil counsel of those ‘broughte up of noughte’ and called, in language taken directly from Cade’s manifestos, for the counsel to be given by ‘the trewe lordes and inespéciall the lordes of the mighti roiall blood.’”¹⁸ These are the events which led up to the *First War*, and ultimately led to the deposition of Henry VI and ascension of Edward IV.

Unlike Henry VI, Edward IV was able to make up his mind and refuse requests.¹⁹ Edward’s problems with counsel stem from his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville in 1464.²⁰ In the beginning of Edward’s reign, Richard, the Earl of Warwick, enjoyed much power under Edward.²¹ Unfortunately for Warwick, Elizabeth brought with her a large family of two sons from a previous marriage and thirteen siblings.²² Elizabeth ensured her family members were

¹² Grummitt, p. xxviii.

¹³ Hicks, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Grummitt, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵ Grummitt, p. xxxvi.

¹⁶ Grummitt, p. 29.

¹⁷ Grummitt, p. 31.

¹⁸ Grummitt, p. 31.

¹⁹ Hicks, p. 171.

²⁰ Hicks, p. 187.

²¹ For a list of all that Warwick was put in charge of, see Hicks, pp. 186-187.

²² Grummitt, p. xxxii.

married off to people that Warwick wanted for his own family members.²³ What infuriated Warwick was that Edward was so readily taking counsel from his new family and relying on Warwick less, while also relieving Warwick of more duties.²⁴ In July of 1469, Robin of Redesdale revolted in Yorkshire because he claimed Edward had misgoverned the kingdom and that the Woodvilles had too great an influence on Edward.²⁵ In the same month, Warwick, Warwick's brother (the Archbishop of York), and Edward's brother (George, whom the king had also alienated), issued a "declaration of intent to remove the low-born self-interested counsellors who surrounded Edward and prevented him from governing properly. It complained of widespread injustice and peculation, including the theft of revenues meant for the crusades..."²⁶ Warwick rebelled and killed a few prominent lords, including the queen's father, and took Edward into captivity.²⁷ These events are what lead to the *Second War*. Thus, there are multiple sources, primary and secondary, that confirm that counsel was a major issue for the aristocracy.

Another issue that plagued England was the threat of the Muslim Turks. In 1453, around the beginning of the Wars, the city of Constantinople was sacked. This was a major point in the of hundreds of years of fighting between the Christians and the Muslims. By 1095, the Muslim Turks had been harassing the Byzantine Christians for decades so their emperor, Alexius, appealed for aid to Pope Urban II early that year.²⁸ In November of 1095, at the council

²³ Hicks, p.188.

²⁴ Hicks, p. 188.

²⁵ Grummitt, p. xxxvii.

²⁶ Hardyment, p. 443.

²⁷ Grummitt, p. xxxvii.

²⁸ Jonathan Riley-Smith "The Crusading Movement and Historians" *The Oxford History of the Crusades*. Ed. Jonathan Riley-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). p. 1.

of Clermont Pope Urban II called upon Frankish knights to take up arms and free the Christians from Islamic rule and to also liberate the tomb of Christ.²⁹ This movement grew to involve every country in Europe and touched almost every aspect of life.³⁰ This movement, commonly referred to as the crusades, grew to a point of targeting heretical sects of Christianity in the thirteenth century.³¹ Also in the thirteenth century, crusades were launched against the very Christians that had asked for help in 1095.³² These actions are part of what makes the realistic definition of a “crusade” hard to determine.³³ This is to say that what going on a crusade meant varied to each person. Christopher Tyerman, however, defines a crusader as “a *crucesignatus* or a man signed with the cross, [who] was someone who, with the approval of his local priest or other authoritative cleric, swore a vow to go to fight the enemies of the church, in the Holy Land or elsewhere.”³⁴

The crusades stretched from 1095-1798,³⁵ but nothing shook the world quite like the sack of Constantinople on May 29, 1453 did. Word of Constantinople’s fall and other Turkish victories made it all the way to England.³⁶ On September 30, 1453, a proclamation of a new crusade to the East was made and then renewed in 1455.³⁷ The Fall of Constantinople also provoked a few Scottish and English men to fight the Turks, but there are no accounts of great

²⁹ Riley-Smith, p. 2.

³⁰ Riley-Smith, p. 5.

³¹ Riley-Smith, p. 4.

³² Riley-Smith, p. 4.

³³ Riley-Smith, p. 9.

³⁴ Christopher Tyerman, *England and the Crusades*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). p. 2. For a more in depth explanation about ceremonies, clothes, and immunities of a crusader, see pp. 2-3.

³⁵ For a detailed chronology of the crusades, see Riley-Smith, pp. 390-401.

³⁶ Tyerman, p. 306.

³⁷ Riley-Smith, p. 399.

numbers of people going on crusades in the fifteenth century.³⁸ There is, however, much literary evidence that shows a clear interest in accounts of battles against the Turks, such as Jean de Waurin's account which was presented to Edward IV, and William of Tyre's account of the first crusade, which by the fifteenth century had become a very popular book.³⁹

The concern over the Turks was so great in England that even before the sack of 1453, Henry VI urged reconciliation between France and England so the two countries could unite and recover the Holy Land.⁴⁰ One of Warwick's allegations against Edward was that he misused funds meant for the crusades.⁴¹ The Turks and their actions became synonymous with evil: "Edward IV accused Henry VI's henchmen of 'such cruelty as has not been heard done among Saracens or Turks to christen men.'⁴² The English printer, William Caxton, who was responsible for the first printed edition of *Le Morte Darthur*, was either greatly concerned with the situation in the east or took advantage of the concern over the east as an easy way to market his crusade related books by calling on people to read them so they could learn how to crusade and earn great praise.⁴³ Either way, this points to a serious interest in the crusades.

