A New Ideal for Government in Malory's *Morte Darthur*

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Introduction

This is a paper about the ideal of government expressed in Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Morte Darthur*, but it is also a paper about the relationship of laws to stories, and both to history. In Malory's vision of the founding of the Round Table, King Arthur's knights shed personal histories, family ties, even their memories of the functions of chivalry and knighthood. In place of traditional norms, emotional bonds, and personal histories, they substitute a code that, while it produces behaviors identical in many respects those that the traditional norms would have produced, imagines for itself a new origin in Merlin's magical interventions. Thus redefined, honor becomes about righting all wrongs and eradicating all potential injustices, not just injustices that impinge upon friends and family. The objects of the adventures are not previously associated with the knights in any way and are in many ways irrelevant to the honor-seeking project itself. The Knights of the Round Table serve an ideal of honor that is basically impersonal – the same for every knight in every situation. The fellowship is united not by blood but by excellence.

A knight whose behavior most closely matches this ideal earns "worship," a combination of fame, honor, and a sense of intrinsic value. With worship bound up in this way with impersonal public service, the cumulative effect of individual knights each seeking ever more and more worship is (1) to evolve an humane code of governance, (2) to unify Arthur's reign under that code, and (3) to extend the reach of Arthur's reign and its code as far as possible. A set of rules develops from this definition of honor, and those rules become the Arthurian code of chivalry.[1] The code is impersonal in the sense that

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[1] Distinguishing this quasi-economic pursuit of worship from other sources of inspiration to martial prowess, see Dhira B. Mahoney, "'Ar ye a knight and ar no lovear?': the Chivalry Topos in Malory's *Book*

ideal behavior does not vary with the knight or the circumstance, individualistic in the sense that honor or worship adheres not to families but to knights in their individual capacities. Individual relationships are the only motive force (besides the desire to acquire honor) that the code recognizes.[2]

This substitution of an impersonal, individualist system for a pre-existing tradition of knighthood and governance proves unstable. The narrative of individual merit and impersonal honor seeking relies for legitimacy on its overlap with the family-based definitions of honor and knighthood from which it was derived. Thus, the motive force of family identity continues to operate *sub rosa*, until it rises to the surface to tear the Arthurian polity into its component parts, and the Round Table fractures into warring family groups. It proves impossible both to repress pre-existing, political and emotional motivations and to use them as the driving cultural force behind the code.

Part I of this paper describes the culture of knighthood, kingship and adventuring that pre-exists Arthur's coronation and from which is derived the new, impersonal knighthood that characterizes the Round Table. Part II describes the evolution of this new knighthood, paying special attention to the suppression of the fact and importance of family relationships. Part III focuses on Merlin, the origins of his authority and his status as both founder and symbol of the new code. Part IV describes the development of the new code as the Knights of the Round Table travel out on their adventures. It suggests that the suppression of family origins is incomplete, that the supposedly free-floating code relies on these resources – historical, cultural and genealogical – for its legitimacy

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of Sir Tristram,' in *Conjunctures*, ed. Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 318. Mahoney writes, "[M]otivation for martial action is the pursuit of worship, and worship is pursued for its own sake; self-worth is defined by martial exploit, measured by names, numbers, and quality of defeated opponents. . . [F]or Malory the primary stimulus for prowess is the desire for worship in its own right."
[2] "The power to move lies ultimately in the pattern of relationships between people." Derek Brewer, "The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot: Chretien to Malory," in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed Lori J. Walters (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 26.

and its emotional resonance. This part also traces the ultimate reassertion of all that has been suppressed. The conclusion suggests that the *Morte* is a myth of origins for the liberal state – or, since liberalism is never entirely achieved or perfected, a myth of origins for the liberal aspiration.

The ultimate return of family (with a vengeance) and the consequent disintegration of the Round Table, has been the subject of voluminous critical attention.[3] However, the reliance of the Round Table for its code on the very institution it purports to reject has yet to be fully explored. It is the goal of this paper to examine the attempted suppression of the cultural origins of the code and the effects of that suppression on Malory's alterations of his source, on characterization, on Merlin's role, and on the conception of a legal or political ideal that arises as a result.

Malory's narrative of how Arthur's Round Table rose and fell is also the story of the rise and fall of a very peculiar political ideal, that of unity through individualism. At the beginning of the *Morte*, the impersonal, individualist system strikes Arthur's newly assembled knights as alien and strange but, by the end of the *Morte*, it seems not only natural but inevitable that a polity should be measured by its proximity to this ideal. The cultural background of familial politics is initially a neutral fact of the landscape, whereas the return of family at the end indicates the total failure and collapse of the polity. Malory does not imagine how the ideal was realized in a stable, permanent state. Quite the contrary. However, he imagines how this particular ideal gained a stable, permanent hold

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[3] See generally, Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Studies XI (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1985) 218-29; Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, Medieval and Renaissance Authots, vol. 9 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987) 145-54; Stacey L. Hahn, "Camelot Through the Eyes of Arthur's Nephews: Seeds of Dissension in the Cyclic Prose Lancelot," in *The Arthurian Yearbook II*, ed. Keith Busby (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 21-38.

over the English imagination. The *Morte Darthur* is a myth of origins – not the origin of a world, but the origin of the idea of a world.

I.   Before the Round Table: Balin, Balan, and the Dolorous Stroke

Before the arrival of the Round Table and the re-conceptualization of chivalry, knighthood is inseparable from the ideal of family honor and the occasional necessity of blood vengeance. The very first adventure of Arthur's reign, the one that sets the pattern for the adventuring knight, has its origin in this sort of blood feud.[4] This type of knighthood, although distinct in many ways from the Round Table ideal that follows in later chapters of the *Morte*, remains at the heart of what it means to be an honorable knight.[5]

The story is as follows. Sir Balin, whose recent accomplishments have earned him the envy and admiration of Arthur's entire household, attacks and kills the Lady of the Lake, who has just arrived at Arthur's court. He explains to Arthur that this was necessary because The Lady had killed Balin's mother and generally made war on his family. Arthur is nonetheless furious. She was a guest in his court and under his safe-conduct, and the disgrace of her death leaves Arthur unmoved by any explanation Balin can provide: "'For what cause soever ye had,' seyde Arthure, 'ye sholde have forborne in my presence. . . . Therefore withdraw you oute of my courte in all the haste that ye may'"

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[4] For a discussion of how Balin's mode of adventuring reverberates through the later adventures of other knights, see Jill Mann, "Taking the Adventure: Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*," in *Aspects of Malory*. Arthurian Studies I, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiua and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981), 89.

[5] Beverly Kennedy classifies Balin as an "heroic" knight (such as Gawain), as opposed to a "worshipful" knight (such as Lancelot) or a "true" knight (such as Galahad). Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Studies XI (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1985), 95. Her "typology of knighthood" is a useful way to distinguish the phases of political affiliation. However, Kennedy places more emphasis on the courtly rather than on the political distinction between the types. A more political reading would regard these types as extending their range of fellowship and identification outward from clan, to state, to God. Seen this way, Gawain occupies liminal space between heroic and worshipful, since he initially forgoes a blood feud but ultimately brings down the Round Table to pursue one.

(II.41).[6] Balin leaves Arthur's court in disgrace, closely pursued by Lanceor, who attempts to revenge Balin's disrespect for Arthur. They fight; Balin kills Lanceor, and Lanceor's lover, Colombe, appears out of nowhere and kills herself in grief. A mysterious dwarf and then Merlin appear in quick succession, each prophecying the horrible consequences of these deaths. They explain that Balin, previously doomed to kill his own brother, is now also doomed to deliver the Dolorous Stroke, which will bring ruin and misery to three kingdoms at once. Balin vows to regain Arthur's favor by subduing one of Arthur's enemies, and his brother Balan joins him on this quest. The two are later separated and, when Balin has fulfilled the prophecies and brought ruin to three kingdoms, he meets his brother in disguise, and they kill each other.

A.   *Political versus Family Identity*

By killing the Lady of the Lake when she was under Arthur's protection, Balin prioritizes his duty to take personal or family vengeance over his duty to preserve the peace of Arthur's household.[7] He regards this prioritization as inevitable, less a choice of how to act than a simple matter of his identity. As he explains to Arthur, "Sir . . . me forthynkith of youre displeasure, for this same lady was the untrwest lady lyvynge . . . and she was causer that my modir was brente thorow hir falsehode and trechory" (II.41). He killed her although he knew it would cause Arthur no small embarrassment because, for Balin, revenging his mother's death is more important than his status in the Arthurian community. He is a member of his family before he is a member of Arthur's household.

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[6] This and all references to the text are from *Malory: Complete Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). For ease of reference to other editions, numbers in parentheses provide both Caxton's chapters (in Roman numerals) and the edition-specific page numbers (in Arabic numerals).
[7] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Studies XI (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1985), 223.

Balin's first encounter with his brother, Balan, draws home this point of instantaneous identification among the Balin/Balan family over and against any similar identification with Arthur's house. Balan finds his brother only after Balin has killed Lanceor, when Balin is not only alienated but potentially at war with Arthur's household, and it is at this moment that Balan vows to join him: "I woll ryde with you and put my body in adventure with you, *as a brothir ought to do*" (II.44, emphasis added). Balan arrives to provide aid to a family member, not to help King Arthur or to join the Arthurian polity. And since Balan arrives to aid his brother precisely when Balin is as detached as possible from the larger political community of Arthur's court, the timing of heightens the sense of opposition between familial and political ties. Balin and Balan are engaged, first and foremost, in a family-oriented project: they preserve family honor and provide aid to family members.

