THE ARTHURIAN ADULTERY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE,
WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON
MALORY, TENNYSON, E.A. ROBINSON, AND T.H. WHITE

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the history in English literature of the relationship between King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, in order to show how various authors have enriched the legend by developing the psychological potential of the chief characters, and by projecting the standards of their respective ages into their versions of the story. Special emphasis has been placed on the work of Sir Thomas Malory, Alfred Tennyson, E.A. Robinson, and T.H. White.

The Arthurian legend is particularly appropriate for such a comparative study. It has received the attention of English writers for eight centuries, and, for the past hundred years, of writers in America as well. In the fifteenth century Malory used the legend to argue for a strong monarchy, and to remind his aristocratic countrymen of the neglected ideals of chivalry; in the nineteenth century Tennyson hoped that the re-telling of the story for its elements of moral and spiritual allegory would inspire the Victorians to rise above the materialism and sensuality which to him were signs of the times; early in the twentieth century Edwin Arlington Robinson suggested a comparison between the disintegration of Camelot and the disruption of European society after World War I, and he questioned the traditionally accepted greatness of Arthur and his kingdom; in the last decade Terence Hanbury White has seen that the
problem facing King Arthur also confronts the strife-torn twentieth century—how can the energies of men be harnessed for constructive rather than destructive action?

The adultery between Guinevere and Lancelot has been made the focal point of this study because it involves the three best-known characters of the legend, and because it has attracted the interest of writers more than has any other element of the Arthuriad, particularly in the past one hundred years.
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INTRODUCTION

The Arthurian legend has commanded the attention of writers from the Anglo-Saxon period to the twentieth century; indeed, after more than eight centuries of treatment, Arthur and his knights still fascinate the imagination. It is true that the story is not as fresh as it once was, but there are few signs of exhaustion. Writers such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and T.H. White in the twentieth century are still attracted by this ancient legend of chivalry and its tragic champion. A.B. Taylor has summarized the reasons for this popularity:

But the strength of the Arthurian legend lay in its capability of infinite adaptation. From the beginning it was fashioned to reflect contemporary ideals...It began as a symbol of national and religious warfare...reflecting the Norman militarist spirit and crusading zeal...it was used by French poets as the symbol of chivalry and of love. In the Grail quest it symbolizes the fascination exercised by religious mysticism. In Malory's "Morte Darthur" it reflects the aspirations of the noallest men at a time when real chivalry was dead...and in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" the ideals and failings of the Victorian era.

The legend offers such a wide variety of characters and incidents that practically every age has found in it something of its own problems and conflicts. In other words, the Arthurian legend throughout the centuries has been the mirror of

man's ideals and aspirations, and particularly of his ideals of human character. The different versions of the legend not only reveal in a broad way the standards of the age in which they were written, but also have gradually deepened the profundity of the story by increasing analysis of the psychology of the chief characters.

The late nineteenth century believed that Tennyson had said the last word, but within five years of Tennyson's death Mark Twain carried his Connecticut Yankee into King Arthur's Court, and used the legend to condemn aristocratic ideals. Another American, Edwin Arlington Robinson, enriched the legend by undertaking a minute psychological examination of the traditional characters; he saw their tragedy re-enacted in the somber period after World War I. In the last decade the British novelist T.H. White has used Arthurian materials to examine the profound problems of hatred and oppression; he has also employed the legend for satire and humor, and has humanized the characters even more, so that they speak like neighbors chatting over the back fence.

The phase of the legend that has received the most attention in English literature is the adulterous triangle involving Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, the chief characters. All of the best known treatments of the Arthuriad deal with it to some extent, but no two versions are alike. The approach of four authors---Malory, Tennyson, E.A. Robinson, and T.H. White---to the adultery theme will be examined in detail in order to show to what extent these authors contributed to the development of the legend by enlarging the psychological potential of the chief characters,
and by projecting the standards of their respective ages into their versions of the story. The discussions of the influence of the different ages on the versions of the Arthuriad do not pretend to be exhaustive, but a broad treatment is all that is necessary in a mainly literary study.

Some attempt will also be made to summarize other Arthurian works in English that treat the adultery.
CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND TO MALORY

The Arthurian legend had its first known expression in the *Historia Brittonum*, first compiled around 680 and revised at the end of the eighth century by Nennius. In the *Historia* Arthur is described as a *dux bellorum*, or British war lord, rather than as a king, who led the Britons in twelve battles against the Saxons. The first detailed account of the legend, however, was not produced until 1137 when Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his extremely influential *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the most important early source of Arthurian material. Geoffrey's work is a mixture of matter drawn from authors such as Gildas, Nennius, and Bede, from the products of his own free invention, and probably from a large element of legendary lore.¹

In Geoffrey's chronicle, Arthur is no longer a primitive war lord, but a noble and cultured British king, the Christian conqueror of the Roman world. Guinevere plays a slight role. She is not accused of adultery prior to Arthur's Roman campaign, but her character is tarnished by her semi-acquiescence in marriage with Mordred, the traitorous son of Arthur, who usurps the kingdom during the king's absence on the continent. There is no mention of Lancelot, who was introduced by Chrétien de Troyes thirty years later.

Geoffrey's history was translated into Norman-French poetry (c. 1155) by Wace, who depicted Arthur as the gracious, refined head of a court governed by the knightly rules of chivalry. Wace was later translated into English verse by Layamon, the first poet to use the language for Arthurian material. Neither poet, however, changed the basic plot: the pseudo-historical Arthur remains, with Mordred still the lover of Guinevere.

In 1170 Chrétien de Troyes made a vital addition to the legend. Encouraged by his patron, Marie de Champagne, Chrétien combined the old stories of war and manly adventure with the softer themes of love and courtliness. In his Le Chavalier de la Charrrette Chrétien introduced his own creation, Lancelot, lover of Queen Guinevere and greatest knight of all the world. Only once before had Lancelot been mentioned---in Chrétien's Erec, written about ten years prior to the Charrette. In the earlier poem Lancelot is ranked third in importance among the knights, behind the hero Erec, and Sir Gawain, traditionally Arthur's most valued warrior.

What prompted Chrétien to make such a radical departure from the story? Why was he encouraged to make a cuckold of a heroic king, an adulteress of his queen, and an illicit and traitorous lover of the man who otherwise was the epitome of chivalry? The answers are found in the work of the French troubadours and in their cult of amour courtois, which had become immensely popular among the knightly classes on the continent.