During this period, Sir Thomas Malory (c. 1415 – 1471) was participating in the *Wars of the Roses*. Malory is a very obscure figure and we do not know a lot about him and his personal interests. In fact, for a long time people were unsure of who exactly Sir Thomas Malory was

³⁸ Tyerman, p. 309.

³⁹ Tyerman, p. 304.

⁴⁰ Tyerman, p. 307.

⁴¹ See note 24.

⁴² Tyerman, pp. 306-307.

⁴³ Tyerman, p. 306.

until P. J. C. Field resolved that problem in 1993.⁴⁴ We do know, however, some facts about his life based on various calendars such as the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* [Henry III – Henry VII] and public records from The Public Record Office in London and other repositories. We know that he was hired by the Duke of Buckingham to go on “murderous rampages.”⁴⁵ He was also accused of rape, theft, and extortion.⁴⁶ After a falling out with Buckingham, Malory was most likely employed to commit crimes similar to those he had previously committed for Richard, Duke of York. This is based on York’s clear need for men who were willing to raid and kill like Malory and Malory’s need for a protector against the Duke of Buckingham. The fact that Malory held Newbold Revel because of York’s main ally, the Duke of Norfolk also suggests a relationship between York and Malory.⁴⁷ York and Norfolk needed as many allies in Parliament as possible and so they arranged for Malory to become the MP of Wareham, in Dorset.⁴⁸ Since Malory was clearly involved in the wars that were happening in England at the time, it is not shocking that *Le Morte Darthur* in many places seems familiar to someone who studies this period.

Malory spent the last few years of his life imprisoned under Edward IV and this is where he wrote *Le Morte Darthur*.⁴⁹ We also know that it was completed in either 1469 or 1470 because Malory says he finished this book in the ninth regnal year of Edward IV, which means sometime between March 4, 1469 and March 3, 1470.⁵⁰

⁴⁴P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993). Chapter I: Alternatives, pp. 1-24.

⁴⁵ Field, p. 96.

⁴⁶ Field, p. 97.

⁴⁷ Field, pp. 98-99.

⁴⁸ Christina Hardymont, *Malory: The Knight Who Became King Arthur’s Greatest Chronicler* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005). p. 275.

⁴⁹ Field, p. 131.

⁵⁰ Malory, p. 698, lines 3-4 and n. 4

A person of Malory's station would not necessarily have to be deeply interested in issues such as counsel⁵¹ and crusading but it can be proven that he, in fact, was. Malory presents his *Le Morte Darthur* as an English translation of his French source, but the reality of his work contradicts that. While Malory did include "virtual word-for-word translations or incorporated words and phrases verbatim from his English sources,"⁵² he frequently proclaimed the authority of his French source when no known source exists.⁵³ Based on Malory's known sources, however, we see the removal and significant abbreviation of many aspects from those sources.⁵⁴ The changes Malory made in *Le Morte Darthur* were made to specifically reflect some of the events that occurred during his lifetime, such as issues with advisors and the general concerns about the Turks. Because of the changes Malory makes regarding the way counsel and advice are received and the new role the crusades play greatly affect the outcome of *Le Morte Darthur*, we can see that Malory had a great interest in counsel and crusades in relation to the threat of the Turks.

⁵¹ Especially considering, as I have mentioned, that the *Wars of the Roses* was paraded as a dynastic dispute.

⁵² Stephen H. A. Shepherd, "Sources and Background," *Le Morte Darthur, Or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*, edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2004) pp. 701-905. p. 703. For an outline of major sources, see pp. 701-702.

⁵³ Shepherd, p. 701. For a list of Malory's known sources see pp. 701-704.

⁵⁴ Shepheard, p. 703

ADVICE AND COUNSEL

King Arthur and Counsel

One of the most major changes Malory made is the way King Arthur receives counsel. This change is most likely due to the fact that much of *Le Morte Darthur* is shaped by 'mirrors for princes.'⁵⁵ This popular genre explained how a good king should behave and rule. Uprising and rebellion was always a fear for late medieval English kings⁵⁶ so it was in a king's best interest to consider these texts. One theme of these advising texts was how and when to receive counsel.⁵⁷ The changes Malory makes in his retelling of the life of King Arthur show the direct impact counsel and advice has on governance, impacts which kings during Malory's life were experiencing.

In the beginning of *Le Morte Darthur*, after Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, dies, the realm falls into chaos.⁵⁸ This is not matched in Malory's sources but it is reminiscent of the current situation in England at the time of Malory's writing.⁵⁹ The similarities continue in that both Edward IV and King Arthur had to fight their way to the throne at a young age. Edward was only 18 years old⁶⁰ and Arthur an untested youth when they came to power. Thus, they both required strong counsel to keep their kingship secure. In fact, even though Arthur had

⁵⁵ Meredith Reynolds, "Malory's Use of 'Counsel' and 'Advyce' in Creating a King." *Arthuriana*, Scriptorium Press, 2006, Volume 16, Number 2, pp. 40-44. p. 40

⁵⁶ From 1400-1485, England saw 8 different kings with half of those kings' reigns ending in deposition and/or assassination.