The language describing Balan's inclusion in Balin's quest ("as a brothir ought to do") further emphasizes this priority of family motivation. Balan explains that he joins his brother because he "ought to," not because he wants to or because it would be wise to. His language is qualitatively different in this respect from Balin's explanation of his plan to subdue King Royns. Balin has no pre-existing duty to defeat King Royns. It is a means of reintegrating himself into the Arthurian community and winning back Arthur's favor, and it is undertaken his quest voluntarily, because he wants to, not because he ought to:

> As for that [having displeased King Arthur],' seyde Balyne, "I woll hyghe
> me in all [the] haste that I may [to] mete with kyng Royns and destroy
> him, other ellis to dye therefore. And iff hit may happe me to wynne hym,
> than woll kynge Arthure be my good frende.
> (II.41)

He identifies an action that will please Arthur and vows to undertake it, but there is nothing inevitable about the choice. It is a conscious effort to ally himself with the King rather than a spontaneous expression of his sense of identity as one of Arthur's knights. The structure of the situations is similar – in both cases one knight adopts the cause of another – but where Balin speaks from a sense of distance and choice, Balan adopts his brother's quest as the natural consequence of their identity as brothers.[8] Balan is undertaking a duty ("a brother ought"), while Balin is merely expressing an intention ("I will"). In that difference, the distinction between duty and will, is the difference between identity and alliance.

Balin's (and Balan's) sense of identity extends beyond self to include family, but not to any larger political unit. Balan and Balin identify with each other, but although they admire and wish to ally themselves with Arthur and his knights, they do not identify themselves with him or with them.[9] This mode of family-oriented chivalry is already becoming obsolete, and even in this prelude to the founding of the Round Table chapters, there is an assumed, emerging connection between the individual and the polity. In this context, Balin's construction of the individual through family ultimately proves unhappy, because it does not allow him to predict or to understand the consequences of his actions in the larger political context. Violence in the *Morte* always ripples out beyond the individuals immediately involved to include the group that identifies with them. Balin

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[8] The alliance of the Eleven Kings (whose war with Arthur precedes the founding of the Round Table) provides another illustration of this contractual or voluntary mode of association: "[L]ooke every of fyou kyngis lat make such ordinaunce that none breke upon payne of deth. And who that seeth any man dresse hym to fle lightly, that he be slayne; for hit ys bettir we sle a cowarde than throrow a coward all we be slayned" (King Lot, I.23). It is clear that the kings may decide either to join with each other in this way or not, and defection had previously been a real possibility. The contrast with Balan's reasoning ("as a brothir ought to do") is the contrast between a voluntary and involuntary duty. Where the Eleven Kings identify a possible action, Balan enacts his only possible identity.

[9] This extension of the boundary of the self outward from the family has been used to describe the creation of ethnicity. Amy Chua, *World on Fire* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 14. On the link between family, ethnicity and nationalism, see *infra,* n. 12.

imagines that these ripples should stop at the bounds of family, but the identification actually extends through and beyond family. He must live with the consequences of this extension whether he understands them or not.

The first hint of this opposition between interpretive systems (family versus polity) comes with dwarf's prophecy on the death of Lanceor. In contrast to Balin and Balan, the dwarf is preoccupied with political identity. Before pointing out to Balin that Lanceor's family will take revenge for the killing, the dwarf announces, "Thou hast done grete damage *unto thyself*" (II.44, emphasis added). There is a suggestion that Balin's fate is intimately bound up with the fate of one of Arthur's men; by fighting and killing Lanceor, he Balin has somehow injured himself as well. If killing Lanceor is an injury to Balin, then Balin is identified with Lanceor in some way, presumably because Balin has also been a member of Arthur's household. Despite his current alienation from Arthur's court, the dwarf suggests that Balin is identified with Arthur's house as strongly and as inevitably as Balin feels himself to be identified with Balan.

Balin does not understand this aspect of the dwarf's message. He recognizes that potential opposition exists between the demands of the polity and the demands of his family, but he does not understand the conflict as a question of identity: "'As for that' seyde Balyne, 'the[m] [Lanceor's family] I fere nat gretely; but I am right hevy that I sholde displease my lorde, kyng Arhture, for the deth of thys knyght'" (44). Ignoring the first part of the warning, the lesson that Lanceor's death damages Balin, he responds only to the threat of vengeance from another family.[10] Although he wishes to please Arthur, Balin does not identify himself with Arthur in the way he identifies himself with Balan. He sees his alienation from Arthur as producing only sadness, not harm.

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[10] Incidentally, Lanceor's family never makes an appearance, and nothing comes of this element of the prophecy.

As if to drive home this point (and Balin's inability to grasp it), the language of identity is repeated almost immediately. Colombe kills herself, and this time the prophetic voice is Merlin's: "'A, Balyne!' seyde Merlion, *'thou hast done thyself grete hurte* that thou saved nat thys lady that slew herself.'" (II.45, emphasis added). Again there is this combination of intimacy crossing over into identification. And as with Lanceor, the intimacy and identification are involuntary. Balin has done himself a harm whether he accepts this understanding of his identity or not.

B.   The Dolorous Strike (Political Identification Triumphs)

A similar process of identification along political lines explains the effect of the Dolorous Stroke, but here the effects are amplified through the device of a magic lance. Having lost his sword, Balin, pursued through an enchanted castle, takes up a lance and strikes at his attacker. Instantly the castle falls into ruins, and three kingdoms fall into poverty and distress. The Dolorous Stroke enacts one consequence of identification through political lines: the amplification of violence as it spreads from one individual to those who identify with his injuries. This is familiar to the modern reader in the sense that an attack on a fellow-citizen abroad makes him feel less safe.[11] And it would be familiar to Balin in the sense that an attack on his mother or his brother would be perceived as an attack on himself.

In this, the structure and the lived experience of political identification resembles the experience of lineal identification, and the spread of violence through total war

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[11] When Pearl Harbor was bombed, it was a purely political identification that led Americans thousands of miles away and in another time zone to feel that they themselves had been attacked and, more to the point, were currently under attack. This response that was not only a coming together under stress, but an expression of perceived identity. In the unlikely event that Japanese bombers had attacked the base in the course of a purely personal dispute with one of its employees, this response would have seemed both outsized and ludicrous. The response from citizens of Kansas to the attacks on the World Trade Center is another case in point.

mimics the spread of violence through the blood feud. Indeed, the Dolorous stroke has

been interpreted the instant fulfillment the blood feud's worst possible outcome, the

spread of reciprocal vengeance to engulf and eventually destroy an entire society.[12]

However, the extension of this sense of identification beyond families or even households

greatly increases its effectiveness. Just as violence is amplified as it travels from

individual to individual in the blood feud, it is amplified that much more when the lines

of identification spread beyond families to entire political alliances.

Because Balin does not understand how harm to someone outside his family could

be reinterpreted as harm to himself, he cannot understand this amplification of injury to

include entire kingdoms. When Merlin describes it, with specific emphasis on the

magnitude of the destruction,[13] Balin rejects the possibility that such harm could possibly

emerge from anything he alone might do: "'Nay,' seyde Balyn, 'nat so; for and I wyste

thou seyde soth, I wolde do so perleous a dede that I wolde sle myself to make the a lyer"

(II.45). The horror of his fate, and his inability to believe or engage with that horror, has

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[12] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, Arthurian Studies XI (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1985), 229. She cites the description of the blood feud's potential evolution in René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*,trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), 14. "There is the risk that the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size." A link (original to Malory) between the Dolorous Stroke and the death of the Lady of the Lake during a blood feud lends potential support for this interpretation, that the Dolorous Stroke itself illustrates the potential consequences of blood feud. However, it is not clear that the prophecy actually refers to the Lady of the Lake, and it is equally if not more likely that it is actually Columbe's death has doomed Balin to ruin three kingdoms. Jill Mann, "Taking the Adventure: Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*," in *Aspects of Malory*, Arthurian Studies I, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiua and Derek Brewer (1981), 71-91, 81. For the contrary assertion, see Kennedy, 226. The (political and analytic) difficulty of disentangling ethnic and political state-building may be the source of the difficulty of disentangling blood vengeance from political ramifications in an analysis of the Dolorous Stroke. For a general discussion of the conflicts and similarities between ethnic solidarity and political citizenship, see Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986) 149-52. For a discussion of the psychology of cultural and political identification, see John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1982, 1993), 414-18. For a cursory description of the relationship between the blood feud and the rule of law that arises to interrupt and redirect it, see Richard Posner, *Law & Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 52-53.

[13] *Morte*, II.45. "[B]ecause of the dethe of that lady thou shalt stryke a stroke most doloerous that ever man stroke . . . and thorow that stroke three kyngoms shall be brought into grete poverté, miseri and wrecchednesse twelve yere."

been explained in a number of ways.[14] However, none accounts for the consistent rhetoric of identification that Balin continually hears and ignores. The answer that he is encountering political identification for the first time, explains both the magnitude of the destruction and his inability to imagine such an enormous amplification of individual violence.

Later, the political identities brought to light by the Dolorous Stroke become the norm. After the founding of the Round Table, individual knights will identify themselves through their affiliation with Arthur's fellowship, even leaving their families to join it. The future of Arthur's realm is this sense of intimate, almost familial identification, and it cannot incorporate Balin's limited conception of a knighthood.[15] However, Balin's pre-political understanding of honor and virtue nonetheless provides the background for many of the virtues that the Round Table expounds. The instantaneous identification of Balan with his brother, their willingness to share each others' adventures, Balin's unflinching acceptance of even the most obscure adventure and dangerous tasks if duty to the larger group requires it – all of this becomes the substance of the Round Table's code of "worship" or honor. The "new" code that the Round Table adopts is not created from nothing; it is the old code purged of Balin's familial or clannish limitations, a purgation the Round Table institutionalizes from the moment of its founding. Or tries to.

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[14] Jill Mann concludes that the lack of any obvious link between Colombe's death and the Dolorous Stroke is, in the fatalistic context of this episode, the point of the prophecy. Oblique connections rather than explication characterize this episode in particular and the *Morte* more generally. In context, Balin's refusal even to try to understand, like his fatalistic willingness to "take the adventure" is a peculiarly Arthurian virtue. Jill Mann, "Taking the Adventure: Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*," in *Aspects of Malory*, Arthurian Studies I, ed. Toshiyuki Takamiua and Derek Brewer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981), 82.

