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The Death of King Arthur: The Legend Beyond The Legend

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There are three thematic issues prevalent in Geoffrey of Monmouth's The History of the Kings of Britain, the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, the Alliterative Morte Arthure, and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur in the sequence of events that lead up to Arthur's death. These thematic issues concern the failure of Arthur's kingdom, symbolism of Arthur as a Christ figure, and the prophecy of Arthur's return, and serve as a vehicle for the authors to make assertions as to what they thought was important about the legend. All of the texts include dream sequences that foretell Arthur's ruin, but each piece posits a different reason for why Arthur's kingdom fell. In some cases, as in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, it is the affair between Launcelot and Guinevere that causes the fallout among Knights of the Round Table and the final battle. Geoffrey of Monmouth and the author of the Alliterative Morte Arthure, on the other hand, treat Mordred's usurpation as the pivotal point towards the downfall of Arthur's kingdom. By far the most fascinating commonality among these texts is the prophecy of Arthur's return and why some texts leave Arthur's death open-ended, a mystery which has given rise to all sorts of mystic wonders from imbuing Arthur with Christ-like qualities to Gnostic prophecies about Merovingian Kings.

Beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth, Richard White, in his introduction to King Arthur in Legend and History, points out that "Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1135), which he claimed to have translated from a Welsh chronicle, is the first major

contribution to Arthurian legend, providing a complete account in Latin prose for an erudite audience" (xvii). Geoffrey sets up the fall of Arthur beginning with the coming of Emperor Lucius. For Geoffrey, Arthur's tragic flaw is pride. Arthur is not content to defend Britain but must prove his prowess and conquer all of Rome. Geoffrey implicates Arthur's pride when Arthur is in conference with his knights deciding how to respond to the Emperor of Rome's threats. Arthur says of Lucius, "Nothing that is acquired by force and violence can ever be held legally by anyone" (Geoffrey 232). This is an ironic statement to make after Arthur has spent his whole reign conquering and pillaging Britain. Geoffrey continues to drive his point home with Arthur's decision to invade Rome: "Finally he sent word to the Emperors by their own messengers to say that he had no intention whatsoever of paying them tribute ... He was coming, on the contrary, to exact from them what they had decreed in their own judicial sentence that they would exact from him" (236).

When the Romans learn of Arthur's plan and in turn send troops to conquer Britain, this is a critical turning point in the tragedy of Arthur according to Geoffrey. Geoffrey asserts, "When Arthur learned of their coming, he handed over the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and to his queen, Guinevere" (237). Shortly after this decision, while Arthur is sailing away at sea, he has a dream foreshadowing his death. Arthur dreams of a bear flying through the air at whose growl the very earth shakes, and a dragon with flaming eyes coming in from the west. The titans meet and fight in the sky, but the dragon's fire kills the bear. It is logical to assume that the dragon is Arthur, of course, because Arthur's surname is Pendragon. Arthur's philosophers translate the dream in the same manner, that Arthur will be victorious in his battle with the Emperor. The philosophers qualify the dream, however, and say it could mean that Arthur will win a battle against a giant. The meaning of the dream is left to the reader to

interpret, and given that the events which follow lead up to Mordred's treason, the dragon could indeed represent Arthur's enemy.

It is not until Arthur gains the victory over Emperor Lucius that news reaches Arthur of Mordred's treason. Geoffrey says, "His nephew Mordred, in whose care he (Arthur) had left Britain, placed the crown upon his own head. What is more, this treacherous tyrant was living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinevere" (257). The news of Arthur's return drives Guinevere to despair and, "She fled from York to the city of the Legions and there, in the church of Julius the Martyr, she took vows among the nuns promising to lead a chaste life" (259). The bloody battle ensues between Arthur and Mordred, as Geoffrey painfully describes, "It is heartrending to describe what slaughter was inflicted on both sides, how the dying groaned, and how great was the fury of those attacking" (261). Mordred is killed in the battle of Camblan, and Arthur receives his mortal wound as well. What happens to Arthur after that is left open-ended. Geoffrey suggests, "Arthur himself, our renowned king, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to" (261).