When the courtly love of the troubadours spread to northern France, Chrétien de Troyes had no choice but to accede to the wishes of Marie de Champagne and apply it to Arthurian materials. There was the additional incentive of the popular Tristram story, which involved adultery between a queen and a famous knight. It was clear that Camelot must also have a conventional courtly liason between a bachelor knight and a married woman—an absorbing theme to Marie, and to most high-born ladies of the twelfth century.³

It was a simple matter for Chrétien to give Guinevere a lover. The old mythological story of Guinevere's abduction gave wide currency to a tradition of her faithlessness. Early Welsh legends make her fickle, if not unfaithful. In Geoffrey she is more than semi-acquiescent in adultery with Mordred. In the lays of Marie de France, the notable French poetess and contemporary of Chrétien, Guinevere is grossly unfaithful.⁴ Apart from all these reasons, however, she was still the logical candidate. She was the greatest lady in the land, wife of the noblest and most powerful king of Christendom, and altogether worthy of the aspirations of the mightiest knight that a romanticist could conceive.

Chrétien's chief problem was the identity of the lover. Gawain? He was traditionally Arthur's first knight, but at the same time was a symbol of physical purity, and so was disqualified. Mordred? Again, as a well-entrenched symbol of cunning evil he

³ A.B. Taylor, op. cit., p. 64.
was inappropriate for the role of the courtly lover, who must be handsome, clean, well-dressed, witty, courteous, even-tempered, humble and meek. It was thus immediately apparent that to change suddenly the character of either of these knights would be too radical. Chrétien solved the problem by inventing the figure of Lancelot. It is rather ironic that this man who was to become the most popular and exalted of all the members of Arthur's Round Table should have appeared so casually to steal the limelight from so many tradition-ripened figures. Where Chrétien found his model has never been established. Lancelot is not mentioned in any of the chronicles, is the subject of no known popular tradition. In the bas-relief of the cathedral of Modena (c. 1130), which represents many famous Arthurian knights, he has no place. In the light of present evidence scholars have been forced to conclude that Lancelot was Chrétien's personal creation, embodying all of the virtues of the flowerhood of chivalry, and well qualified to love the finest lady of the kingdom.  

In Chrétien's *Le Chavalier de la Charrette*, or *The Knight of the Cart*, Arthur is unimportant, since the interest revolves around Lancelot's service to and adoration of Guinevere, who admits him to her favors, but expects him to perform many rather debasing deeds in order to show his devotion. She angrily scolds him because he hesitates to endure the disgrace of riding in a hangman's cart while hurrying to rescue her, and later orders him to lose deliberately in a tournament as a test of his obedience.

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App does not like Lancelot in this role of the perfect courtly lover:

Lancelot in this romance seems to be nothing more than a puppet intended to prove that a grovelling, self-effacing, adulterous devotion and love for one lady constitutes the ideal lover.6

It is true that in no other treatment of the legend does the modern reader have less admiration for Lancelot, but to go so far as to condemn him as a "love-sick simpleton"7 is to judge too harshly, and to ignore the highly artificial nature of the cult conventions that guided Chrétien's treatment.

The adulterous triangle continued its development in the French prose romances of the first quarter of the thirteenth century, with Lancelot still holding the center of interest. In the prose Lancelot he is still the perfect courtly lover, whose sinful but faithful love is his chief glory. In La Queste de Saint Graal, however, the first suggestion of a sense of guilt appears. During his search for the Holy Grail, Lancelot confesses his sin to various hermits, and candidly admits that his failure to achieve the quest is due to his inability to feel sincere repentance for his illicit relationship with Guinevere. In a third romance, the Mort Artu, the synthesis of the courtly love and morality themes is complete; Lancelot is a relatively human and tragic figure as he struggles with his guilt.

The adultery is now viewed as the primary cause of the final catastrophe of the dissolution of the Round Table and Arthur's death.

7. Ibid., p. 46.
Of the many Middle English romances written on the Arthurian legend between Geoffrey and Malory, only one, the stanzaic Le Morte Darthur, merits attention as far as the adultery theme is concerned. Written in the latter half of the fourteenth century, the poem represents the last stage in the evolution of the Arthuriad before Malory. It follows the romantic tradition, but although the Guinevere-Lancelot love story prevails, "the spirit of the abject devotion of a grovelling knight to a capricious, unreasonable lady" has largely disappeared. One of the poem's chief additions to the romantic theme is the story of the lily-maid, Elaine, whose love for Lancelot means her death. A change in spirit from the cult of courtly love is immediately apparent when Lancelot soundly rebukes Guinevere for her suspicions about his fidelity. Such reproach to the object of adoration would have been completely alien to the spirit of Chrétien de Troyes.

Although Chaucer was certainly familiar with the Arthurian legend, he wrote practically nothing about it. Why he was not attracted to it is, of course, impossible to say; the suggestion that he was too interested in realistic portraiture is not really satisfactory, since most of Chaucer's work outside of the Canterbury Tales is more romantic.

8. App, op. cit., p. 36.

9. Another contemporary poem was the alliterative Morte Arthure, based on the pseudo-historical tradition of Geoffrey's chronicle, in which the main interest is epic rather than romantic. Arthur is the noble champion of English honor, with Gawain his first lieutenant and Guinevere a minor background figure. There is no adultery with Lancelot, who bears a faint likeness to the romantic French figure. A personal favorite of the king, he is depicted as a boastful young war-lord who dies in the final battle.
Tales is highly romantic. That he conceived Lancelot as a rather light-minded cavalier delicately adept in the art of flirtation is suggested in The Squire's Tale:

Who koude telle yow the forme of daunces
So unkothe, and swiche fresshe contenaunces,
Swich subtil lookyng and dissymulynges
For drede of jalouse mennes aperceyvynges?
No man but Launcelot, and he is deed.

(ll. 283-87)\textsuperscript{10}

By the time that Sir Thomas Malory undertook his compilation and condensation of the various strands of the Arthurian legend in the middle of the fifteenth century, the creative age of Arthurian romance had long passed. Like Milton, he came to his great work almost too late; except for his Morte Darthur, which synthesized the story into a single narrative, the Matter of Britain might have escaped the notice of later writers.

Malory relied mainly on the thirteenth-century French prose cycle and the alliterative Morte Arthure in English, translating his sources into an unadorned prose that has delighted readers for centuries and given inspiration to all subsequent efforts to rework the legends. His version includes the continental campaigns of Arthur, and stresses the glory and prowess of the English power, but the main interest of Malory's Morte Darthur is romantic, not historical. Lancelot is the real protagonist of the story, and Malory is extremely interested in the adultery as a prime catalyst in the process leading to the final tragedy.