[15] Indeed, his unthinking engagement in blood vengeance stands in direct opposition to Gawain's initial decision to forgo the blood feud under similar provocation several pages later. See Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, Medieval and Renaissance Authots, vol. 9 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 154. Riddy explicitly draws the connection between rejection of vengeance here and the rejection of the blood feud as a motivation for chivalry. (In some sense, Gawain's rejection of the feud initially founds the Round Table, just as his acceptance of the feud ultimately destroys it.)

II.   Establishing the Round Table, Establishing the Code

The outline of the adventures that follow the founding is similar to the outline of Balin's adventures – a strange test, a loss of honor, a quest undertaken to regain and perhaps even improve one's position – but the genealogical elements are missing. The initial dishonor contains no aspect of family commitment or feud, and Balin's identification with his family is replaced by the knights' identification with other Knights of the Round Table. The genealogical motivation is gone, and with it goes much of the cultural explanation for knighthood. Merlin attempts to remedy the loss by substituting his own rules and prophecies for the knights' prior understanding of their role, with mixed results. The apparent replacement of history and genealogy with magic and prophecy gives Merlin an outsized role in the affairs of the Round Table, and the sheer power of Merlin's magic at first seems sufficient to suppress the reality of cultural and genealogical background that the knights bring to the Table. However, the background of the Balin material and the similarity of the new code to the old chivalry soon makes it clear that Merlin relies on the very tradition he attempts to suppress. Arthur is king because he is the son of a king, not merely because he pulled the sword in the stone. And the knights know what to do on adventures because there is a pre-existing tradition of knighthood, not merely because Merlin tells them what honor is. The new era of the Round Table is only possible through constant (if oblique) citation to the old era of kinship and feud.

A.   *The First Adventure of the Round Table*

The first feast at King Arthur's Round Table celebrates both his marriage to Guenevere and the inauguration of the Round Table itself. The Round Table, a wedding

present from King Lodegreaunce, Guenevere's father, has only recently arrived, and Merlin has only recently procured for it the best knights in the land. Their arrival, and their carefully ordered seating according to their "degree" is, according to King Lodegreaunce's explanation, the table's primary function. When King Lodegreaunce gave it as a gift he explained only that: "[W]han hit ys fullé complete there ys an hondred knyghtes and fifty. And as for an hondred good knyghtes, I have myselff, but I wante fyfty" (III.60). What these hundred and fifty knights are intended to do is never discussed, and in the absence of other information their ceremonial assembly seems their only *raison d'être*. The lack of any stated purpose for the assembled knights leaves Merlin room to define their function.

The development of Arthur's household into an idealized governing body takes place primarily through Merlin's intervention as he assembles and defines the Round Table. When, at their first assembly, he commands the celebrating knights to be still and quiet and attend, for a "struange and a mervailous adventure" is coming, they are visited almost immediately by a white hart, pursued by a white brachet and a pack of black hunting dogs. The brachet attacks the hart, only to be obscurely kidnapped by one of the knights. He in turn is pursued by a lady demanding the return of her little dog, and the lady is pursued in her turn by an unidentified knight, who carries her off by force, "and ever she cryed and made grete dole" (III. 63). An irritated Arthur is relieved to see her go: "So whan she was gone the kynge was gladde, for she made such a noyse" (III. 63). Arthur is disinclined to involve himself with the plight of a stranger. He appears to regard the Round Table and its assembly of knights as purely ceremonial, and he understands its ceremonial function to have been inappropriately interrupted by the chaos and "noyse" of the intrusion.

Merlin corrects Arthur's misinterpretation, suggesting that the assembly of knights has a larger purpose: "Nay . . . ye may nat leve hit so, thys adventure, so lyghtly, for thes adventures muste be brought to an ende, other ellis hit woll be disworshyp to you and to youre feste" (III. 63). He articulates what is to become a consistent theme in the hundreds of pages to follow. The "worship" of Arthur and his knights is obscurely bound up in their response to this and other complaints that arrive before them. Providing help is a crucial part of that engagement, and failure to provide help produces the disgrace of "disworshyp."

B.   Rules and Culture

Merlin speaks as if his rules of chivalry were divorced from the longstanding tradition of knighthood that preceded the assembly of The Best Knights in the World at the Round Table. He ignores the tradition of knightly adventuring that gives meaning to both the initial stillness and the eventual activity, a tradition that informs the rule he imposes. Impersonal assistance is closely related to the loyal aid of friends and family in trouble. A pre-existing tradition of such assistance, together with some hierarchy for providing that assistance based on need or dessert, is a necessary precursor to a rule prescribing an impersonal, absolute duty to give aid. Balan's participation in Balin's quest and Balin's response to his mother's death provide evidence for such a background. Yet Merlin's rule-driven explanation pretends that the knights' re-engagement with the world is not a re-engagement on new, more expansive terms but a first foray motivated by the rules themselves. The effect of this pretension is to posit the new rules as the explanation for the adventure by suppressing their dependence on the conception of

knighthood that led to the knights' assembly in the first place. The source of the rules on family loyalty and the necessity of blood vengeance is vigorously suppressed.

This suppression depersonalizes the origin of knightly duties. It implies that knights give aid to everyone, not because they once gave aid to some people, but simply because giving aid to everyone is the new way of gaining personal honor. Their behavior becomes entirely rule-driven. The rule that Merlin's command generates ("when you see people who need help, it is bad to reject them and good to follow them and find out more") finally achieves its full articulation in the Pentecostal Oath, which the knights take upon the completion of this first trio of adventures. Once Arthur adopts this rule as a policy by which honor is distributed, the knights individually choose to intervene because intervention brings them worship as individuals. They relate to the objects of their knightly intervention only as interchangeable sites for the appropriation of honor and worship. The familial and cultural origin for knightly adventuring vanishes.

The depersonalization of assistance is appropriate and even desirable from a social-justice perspective, because the knights' interventions do not depend on their knowledge of the individuals concerned or any previous involvement. Instead, they extend justice uniformly throughout the realm. This transition from personal to impersonal engagement is one way to define the creation of a governing bureaucracy over and against a feudal or tribal overlord. Impersonality assures that everyone who comes before the Round Table is treated according to the merits of the case, and this makes it an attractive place to bring disputes.[16]

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[16] As Richard Kaeuper has pointed out, this commitment to a fair hearing for complaints makes the Round Table a mirror for the evolving English judiciary. Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 292. The hearing of disputes originated in the Exchequer, part of the king's household. Royal judiciary authority traveled outward from the king to his household to a group of specialists within the households. The Exchequer, which originally heard only disputes related to debts

The apparent result of Merlin's intervention and instruction in this episode is that his rules give the knights a reason to undertake the adventure. However, the substitution of rules for other rationales, rationales more organically related to the knights themselves, is not as complete as Merlin would have it. The actual result of his intervention is that the idea of honor according to his rules of worship competes with pre-existing definitions as the stimulus behind this kind of impersonal chivalric adventure. (It was the old definition that supplied the criteria under which the knights achieved their status as the Best Knights in the World.) This explanation of honor maximization according to new rules now sits alongside the intuitive one – that this is an extension of what knights have always done for those they love. Merlin entirely ignores the tradition of knightly adventuring that gives meaning to both the initial stillness and the eventual activity, a tradition that informs the rule that he imposes.

C.   *Rules and Genealogy*

Just as Merlin suppresses the source of the code's cultural background in family identity, he suppresses the power of genealogy to determine who should be king. With respect to Arthur's accession to the throne, Merlin uses the magical device to reveal Arthur's identity as king, and he behaves throughout as if the magical device were independent of the tradition of inheritance that in fact dictates possession of the throne.

Uther Pendragon, the former king, had had an affair with the wife of the Duke of Tintagel. With Merlin's help, Uther disguised himself as her husband and snuck into her bedroom. It is later learned that her husband had died on the battlefield before this encounter took place. Uther subsequently married her, and Arthur was born after their

owed the king, became the source of the Anglo-American common law and the foundation of England's judiciary.

marriage. Whatever the measure of Arthur's legitimacy as Uther's son (post-marriage birth or conception after the end of the first marriage), Arthur is the son and legitimate heir.[17] But Merlin, for reasons of his own, requires that the Queen turn over the child to him. It is thus only through Merlin and his magical intervention (the sword, the stone, the fateful prophecy) that the rightful heir actually ascends the throne.

Arthur's succession to the throne, although conventional in substance (he is the son of the king and thus the rightful heir to the throne), is procedurally peculiar. The sword-in-the-stone device for identifying the heir of the king accomplishes two tasks both crucial to Merlin's suppression of culture. First, it substitutes Merlin's judgment for the usual methods of establishing the paternity of a prince. Second, it diffuses the power of paternity. Power, instead of traveling through the paternal line, takes a detour into the natural landscape, which, imbued with quasi-magical power, takes over the function of recording and publicizing the genealogical foundations of Arthur's succession. But as the genealogical information takes this detour away from the family, the source of the king's power is blurred. Is it the landscape or the father who confers this power and this inheritance? Does the landscape reflect paternity or vice versa? Is there any distinction? Does it matter? As a result, Arthur's claim to the throne touches only lightly on his paternity. The power Arthur brings to his claim (and ultimately to his reign) is bound up in his possession of the magical sword, and only secondarily on his parents.

By severing Arthur from his origins, Merlin appears to create both an authority (Arthur as king) and a rule (election of monarch through a magical-sword device) that lack precursors. Whereas a traditional succession focuses on the prince's inheritance of a

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[17] In arguing for Arthur's legitimacy, Merlin first establishes that Arthur was conceived *after* the death of Igraine's first husband. He then points out that Uther married Igraine before Arthur was born. Arthur's legitimacy is thereby established according to two independent criteria. Morte, I.11.

kingdom, the magical-sword succession focuses on the selection of a king. This is an important distinction. The line of succession has been twice interrupted – narratively by the passage of time and thematically by the peculiar king-finding device – with the result that Arthur becomes king in the almost complete absence of a kingdom: there is neither order in the realm nor definite boundaries for it. The focus of this interrupted succession narrative is the re-establishment of patrilineal continuity but Arthur's project of self-fashioning.[18] He is a free-floating king, looking to realize his identity by creating a kingdom, and the paradox of priority is that he inherits a kingdom he must invent. He is thereby able to enjoy the legitimacy that predecessors confer without the anxieties and limitations that arise from belatedness, the inheritance of a defined thing and a predetermined role with respect to it.[19] Arthur's accession is severed from the narrative of patrimony that traditionally gives meaning to accession. In place of the traditional narrative is one authored and implemented by Merlin.[20]

But Arthur is not really severed from his origins, and his authority does not arise solely form the sword in the stone. As with the supposed substitution of rules for other motivations that occurs at the feast, Merlin attempts to substitutes a thin, unconvincing

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[18] The complex, diaclectical process by which the individual uses new and unfamiliar processes to negotiate his way to identity is in some ways to that described in Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), 1-2. "[I]f we say there is a heightened awareness of the existence of alterative modes of social, theological and psychological organization, we must say that there is a new dedication to the imposition of control upon those modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives."