⁵⁷ For example, see Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement for Princes*.

⁵⁸ Malory, p. 7

⁵⁹ Shepherd, p. 7

⁶⁰ Shepherd, p. xxii

committed many acts of prowess, it was not until his would-be advisers accept him that Arthur is able to truly become king.⁶¹

The wizard Merlin instantly becomes Arthur's first and most important advisor. In the section depicting Arthur's rise to power, the words 'counsel' and 'advyce,' and their orthographic variants are used twenty-two times and eleven times, respectively, because Malory frequently increases word repetition to show significance.⁶² Many of these references to counsel are in relation to something Merlin has said, since he is truly Arthur's most important counselor. Malory increases Arthur's reliance on Merlin's counsel. Malory also makes it clear that Merlin's advice is valued above everyone else's. Raluca Radulescu beautifully explains that:

there are instances in the *Morte Darthur* where the nature of good kingship includes the king's cooperation with his barons, who, in their turn, are expected to advise him as best they can. Especially at the beginning of the *Morte*, important decisions at King Arthur's court are reached by the king with the help of his knights and barons, although an important element in the Arthurian story is Merlin, who is conspicuous as the king's chief advisor. The barons' council is of secondary importance to that of Merlin: "And soo by the counceil of Merlyn the kynge lete calle his barons to council [...] wherfor the kyng asked counceil at hem al. they coude no counceil gyve [...] Alle the barons sayd

⁶¹ Raluca Radulescu, "Malory and Fifteenth-Century Political Ideas," *Arthuriana*, Scriptorium Press, 2003, Vol. 13, Number 3, pp. 36-51. p. 38.

⁶² Reynolds, p. 40

they wold pray [for Merlin] and desyre hym. Soo Merlyn was sente for and fair desyred of al the barons to gyve them best counceil.”⁶³

Merlin’s role as counsellor is important because it shows how counsel and advice play a major role in what happens in the story: when Arthur listens to Merlin good things happen,⁶⁴ but when Arthur goes against Merlin’s advice, bad things happen.⁶⁵

Merlin disappears, and soon after Arthur is required to make decisions when a messenger from Rome comes. Instead of rushing to answer the messenger, Arthur requests the advice of his barons.⁶⁶ In this instance, Arthur exhibits wisdom. In the beginning of *Le Morte Darthur* Arthur is generally successful in seeking counsel from either Merlin or a group of barons. Later, when Arthur starts making decisions on his own or in consultation with only one knight, things start to go terribly wrong.⁶⁷

Malory appears to have had the aforementioned historic events based on kings failing to obtain adequate advisors in mind when he was writing *Le Morte Darthur* and we see this reflected in changes made from his sources in *The Deth of Arthur*. In this section, Malory altered his sources in significant ways. In both the Vulgate *Death of Arthur* and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur’s Deth of Arthur*, Lancelot saves Queen Guinevere from execution and the Bishop of Rochester tells King Arthur that the Pope says Arthur must take Guinevere back and

⁶³ Radulescu, p. 40.

⁶⁴ This can be seen when Merlin’s battle plan for Arthur to become the sole king of England is successful in Malory, pp. 14-28.

⁶⁵ This can be seen when Merlin tells Arthur not to marry Guinevere and Arthur does anyway in Malory pp. 62-66. Guinevere’s adultery with Lancelot is one of the factors that leads up to the downfall and death of Arthur.

⁶⁶ Malory, p. 113-117.

⁶⁷ Radulescu, p. 45.

end the war with Lancelot under threat of excommunication for all of England. In the Arthurian Vulgate, Arthur is easily convinced to allow the queen to return unharmed, “but said that, even if the queen returned, the war between Lancelot and him would not cease, since he had begun it.”⁶⁸ Arthur himself makes the decision to not end his war with Lancelot. Malory’s interpretation of this event emphasizes council in that Arthur listens to one of his most trusted advisors, Gawain:

So whan thys Bysshop was com unto Carlyle he shewed the Kynge hys bullys; and whan the Kynge undirstode them, he wyste nat what to do. But full fayne he wolde have bene acorded with Sir Lancelot, but Sir Gawain wolde nat suffir hym; but to have the Quene he thereto agreed—but in no wyse he wolde suffir the Kynge to accorde with Sir Lancelot—but as for the Quene, he consented.⁶⁹

In this version, Arthur wants to do one thing (i.e. end the war with Lancelot), but one of his trusted advisors, Gawain, wants something different (i.e. to never end the war). Arthur ends up listening to one of his advisors instead of himself or consulting multiple advisors which leads to Arthur being more at fault for the death of himself and Gawain.⁷⁰ Arthur should have considered Gawain’s readiness towards rage⁷¹ and done what he felt was right, because he was thinking rationally at the time and Gawain was not. And it may seem as though listening to only

⁶⁸ Norris J Lacy, *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, Volume IV (New York: Garland, 1995). p. 131

⁶⁹ Shepherd, p.p. 664-665, lines 43-3

⁷⁰ How Arthur is more at fault is explained in more detail below.

⁷¹ For example, see Malory, p. 68 for when Gawain is angry that a knight killed Gawain’s greyhounds and, even though the knight asks for mercy, Gawain is too angry to stop and goes to strike the knight dead but the knight’s lady jumps in front of him and Gawain accidentally slays her instead. Gawain lived with this shame for the rest of his life. For another example, see n. 70, p. 14.