Geoffrey's account of the mystery of Arthur's death is brief, probably because he was not the first to contemplate Arthur's fate. White argues, "The British belief that Arthur did not die was clearly not invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth, since it was apparently widespread in the Celtic regions during the medieval period. It is even possible that the legend may have originated as early as just after Arthur's death, in order to inspire courage in the demoralized Britons so that they would continue their resistance against Saxon invaders" (xxv). No other death of a war hero has received as much attention as Arthur. Richard Cavendish adds, "A poem in the Black Book of Carmarthen mentions various famous heroes and their burying places, but of Arthur it says: 'An eternal wonder [anoeth] is the grave of Arthur.' There is no way of

being sure what this means, but it may refer to the belief that, though seriously wounded in his last battle at Camlann, the hero had not died but had been translated to a different plane" (23). William of Malmesbury, writing ten years preceding Geoffrey declares, "Arthur's tomb is nowhere to be found, for which reason ancient fables declare that he will return again" (White xxv).

The focus shifts with the passing of 200 years from the historical perspective of Geoffrey to the romanticizing of the Arthurian legend in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, a poem written around 1350 C.E. by an unknown author. Unlike the History, this text concentrates on the love affair between Launcelot and Gaynor (Guinevere) as the cause of the strife that leads to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom. Sir Agravain, Sir Mordred, Sir Gawain and his two brothers, Sir Gaheries and Sir Gaheriet, struggle with the knowledge of Launcelot's treason. Gawain and his brothers refuse to tell the king, but Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred are glad to share the awful news. The poet reveals, "Agravain told all bydene/To the king with simple cheer,/How Launcelot ligges by the queen,/And so has done full many a yere" (ll. 1728-1731). Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred trick Launcelot and Gaynor into believing Arthur has gone hunting in order to trap them together in the queen's bedroom. When the lovers are discovered, the queen is sentenced to be burned at the stake. As Launcelot rushes to the queen's rescue, a battle ensues and Gawain's brothers are slain. Arthur's reaction is piteous when he learns of Gawain's brothers' death and cries, "Jesu Crist! What may I sayn?/In erthe was never man so wo;/Such knightes as there are slain,/In all this world there is no mo./Let no man telle Sir Gawain/Gaheriet his brother is dede him fro,/But wele-away, the rewful reyne,/That ever Launcelot was my fo!" (1974-1981).

Eventually, at the behest of the Pope, Launcelot returns Gaynor to Arthur, but Gawain never forgives Launcelot for the death of his two brothers. This is important to the failure of

Arthur's kingdom in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur. Launcelot returns to France, and Gawain urges King Arthur to follow Launcelot and finish him off. Here the author of the Stanzaic Morte Arthur shifts the plot to Mordred, thus creating dual culprits in Arthur's fall. The interesting thing this author adds to the role of Mordred as deceiver is that when Arthur gathers his knights to decide whom to leave in charge, "The knightes answered, without lees,/And said, for sooth, that so them thought/That Sir Mordred the sekerest was/Though men the reme throughout sought,/To save the reme in trews and pees" (2516-2523.) This is either an ironic statement or a clever one on the part of the author, because after two months of battle in France against Launcelot, Arthur decides to return home only to hear that Mordred has usurped the throne. Arthur then has his dream of fortune's wheel where he stands uncertainly over a pool of black water swarming with dragons. The battle between Arthur and Mordred once again follows the prophetic dream.