[19] In Harold Bloom's terms, Arthur is the Shakespeare of kingship, belonging to the "giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central" or even relevant. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11. In Robert Cole's terms, he paradoxically mimics two independent sources of authority, the authority of the innovator and the authority of the faithful delegate. David Cole, "Agon at Agora: Creative Misreadings in the First Amendment Tradition," *Yale Law Journal* 95, (1986): 904-905. "On the one hand, we grant authority to those whom we regard as legitimate, because they faithfully adhere to society's traditions, mores, and laws. On the other hand, we also assign authority to those who stand out as great, and who in doing so simultaneously violate and redefine our traditions, mores, and laws."

[20] Robert M. Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97 (1983): 4. "[The] intelligibility of normative behavior inheres in the communal character of the narratives that provide the context of that behavior."

explanation for a more robust and organic one. And just as the new code actually relies

on the old knightly culture for its substance and much of its immediate resonance within

the newly assembled community, the substitute relies for its legitimacy on an older,

organic reality: that Arthur is the king because his father was the king. Although the

narrative of paternity cannot express itself through the usual channels, it remains

intensely relevant to the events that follow. Merlin suppressed Arthur's genealogy by

removing him from his parents. The truth of his paternity was then diffused throughout

the natural landscape to assert itself through the rocks as "magic." The sword-in-the-

stone incident speaks about Uther and England and the immutable ties of blood and

inheritance that will bind England together; Merlin pretends that it speaks about Arthur

and his future personal greatness as if his genealogy were incidental.

D.   Rules and History

It will be helpful to pause for a moment to examine the relationship between

comprising a society and establishing rules for it, the ways that the cultural evolution and

the normative one are bound up in each other. Law, in the sense of an underlying premise

of shared rules of conduct (such as Merlin's code), creates society; but it is equally true

that a society must pre-exist its laws in order to evolve them or (in the case of an

imagined intervention, divine or magical) to receive them from a lawgiver. Who were the

American Puritans before they adopted the Mayflower Compact, or the Israelites before

the Ten Commandments? The explanation for their separateness as people, the cultural

importance of that separateness, is not yet fully articulated before the arrival of rules, but

the rules would be meaningless in a vacuum. This combination of law and narrative is, to

quote Robert Cover, world-creating: "In the context of the narratives that give it meaning,

law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live."[21] This retrospective, explanatory force is part of the world Cover describes.

Malory's narrative of the founding of the Round Table embraces the notion of a world-creating law while evading the question of its priority with respect to culture. The knights awaken at the moment of their arrival to Camelot as a complete society created *ex nihilo*. It is as if the Puritans awoke to find themselves assembled at Plymouth, but could not say why, or the Israelites found themselves wandering around the desert with no particular history, their identity entirely bound up in their future. In this case, the rules arrive through Merlin, and the knights bring no history, no code, and no prior activity as knights to their new roles in Arthur's court. The chicken-egg paradox of priority between law and culture is rigorously repressed, and instead of a slow coalescence Malory imagines a culture that is born, mute and inactive and confused, at the same moment that it is magically invigorated with its rules and its meaning. Its similarity to Balin's understanding of himself and his duties would be explained away as coincidental.

Because it is Merlin's command alone rather than a shared history of knightly conduct that spurs the Round Table to follow the kidnapped lady (and her pets), the Round Table's ethos associates itself with magic rather than history. This is crucial to the meaning of the Round Table to itself, because it invests Merlin's intervention with historical significance and, with that investment, Merlin himself absorbs the chicken-egg paradox of culture and law. Merlin uses magic and prophecy to erase the historical foundation of future events, substituting for ordinary causality his own inspired predictions and interpretations. He displaces history and culture to represent the sole origin of the Arthurian reign and the chivalric code. He then borrows much of his

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[21] Robert M. Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97 (1983): 4-5.

legitimacy from the very sources he denies. Seen this way, his words command obedience not because he knows what will happen or because he makes it happen but because he speaks through and for a set of cultural, legal, genealogical norms that are the very foundations of authority. His decision to absorb into himself the entire past and to appear to "create" England *ex nihilo* in this way blurs the distinction between law and culture, authorship and interpretation, cause and effect. There is no direct, unmediated inheritance of anything in the Arthurian universe – not patrimony, not culture, not knowledge. Merlin has his hand in all of it.

III.   Merlin

The knights' acceptance of Merlin amounts to the acceptance of a new, impersonal, universal code, and Merlin simultaneously implements and represents the new system. Narratively, it is Merlin who arranges Arthur's election independent of his genealogy, and it is Merlin who introduces "new" code of adventuring at the first Feast of the Round Table. By absorbing the entire apparatus of culture and tradition into himself this way, he closes the gap between law and interpretation, creating a sort of über-tradition out of his own intervention. Thematically, the way that Merlin achieves this position among the knights makes him the embodiment of a new order that purports to be severed from previous authority. Lacking a genealogical back-story himself, he achieves authority among the knights not through lineal credentials but through carefully orchestrated performances of seemingly magical ability. Thus, the knights' acceptance of Merlin not only *enables* the acceptance of authority without precursors, it *is* the acceptance of an authority without precursors. In this, Merlin both implements and enacts the new irrelevance of family identity. However, the changes Merlin produces are

transient, much of the cultural transformations are illusory, and it is clear that the knights do not really abandoned the old way.

A.   Merlin's Power

A great deal of what Merlin is able "magically" to reveal are secrets that he himself has hidden. Likewise, when Merlin "magically" interprets obscure texts that appear throughout the landscape, he is often revealed as the author of those same texts. The revelation of Arthur's paternity, for example, uses the magical device of the sword in the stone (and magical writing buttressing its authenticity) to reveal a future that is really a history. Merlin engineers and explains the nature of the sword in the stone, which elaborate drama of revelation would have been entirely unnecessary if Merlin had not, when Arthur was born, removed him from his mother's house. Similarly, Merlin's "interpretation" of the Round Table's mission and the meaning of the names inscribed on the seats becomes less magical with the revelation that *Merlin built the Round Table*.[22] The mysteries Merlin reveals are mysteries that he himself created.[23]

As any linear narrative behind Merlin's interventions vanishes into circularity, he becomes increasingly powerful. Arthur is not the king because his father was the king; he is the king because Merlin said that it was so. And Merlin said that it was so by engineering the sword in the stone, and by reading the sword in the stone, and because he knew the identity of Arthur's father. The tortuous link between cause and effect can be traced, and it would be possible at that point to have a reasoned argument about whether Merlin is making things happen or merely describing them, but it is ultimately irrelevant. At some point the reader inevitably loses the thread. Merlin says things, they eventually

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[22] Jane Bliss, "Prophecy in the Morte Darthur," *Arthuriana* 13.1 (2003): 8.

[23] Kathy Cawsey, *Merlin's Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in* Le Morte Dartur *and the English Prose* Merlin, Arthuriana 11.3 (2001): 89-101.

happen, and from a plot perspective it stops mattering why.[24] It is at this moment, the moment when the reader stops trying to puzzle out Merlin's role, that he fully establishes his authority. The "social magic" of sovereign speech, whose effectiveness is rarely questioned, is reproduced here as actual magic.[25]

But social magic has its limits. Between the making of rules and their interpretation, between the code and the stories that endow the code with meaning, there ordinarily exists a sufficient gap to permit a variety of meanings to emerge.[26] A judge, writing an opinion to be followed as precedent, or a legislator drafting a statute to become law, must always be aware of the likely interpretive responses to his work and, accordingly, must be ready to adjust "to that [future] understanding, regardless of how misguided one may think the likely institutional response will be."[27] The reliance on society to carry out an authoritative interpretation of law (the guards to take the prisoners to jail, the sheriffs and bailiffs to collect civil fines) puts some pressure on the interpretive process. A lawmaker can only be so unpopular before he ceases to be a lawmaker and becomes something else (in liberal democracies, he becomes a writer of essays about law; in less forgiving regimes he becomes a dead or deposed former official).[28]

By being simultaneously author and interpreter, Merlin collapses that gap. He ensures that his law is always interpreted according to the intention of its author, who is

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[24] There are instances where Merlin says things that do not happen, at least not in the course of Malory's book. However, there are no cases where a prediction of Merlin's is revealed to have been false. There is a sense in the *Morte* that unfulfilled prophecies either take place offstage or are an authorial error. There is no sense, that these unrealized predictions indicate an underlying unreliability.

[25] I borrow the term from Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 156. "[A] speaker who declares a war or performs a wedding ceremony, and pronounces into being that which he declares to be true, will be able to animate the 'social magic' of the performative." For the distinction between performative and descriptive speech, see below, at n. 30.

[26] For a discussion of the problem created by inevitable gaps between legislators and interpreters, see Jack M. Balkin, "Deconstructive Practice and Legal Theory," *Yale Law Journal* 96 (1987): 782. "It is the text as read, and not the text as written, that becomes the law". On the necessity for stories to endow a code with meaning, see Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," *supra* n. 20.

[27] Robert M. Cover, "Violence and the Word," *Yale Law Journal* 95 (1986): 1612.