Gawain would be okay, since it worked out well when Arthur did exactly as Merlin said, but this is not the case. As previously quoted, Malory specifically mentions that everyone agreed that Merlin was the best advisor. Gawain does not even come close to receiving unanimous support. In fact, Gawain's own brother, Sir Gareth distances himself from Gawain because Gawain is so violent. Malory tells us, "for evir aftir Sir Gareth had aspyed Sir Gawaynes conductions, he wythedrewe himself fro his brother Sir Gawaynes felyshyp; for he was evire vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther—and that hated Sir Gareth."⁷² This, again, is an instance of how counsel directly affects the outcome of the story, showing Malory's clear interest in counsel.

One may think that the easiest solution for Arthur would then be to not listen to any council at all, but Malory also shows us the dangers in that. Malory shows us the dangers in not taking any counsel by making slight yet significant changes to the way Arthur hears of and reacts to the relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot. In the Vulgate *Death of Arthur*, Gawain and Gaheriet do not wish to inform Arthur of what is happening between Lancelot and Guinevere so they leave court. Arthur then forces an explanation of what is going on from Agravain:

"First of all he asked Agravain, who answered that he would not tell him, that he should ask the others. And they said that they would not talk about it.

'If you refuse to tell me,' said the king, 'either you'll have to kill me or I you.' And he ran immediately to a sword that was on a bed, and he drew it from

⁷² Malory, p. 225.

the scabbard and came to Agravain and said that he would surely kill him if he did not tell him what he was so eager to know; and he lifted the sword high in order to strike him on the head.”⁷³

Agravain, fearing for his life, tells Arthur all that he knows. Arthur is shocked and inquires further. Mordred then apologizes, for they have known about Lancelot and Guinevere’s affair for too long without telling the king, so they have “been deceitful and disloyal to [Arthur]. Now [they’re] doing [their] duty.”⁷⁴ Arthur demands that Lancelot be caught in the act and “command[s them] to do so by the oath [they] swore to [Arthur] when [they] became knights of the Round Table.”⁷⁵

The slight alterations that Malory makes to this scene have major consequences. When Sirs Gawain, Gaherys, and Gareth refuse to participate in the conversations about Lancelot and the queen and leave court, Arthur asks “what noyse they made.” Without any hesitation, Agravain says, “I shall telle you, for I may kepe hit no lenger.”⁷⁶ In doing this, Malory changes the way Arthur receives advice and counsel in that the Vulgate Arthur had to force information out of Agravain, but in *Le Morte Darthur*, Agravain tells Arthur everything that he knows quite willingly. Then the modifications continue; Malory tells us that Arthur reacted in the following way:

’For Sir Launcelot ys an hardy knyght, and all ye know that he ys the beste knyght amonge us all; and but if he be takyn with the dede he woll fight with hym that

⁷³ Lacy, p. 119

⁷⁴ Lacy, p. 119

⁷⁵ Lacy, p. 119

⁷⁶ Malory, p. 647

bryngith up the noyse, and I know no knyght that ys able to macch hym.

Therefore, and hit be sothe as ye say, I wolde that he were takyn with the dede.'

For, as the Freynshe booke seyth, the Kynge was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be upon Sir Launcelot and his Quene; for the Kynge has demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for Sir Launcelot had done so much for hym and for the Quene so many tymes that, wyte you well, the Kynge loved hym passingly well."⁷⁷

In this Malorian version, Arthur is enraged that Lancelot is accused of such an act and does not think it would be a good idea to try and catch him in the act because Lancelot would surely fight his way out of it. Arthur eventually agrees to a plan Agravain came up with, namely, to go hunting and not invite Lancelot so Lancelot will meet with the queen and Agravain and his men can catch him. It is clear, however, that Arthur is not fully on board with this plan because Arthur warns, again, that Lancelot will be ready for any attack.⁷⁸ We see in Malory's version that Arthur prefers to not do anything about the information he receives from his counselors. Agravain and other barons encourage Arthur to take their advice and confront Lancelot about his treason, but Arthur prefers to do nothing. This slight, yet significant, adjustment to Malory's source makes it so Arthur is actively rejecting counsel and, thus, more to blame for his own downfall.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Malory, p. 647

⁷⁸ Malory, p. 648

⁷⁹ The specific events leading up to Arthur's downfall will be explained below.

Another change Malory made is the inclusion of the Pentecostal Oath. This Pentecostal Oath greatly increases the significance of Arthur's advisors informing him of Lancelot and the queen. Laura K. Bedwell suggests that the Malorian Arthur's downfall is partially related to Arthur not keeping his side of the Pentecostal Oath.⁸⁰ The Pentecostal Oath was an oath that knights took which specified how they were to behave (i.e. do not be outrageous, do not commit treason, do not murder, do not refuse mercy to those who ask it, do not harm women), but also, what will happen if they break this oath (i.e. break the oath under pain of death). In doing this, Malory made it so that everyone knows exactly what to expect from Arthur if a knight should break the oath. Thus, it becomes Arthur's duty to act on Lancelot's treason when he was directly informed of it by an advisor. Since Arthur avoids considering what his advisor suggests, an unnecessary war is created, in which Arthur leaves the kingdom to Mordred, which ultimately leads to the death of Arthur and Gawain. In the Vulgate *Death of Arthur*, however, there is no Pentecostal Oath and Arthur's reaction to the news about Lancelot and Guinevere is completely different.