F.N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1957. Further evidence of Chaucer's attitude is found in ll. 4402-03 of the Nun's Priest's Tale, in which he refers to

the book of Launcelot de Lake,
That wommen holde in ful greet reverence.
With Malory the Arthurian cycle in the Middle Ages is complete. Geoffrey and the other chroniclers had used the legend to glorify the traditions of British royalty. The courtiers of France had employed it as a background for the new conventions of chivalry and courtly love. Malory hoped to establish a model of honor and chivalry for his contemporaries to follow. There was nothing new to be added to the basic story after Malory; future generations would simply play variations on the theme, interpreting the Arthuriad according to the standards of the particular age.
Malory's times were chaotic, both politically and spiritually. The fifteenth century, which saw the death struggle of the medieval feudal system, was filled with exhausting wars, economic instability and spiritual disillusionment. The Wars of the Roses, producing virtual anarchy in England, destroyed or impoverished most of the noble families of the country. The traditional unity of Christendom had become no more than a pious fiction; certainly the crusading impulse was dead, and any former bond between European Christians had disappeared in the face of ecclesiastical indolence, the Great Schism at the end of the fourteenth century, and the growing national feeling that overshadowed a sense of religious brotherhood. Huizinga sketches a striking picture of the age:

Is it surprising that the people could see their fate and that of the world only as an endless succession of evils? Bad government, exactions, the cupidity and violence of the great, wars and brigandage, scarcity, misery and pertilence---to this is contemporary history nearly reduced in the eyes of the people. The feeling of general insecurity, which was caused by the chronic form wars were apt to take, by the constant menace of the dangerous classes, by the mistrust of justice, was further aggravated by the obsession of the coming end of the world, and by the fear of hell, of sorcerers and of devils. The background of all life in the world seems black. Everywhere the flames of hatred arise and injustice reigns.1

By the end of the fifteenth century the armoured knight was no longer powerful, and chivalry was decadent. Gunpowder and the long-bow of the yeoman had made the knight obsolete, while chivalry had become rather an excuse for ceremony and pageant than a pattern of behaviour for the aristocrat. It was true, of course, that pure chivalry had rarely been practised at any time, but it had certainly been a spiritual force which had given its value to the institutions and deeds of feudalism. However artificial some of the conventions of chivalry were, it had been important as a tempering influence in the violent and often barbarous Middle Ages:

The true knight gave up all thought of himself. At the moment of investiture he swore to renounce the pursuit of material gain; to do nobly for the mere love of goodness; to be generous of his goods; to be courteous to the vanquished; to redress wrongs...to keep his word; to respect oaths; and, above all things, to protect the helpless and to serve women...truly a consecration to high unselfish aims for life.3

The whole chivalrous culture of the last days of the Middle Ages was marked by an unstable equilibrium between sentimentality and mockery. Honor, fidelity and love were treated with unimpeachable seriousness, but the honor was often mere vanity, and fidelity to the overlord and to the Church had less significance after the breakdown of feudalism and the disappearance of Christian unity. Inspired by the fading ideals of chivalry after translating The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry around 1485,


3. Ibid., p. 4.
William Caxton exclaimed:

O ye knyghts of England / where is the custome and usage of noble chyvalry that was used in tho days / what do ye now / but go to the baynes and playe att dyse. And some not wel aduysed use not honest and good rule ageyn alle ordre of knyghthode / leue this / leue it and rede the noble volumes of saynt graal of lancelot of galaad / of Trystram...Ther shalle ye see manhode / curtosye and gentylenesse.

Again in his preface to Malory's *Morte Darthur* in the same year, Caxton reminded the nobility that the book was more than a story:

And I...have doon sette it in enprynte to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble acts of chyvalrye, the jentyl and vertuous dedes that somme knyghtes used in tho dayes, by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vycious were punysshed and ofte put to shame and rebuke; humbly bysechyng al noble lordes and ladyes...that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce, and to folowe the same.

The aristocracy of the fifteenth century was not chivalrous, but corrupt, proud and privileged. Contemporary chronicles say that many major nobles were reckless, dishonest, sensual and brutal; so-called gentlemen committed robbery, rape, sacrilege and murder. It is against this background of political, spiritual, and social disorder that the *Morte Darthur* must be judged. Like Caxton, the conservative Malory saw the lack of national moral fibre in high places; perhaps he hoped that his book, recounting Arthur's wars and the nobility of his Round Table, would inject some national pride and personal virtue into the aristocrats, by whose example society might be improved.

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 94. The *Morte Darthur* and Caxton's preface suggest that Malory regarded chivalry as a practical code of ethics. On the other hand, what we know of Malory reveals that his...
The *Morte Darthur* is not a love story. The stress is not so much on romantic passion as on physical prowess and firm leadership. That the lists are more important than the bedchamber is not surprising in view of Malory's position as an aristocratic man of action, writing to tell a lively story and to remind his contemporaries of the good old days when men had stronger loyalties than a selfish devotion to personal gain. Malory's lack of interest in the theme of passion reflects his active background of service under Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, considered the flower of chivalry in an unchivalrous age. On the other hand, he was two centuries removed from the French cult of courtly love, probably did not fully understand it, and certainly did not approve of its glorification of illicit love.

A study of the characters of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, and of their relationships in the *Morte Darthur*, must focus on the influence of the chivalric code on the thinking of Malory; on Malory's attitude towards the courtly love convention which originally prompted the adultery, and on the extent to which fifteenth century moral standards dictated Malory's stress on the guilt of the lovers.

own activities, which possibly included rape and robbery, were quite unchivalrous. It is generally accepted, however, that Malory wrote his book in his declining years, while imprisoned for these offenses; the apparent discrepancy between his life and his principles in the *Morte Darthur* might have been the result of mature years, or contrition, or both. See E.K. Chambers, "Sir Thomas Malory," *The English Association Pamphlets*, January, 1922; see also Eugene Vinaver's *Malory* for a defence of Malory, in which he casts doubt on some of the charges against the knight.
The figure of King Arthur is important in an assessment of Malory's attitude towards the adultery. A prominent Arthurian critic feels that Malory intended Arthur to be the perfect English king, his reign the embodiment of the past glories of England. This is going a little far, because Malory's king, both morally and intellectually, is far from perfect. Malory, it is likely, saw in the rise and fall of Camelot a lesson for his own age, and as a royalist he certainly believed in the sanctity of the royal title as a dike against the power of the barons and the misfortunes of civil war and sedition, but the Arthur he culled from his sources is no superhuman hero—definitely not an ideal figure as in Tennyson—but is a rather a strong man of simple good will who sometimes displays more personal weaknesses than the chief members of his Round Table.