[28] See Owen M. Fiss, "Objectivity and Interpretation," *Stanford Law Review* 34 (1982): 762.

not subjected to any of these indignities or complexities of independent interpretation. This collapse of two functions into one, quasi-magical individual endows that individual with greatly enhanced authority, and the problem of implementation vanishes. Merlin's word, when he gives rules, becomes fully implemented law almost from the moment of utterance: Arthur *is* the king. Worship *is* impersonal intervention. Mistake, in the normal meaning of the word – misinterpretation, injustice, nonsense – becomes impossible for him, because the temporal and causal gap that is the root of error has always already vanished.

The causality that would purport to explain Merlin's mysteriously influential speech acts becomes irrelevant, because he cannot be wrong. If Merlin cannot utter either incorrect statements or total nonsense, then there is no underlying distinction between making things happen and describing them. When Merlin becomes a rule-making replacement for history and culture, the crucial distinction between performative and merely descriptive speech loses its meaning.[29]

J. L. Austin defines descriptive utterances, in opposition to performative speech act, as utterances whose truth is verifiable.[30] The different ways that performative and descriptive speech acts have of being wrong – false in the traditional sense or invalid in another, more complicated way – distinguish them from each other. Whereas verifiable, descriptive statements are subject to being incorrect or "false," performative speech acts are never "false" in the same way. If the justice of the peace correctly marries two consenting adults and utters the phrase, "I now pronounce you man and wife," he cannot

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[29] I consider prophecy to be primarily descriptive for these purposes.

[30] J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975). Lecture I, 1-11. He uses the term "constative" in order to avoid confusion when his analysis of non-performative speech moves beyond the purely descriptive. There is no need for the term here, and its use would merely confuse the matter. I distinguish simply between "descriptive" and "performative" speech acts.

be *wrong* about their being married, at least not in the way the weatherman can be wrong about the weather. The marriage may be somehow invalid if a variety of necessary conditions are not met (the justice of the peace is an imposter; one of the parties is really a bigamist, etc.), but the marriage is not wrong in the factual sense.

The distinction between invalidity and falseness is bound up in the possibility, even the inevitability, of error, of failures in prediction, misinterpretations of context, misperceptions of reality: "[T]ypically we distinguish different abstracted 'acts' by means of the possible slips between cup and lip, that is, in this case, *the different types of nonsense which may be engendered in performing them*."[31] Merlin's infallibility as a prophet, an interpreter, and an advisor enables him to evade the nonsense that would allow a classification of his speech. In his mouth, the performative/descriptive distinction loses its meaning, because there is never any defining nonsense there.

Or, to use a Derridian articulation that describes the same phenomenon, Merlin blurs the distinction between the authoritative and infelicitous imitation.[32] It is their reliance on imitation that makes the infelicity of performative speech acts possible. One authoritative actor must imitate the rest if he is to maintain his authority, and this reliance of authority on imitation enables those *without* authority to enact an apparently identical imitation.[33] For example, in order to make a marriage intelligible, a speaker must cite

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[31] Ibid, p. 147.

[32] Derrida does not use the word "imitation," to describe this phenomenon. His words, which have become terms of art for this phenomenon, are "citation" or "iteration."

[33] See Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samual Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988), 18.

> Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a 'citation'? Not that citationality in this case is of the same sort as in a theatrical play, a philosophical reference, or the recitation of a poem. That is why there is a relative specificity, as Austin says, a 'relative purity' of performatives. But this relative purity does not emerge *in opposition* to citationality or iterability, but in opposition to other kinds of iteration within a general

certain conventions of promising, and it is this very requirement of citation that leads the

act of marriage open to infelicitous imitation: the conventions are equally accessible to a

bigamist. As Judith Butler has pointed out, this reliance on imitation opens a whole new

field of social possibility that is not limited to fraud or straightforward invalidity. By

citing certain conventions, social actors who are not previously authorized to speak

authoritatively or performatively may do so and, in so doing, they increase their ability to

accomplish the "social magic" of performative speech.[34] Thus, Merlin becomes

authoritative without ever having been granted authority. He does this both because he

imitates authority and because his listeners believe and obey. The collapse of descriptive

and performative parallels (and heightens) the confusion between authority and its

imitation. [35]

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iterability which constitutes a violation of the allegedly rigorous purity of every event of discourse or every *speech act*.

[34] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 156-57. Explaining how this authority-through-infelicitous-imitation can arise, she writes, "Social positions [that legitimize performative speech] are themselves constructed through a more tacit operation of performativity. Indeed, not only is the act of 'delegation' a performative, that is, a naming which is at once the action of entitlement, but authorization [to perform the act] more generally is to a strong degree a matter of being addressed or interpellated by prevailing forms of social power." The rogue computer, Joshua, in the movie War Games perfectly illustrates this phenomenon of tacit authorization through social networks other than official delegation. The computer attempts to win a "game" of Global Thermonuclear War, a that which is parasitic (in the Derridian sense) on the "real" game of the Cold War. His "play" is treated as authoritative by certain key observers who are high-ranking military officials and, upon being treated as real by these officials, the game actually becomes real. Physical preparation for missile launches begin in both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. All this takes place despite the fact that the officials involved do not "actually" have the authority to delegate "real" launch capabilities to a playful computer.

[35] T. H. White's famous, imaginative interpretation of Merlin's character suggests that Merlin is actually living backwards in time, experiencing old age before childhood, the future before the past, etc. Introduced to explain his prophetic ability, this interpretation would also explain Merlin's tendency to establish authority through actions that always should have required some predecessor authority, since for Merlin their future legitimation is always already past. This prioritizes imitative or parasitic speech acts over the "real" authoritative acts upon which they supposedly rely. In Malory's *Morte*, this illustrates Derrida's rejection of the idea that any inherent priority exists between the authoritative and the parasitic speech act. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samual Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988), 91. See n. 33, above. White correctly reads Merlin's rejection of the supposed priority of the parasitic on the iterable speech act. However, by situating Merlin's reversal in a context of a more general reversal, White makes the idea palatable to those readers who cannot embrace the idea that there is no inherent priority between the authoritative and the parasitic. White's Merlin inverts instead of destroying the order of logical dependence. It is, after all, a book for children.

Social legitimation is necessary to any performative speech act. The belief of the audience is a decisive legitimating force and, since Merlin is bootstrapping, he relies that much more heavily on the validating belief of his audience to solidify his authoritative utterances. If no one believes Arthur is the king elect after the sword-in-the-stone incident, for example, then Arthur might not become the king. Malory is appropriately careful to record the reactions of Merlin's listeners each time Merlin speaks, detailing the effectiveness of Merlin's authoritative utterances. For example, when Merlin describes Arthur's birth to the barons: "Some of the kynges had mereyle of Merlyns wordes and demed well that it shold be as he said, and som of hem lough hym to scorne" (I.12); when Merlin reveals hidden treasure to Arthur: "Then kynge Arthure was gretly abaysshed and had mervayle of Merlion, and so had kynge Ban and Bors" (I.26); when King Mark hears the prophecy of the Dolorous Stroke: "Thou [art] a merveylous man . . . that spekist of such mervayles . . . What ys thy name?" (II.45). The first example is particularly significant, because it establishes the link between belief in Merlin's magic and acceptance of Arthur's authority. Not all the kings marvel, and the kings that reject Merlin's "magical" knowledge also make war on their new king. They reject Merlin's (and Arthur's) social authority by refusing to legitimate Merlin's "social magic." The defeat of the unbelievers is crucial to the stability of Arthur's legitimacy.

B.   *Merlin's (Lack of) Genealogy*

Malory further de-historicizes the foundational narrative by excising Merlin's own genealogy and upbringing from the account. This fractures the carefully created link in the Vulgate account between Merlin's control of his own genealogical narrative and

his power as a creator and spoiler of family fictions.[36] Whereas the French Merlin begins

his interventions with an impassioned and magically knowledgeable defense of his own

mother's virtue, Malory's Merlin begins his intervention as a fully formed adult.[37] His

first involvement in questions of paternity and legitimacy occurs around Arthur's

conception.

This expurgation of genealogical prehistory alters the source and the nature of

Merlin's power in Malory's *Morte*. Thematically, the French Merlin's intervention in

Uther Pendragon's lineage makes sense, because Merlin has a unique knowledge and

preoccupation with lineal descent. The preoccupation replicates itself and, in doing so, it

provides Merlin with a magical power over genealogy. He is a "spoiler of family

fictions" largely through his involvement in his own family fictions. In contrast, Malory's

Merlin arrives on the scene with no genealogical history. Accordingly, he reproduces his

own situation by erasing rather than recording Arthur's genealogy, and his power is

magically bound up with that erasure. Malory's Merlin becomes a totem for the shift

from the rule of kinship to the rule of law.

Because of the connection between Arthur's history and Merlin's, the legitimacy

of the two rise and fall together. Every time Merlin legitimizes himself – his own

predictive / performative power – he also legitimizes a deracinated Arthur. And, vice

versa, when a deracinated Arthur is accepted as king by most of the important barons, the

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[36] R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: a Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 212-13.

[37] The Vulgate Account, as well as Robert de Boron's account, contains a long pre-history of Merlin's conception, birth and childhood. Robert de Boron, *Merlin: Roman DU XIIIe Siècle*, ed. Alexandre Micha (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1980), ch. 6-15, pp. 37-71. Robert de Boron, *Merlin and the Grail: The Trilogy of Prose Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron*, trans. Nigel Bryant (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 49-62. Malory's primary source for this material is the Huth *Merlin*, which begins with Merlin's involvement in the Arthurian cycle. However, Malory probably had some knowledge of the Merlin material in the Vulgate. His references to Merlin's devilish ancestors would otherwise be unintelligible. See e.g., *Morte*, II.77. "[S]he was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son."

strongest possible precedent now exists to legitimize Merlin's authority without inquiring into its origins. Merlin's carefully orchestrated performances of authoritative speech enabled him to bootstrap his way to the appearance of discursive power and, from there, to actual discursive power. He provides a model for self-implementing power.