Both Malory's version and Vulgate end with Arthur dying from battle wounds after Mordred takes over Camelot, but a major factor that led to Arthur's death in the Vulgate *Death of Arthur* is the Emperor of Rome starting a war with Arthur, from which Gawain receives battle wounds that he dies from.⁸¹ The Vulgate Gawain's wounds were originally received from Lancelot, but when Arthur asks Gawain if it was through Lancelot that Gawain will die, Gawain says "Yes, sir, by the head wound he caused; *and it would have healed*, except that the

⁸⁰ Laura K. Bedwell, "The Failure of Justice, the Failure of Arthur," *Arthuriana*, Scriptorium Press, 2011, Volume 21, Number 3, pp. 3-22.

⁸¹ Lacy, pp. 144-145.

Romans reopened it in the battle.”⁸² Gawain’s death drastically damaged Arthur’s chances of winning the war against Mordred. What is important to note here is that the Vulgate Arthur holds less blame because he did not start the war from which Gawain died. Gawain’s death is completely at the fault of the Romans, whom Arthur had no control over. This is different in *Le Morte Darthur* because the altercation with the Romans happens in the beginning of Malory’s tale and the Malorian Gawain is present for the first part of the war against Mordred. This Gawain dies from wounds being reopened during the battle against Mordred. This Malorian battle against Mordred only comes about because Arthur leaves Mordred in charge so he can go fight Lancelot and Arthur only has to go fight Lancelot because he did not respond appropriately in multiple situations regarding his advisors. Malory’s changes here exemplify the consequences of not properly listening to advisors, in how Gawain dies. This, once again, greatly affects the outcome of the tale in a way that is different from the sources, showing Malory’s interest in these types of situations.

King Arthur struggled to find the correct balance of advice and his failure to do so often led to terrible occurrences. Similar problems with counsel were also serious issue in Malory’s time and his interest in them greatly affected the way he wrote *Le Morte Darthur*. The way Arthur accepts advice and counsel in Malory’s sources is different from how Malory tells it. In Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, how Arthur behaves regarding advice and counsel relates directly to how the characters’ stories play out. This proves Malory’s interest in advice and counsel because, since he claimed to be translating the French Book, he could have done just that and

⁸² Lacy, p. 148. Emphasis mine.

not made these changes at all. Arthur is not the only one who struggles with these types of situations that involve advice and counsel. Malory continues to emphasize the importance of counsel in his chapters on Sir Tristram.

King Mark and Counsel

King Arthur is not the only one in *Le Morte Darthur* who has to worry about good advisors and advice. In *The Fyrste and the Secunde Boke of Syr Trystrams de Lyones*, we learn about one of the only wholly bad characters in *Le Morte Darthur*. Even though King Arthur struggles with many things, such as taking the right advice, he cannot be viewed as a completely bad ruler. King Mark, however, can be viewed as a bad king, and a “dark doppelganger for Arthur.”⁸³ The Vulgate Death of Arthur refers to Mark as “le plus mescheant de tous les rois” (‘the most wicked of all kings’),⁸⁴ but Donald G. Schueler also points out that Malory “thoroughly blackened the character of King Mark” because Mark was not as evil in the various sources for this section.⁸⁵ And, as I will show, Mark’s new Malorian faults are a direct result of his issues with taking advice and counsel.

In this tale of Tristram, Malory emphasizes Mark’s significance by the slight alterations of his sources, in ways similar to those which we have seen above. Malory’s tale of Tristram begins with “Here begynnyth the fyrste boke of Sir Trystrams de Lyones; and who was his fadir and hys moder; and how he was borne and fostyrd; and how he was made knyght of Kyng Marke of Cornuayle.”⁸⁶ It has been argued that these first few lines are based on the English verse *Sir Tristrem*, which are: “Per herd Y rede in rounne, / Who Tristrem gat & bare; / Who was

⁸³ D. Thomas Hanks Jr. “Malory’s ‘Book of Sir Tristram’: Focusing ‘Le Morte Darthur.’” *Quondam et Futurus*, Scriptorium Press, 1993, Volume 3, Number 1, pp. 14-31.p. 21.

⁸⁴ Edward Donald Kennedy, “Malory’s King Mark and King Arthur,” *King Arthur: A Casebook*, edited by Edward Donald Kennedy (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996). p. 140.

⁸⁵ Donald G. Schueler, “The Tristram Section of Malory’s ‘Morte Darthur,’” *Studies in Philology*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1968, Volume 65, Number 1, pp. 51-66. p. 54.

⁸⁶ Malory, p. 228.

king wip croun, / & who him fostered 3are.”⁸⁷ If this is the case, Malory made significant changes to these opening lines. The changes suggest, since both incipits include mention of who gave birth to and raised Tristram, but only Malory’s mentions Mark, that Malory is intentionally making Mark an important part of this extremely lengthy tale. It stands to reason that Malory chose to do this because, again, Malory is interested in exploring issues with counsel and a number of Mark’s issues are concerned with counsel.