Unlike in Geoffrey, there are Christian iconographic references in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur during the final moments of Arthur's life. Before he dies, Arthur asks Sir Bedivere to throw Excalibur into the "salte flood," (3450) and asks Bedivere to tell him what he sees when he does so. Bedivere can't bring himself to do it the first two times, and Arthur gasps, "'A, false traitour!'/'Twice thou hast me tresoun wrought;/That shall thou rewe sely sore,/And, be thou bold, it shall be bought.'/The knight then cried, 'Lord, thine ore!'/And to the sworde soon he sought'" (3480-3485). Finally the third time Bedivere does Arthur's bidding, the symbolism being, of course, Peter's denial of Christ three times. Then a ship with ladies "that were fair and free" (3502) comes to carry Arthur away. When Bedivere asks: "'Lord, whider are ye boun?/Allas! Whider will y fro me found?'" (3512-3513). Arthur replies, "'I will wend a little stound/Into the vale of Aveloun,/A while to hele me of my wound'" (3515-3517). This text,

however, is careful to put to rest any questions about Arthur's return when the next day, at dawn, Bedivere finds a chapel with a hundred candles lit and asks the hermit to tell him who's grave is there. The hermit answers, "'Thereof I can tell no more;/About midnight were ladies here,/In world ne wiste I what they were;/This body they brought upon a bere/And buried it with woundes sore'" (3538-3541). Bedivere assumes it is Arthur's tomb, and at once becomes a priest.

Like the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, another text that attributes the fall of Arthur's kingom to the affair between Launcelot and Guinevere is Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur. Malory, writing over 300 years after Geoffrey of Monmouth, was influenced by much Arthurian literature that had been written during the interim, including the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and the Alliterative Morte Arthure. In his story, Malory chose immediately to put the blame for Arthur's death on the courtly love affair between Arthur and Queen Margawse of Orkney. When Margawse visits Arthur's court, "Her secret purpose was to spy on Arthur, but soon she found herself in love with him, and he with her, so they became lovers. They lived together for a month and the bastard Sir Modred was conceived" (Malory 36). Malory does not see Arthur as the hero of Geoffrey's History. He views him as a man without morals. In a merciless, brutal act to remedy his incestuous mistake, Arthur orders that all the male babies born on a certain day are to be cast out to sea. Yet the inevitable tragedy takes shape when, "the plan failed, for the wreck was discovered by a yeoman who clambered aboard and found a lone survivor whom he took into his care, and this was the baby Modred" (43). Arthur's fate is sealed with the slaughter of innocents. However, that being said, Malory also follows the romance tradition that implicates the adulterous affair between Launcelot and Guinevere for the downfall of Arthur's kingdom as much as Arthur's tragic flaw. The similarity is, of course, adultery itself.

The plot shifts in Malory's text when Sir Aggravayne and Sir Modred accuse Launcelot

to the king, which is a turning point toward the failure of Arthur's reign. Launcelot defends his and Guinevere's innocence and rescues the queen when she is to be burnt at the stake. Arthur is distressed that Launcelot has brought such misery. He protests "For shame understand, Sir Launcelot, that I am your mortal enemy; for have you not killed many of my own loyal knights and, after consorting with the queen for many years now abducted her by force?" (48). Norma Lorre Goodrich in her book entitled King Arthur, finds fault with Malory's premise.
She asserts, "Aside from Sir Thomas Malory's brilliant, wonderful, and moving accounts of the deaths of Queen Guinevere, Sir Gawain, and Sir Lancelot in the last chapters of Le Morte d'Arthur, the story of Queen Guinevere's adultery has proven in the long run a poor solution to the problem of lost knowledge. The careers of great kings and great queens are not, according to history, based upon such lamentable vices as uncontrolled sexuality. Such accusations emerge from the life experiences of different authors, long centuries after the events removed from then in land and custom" (259).