Merlin replaces previous authorities with magic by collapsing history, culture and genealogy into himself. In doing so, he simultaneously brings about and represents the new way, but he cannot provide the cultural thickness that inhered in the old traditions. Such a complete collapse of multiple origins into one voice would sap Arthur's court of the robust cultural background that is as necessary as precedent for the legitimacy of law.[38] This leaching away of complexity does not actually occur, because the old meanings remain strongly present, though unspoken. Merlin's individualist, authoritative voice provides one way for the Round Table to understand itself, and this is a profound and useful innovation, but it is not the beginning and end of the knights' understanding of their world. By collapsing cultural origins into his own magical utterances, Merlin adds something new to the tradition of knighthood, but he does not really replace it.[39]

C.   *The Collapse of the Collapse*

The knights imagine or pretend that they react entirely to the "Merlinian" code of "worship" and to the elaborations on it that they evolve through trial and error during their adventures. On the surface, Merlin becomes what the knights share instead of

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[38] For the necessity to law of culture and its narrative expressions, see e.g. Robert M. Cover, "Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97 (1983): 4-68. See also Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[39] To the extent that Merlin provides a new theory of the world, this makes perfect sense. Every total theory must explain the complete world, including previous theories. However, for all this explanatory patricide, success is not measured in the erasure of predecessors but in the acceptance alongside them.

history.[40] However, Merlin's elaborate game with priority and authority gives them room to preserve their own histories. It is never made clear to them whether Merlin is a brilliant interpreter of their (pre-existing) world or if he is actively bringing that world into existence, and the mere possibility that Merlin is merely interpreting opens the possibility of the knights' historical and interpretive priority. To the extent that their own pre-existing social system founds his supposedly new code, preservation of the old values is not transgressive; it is absolutely necessary. The collapse of origins into magic collapses in turn under the pressure of these old values, and Merlin's demise enacts this second collapse.

This failure of the Merlinian substitution is foreshadowed in the failure of Merlin himself. Magic is the only explanation for Merlin's authority, and magic succumbs to itself when Nynyve imprisons an infatuated Merlin beneath a rock for all eternity:[41]

> And allwayes he lay aboute to have hir maydynhode, and she was ever
>
> passynge wery of hym and wolde have bene delyverde of hym . . . So by
>
> hir subtyle worchyng she made Merlyon to go under rthat stone to latte her
>
> wete of the mervayles there, but she wrought so there for hym that he
>
> come never oute for all the craufte he coude do, and so she departed and
>
> leffte Merlyon.
>
> (IV.77)

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[40] The answer "History" might serve as an answer to Jane Bliss's question of what, precisely, is speaking through Merlin when he is prophetic. Jane Bliss, "Prophecy in the Morte Darthur," *Arthuriana* 13.1 (2003): 5. This answer certainly fits better with his overall role in the *Morte* than does Christopher Dean's suggestion that God or a religious power is the force behind Merlin's magic / knowledge. Christopher Dean, *A Study of Merlin in English Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, (Lewiston: E. Mellon Press, 1992). This explanation seems to describe Malory's French prose sources better than Malory's work.

[41] She is "Vivien" in most versions of the story.

When Merlin warns Arthur of their impending separation, Arthur asks why Merlin cannot avoid his doom. Merlin has no explanation:

> 'A,' sayde the kyng, 'syn ye knowe of youre evil adventure,
>
> purvey for hit, and putt hit away by youre crauftes, that mysseadventure.'
>
> 'Nay,' seyde Merlion, 'hit woll not be.'
>
> He departed frome the kyng, and within a whyle the damesell of
>
> the Lake departed, and Merlyon went with her evermore wheresomever
>
> she yeode.
>
> (IV.76)

The inevitability of his imprisonment parallels the inevitable reassertion of the kinship culture. Merlin succumbs, because his love for Nynyve is intrinsic to who he is. He cannot avoid his infatuation any more than Balan can avoid joining his brother on a quest, or Gawain will be able to avoid making war on Lancelot. And if even Merlin's identity is less bound up in his relationship with the Round Table than in his relationship with another, what chance is there for the rest of the fellowship?

Furthermore, Merlin's ruin enacts the consequences of the individualist code with a sort of poetic justice. In a system that evaluates each knight's honor solely with reference to his own personal deeds, the identification with and through family is destroyed. Relationships that were, in the most basic sense of the word, *meaningful* become recreational or irrelevant, and isolation becomes an inherent aspect of the knightly experience.[42] Merlin, who brought the code and thus the isolation that

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[42] The desire to bridge this sense of psychic distance between knights is a primary, motivating force during adventures. Jill Mann has compared the resulting encounters between armed knights as a ballet, in which a moment of closeness at the collision punctuates an otherwise unbroken sense of alienation and solitude. See generally Jill Mann, *The Narrative of Distance, the Distance of Narrative in Malory's* Morte Darthur (London: Birbeck College, Univ. of London, 1991).

characterizes its operation, experiences that isolation the most profoundly of anyone. Insofar as his rise to political authority enacted the sourcelessness of the new code, his fall into isolation and imprisonment enacts its new loneliness.

IV.   The Law Itself: The Evolution and Effect of the Pentecostal Oath

Merlin's command is the sole inspiration for the *procedures* of the code (adventure, return, deposition), but its *substance* develops an independent narrative foundation when the Round Table's knights begin adventuring. The adventures of the lady, the hart and the brachet – the foundational adventures that follow the Round Table's foundational feast – culminate in the Pentecostal Oath, at which the entire fellowship commits itself explicitly to a code of knightly conduct. The Round Table draws its code explicitly drawn from the successes and the transgressions of the three adventuring knights whose foundational adventures were ultimately reported back to the Court. Thus, the foundational adventures provide the code with the kind of cultural and historical meaning that Merlin suppressed at the founding feast. However, the focus on individual knights rather than on the Round Table community means that this substitute meaning is basically individualist. The narratives of foundation give cultural content to the dry rules about how individuals should comport themselves, but the content is almost as dry as the rules.

This dry, individualist substitute for cultural meaning has two practical advantages: (1) simplicity of application and (2) universality. Simplicity of application leads to predictability of behavior. Since the standard of conduct does not rely on any complicated analysis of feelings or pre-existing loyalties, there is very little difficulty in determining whether an individual lived up to the code; excuses or exceptions become

impossible. Honor has the same meaning to every knight who takes the oath. Each knight's behavior is simple and predictable in the ex ante regime, before the adventure, because the maximization of individual honor has the same meaning for every knight. Finally (and most importantly from Arthur's point of view), the theoretical freedom from cultural content makes possible a theoretically endless extension of the code to all knights, regardless of pre-existing loyalties. The kind of debate that King Arthur had with Balin before the latter's departure vanishes, and with it the tragic possibility of *agon*.

A.   *Individualist Code, Individualist Meaning*

Gawain, whose assignment after the founding feast was to return with the white hart, makes two errors. These provide (narrative) cause and (cultural) meaning for the sections of the Pentecostal Oath that address those errors. First, Gawain refuses mercy to a knight who killed his greyhounds. Then, attempting to strike off the knight's head, he accidentally kills the knight's lady, who throws herself over her lover in a vain attempt to intercede on his behalf:

> But sir gawayne wold no mercy have, but unlaced hys helme to have
>
> strekyn of hys hede. Ryght so com hys lady oute of a chambir and felle
>
> over hym, and so he smote of hir hede by myssefortune.
>
> (III.66)

In this disastrous moment, Gawain commits two trespasses against what will later be formalized in the oath: (1) he fails to grant mercy to a knight who requests it, and (2) he kills a lady, albeit accidentally. The crimes compound each other: the exculpatory thrust of the killing's accidental nature is undermined by Gawain's brutal intentions, so that the interconnectedness of the offenses heightens rather than ameliorates Gawain's guilt.

There is a strong sense of illustrative causality about the incident, a lingering impression that the murder serves to display and magnify the shame of the act, maybe even to punish it.

      The Court, when it hears of the incident, is understandably appalled and assigns to Gawain a quasi-punitive life's mission that responds to the specifics of his shortcomings:

> Than the kynge and the quene were gretely displeased with sir Gawayne . .
> . and they juged hym for ever whyle he *lyved to be with all ladyes and to*
> *fyght for hir quarels*; and ever that he sholde by curteyse, *and never to*
> *refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy*.
> (III.67, emphasis added)

The imposition of a judgment in response to the deposition is here limited to Gawain, but the final oath at the completion of the first round of adventures soon extends its reach beyond Gawain and his immediate situation to cover all knights on all their adventures:

> Thus when the quest was done of the whyght herte the which followed sir
> Gawayne, and the queste of the brachet which folowerd sir Torre, kynge
> Pellynors son, and the queste of the lady that the knyghte toke away,
> which at that tyme followed kynge Pellynor, than the kynge stablysshed
> all the knyghtes and gaff them rychesse and londys; and charged them
> enver to do outerage nothir nourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and *to*
> *gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy*, upon payne of forfiture of their
> worship and lordship of kynge Arture for evermore; and *allwayes to do*
> *ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen and wydowes socour*: strengthe hem in
> hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe. Also, that no
> man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldis

goodis. So unto thys were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde, both

olde and younge, and every yere so were they sworne at the hyghe feste of

Pentecoste.

(III.75-76, emphasis added)

The timing of the oath, at the conclusion of the three quests, together with its repetition

suggests that it is both foundational and enduring. The oath is a response to the

adventures that precede it, and it is a permanent, institutional response. Thus, it is in

response to Gawain's trespass that all knights must promise to help ladies and to give

mercy. In a common-law-style evolution from trespass to code, the instruction ceases to

be a punitive or corrective and becomes a prophylactic measure. The duty of restrained

intervention is not merely Gawain's penance – it extends beyond Gawain to the rest of

the community, a community that defines itself largely through the knights' acceptance

of this new duty.[43] Gawain's inaugural adventure provides new cultural content for the

rules, cultural content that had been missing when Merlin's intervention stripped away

the familial and political bases for the knights' attendance on Arthur. The rule is not

imposed; it emerges organically from the experience of the community.