For example, in both the Vulgate and *Le Morte Darthur*, Tristram is arrested and tried by Mark. The difference between Malory and the source is that in Malory, Tristram strikes the king five or six times, but in the Vulgate, Tristram actually threatens the king’s life.⁸⁸ Edward Donald Kennedy tells us that:

...but Malory omit this [threatening to kill Mark] and thus makes Tristram less reprehensible. Mark asks his barons what he should do; they advise him to ask Tristram to return, and Dynas the Seneschal warns Mark of the probable consequence if he does not: ‘...many men woll holde with sir Trystrames and he were harde bestadde. ... we know none so good a knyght but yf hit be sir Lancelot du Lake. And yff he ... go to kyng Arthurs courte ... he woll so frend hym there that he woll nat sette by your malice.’ Mark, seeing the advisability of this warning asks that Tristram be sent for so ‘that we may be frendys.’⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ralph Norris, *Malory’s Library: Sources of the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008). p. 97. For more evidence supporting the notion that Malory based part of this tale on *Sir Tristrams*, see pp. 98-104.

⁸⁸ Kennedy, p. 141.

⁸⁹ Kennedy, p. 141.

This is one of the only occasions when we see Mark behave as a good king and the behavior that makes Mark a good king is receiving good advice and acting on it. But this behavior is very uncommon for Mark. Malory is more interested in making his changes related to counsel and advice have more drastic outcomes.

After Tristram and Isode are caught in bed together, Tristram is condemned to death but he escapes. He is caught and brought back to stand trial. Mark claims that he wants his barons (i.e. those who should be advising Mark) to decide the case but Mark tries to command them to condemn Tristram to death. Instead, they advise Tristram to be exiled for ten years.⁹⁰ The change Malory makes here is that in the source, Mark does not want Tristram killed, but exiled permanently. This change already makes Mark seem like a worse king but Malory continues in his changes. In both the Vulgate and *Le Morte Darthur*, Tristram lists all the deeds he has done for Cornwall, but Malory increases the amount of heroic deeds Tristram has accomplished “in order to stress Tristram’s value to Cornwall and to emphasize the folly of Mark’s desire to execute him.”⁹¹ Mark would not be viewed as such an awful king if he had consistently taken the good advice his barons offered him.

Another example that shows Malory’s interest in the dangers of not receiving proper counsel is when Mark decided he wants to kill Tristram so he, along with two knights and squires, goes to England. Mark came up with this plan on his own and did not tell anyone what it was until they were already on their way. When Mark does finally tell them, he says “Now I

⁹⁰ Kennedy, p. 142.

⁹¹ Kennedy, p. 142.

woll tell you my counsel, for ye ar the men that I moste truste on lyve.”⁹² Mark did not consult anyone in his decision to murder Tristram and he tells his men that this is what he has decided and so this is what will be. Since Malory is exploring the dangers that follow not taking counsel, Mark’s plan goes terribly. Malory writes how one of the knights, Sir Bersules, responds to Mark’s plan and what happens after in a way that shows Mark’s cruelty:

‘Alas,’ seyde Sir Bersules, ‘my lorde, what meane you? For and ye be sette in such a way, ye ar disposed shamfully, for Sir Trystram is the knyght of worship moste that we knowe lyvyng. And therefore I warne you playnly, I woll not consente to the deth of hym—and therefore I woll yelde hym my servyse and forsake you.’ Whan Kynge Marke harde hym say so, suddeynly he drewe hys swerd and seyde, ‘A, traytoure!’ and smote Sir Bersules on the hede, that the swerde wente to his teithe.

Whan Sir Amant, his fellow, sawe hym do that vylounce dede, and his squyers als, they seyde to the kynge, ‘Hit was foule done, and were you well we woll appele you of treson afore Kynge Arthur.’ Than was Kynge Marke wondirly wrother, and wolde have slayne Amaunte; but he and the two squyers hylde them togydirs [i.e. stood firm] and sette nought by his malice.

So Whan Kynge Marke sawe he might nat be revenged on them, he seyde thus unto the knyght Amante: “Wyte thou well, and thou appeyche me of treson, I shall thereof defende me afore Kynge Arthure; but I require the that thou telle

⁹² Malory, p. 346.

nat my name, that I am Kynge Marke, whosomevir come of me.' 'As for that,'
seyde Sir Amante, 'I will not discover your name.' And so they departed; and Sir
Amante and his felowys toke the body of Sir Bersules and buryed hit.⁹³

This scene shows us how badly things can go when a king takes no advice and acts on whatever he feels. Not only did Mark murder a knight for not wanting to partake in the murder of Tristram, but the remaining knight and squires leave his service to go and accuse him of treason before Arthur and his court. Learning nothing from this, Mark then continues his journey and runs into various knights and, eventually, the knights of the round table. Mark gets greatly embarrassed at every encounter by means of getting knocked off his horse and being chased by a fool.⁹⁴ Mark is eventually able to convince Arthur to set him free by falsely swearing to be better, but all of Mark's humiliation could have been avoided if he would have taken advice instead of trying to force plans on his men to murder a knight whom they respected.

King Mark's decisions regarding counsel and advice are further proof of Malory's interest in counsel. Just like how Malory worsening the character of Arthur was unnecessary, the way Malory made Mark into an even worse king was also unnecessary to do because it differs greatly from Malory's source. Mark is bad in Malory's source, but the Malorian Mark is worse and what makes him worse is how many times he has the opportunity to seek good advice from his barons and chooses not to do so. If Malory were not fascinated by advice and

⁹³ Malory, pp. 346-374.

⁹⁴ Malory, pp. 347-356.

counsel he would have not made such drastic changes to his characters, he would have simply made them how his sources made them.