Arthur's ruin is, to some degree, the result of his own stubbornness, lust and fear; he engages in illicit passion which produces the traitorous Mordred, attempts to drown a shipload of babies after Merlin has predicted that one of them would eventually destroy him and his realm, and marries Guinevere in spite of Merlin's warnings. These do not sound like the actions of a great king, but this unevenness in characterization is probably caused by differences in the sources from which Malory worked. Perhaps he did not notice the discrepancies; in any case, it is unlikely that he would have cared too much. Malory was principally interested in sketching a hearty comrade and an inspiring leader, and Arthur's character in these respects is quite consistent.

Although he fails to remove some of the most incongruous flaws in Arthur, Malory takes pains to depict him as a loving and faithful husband. The stress on the king's love for Guinevere is heavier than in Malory's sources, and he omits the traditional marital infidelities of Arthur so prominent in the French romances. These are perhaps small changes, but they are important. Malory knew that the English reader would have little sympathy for a cuckolded playboy, and that an essentially virtuous Arthur was necessary if the guilt and sorrow of Lancelot and Guinevere were to have any genuine motivation. More important, infidelity in marriage would seriously damage his stature as a chivalric leader and king.

Malory's King Arthur is a forthright, simple, almost naive person, who is a courageous warrior and a beloved leader. A sometimes lusty man of uneven temper, he is often tactless, impetuous and unchivalrous. His views on love are liberal, and he expresses distaste for the pomp and ceremony of kingship. Above all—and this is vital in an examination of his marriage—he is passionately devoted to law and order, to the welfare of his realm, and to the good fellowship of his Round Table.

Although the morals of Malory's Arthur are better than they had ever been, it is sometimes difficult for the reader to sympathize with a husband who is stubborn and even downright stupid about the possibility of his wife's infidelity. Before his marriage, Arthur tells Merlin that he will not marry without the wizard's counsel and advice.\footnote{Morte Darthur, (Book III, 1).} Merlin warns him that Guinevere is
not "holsom" because "Launcelot scholde love hir, and sche hym agayne." But when a man's heart is set, adds Merlin, there is no use in arguing with him. Arthur agrees, and marries her anyway---in other words, he does not care what Merlin's advice is. Modern writers tend to omit this bit of prophecy; in a skeptical age the less magic the better. Because Arthur has foreknowledge of the adultery, it is difficult to sympathize with him when he is wronged by Guinevere. What is even more surprising is that he seems to forget the prophecy entirely, and is not reminded of it later when he receives a slanderous letter from the evil King Mark which bluntly reveals the affair; furthermore, when the king's spiteful sister, the witch Morgan Le Fay, sends Tristram to Camelot with a shield depicting a knight standing on the heads of a king and queen, Arthur is the only person present who is unaware of the insinuation. He dismisses Mark as a venomous liar, and puzzles vainly for hours over the shield. No king should be so ingenuous.

Malory was anxious to teach his contemporaries some lessons about chivalry, but it is Lancelot rather than the king who is a model of gentlemanly conduct. In fact, on at least three separate occasions in the lists, Arthur's knightly courtesy leaves much to be desired. During one tournament Arthur asks Lancelot to encounter Sir Gareth, who has beaten many of the Round Table knights; Lancelot refuses because Gareth is tired and deserves the honor. Perchance, suggests Arthur's chief lieutenant, the knight is fighting for his lady's grace, and it would be a shame to crush his efforts on behalf of love. Arthur's impetuousness and passion for victory land him in the dust when he is hot enough to challenge Tristram. Even though an anonymous Tristram
has been fighting all day, the king insists on jousting because Tristram will not tell his name. Tristram roars, "Ye ar no valyaunte knyght to aske batayle of me, consyderynge my grete travayle."\(^1\) The unhorsed king regains sympathy by admitting that pride and arrogance prompted his challenge. He does not learn his lesson, however; later he wants to do battle with Tristram and Palomides, who are fatigued after routing many of the Round Table. Lancelot again reminds him of the code of chivalry, but he insists on his will and is once more defeated.

Although Arthur gives Guinevere no justification for her behavior on the grounds that her husband is also promiscuous, the king has a healthy interest in feminine charms. His stubborn insistence on marrying the beautiful Guinevere is a victory of passion over judgment. Later he is fascinated by the charm of Isoud, and on one occasion his rashness again forces Lancelot into an embarrassing situation. Struck by Isoud's beauty when he sees her riding into the forest with Tristram and Palomides, he wants to meet her. Lancelot warns him that it may mean trouble if he rushes up to the group unawares. Arthur ignores the advice, snorting that he does not care whom he offends. Lancelot shrugs and follows. Palomides knocks Arthur down, and poor Lancelot must go through the motions of beating Palomides to salve the king's injured pride.

An interesting scene occurs when Arthur and Lancelot are guests of Tristram and Isoud at Joyous Garde. The king salutes Isoud: "Madame, hit is many a day ago sytthyn I desyred fyrst to

se you...now I dare say ye ar the fayryste that ever I sawe, and
Sir Trystram ys as fayre and as good a knyght as ony that I know.
And therefore mesemyth ye ar well besett togydir."¹¹ Perhaps
Arthur's words are only courtly hyperbole, but it is questionable
whether Guinevere would have been pleased with his unqualified
flattery. Arthur's approval of the Tristram-Isolt adultery can
hardly be likewise dismissed as routine courtesy. Earlier, he
praised Lancelot for giving the lovers refuge in his castle.
The only possible conclusion is that Arthur is condoning an illicit
passion; after all, no matter how hateful a villain Mark is, he
is still Isoud's husband, and the lovers, for all the aura of
romance and magic that surrounds them, are still adulterers.
Did Malory realize that his king was here adopting the credo of the
old cult of courtly love? A¿d has a man who countenances adultery
elsewhere much basis for indignation when his own wife strays?

Perhaps such questions appear to be an attempt to defame
Arthur and to justify, or at least excuse, the sin of Lancelot
and Guinevere. They are not. Malory certainly would not have
cared particularly what his readers thought about Arthur as a
wronged husband. He was not writing a love story for ladies of
a twelfth century French court, but an adventure story about
kingship, law, order, and the comradeship of chivalry. Malory
realized that it does not really matter whether Arthur deserves
to lose his wife; what matters is whether Arthur deserves to lose
his kingdom, to see it slip away into chaos.