In this, Gawain's transgression resembles the Golden Calf of the Israelites, or the

near-assimilation in Holland of the Puritans. The event itself takes place too late to be the

actual cultural content that makes the system of rules intelligible to its adherents. Moses

did not know of Aaron's transgression until after he brought down the commandments

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[43] This transformation of transgression and also of honor into something that adheres to the community at large is an element of the creation of fellowship. Compare to the sense that family members can bring shame on each other. The Round Table's character as an institution relies on this collective response, and when it when it falls apart, it is only this collective character that is destroyed. See C.M. Adderley, "Malory's Portrayal of Sir Lancelot," *Language Quarterly* 29:1-2 (1991): 47-65, 62 (noting that the end of the Round Table destroys only the collective goodness; individually, each of the knights ends his life well). Contrast Michael V. Dimassa, "Malory's Courteous Knights?: Gareth, Launcelot, and the Disintegration of Courtesy in the *Morte Darthur*," *Poetica* 43 (1995): 19-36 (suggesting that the progressive loss of personal excellence by the great knights accompanies the fellowship's disintegration).

from Mount Sinai, and the Puritans knew nothing about the dangers of assimilation when they set out to be both separate and free. But despite the logical impossibility of any straightforward cause-and-effect account, the sense of people-hood that imbues the rules with meaning relies on this moment as a crucial part of its foundational narrative. The transgression provides some of the cultural meaning for the system of rules that follow. In the case of the Round Table, Gawain's narrative provides a substitute for the cultural and historical meanings that Merlin's intervention had attempted to repress.

To divorce the code from any story prior to the founding, it is necessary to ignore a very similar vow by Balin in very similar circumstances. When Lanceor's lover killed herself without his aid, he swore, "[F]or hir sake I shall owghe all women the bettir wylle and servyse all the dayes of my lyff" (II.44). Because the vow was made before the founding of the Round Table, it remained personal and died with Balin. If Gawain is the second knight to commit this crime against honor, rather than the first, then both the procedures and the substance of the code have a much deeper and more satisfying origin. The combination of Balin's tragic end with Gawain's near repetition of it motivates both the deposition procedure and the substance of this particular oath. Knights report so that it will take only one mistake rather than two; they chose this particular vow because Arthur's knights seem generally vulnerable to this particular error. The consequences of trespass for Balin provide an additional layer of meaning, whereas Gawain does not seem to have suffered any consequences beyond shame.

There is clearly a connection between Balin's history and the history of the code, but there is no mention of that connection. To tie the code to Balin would be to tie it to a story of familial rather than political destruction and to link the Round Table to the very origins Merlin is at such pains to suppress. Although it is clear that Balin's understanding

of his own trespass informs the consensus the Round Table brings to its judgment on

Gawain, the origin of that understanding is suppressed along with the rest of the knights'

cultural inheritance. By making the code rationally or intuitively inevitable instead of

culturally contingent, Malory severs the code from its own history. Gawain's story,

lacking as it does in family connections or ties to the cultural origins of knighthood,

provides a clean narrative. But Gawain's story, lacking as it does any ties to the cultural

origins of knighthood, provides an unsatisfactorily thin narrative.

Divorced from the repetition cycle in which the Balin narrative would situate it,

Gawain's transgression is too individualistic to provide a deep enough meaning for the

rule that emerges. Community transgressions are more obvious sources of cultural

meaning, and the use of an entirely individual narrative sets this episode apart from the

Puritan/Israelite examples. The code itself provides only that some things shall or shall

not be done, and the narrative meaning of that code goes no further than to illustrate the

universality and obviousness of the code. Gawain's story describes an impetuous,

emotional response and its rejection from a considered, rational, objective viewpoint. The

only community input to the story is the promise that such an objective viewpoint will

eventually be imposed, and the community's sole function is to provide that viewpoint at

the culmination of adventures. This is an extremely thin vision of the community's role in

creating and transgressing its own laws, and an even thinner vision of the relationship

between individual and community.

The persistent return to Arthur's dinner table for deposition and judgment at the

end of every adventure illustrates "the living conviction of the group as validated by use

and comment consent."[44] This is certainly true, as far as it goes, but the statement side-steps the question of where and how that consent develops. Whether it comes from Merlin's intervention, or the experience of having heard Gawain's narrative of his adventures, Malory presents only the barest explanation for the consensus that enables the common consent. The implication is that the emerging code is simply rational or intuitively obvious, rather than culturally contingent.

B.   *Advantages of Predictable Conduct*

The usefulness of a code that is universal in this way becomes immediately evident in an adventure of Lancelot, which closely imitates the factual circumstances that gave rise to Gawain's transgressions. With the advantage of the oath and his knowledge of Gawain's transgression, Lancelot's response to similar circumstances is quite different. He too attempts to protect a lady by interposing himself between arguing spouses. Tricked by the husband into looking away, Lancelot turns his back momentarily and the husband seizes the opportunity to strike off his wife's head. Lancelot is furious:

> And whan sir Launcelot had aspyed hym what he had done, he seyde and
>
> so called hym: 'Traytoure, thou haste shamed me for evir!' And
>
> soddenynly sir Launcelot alyght of his horse and pulde outhis swerde to
>
> sle hym. And therewithall he felle to the erthe and gryped sir Launcelot by
>
> the thyghes and cryed mercy.
>
> (VI.171)

Again the killing of a lady is tangled up in the question of mercy, but where Gawain's response was personal and emotional, bound up with such idiosyncrasies as his affection

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[44] R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval French Literature and Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 49.

for his dogs and his quickness to anger, Lancelot's response is entirely rule-driven.[45] It

depends on nothing so much as his oath not to take revenge on a contrite foe. His

feelings, particularly his sense that an unscrupulous operator is taking advantage of

Lancelot's duty to give mercy, do not determine his actions. Although Gawain's mistake

closely imitated Balin's before him, Gawain did not enjoy this advantage of institutional

memory. He did not identify with Balin's penance or assume new duties as a result of

Balin's error. Indeed, he never even learned of it. Lancelot's situation is similar to

Gawain's, but Lancelot avoids the consequences of an angry, impetuous response.

For Lancelot as an individual, the code is clearly useful in saving him disgrace.

But the full value of predictable, impersonal response goes beyond this. Systematic rules

of engagement and response, rules that depend neither on the knight nor on the objects of

his engagement, enable the Round Table's knights to predict and rely on each other's

responses. Because Round Table knights follow adventures in an attempt to win a

universally recognized and clearly defined "worship," they are eternally certain that

another Round Table knight will eventually pursue the same adventure and, if necessary,

rescue them. Even when knights stumble upon remote adventures, steered there by

obscure hermits in wild forests, they can be confident that some other knight is bound to

retrace the same path. This is the case regardless of the circumstances of his capture –

whether he was alone at the time, whether anyone knew of his adventure or his

whereabouts, whether anyone (even apparently unrelated spectators) witnessed the

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[45] Lancelot's adherence to the oath is central to his character. Danielle Morgan MacBain, "The Tristramization of Malory's Lancelot," *English Studies* 74.1 (1993 Feb): 60. MacBain interprets this fact by incorporating the substantive elements of the code as crucial elements of his character – commitment to justice, protecting ladies, etc.). I suggest that a uniform, objective code of conduct has its own attractions, and that his peculiarly intense need for this type of community provides independent evidence about character. Contrast to Maureen Fryes, "Malory's Tristram as Counter-Hero to the *Morte Darthur*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76 (1975): 605-13 (attaching independent significance to the substance of the oath, and even to its adherence or violation regardless of exposure to its terms).

moment of capture itself. It is a condition of Round-Table existence, a consequence of hundreds of knights all pursuing identically defined "worship" through "adventures."[46]

Ector's capture by Tarquin is a case in point. Ector, seeking Lancelot (who is out adventuring with Lionel), comes upon a forester whom he asks for directions to the nearest adventure. Suitably directed, he encounters Tarquin, who defeats and imprisons him.[47] On the face of it, Ector does not seem very well positioned to expect discovery and rescue. He failed to set out in a known direction on a particular adventure in circumstances that commanded the attention of the entire court. And he lacks the advantage of Lionel, who is also imprisoned by Sir Tarquin, but who is traveling in the company of Sir Lancelot when captured and can therefore expect Lancelot to notice his absence immediately. As the various knights' adventures play themselves out, however, Lancelot's discovery of Tarquin and the scores of knights imprisoned within his castle proves to be both over-determined and, oddly, unrelated to the circumstances underlying the capture of any particular knight. Lancelot notices that his nephew Lionel is missing but, having been kidnapped himself by Morgan Le Fay and having promised to help his own rescuer at a tournament, he cannot set out to look for Lionel at once. He finally arrives at Tarquin's castle entirely by coincidence when, having participated in the promised tournament, he asks a mysterious damsel on a white palfrey if there are any adventures near at hand. She directs him to Tarquin, whose prisoners include sixty-four of Arthur's knights, two of whom happen to be Lionel and Ector. Given the circumstances of Lionel's capture, it is possible to expect Lancelot to seek his nephew, but instead he stumbles upon him through an independent coincidence unrelated to any particular quest. He finds him without needing to seek him.

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[46] See *supra*, n. 1.

[47] *Morte,* VI.150.

The rescue does not depend on Lancelot's familial relationship with Lionel or even on the fact that they were traveling together. Lancelot does not even know that Lionel has been kidnapped, much less that he has been imprisoned in the very castle to which the lady on the palfrey directs him. Although the adventure of Tarquin's defeat turns out to be Lancelot's, there is nothing in the progression of events to suggest that it was necessarily so. It is rather the shared impulse toward adventuring that leads Lancelot to Tarquin, not any particular, personal mission. The same, impersonal pressure led scores of other knights take the adventure before Lancelot (thus all the prisoners) and, had Lancelot failed, scores of knights would presumably have taken the adventure after him. The depersonalization of the adventure, its passage from knight to knight, is a key to the ultimate victory of Arthur's knights over the rest of the country. Uniformity of conduct supplements and in some cases even supplants actual communication.