Malory does, however, follow some literary precursors in his story. Arthur leaves Sir Modred in charge while he sails away to France, in this case, to battle Launcelot. Modred usurps the throne in Arthur's absence and tries to convince Guinevere to marry him, but in this story she flees to a tower. At this point Arthur has his dream of portent: "He (Arthur) was appareled in gold cloth and seated in a chair which stood on a pivoted scaffold. Below him, many fathoms deep, was a dark well, and in the water swam serpents, dragons, and wild beasts. Suddenly the scaffold tilted and Arthur was flung into the water, where all the creatures struggled toward him and began tearing him limb from limb" (Malory 498). The symbolism here is immediately followed by the grisly encounter between Arthur and Modred, a gruesome exchange of death blows.

Malory's account of Arthur's doom and the failure of his kingdom is not solely a commentary on the corruptive behavior of courtly love. Until this point there is little reference to anything religious, but Malory does include the symbolic episode of Excalibur's return to the Lady of the Lake, and gets his source from the Stanzaic Morte Arthur. The mysterious removal of Arthur's body by Queen Morgan le Fay, the Queen of North Galys, the Queen of the Waste Lands, and Nyneve, all sorceresses, is coupled with the scene where Bedivere encounters the Archbishop of Canterbury praying over a fresh grave. The archbishop tells Bedivere that a company of ladies brought Arthur's body to a hermitage to be buried. Malory, being the skeptic that he is, gives his own opinion. He speculates, "In many parts of Britain it is believed that King Arthur did not die and that he will return to us and win fresh glory and the Holy Cross of our Lord Jesu Christ; but for myself I do not believe this, and would leave him buried peacefully in his tomb at Glastonbury" (502). Lacy and Ashe point out that, "Whenever the possibility of a return is held open, it is said that Arthur, grievously wounded, is taken away to a place called Avalon, to have his wounds healed. Avalon has most often been identified with Glastonbury" (27). Almost as if irresistibly, Malory concludes the chapter on Arthur's death with the famous epigraph inscribed on a lead cross supposedly found in a tomb at Glastonbury believed to be Arthur's grave: "Hic Iacet Arthurus, Rex Quondam Rexque Futurus" (502).

The scene of Arthur being carried away by the three queens in Malory poses a very interesting question regarding the prophecy of Arthur's return. Why would Arthur be carried away by sorceresses, specifically the mother of Mordred whom he killed? An intriguing theory coinciding with the Arthurian legend is that Arthur represents the Merovingian Grail King. Merovingian, from the medieval Latin Merovingi, means descendants of Merovich, Clovis the First's grandfather, a legendary Frankish leader. The histories of Merovingian France and Britain

were intertwined. Clovis's heir, Clothair, lived and died during the time of the historical Arthur. Even more ironically, Clothair battled the king of Ile Tristan, Conomorus, the historical king Mark, at Plouneneru Menez. According to John Morris, "The battle was decisive for the future of the Franks as well as the British. Clothair died at Tours in December 561 [...] As he died, the old king protested, 'Wa! Wa! How great is the king of Heaven, who can kill kings as great as I am.' He was the last of the great Merovingian kings" (Morris 258).

The Merovingian Kings claimed to have mythical roots from a man who was half sea creature and possessed supernatural powers (Twyman). The Merovingians believed that Jesus Christ was of their bloodline, and that he didn't actually die on the cross but that he secretly came to France and wedded Mary Magdalene (Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln 313). This Gnostic heresy was the cause of much concern for the Church of Rome. The connection with the legend of King Arthur is that the Merovingians anticipated the return of a great king after the fall of Clothair and the Merovingian Dynasty. Interestingly enough, the historical connection carried down to the time of our first significant writer of Arthurian tradition, Geoffrey.

In some ways Arthur's birth is the perfect fit for return of the Merovingian King. Whether he meant to or not, in tracing Arthur's roots all the way back to Aeneas, son of Venus, Geoffrey gave Arthur the blood of gods. It follows that the conception of Arthur would then happen under extraordinary circumstances. This idea of Arthur's conception as something supernatural in nature may have been inspired by an older myth. As Cavendish observes, "The simple explanation is that a hero of superhuman powers cannot appropriately be conceived in a normal coupling of man and wife, but the logic of these stories goes far beyond this. The hero is born of an act which is perverse and wrong, which outrages nature and morality" (31-32).