The life dream of Arthur is to build not a happy marriage, but a happy realm. His fellowship of the Round Table, which maintains the right in Britain, is dearer to him than a dozen queens. Lancelot is a greater loss than Guinevere. After Lancelot rescues the queen from the fire, Arthur exclaims:

"And therefore...syte you well, my harte was never so hevy as hit ys now. And much more I am soryar for my good knyghtes losse than for the losse of my fayre quene; for quenys I myght have inow, but such a felyship of good knyghtes shall never be togydirs in no company. And now I dare sêy...there was never Crystyn kynge that ever hylde such a felyshyp togydyrs. And alas, that ever sir Launcelot and I shulde be at debate." ¹²

Later, during the siege of Lancelot's castle, Lancelot refuses to fight: "God deffend me...that ever I shuld encounter wyth the moste noble king that made me knyght." Arthur answers,

"Now, fye uppon thy fayre langayge!...for wyte thou well and truste hit, I am thy mortall foo and ever woll to my deth-day; for thou haste slayne my good knyghtes and full noble men of my blood, that shall I never recover agayne. Also thou haste layne be my quene and holdyn her many wynters, and syttyn lyke a traytoure, taken her away fro me by fors." ¹³

Arthur is not sincere here in his hatred of Lancelot, but is simply putting up a half-hearted show for the benefit of the vengeful Gawain. After Lancelot dutifully spares his life on the field of battle, Arthur immediately breaks into tears, "thynkyng of the grete curtesy that was in sir Launcelot more than in ony other man." ¹⁴ It is also notable that his major complaint is again the loss of his knights; the loss of his wife is almost an afterthought. Certainly it does not prey on his mind.

¹². Morte Darthur, (XX, 9).
¹³. Ibid., (XX, 11).
¹⁴. Ibid., (XX, 13).
Whatever are Arthur's weaknesses in his minor personal relationships, his kingship is never in doubt. He receives nothing but praise and obedience from all but the most evil of the knights. He is a great feudal monarch—the Flower of Chivalry, as Tristram calls him—who brings peace and prosperity to the country, drives out the power of Rome, and is roundly admired by his followers because he is ever willing to jeopardize his royal person by venturing forth as a knight errant "as other poor knyghtes ded." His desire for peace at any price is evident in his agreement to subordinate personal pride and happiness by taking back Guinevere at the command of the Pope. Malory's scorn for the "new fangle" people who later side with the traitorous usurper Mordred is typical of a conservative man living in an age when everywhere there were upstarts whose "new fangle" ideas threatened to upset every value of the medieval order. Malory's handling of the moral theme in the Morte Darthur can be understood only as long as it is remembered that morality was not his chief interest, but was of importance only insofar as it reflected on the social and political health of King Arthur's realm.

Malory was two centuries removed from the days when the cult of courtly love enjoyed its greatest popularity, and it is certain that a hardy fifteenth century Englishman would have little understanding of, or sympathy for, the artificial and immoral philosophy of a remote French aristocracy. Since, however, Malory was working with prose romances strongly influenced by Chretien de Troyes, it was inevitable that elements of the courtly conventions would appear in his version of the Arthuriad. Committed to an adulterous situation, what did Malory think of this liaison between
a knight and the queen of the greatest realm of Christendom?
The fact is that he was extremely sympathetic to it. Admittedly he ennobled Arthur and stressed the lovers' awareness of guilt instead of glorifying their desire, but he did not condemn them. In fact the lovers emerge from the disaster rather better than practically any other members of the court; both are granted peaceful, holy deaths by Malory.

Malory's sympathy for the lovers is the natural outcome of his admiration for chivalry as a practical code of behavior. At the core of the chivalric ideal is the virtue of fidelity, and in an age that seemed to have forgotten loyalty, which is vital to law, order and progress, Malory was forced to admire the unwavering bond between Lancelot and Guinevere, even if it was sinful. However much he might have recoiled from the affectations of courtly love, he was certainly in full agreement with its insistence that promiscuity was the worst of sins. In one of the rare prolonged passages in the *Morte Darthur* apparently original with Malory, he mourns the loss of stability in love:

> But nowadayes men cannat love sevennyght but they muste have all their desyres...And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote sone colde. Thys ys no stabylyte. But the olde love was nat so. For men and women coude love togydurs seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them, and than was love, trouthe and faythefulnes. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in kynge Arthurs dayes.
> Wherefore I lykken love nowadayes unto somer and wynter: for, lyke as the tone ys colde and the othir ys hote, so faryth love nowadayes.  

If there is any doubt that he is thinking of Lancelot and Guinevere, it is immediately dispelled by his concluding tribute:

And therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre remembraunce the monethe of May, lyke as ded quene Gwenyver, for whom I make here a lytyll mention, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende.  

Furthermore, no characteristic of the adultery is so strongly emphasized as the mutual fidelity of the lovers. App misunderstands Malory's intentions when he says that Malory countenances and excuses the sin: both Lancelot and Guinevere have good ends because they are "true", not because they are lovers. Lancelot in particular is tortured by an awareness of guilt, while Guinevere takes her final leave of him with these words:

Therefore, sir Launcelot, wyte thou well I am sette in suche a pylght to gete my soule hele. And yet I truste thorow Goddis grace and thorow Hys Passion of Hys woundis wyde, that aftir my deth I may have a syght of the bylssed face of Cryste Jesu, and on Doomesday to sytte on Hys ryght syde; for as synful synfull as ever I was, now ar seyntes in hevyh.  

Living a more regulated court life, Guinevere has little opportunity for infidelity. There is, of course, the weight of Malory's praise on her behalf, and certainly she is loyal and courageous during Mordred's insurrection when she flees to the Tower and withstands a siege rather than give herself up to the usurper. Often petulant, jealous and spiteful in the style of grand and passionate ladies, she nevertheless commands respect and admiration.

The handsome and famous Lancelot is faced with many further trials of the flesh during his adventures as a knight-errant. When four leering enchantresses capture him and threaten death

unless he chooses one of them as his paramour, he rejects their threats and their jealous insults to Guinevere:

'This is an harde case,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'that other I muste dye other to chose one of you. Yet had I lever dye in this preson with worsyp than to have one of you to my peramoure, magre myne hede. And therefore ye be answeryd: I woll none of you, for ye be false enchauntresses. And as for my lady, dame Gwenyvere, were I at my lyberte as I was, I wolde prove hit on youre's that she is the treweste lady unto hir lorde lyvynge.'

Lancelot's anger and horror when he discovers that Dame Brisen has tricked him into the begetting of Galahad with Elaine are evidence of his desire for complete fidelity. In the convent at Almsbury during their final parting, Guinevere encourages Lancelot to go to France, take a wife, and live with her in joy and bliss; but he refuses because he has promised never to be false to her. He will rather accept the same fate as she does by becoming a recluse to heal his soul.