THE CRUSADES

P. J. C. Field claims that Sir Thomas Malory was interested in his ancestry.⁹⁵ Malory “often shows himself conscious of his characters being ‘of jantill strenne of fadir syde and of modir syde.’”⁹⁶ Malory’s relative, Sir Robert Malory, was Prior of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem in England from 1432 to 1439 or 1440.⁹⁷ Thus, it stands to reason that Malory’s familial interests led him to an interest in the crusades as well and Malory’s interest in the crusades and threat of the Turks is made clear by the changes he makes from his sources in *Le Morte Darthur*.

One of the changes Malory makes to *Le Morte Darthur* is how hard Arthur had to fight to prove that he is the rightful king. The eleven kings did not readily accept Arthur as sole king and Malory includes:

an invasion of the Saracens [which] occurs as a result of a rebellion against King Arthur: So with that there com a messyngere and tolde how there was comyn into theyre londis people that were lawless, as well as Sarezynes a forty thousande... ‘Alas’! seyde the eleven kyngis, ‘here ys sorrow upon sorrow, and if we had not warred agaynste Arthure as we have done, he wolde sone a revenged us.’⁹⁸

Malory’s major changes in this section enhance the significance of Arthur as king in that the addition of this passage regarding the Turks shows that Arthur is so important, rebelling against

⁹⁵ Field, p. 36.

⁹⁶ Field, p. 36.

⁹⁷ Field, p. 68.

⁹⁸ Meg Roland, “Arthur and the Turks,” *Arthuriana*, Scriptorium Press, 2006, volume 16, number 4, pp. 29-42. p. 35.

him leads to countries being overthrown. Malory did not need to make Arthur's rise so complicated because, again, Malory claims he was translating the "French book" and while no such book exists, none of his known sources do this either. Malory, however, chose to write the story this way anyways and he chose to specifically insert references to the Turks. This unnecessary reference to the Turks and the potential results of a Muslim invasion surely shows Malory's interest regarding the threat of the Turks.

One of the first times going on a crusade is mentioned in *Le Morte Darthur* is at the end of "The Noble Tale Betwyxt Kynge Arthur and Lucius the Emperour of Rome."⁹⁹ After Arthur has succeeded in defeating the Romans, he says, "And than, as I am avysed, to gete me over the salte see with good men of armys to deme for His deth that for us all on the Roode dyed."¹⁰⁰ When compared to the source for this section,¹⁰¹ we see that Malory's inclusion of a crusade is an idea he came up with on his own. Going on a crusade would have been very anachronistic for Arthur, but Malory still chose to insert this detail anyways. Malory's most significant change to his sources is his complete change to how and why Arthur dies.¹⁰² This change is so significant because Malory rearranged these sections so he can have Arthur propose a crusade. If Malory wanted Arthur to propose a crusade after defeating the Romans he had to make this alteration to his source because at the end of the Vulgate Death of Arthur, Arthur dies so he cannot propose a crusade to the Holy Land.

⁹⁹ Malory, pp. 113-1510

¹⁰⁰ Malory, p. 149.

¹⁰¹ In the Vulgate Death of Arthur, the Roman War episode happens at the end of the tale, see Lacy, pp. 91-160. Malory chose to put the Roman War episode in the beginning of *Le Morte Darthur*.

¹⁰² See above under "King Arthur and Counsel" for more explanation on the Malorian death of Arthur.

Shepherd also tells us that “Malory evidently wished Arthur’s Roman war to establish the legendary promise of a great king rather than depict a territorial distraction that led to his downfall.”¹⁰³ This further supports the idea that this sections provides significant changes to the outcome of *Le Morte Darthur*. Since Malory added a proposed crusade by Arthur when he did not need to, and, considering all of the major details he changed, it would have been easier to not add this, it is obvious that Malory was very interested in crusades and the affect that they can have.

Malory ends *Le Morte Darthur* by saying:

Than Syr Bors de Ganys, Syr Ector de Maris, Syr Gahalantyne, Syr Galyhud, Sir Galyhodyn, Syr Blamour, Syr Bleoberys, Syr Wyllyars le Valyaunt, Syr Clarrus of Cleremount, al these knyghtes drewe them to theyr contreyes—howbeit Kyng Constantyn wold have had them wyth hym, but they wold not abyde in this royame—and there they al lyved in their contreyes as holy men. And somme Englysshe books maken mencyon that they wente never oute of Englund after the deth of Syr Lancelot; but that was but favour of makers, for the Frensshe book maketh mencyon—and it is auctorysed—that Syr Bors, Syr Ector, Syr Blamour, and Syr Bleoberis wente into the Holy Lande, there as Jesu Cryst was quycke and deed. And anone as they had stablysshed theyr londes—for the book saith, so Syr Launcelot commanded them for to do or ever he passyd oute

¹⁰³ Malory, p. 150 n. 6.

of thys world—these foure knyghtes dyd many bataylles upon the myscreantes
or Turkes; and there they died upon a Good Fryday for Goddes sake.¹⁰⁴

This passage is potentially problematic in that we only have this section from Caxton's printed version of *Le Morte Darthur*, because the last sixteen or so folio sides are missing from the Winchester Manuscript.¹⁰⁵ Caxton had made changes in his edition of *Le Morte Darthur*,¹⁰⁶ but there is no conclusive evidence to definitively suggest that Caxton made changes to this section.¹⁰⁷ Regardless, this is yet another section in which Malory claims the authority of a French Book when no reference, French or otherwise, can be found.¹⁰⁸ This change significantly affects the outcome of the text in three ways.