The Merovingian connection with British bloodline during Geoffrey's time was Eleanor

of Aquitaine. Ellie Crystal asserts, "The Plantagenets established their Merovingian heritage only through Eleanor of Aquitaine... Eleanor descended from Charlemagne and therefore Clovis, one of the first Merovingian Kings." Eleanor married Henry II in 1152 and became Queen of England. We can see threads of this connection in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and in Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur in Arthur's battle with Launcelot, whose kingdom was in France. Not only that, but Richard Cavendish in King Arthur & The Grail adds, "The Welsh at this time were said to believe that they would reconquer all Britain when Arthur came back to lead them. The Bretons, it was said, expected Arthur's reappearance as confidently as the Jews awaited the Messiah, and anyone who ventured to tell the Bretons that Arthur was dead would be lucky to escape being stoned" (23).

The response to these Gnostic ideas concerning Arthur was strictly addressed in the Alliterative Morte Arthure, which presents some very powerful images unlike in any of the other three texts discussed here. Written around 1400 C.E. and mirroring Geoffrey of Monmouth's History, the Alliterative Morte Arthure does not include the affair between Launcelot and Guinevere as part of the downfall of Arthur's realm. In fact, it is not mentioned at all. In addition to that, the dream imagery in the Alliterative Morte Arthure is vivid and foreboding. Arthur's dream of the battle between the dragon and the bear is described in detail. The description of the dragon is a royal image. The poet observes, "His shoulders were shaled all in clene silver/Shredde over all the shrimp with shrinkand pointes;/His womb and his winges of wonderful hewes,/In marvelous mailes he mounted full high.../ His feet were flourished all in fine sable/And such a venomous flaire flow from his lippes/The flood of the flawes all on fired seemed!" (ll. 766-773). When Arthur seeks the advice of his philosophers, they again, as in the other texts, say, "The dragon that thou dremed of, so dredful to shew,/That come drivand over

the deep to drenchen thy pople,/Soothly and certain thyselven it is,/That thus sailes over the se with they seker knightes" (815-817). However, this author is very subtle, and it would take a keen eye to notice that when Emperor Lucius is coming to battle, it is Lucius who "Dresses up dredfully the dragon of gold,/With egles all over enamelled of sable" (2026-2027).

Another twist on the failure of Arthur's kingdom in the Alliterative Morte Arthure concerns how Mordred reacts when Arthur leaves him in charge. Modred pleads, "I beseek you, sir, as my sib lord,/That ye will for charitee chese you another,/For if ye put me in this plitt, your pople is deceived" (681-683). Again Mordred shows a side we have never seen before in his speech upon Gawain's death. Modred confesses, "'He was madless on molde, man, by my trewth./This was Sir Gawain the good, the gladdest of other,/And the graciousest gome that under God lived,/Man hardies of hand, happiest in armes,/And the hendest in hall under heven-rich" (3874-3879). As Mordred moves away from the pitiful scene, he feels remorse and "[T]eres let he fall,/Turnes him forth tite and talkes no more,/Went weepand away and weryes the stounde/That ever his werdes were wrought such wandreth to work!" (3886-3880). Mordred's repentance is not in any of the other three works discussed here. The theme of repentance is even more meaningful when expressed by the anti-Arthur. Yet even though Mordred shows this rather sensitive side, he still has the nerve to steal the throne and the queen while Arthur is away in Rome, and worse than that, conceives a child by her. This appears to be a direct reference to the Gnostic heresy about Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