When Tristram leaves Isoud of Ireland and marries Isoud of the White Hands in Brittany, Lancelot is enraged. It is certainly more difficult for a modern reader to sympathize with his anger, but his indignation is perfectly natural for the ideal courtly lover. Once a man has committed himself to one lady, be she married or single, he must be loyal until rejected. That Tristram leaves an adultery for a marriage does not excuse him in the eyes of Lancelot:

'Fye uppon hym, untrew knyght to his lady! That so noble a knyght as sir Tristrames is sholde be founde to his fyrst lady and love untrew, that is the quene of Cornwayle! But sey ye to hym thus,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'that of all knyghtes in

19. Morte Darthur, (VI, 3).
the worlde I have loved hym moost and had moost joye of hym, and all was for his noble dedys.
And lette hym wete that the love betwene hym and me is done for ever, and that I gyff hym warnyng: from this day forthe I wolle be his mortall enemy.'

Actually, on his wedding night Tristram had remembered Isoud of Ireland, and had taken no pleasure with his wife but "clyppyng and kyssyng." He later explains this to Lancelot, begging his pardon, and the incident is forgiven.

While it is true that the immorality of courtly love is less objectionable to the Gallic than to the British temperament, Malory was not the only prominent English writer to admire its stress on fidelity. The illicit love in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is not treated as a crime; the capital sin of the story is Criseyde's infidelity to her oath of loyalty to her lover. What Malory called "stablyte", Chaucer termed "stedfastnesse", and many of his short lyrics bemoan its absence in English society a century before Malory. Indeed, even in the enlightened twentieth century are found those who will excuse philandering on the grounds of fidelity:

And in our own country today, if there is to be love outside marriage, steady faithfulness to one person puts it in an entirely different category from that of promiscuity. Though in both cases it may be sinful, the first is, at least in one of mature years, the more respectable.

Whether Malory would have agreed that age has anything to do with it, is hard to say.


If it is remembered, finally, that the code of courtly love, which was first responsible for the creation of Lancelot as lover of the queen, defined "fidelity" in love in a rather specialized way, one of the major paradoxes of the *Morte Darthur* can be resolved. Lancelot repeatedly protests that Guinevere is "faythfull unto hir lorde." How, many critics have asked, can a man who is ostensibly the epitome of chivalry tell such bare-faced lies about what is obviously a carnal relationship? And is it not a ludicrous lack of consistency in characterization when Malory allows some of the holiest members of the Round Table to side with Lancelot, and even to offer their aid in promoting the affair?

Normally fidelity in marriage implies loyalty to the partner, and a denial of all promiscuous behavior. Under courtly love, however, to take a single lover was acceptable, and was not really adultery. When judged by twentieth century standards, Lancelot is a liar; when judged by the standards of courtly love, which strongly influenced the morality of Malory's sources, Lancelot speaks the truth.

Such technicalities are not necessary to explain why so many of the noblest knights---Sir Bors, for instance---side with Lancelot after he flees from court. To the conventional chivalric loyalties to God, the King, and the lady might be added a fourth---fidelity to a friend, to a comrade. These men were chiefly warriors who admired courage and hardihood before anything else; when faced with a man like Lancelot, a little weakness of the flesh would not be enough to lessen their admiration and love for his superiority in every other capacity. But this

does not explain why a holy knight like Sir Bors, one of the few granted a glimpse of the Holy Grail, should countenance and aid the adultery. Afraid of scandal, Lancelot tries to avoid the company of Guinevere, who accuses him of infidelity and orders him from the court; Lancelot turns to Sir Bors, who promises to help him to regain his lady's favor.\textsuperscript{23} The answer again is simply that, in terms of the courtly code, there never was any adultery.

It would certainly be an error to call the adulterous triangle in the \textit{Morte Darthur} a traditional courtly romance. Although he obviously admires the fidelity of the love, and the chivalric qualities of Lancelot, Malory is strongly influenced by the morality of his age to lay special stress on the essential guilt of the lovers, particularly on the remorse of Lancelot that first appears when he undertakes the Grail quest. Malory underlines the moral guilt in a variety of ways: Lancelot's self-accusations, the scoldings of the holy hermits, the warnings of supernatural voices, Lancelot's failure to achieve the Grail, and his admitted inferiority to Galahad as the greatest knight in the world.

When his quest seems to be vain, Landelot confesses to a hermit:

'And all my grete dedis of armys that I have done for the moste party was for the quenys sake, and for hir sake wolde I do batayle...And never dud I batayle all only for Goddis sake, but for to wynne worship and to cause me the bettir to be beloved, and litill or nought I thanked never God of hit.'\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Morte Darthur}, (XVIII, 2).

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, (XIII, 20).
He is human and honest when he admits that

'My synne and my wyckedness hath brought me unto grete dishonoure! For whan I sought worldly adventures for worldely desyres I ever encheved them and had the bettir in every place...And now I take upon me the adventures to seke of holly thynges, now I se and undirstonde that myne olde synne hyndryth me and shamyth me, that I had no power to stirre nother speke whan the holy bloode appered before me.'

In his despair Lancelot complains of his spiritual barrenness to another holy man, who is frank in reply:

'...there is no knyght now lyvynge that ought to yelde God so grete thanke os ye, for He hath yevyn you beaute, bownte, semelynes, and grete strengthe over all other knyghtes. And therefore ye ar the more beholdyn unto God than ony other man to love Hym and drede Hym, for youre stren­gte and your manhode woll litill avayle you and God be agaynste you.'

Shortly Lancelot hears a voice in the air describing him as "...more harder than ys the stone, and more bitter than ys the woode, and more naked and barer than ys the lyeff of the fygge­tre." This is harsh criticism for a man who has experienced no­thing but praise throughout his life, but he submits meekly because he is honest enough to admit that the immorality of an artificial courtly code is alien to pure Christianity.

Malory places further emphasis on the one moral flaw in the character of his protagonist by devoting considerable space to the glories of Galahad, who is allowed to displace his father as the greatest knight in the world. Galahad is probably not physically superior, but he is able to defeat Lancelot in a

joust because of his purity of soul. Lancelot accepts even this
shame with perfect humility.27

That Malory was attracted to the spiritually chastened Lance-
lot is evident in his reluctance to resume the main story of
adultery after the return of the knights to Camelot. With an
unusual concern for crediting his sources, in the two sentences
describing the resumption of the passion at the beginning of
Book XVIII he twice adds, "as the booke seyth"; perhaps this is
coincidence, but it seems more likely that Malory either wants
to make it clear that this is not his story, or intends to
suggest subtly that his sources may have erred. Malory, remem-
ber, believed in the historical truth of most of what he com-
piled, and frequently when an event placed too great a strain
on credulity, he resorted to "as the booke seyth," as a sort of
crude footnote. Probably his love of chivalry and his belief
in conventional morality made the spiritual relapse of Lancelot
a sad occasion indeed.