C.   *The Persistence of Family*

In the example above, Lancelot does not rely on a personal, family relationship for any aspect of the adventure. And yet, somehow family weaves itself into the narrative, a suggestive if not an actual cause of events. Despite the impersonality of the coincidence that leads him to accomplish the final rescue, the sheer fortuitousness of his encounter with the damsel, there is an overriding sense that this particular rescue of these particular knights was essentially Lancelot's adventure. Tarquin's two most recently imprisoned victims were associated with Lancelot upon his setting out from Court: Lionel was Lancelot's nephew, and Ector had left court specifically to search for Lancelot. Despite the long chain of impersonal coincidences that ultimately brings Lancelot to the right place at the right time for an impersonal rescue of whatever knights require rescue,

there is a sense of oblique causality in their identity.[48] It is their relationship and not merely Lancelot's adventuring that seems to draw Lancelot to the spot. In multiplying impersonal reasons to account for the rescue of a family member, Malory arranges circumstances that mask the adventure's underlying, identity-driven nature. Lancelot's adventures appear to differ from Balin's more than they actually do.

The constant necessity of integrating family realities into knightly ideals is best illustrated by a particularly complex negotiation that takes place in the Tristram materials. When he wins a judicial duel on behalf of King Agwisance, whom Sir Blamor de Ganis has charged with murder, Tristram must confront and eliminate potential familial repercussions of his decisions while at the same time disguising that this is his goal. Disgraced with respect to both his lawsuit and his knightly prowess, Sir Blamor refuses to yield, preferring death to shame. Tristram finds himself in an awkward and dangerous position:

> Whan sir Trystrames herde hym sey so knyghtly, in his herte he wyste nat
> what to do with hym. Remembryng hym of bothe partyes, *of what bloode*
> *he was commyn of, and for sir Launcelottis sake*, he wolde be loth to sle
> hym; and in the other party, in no wyse he myght nat chose but to make
> hym sey the lothe worde, othis ellys to sle hym.
>
> (VIII.256, emphasis added)

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[48] To borrow Larry Benson's distinction, there is a thematic or "vertical" rather than a realistic or "horizontal," driven by the cause-and-effect motivations of proto-realism. Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), 73. Similarly, Derek Brewer has suggested that Malory connects images and sometimes even events more through "verbal sequences" than by naturalistic cause and effect. Derek Brewer, "The Presentation of the Character of Lancelot: Chretien to Malory," in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*, ed Lori J. Walters (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 25. The fact of family identity works obliquely in this way – not naturalistically but as theme, an organizing principle.

On the one hand, the official code of knightly conduct requires that Sir Blamor either yield or die. On the other hand, there are consequences to killing one of Lancelot's cousins. Tristram is acutely aware of those consequences, and yet it would be inappropriate for him to acknowledge this blood bond as a motive for action. When he appeals to the judges for Sir Blamor's life, he is careful to avoid mentioning Sir Blamor's relations. "[O]f what bloode he was commyn of" is replaced with "for kynge Arthur's love," substituting the a-familial fellowship of the Round Table for the basic fact of genealogy:

> Than sir Trystrames sterte abacke and wente to the kynges that were juges,
>
> and there he kneled downe tofore them and besought them of their
>
> worshyppis, *and for kynge Arthurs love* and for sir Launcellottis sake, that
>
> they wolde take this mater in their hondis.
>
> (VIII.256)

But this is not as far as the substitution goes. Tristram continues to obfuscate and repress until not only is the original reasoning lost but reasoning itself goes out the window. By the time the plea for Sir Blamor's life reaches direct discourse, it is devoid of all reasoning, a pure plea for mercy:

> [H]it were shame and pyté that this noble knight that yonder lyeth sholde
>
> be slayne, *for ye hyre well, shamed woll he nat be.* And I pray to God that
>
> he never be slayne nother shamed for me. And as for the kynge whom I
>
> fyght fore, I shall require hym, as I am hys trew champion and trew knight
>
> in this fylde, that he woll have mercy upon this kynght.
>
> (VIII.256)

Tristram's intervention breaks down into three parts. First, he recognizes the additional consequences that attend even a knightly killing when a family-member may be angered. Second, he articulates a more general reason for avoiding the killing. Third, he avoids reasoning from relationships at all; it is the knight's desire to avoid shame that makes him worthy of mercy. Relational elements are excised from the conversation; the knight is reduced to purely individual characteristics; and yet the ideal result from a relational/political perspective is achieved as if by coincidence.

Malory and his characters consistently suppress their knowledge of how family bonds motivate events.[49] However, the suppression remains incomplete. Again and again characters must do what Lancelot, Gareth and Tristram do: reach the correct result from a relational point of view without bringing family relationships into focus. In this, the suppression of family is similar to the suppression of evil or otherness that is required by the Round Table's assimilationist system of expansion. As Frederic Jameson has commented, the Arthurian program regards every powerful man as a potential member of the community, a knight who, with his evil custom sufficiently suppressed, will join the fellowship of the Round Table to become one of Arthur's men. This presents a problem for the treatment of evil, since the object of the Round Table's adventurous/martial attentions do not take individuals as the permanent object for their destructive energy:

> Now that the 'experience' or the seme of evil can no longer be
>
> permanently assigned or attached to this or that human agent, it must find

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[49] The role of family and lineage, particularly in the matter of competition between families, is not exactly a secret within the Arthurian prose cycle. For a short discussion of inter-lineal competition see, for example, Stacey L. Hahn, "Camelot Through the Eyes of Arthur's Nephews: Seeds of Dissension in the Cyclic Prose Lancelot," in *The Arthurian Yearbook II*, ed. Keith Busby (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993) 21-38. She notes that ""The blood feud is certainly one of the major driving forces stimulating adventure. Lancelot's first heroic deed was to take on a blood feud against all of Caradoc's clan in defense of Arthur's vassal, Melian . . . Throughout the whole of the work Lancelot consistently defends the lineage of all knights loyal to Arthur" (28). Malory seems uniquely invested in suppressing it.

itself expelled from the realm of interpersonal or inner-worldly relations . .

. and thereby be projectively reconstituted into a free-floating and

disembodied element, a baleful optical illusion in its own right: that

'realm' of sorcery and magical forces which constitutes the semic

organization of the 'world' of romance and henceforth determines the

provisional investment of its anthropomorphic bearers and its landscapes

alike.[50]

This landscape is invested with the "free-floating and disembodied element" that has

been excluded from the human affairs that (presumably) generated it. A similar

transfiguration happens with the relationship or honor to family. When family

relationships cease to constitute official motivation for behavior, a magical force in the

landscape appears in its place, steering knights as if by chance to the adventures that will

discharge their family duties or respond to their lineal identities. When Merlin replaced

the fact of Arthur's lineage with the sword in the stone, he literally drove genealogical

information into the landscape.

D.   *The End of the Fellowship*

Arthur's reign ultimately collapses into civil war, with the two warring factions

delineated by family. Lancelot, in his attempt to rescue Guenevere, accidentally kills one

Gawain's brothers, a nephew to King Arthur. Gawain and his family challenge Lancelot,

and Lancelot's family rallies to his defense, demanding that he answer Gawain's

challenge immediately. The Fellowship is split by lineage, and King Arthur's death

follows close apace. In a pointed demonstration of the impossibility and danger of

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[50] Frederic Jameson, "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), 118-19.

proceeding as if one lacks a genealogical past, it is Mordred who kills Arthur: Mordred, Arthur's own son and nephew, conceived during an accidentally incestuous encounter between Arthur and his (previously unidentified) half-sister. Literally, the return of family with a vengeance.

The collapse of the fellowship frees characters to speak honestly about their family loyalties, how the action has been driven by inter-familial relationships and intra-familial duties. But it would be a mistake to read this as a return of family itself. The end of the Round Table is the end of an illusion of freedom from identity, culture, and history – from families and all the ways embeddedness in a family directs and limits the course of each individual's life. The Round Table reveals this freedom to be impossible illusion, but it also provided the imaginative space to conceive of such freedom. By the end of the *Morte*, the success of a polity is measure by its proximity to this ideal, of freedom from family identity and cultural background. The reality of the Arthurian world remains, as it had always been, driven by blood ties and inter-familial conflict, but the unmasking of the cultural reality after its long concealment leaves in its wake a new conception of the ideal polity. When the Vulgate Arthur dies, he mourns the end of his life and his line; when Malory's Arthur dies, he mourns the end of the Fellowship of the Round Table.[51] It is a different sadness, triggered by a new and different idea of political achievement. Balin would not have recognized it or remarked on its absence, and his incomprehension measures the change that has occurred. Family has returned, but the meaning of family has changed.

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[51] Felicity Riddy, *Sir Thomas Malory*, Medieval and Renaissance Authors, vol. 9 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 145.

V.   The Once and Future Political Economy

Malory's *Morte* is a myth of origins for liberal individualism – for a consent-based polity in which each participant's defining feature is individual merit ("The Best Knights") according to a universal system ("In the World"). Initially bound by blood ties and family loyalties, Lancelot, Tristram, Arthur and even Gawain learn to resist those ties, and their desire for something larger than family provides a mythological answer to the questions of how and why the peculiar ideals of individualism and universalism supplanted the ancient commitment to family honor. This is not a story about how feud gave way to law; it is about how the desire for feud became the desire for a specific kind of law.

Merlin attempts to bring the new polity magically into existence, and he fails. Always haunted by its origins in family honor, vengeance and feud, the individualist polity that Merlin imagines can never be achieved. However, its very impossibility proves an incitement to desire. The knights try to bring Merlin's imagined world into being, and their desire for it outlives the imperfect institution that results. It is this desire that prevents a return of the old way. Family cannot re-occupy its previous place in the political imagination, because the idea of family identity has been interrupted and altered by this new aspiration. Arthur's return is foretold (he is Rex Quondam et Futurus, the Once and Future King) and with it the return of everything the fellowship almost was.

Culture requires a consensus of desire, a shared belief about what is missing from the world as it is, and Malory's legend of the rise and fall of the Round Table provides that consensus. As such, the *Morte* is a creation myth for the liberal state: it tells us what we almost had, and how we nearly lost it, and how very badly we want it back.