It is extremely important to the author of this text that Arthur be given the qualities of a Christian king. Arthur always gives thanks to God when providence shows him favor. Arthur defers to Jesus saying, "'Crist be thanked,' quod the king, 'and his clere Moder,/That you comforted and helped by craft of Himselven./Skillfully skomfiture He skiftes as Him lies/Is none

so skathly may scape new skew from His handes;/Destainy and doughtiness of deedes of armes,/All is deemed and delt at Drightenes will!'" (1550-1564). Furthermore, Arthur's shield has the image of Mary and the Christ child. The poet reiterates, "But there was chosen in the chef a chalk-white maiden,/And a child in her arm that Chef is of heven;/Withouten changing in chase these were the chef armes/Of Arthur the avenaunt, while he in erthe lenged" (3648-3651). And in an emotional outburst Arthur mourns the death of his nephew Gawain, as if he were Jesus mourning death of his cousin John the Baptist. He cries, "Dere cosin of kind in care am I leved,/For now my worship is went and my war ended!/Here is the hope of my hele, my happing in armes,/My herte and my hardiness holly on him lenged!/My counsel, my comfort, that keeped mine herte!/Of all knightes the king that under Crist lived!/Thou was worthy to be king, though I the crown bare!" (3956-3962). If this Christ image is what the author had in mind, it would explain the overreaction on Arthur's part at Gawain's death.

The author of Alliterative Morte Arthure is also careful to make sure that Arthur receives a Christian burial, and leaves no open ends about his return. After Arthur kills Mordred and is mortally wounded himself, he asks the remaining knights to take him to Glastonbury. The knights repond and, "Then they hold at his hest holly at ones,/And graithes to Glashenbury the gate at the gainest;/Entres the Ile of Avalon and Arthur he lightes" (4307-4309). Before he dies, Arthur abdicates the throne to his cousin Constantine, and curses Mordred's children, prophesying, "That they be slely slain and slongen in waters" (4321). The author supports the idea of an earthly burial and indicates, "The baronage of Bretain then, bishoppes and other,/Graithes them to Glashenbury with glopinand hertes/To bury there the bold king and bring to the erthe/With all worship and welth that any wye sholde" (4329-4331). This concentrated effort may well have helped put an end to the Gnostic heresies concerning the return of a

mythical Merovingian King.

Having looked at four of the most brilliant pieces of literature in the Arthurian tradition, what does the death of Arthur signify in each text? Arthur's dreams are a foreshadowing of the failure of his kingdom, which in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain is attributed to Arthur's pride. Geoffrey claims Arthur is carried off to Avalon, "so that his wounds might be attended to" (261). The affair between Launcelot and Guinevere is the focus of the eloquent romance poem the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur as the foremost cause of Arthur's demise. All four texts include Mordred's usurpation of the throne, but Geoffrey of Monmouth's History and the author of the Alliterative Morte Arthure place the burden of Arthur's fall on Arthur's poor choice of a steward. In the Stanzaic Morte Arthur King Arthur says, "I will wend a little stound/Into the vale of Aveloun,/A while to hele me of my wound," (ll. 3515-3517) and he is taken away in a ship by ladies "fair and free" (l. 3502). A body is buried, but it is only implied that the body is Arthur's.

King Arthur receives Christian burial in the Alliterative Morte Arthure, but the text ends with the famous epigraph, "king once, and king to be" (l. 4348), hauntingly resonant of the Merovingian prophecy. Yet the elevation of Arthur to a Christ figure in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur and the Alliterative Morte Arthure was more likely a direct response to Gnostic heresies at the time connecting Arthur to a Merovingian demigod. As Morris puts it:

> Arthur existed, and was honoured in the next few generations as the greatest general and ruler of the recent past; just enough to show that in Britain he subdued the Germans who elsewhere mastered Europe, that the prestige of his victory and the force of his character maintained for two decades a strong government against impossible odds among the ruins of Roman Britain (141).

Clearly, these authors wanted to reiterate that legend surrounding Arthur's death was meant to be a symbol of hope for the people of Britain.

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