The influence of what was still essentially an Age of Faith
is evident in the large amount of space that Malory devotes to
the spiritual regeneration theme of the Grail quest. That Malory
was attracted toward mysticism is a direct reflection of the

27. App's determined attempt to defame Malory's Lancelot as a
conceited, hypocritical sensualist leads him into a blunder
in this connection. When Galahad is able to pull the sword
out of the stone because he is purest of all knights, a
woman tells Lancelot that he is no longer the best knight
in the world. "I know well I was never the beste," he
replies. App says this is false humility because in (XX, 17)
Lancelot says he can defeat anybody, and rehearses his past
deeds. Obviously Lancelot uses "best" in the spiritual sense,
not the physical, but App chooses to ignore this distinction
in his eagerness to support his extremely unorthodox inter-
pretation of the character.
Christian civilization in which he lived. This emphasis is even of greater significance when one notes that the other three Arthurian works under consideration give slight attention to this major interest of Malory. Vida Scudder suggests why this is so:

During the centuries of reaction after the Renascence, as the desire grew to penetrate Nature's secrets instead of scorning them, mediaeval mysticism ceased to make any appeal. Even the romantic revival ignored it, and people who delight in the picturesque of the Middle Ages, as shown by Scott or William Morris, would yet turn with contempt from tales of contemplatives in their rapt or ascetics in their agonies...Our distaste for asceticism is a cause of our failure to understand with sympathy the more mystical phases of mediaeval imagination—a failure conspicuous in the work of some Arthurian scholars.

Most judgments on the philosophy and intent of Malory in his Morte Darthur must necessarily be tentative. His work was basically translation, and no matter how free or selective such translation is, it is unjust and unfair to hold the translator as responsible for the results as he would be if he were creating original material. Unhappily, none of Malory's other writing is available as a basis for comparison.

It is also unrealistic to seek complete consistency in the characters, who are derived from a semi-barbarous Celtic mythology, refined by the influences of chivalry and courtly love, and chronicled much later by a man living when the values on which the stories were based were in eclipse. Each stage of the development of the Arthuriad up to Malory's time left its peculiar stamp, and Malory was sometimes unable to reconcile the differences. A student of the Morte Darthur must give details

only the attention they deserve, and must look for general
trends of emphasis that roughly indicate how this fifteenth
century knight was influenced by his background to assemble
the many strands of the legend into a work of interest and
significance to his age.
CHAPTER III

SURVEY: MALORY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Not a single piece of first rate writing in English on any aspect of the Arthurian legend was produced in the four hundred years between Malory and Tennyson.¹ In a majority of the treatments Lancelot and Guinevere appear only incidentally, often not at all. They are rarely lovers, because the romantic tradition of the French romances, adopted by Malory, suffered a prolonged eclipse in popularity in favor of the pseudo-historical version of Geoffrey of Monmouth. Perhaps it was an increasingly strong national pride that chose to depict Arthur as a noble and victorious British monarch, and not as the deceived husband, a perennial object of comedy. Malory, indeed, compiled his masterpiece almost too late, as is evidenced by his desire to remind his contemporaries of the forgotten ideals of chivalry, and on the horizon were the Renaissance, with its revival of classical learning, and the Reformation with its militant fervor for religious independence. Both were developments alien to feudal chivalry and humble mystic devotion, two of the basic elements of the Arthuriad. The mist was thickening over the vales of Avalon.

¹. Spenser's Faerie Queene cannot properly be considered as dealing with the Arthuriad. Although it is a romance of chivalry, and employs some familiar Arthurian names, it does not attempt to tell any of the traditional story.
Before the work of Tennyson, Robinson and White is considered in detail, it is necessary to review the Arthurian writings between Malory and the twentieth century which involve the adultery.

A fragmentary Scottish metrical romance, *Lancelot of the Laik*, is contemporary with Malory. Its main interest lies in its description of Lancelot's initial meeting with Guinevere, an episode ignored by Malory. While riding to help Arthur in a local war, Lancelot sees the queen looking down from a parapet, and is stunned by her beauty. He strives in every way to please her, even to the point of refusing to help the king until she bids him do so. Perhaps it is well that the pair have their brief happiness, for it will be a long time before authors will again permit them to love.

How distasteful was the adultery theme to the generations after Malory is seen in John Leland's *Assertio Inclytissimi Arturii Regis*. Published in 1554 it offers various proofs of the existence of an historical Arthur. Leland says that "Guenhera" was certainly beautiful, and wishes that he could honestly spare "the impayred honor and fame of noble women," but "historie pluckes him by the eare," and he must faithfully report what the Auncient Authors have said of her lack of chastity and her carnal knowledge with Mordred the Pict. Leland is, of course, referring to the pseudo-historical Arthur, not to the later versions of French romance.

2. Some major Arthurian authors, notably Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis, are omitted, since their work does not concern the adultery.


Leland knew of Lancelot, who is described as the king's warmest and truest friend, and it is ironic that the author naively uses the knight to cast doubt on Guinevere's reputation for infidelity with Mordred. Lancelot, says Leland, buried the dead Guinevere near Arthur's grave: would he have done this if she was an adulteress? It seems incredible that Leland would be ignorant of Lancelot's role in the French romances and in Malory; if he was familiar with it, he should have had better judgment than to present Lancelot as evidence of her fidelity. In any case, the Assertio was designed to whitewash the reputation of the historical Arthur and his court.

The reaction against romance in the last half of the sixteenth century is evident in Roger Ascham's disgust in his Scholemaster (1570). Because he obviously has no true understanding of the spirit of medieval romance, Ascham is completely revolted by Malory's Morte Darthur, which is based on

...slaughter and bold bawdrye; in which booke those be counted the noblest knightes that do kill th\nthe most men without any quarrell, and commit fowllest adoulteries by sutlest shiftes.5

Only one other author of note has chosen to treat the legend in the bitter spirit of Ascham; there was, however, a quick antidote for Mark Twain's venom in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. Unhappily, there was not anyone to answer Ascham.

The only play on the Arthurian theme produced by the Elizabethan theatre was Thomas Hughes' The Misfortunes of Arthur, a Senecan tragedy acted before the Queen in 1587. The author reverts to the version of Geoffrey and the early English romances.