First, it made the text directly contradict itself. The beginning of the passage states that Sirs Bors, Ector, Blamour, and Bleoberis lived the rest of their lives as holy men in their countries, but right after it claims that they went to the Holy Land to fight the Turks. This clear contradiction suggests that Malory really wanted this reference to crusading to be included. Malory wanted this section included so badly he was either willing to overlook the contradiction or he was so intent on writing this passage that he did not realize what he had done.

¹⁰⁴ Malory, p. 697.

¹⁰⁵ Malory, p. 692, n. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Compare, for example, the opening of the Roman War chapter in Malory, p. 113 ("Hyt befelle whan Kyng Arthur had wedded Quene Gwenyvere and fulfilled the Rounde Table, and so aftir his marvelous knyghtis and he had venquyshed the moste party of his enemyes...") to the opening of the Roman War chapter in Caxton's version, Manchester, John Rylands University Library, Sig. h7v (Whanne kyng Arthur had after longe werre rested and helde a Ryal feeste and table rounde with his alyes of kynges prynces and noble knyghtes all of the round table there cam in to his halle he syttyng in his throne Ryal xij auncyen men berynge eche of them a braunche of Olyue in token...)

¹⁰⁷ Roland points out that there are some linguistic factors that could, perhaps, suggest Caxton added to this portion of the text but there is no direct proof of this and there are also linguistic factors that suggest Malory could have also written this passage. For more information, see Roland's article.

¹⁰⁸ Malory, p. 697, n. 9.

Second, this passage “brings a surprising political specificity” to *Le Morte Darthur*.¹⁰⁹ As I have pointed out, Malory does reference the crusades multiple times, but here it is referenced in a way that is reminiscent of contemporary history, i.e. the Muslim Turks sacking Constantinople less than thirty years before. This affects the end of the story because it is not what the reader was expecting at all. Malory did not have to include this passage since his French source did not but his inclusion of it speaks to his interest in the crusades.

Third, it speaks to Malory’s views on the current state of England. This passage comes after Malory altered the details of Arthur’s final wars. Malory changed Arthur’s downfall so that it was a result of his civil war with Lancelot.¹¹⁰ Malory previously made it clear that he did not like this type of war:

Lo, ye, all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kyng and nobelyst knyght of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes—and by hym they all were upholdyn—and yet might nat the Englyshemen holde them contente with hym. Lo, thus was the olde custom and usayges of thys londe: and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom. Alas, thy sys a greate defaughte of us Englyshemen, for there may no thyng us please no terme.¹¹¹

Malory must have been concerned with what was going on in England during his life because we have seen his clear interest in how counsel can go wrong, which can lead to disastrous civil wars. The disasters that stem from civil wars can manifest as an invasion from the Turks.

¹⁰⁹ Roland, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ See my section on King Arthur and Counsel.

¹¹¹ Malory, p. 680.

Similarly, my first quote from this section also illustrates Malory's views. Malory shows that not accepting the rightful ruler as king leads to an attack of the Saracens. Perhaps Malory wanted this English civil war to end so the English could focus their energy on more pressing matters, like the threat of the Turks. And unlike civil war, the crusades were a justified holy war whose original goal was to resolve the problem of the Muslim Turks.

Malory could have ended *Le Morte Darthur* like his source, without mention of the crusades, since he claimed he was only translating his source. Instead, Malory chooses to change the very ending of the tale to include reference to an unnecessary topic, i.e. the crusades, which shows that he was clearly interested in it.

CONCLUSION

The stories of King Arthur and his life have changed since early mentions of a warrior leader named Arthur from the late sixth century in later Welsh poems,¹¹² but, perhaps, no changes have been so intentional as those made in the fifteenth century Sir Thomas Malory. Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is purported as a French translation of the tales of King Arthur, but when I thoroughly examined *Le Morte Darthur*, I found Malory made a meaningful amount of changes. These changes involve the way counsel and advice was received in Camelot and inclusions of new references to the crusades and Turks. Since Malory claimed to be translating the French Book, making such clear changes must be important, especially because, as I have shown, of how these changes affect the outcome of *Le Morte Darthur*.

Considering how popular *Le Morte Darthur* was and still is today, we know very little about Sir Thomas Malory. Thankfully, Malory inserts direct details from his own life in multiple places, such as the endings of the chapter "Aftir Thes Questis,"¹¹³ "Sir Gareth of Orkney,"¹¹⁴ and "The Deth of Arthur,"¹¹⁵ where he asks the reader to pray for the author of the work and when he laments the state of England in "The Deth of Arthur."¹¹⁶ These insertions prove that Malory was inserting his own thoughts and feelings into this work. Thus, through the evidence outlined in this thesis, we can determine some of what Malory was interested in, such as counsel and issues relating to the Turks. This is significant because, although Malory was slightly involved in

¹¹² Lacy, p. xvii

¹¹³ Malory, p. 112.

¹¹⁴ Malory, p. 227.

¹¹⁵ Malory, p. 698.

¹¹⁶ Malory, p. 680.

politics, he was not high up enough in the government to be required to be so deeply fascinated by these topics.

Often, it is nearly impossible to go inside the head of someone from the past and determine personal details, such as their interests, but fortunately, the way *Le More Dathur* was written provides us with the opportunity to determine the interests of its author.

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