Mordred, the son of Arthur by his half-sister, is the lover of a faithless Guinevere, who gives full support to the coup of Mordred during Arthur's absence on the Roman campaign. Arthur is the usual heroic king, but has no Lancelot to help him. Why Shakespeare ignored the story is a major puzzle to Arthurian scholars. He most certainly must have known the legend ---there were, for instance, six editions of Malory between 1485 and 1634---and Spenser's Faerie Queene, although only remotely connected with the true Arthuriad, at least employed the name and a similar romantic setting. Shakespeare was certainly attracted by the concept of kingship, and the excuse that Arthur was too remote and vague a monarch for his taste seems rather weak. Conjecture, however, is fruitless, for Shakespeare, unlike Milton, left posterity no hints of his reasons for silence.

In his Faerie Queene Spenser returned to the age of knighthood and chivalry, and borrowed the name of Arthur with its rich overtones, but he in no way attempted to reconstruct the genuine legend. Prince Arthur, unlike the slightly blemished king of Malory, is a perfectly idealized figure who occasionally takes time out from his search for the Queen of Fairyland to render some valuable service to someone in trouble---rather like a medieval deus ex machina. Spenser intended to instruct, to moralize, to improve his readers through the use of allegory. Arthur is, ironically, found defending protestantism against the old church, whose traditional champion he had always been:

...we may see that, in spite of the author's glorification of old and dead ideals, he is too much a child of his own time not to make his hero in his doctrines and maxims an Elizabethan nobleman. 7

It is Spenser's avoidance of the adultery theme rather than his treatment of it that is of interest in a survey of the English Arthuriad. The allegory absolutely prevented Spenser from borrowing much more than Arthur's name---and forced him, by the way, to demote the king to the status of a prince in order to obscure further the association. Since it was Spenser's declared intention that the Faerie Queene, the object of Prince Arthur's love, should represent Queen Elizabeth, it was obviously impossible to introduce Guinevere. Tradition also barred Lancelot, for he would immediately be coupled with the beloved of Arthur. One can imagine the implications, for instance, if Tennyson had declared that his Arthur represented Victoria's Prince Albert! 8

Christopher Middleton's History of Chinon of England, a prose romance published in 1597, does not deal with the central Arthurian tragedy, but is of interest in that the author takes some freedoms with the role of Lancelot, who has a chaste love for a virgin maid, Laura, and has no connection with Guinevere. Lancelot suffers from love-sickness in the old courtly fashion, but otherwise is conventionally brave, courageous and generous. He wins the girl, but she is not half so exciting as the passionate queen of Arthur.


8. Tennyson did, in fact, allow that the virtues of Arthur were those of Albert, but even then he was on delicate ground.
By the end of the first quarter of the seventeenth century, there were increasing doubts about the authenticity of the Matter of Britain. In his *Polyolbion* (1622) Michael Drayton says that his age "scarce believes that Arthur ever was." It was the beginning of the barren age in Arthurian literature, whose themes and characters were alien alike to the standards of puritanism and the growing classicism. The decay in prestige which was to put the mystery and beauty of the myths and legends at a discount continued for well over a century, culminating in Fielding's *Tom Thumb* in the early eighteenth century. This was to be the point of lowest disgrace, after which Arthur would begin his preparations to return from Avalon once again to swell the hearts of the British people.

There has always been profound regret among Arthurian scholars that in the middle of his literary desert, Arthur just failed to win the grandest champion of them all. John Milton's consideration of the Arthuriad as a subject for an epic poem is well known, chiefly from his lines at the beginning of Book IX of *Paradise Lost*:

> Since first this subject for heroic song  
> Pleased me, long choosing and beginning late;  
> Not sedulous by nature to indite  
> Wars, hitherto the only argument  
> Heroic deem'd, chief mast'ry to dissect 

> ....................

> With long and tedious havock fabled knights  
> Or tilting furniture, amblazon'd shields,  
> Impresses quaint, caparisons and steeds;  
> Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights  
> At joust and tournament.

In his list of potential epic subjects he listed the Arthurian materials; that he was early attracted to them is evidenced in his "An Apology for Smectymnuus":

Next...that I may tell ye whether my younger feet wander'd; I betook me among those lofty Fables and Romances, which recount in solemn canto's the deeds of Knighthood founded by our victorious Kings;...There I read it in the oath of every Knight, that he should defend to the expense of his best blood...the honor and chastity of Virgin or Matron. From whence even then I learnt what a noble vertue chastity sure must be, to the defense of which so many worthies by such a deare adventure of themselves had sworne. 10

Was Milton, like Ascham, shocked and repelled by such knights as Lancelot, Tristram and Gawain, who were not always faithful to their oaths of chastity? Would he have roundly condemned the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere? Probably not. In his sole comment on the subject he sounds regretful and disappointed, like Leland, that such admirable people should reveal any baseness:

And if I found in the story afterward any of them by word or deed breaking that oath, I judg'd it the same fault of the Poet, as that which is attributed to Homer; to have written undecent things of the gods...So that even those books which to many others have bin the fuel of wantonnesse and loose living, I cannot thinke how unlessse by divine indulgence prov'd to me so many incitements as you have heard, to the love and stedfast observation of that vertue which abhorres the society of Bordello's. 11

In the last decade of the century there were three attempts to resurrect the Arthuriad, all of them miserable failures because of the wide divergence between the standards of the Augustan Age the the spirit of medieval romance. The first was Dryden's pastoral opera King Arthur, produced in 1691, followed

11. Ibid., p. 891.
by Sir Richard Blackmore's two lengthy epics in couplets, *Prince Arthur* (1693) and *King Arthur* (1697).

Dryden at first considered an epic treatment of the material, but settled for what is now an obscure light opera, full of melodramatic effects, including Merlin in a flying chariot pulled by dragons and attended by spirits.\(^{12}\) Full of pretty conceits and conventional wordplay, the piece borrows little more than the Arthurian names.\(^{13}\) There is some slight interest, however, in Dryden's treatment of Arthur, who is described as "void of all...faults," and who forgives "as a forgiving God."\(^{14}\) Such comparisons with the Almighty were to be made by Tennyson in his famous idealization of Arthur. Furthermore, Arthur tells the abductor, Oswald, that force will not win a maiden: "You should have made a conquest of her mind," he says, which is certainly a more modern philosophy than that of Tennyson's Arthur, who takes it for granted that Guinevere loves him without ever seeing him.


13. Over a century later a true traditionalist, Sir Walter Scott, had this to say about Dryden's cavalier handling of great names:

Dryden in immortal strain
Had raised the Table Round again,
But that a ribald king and court,
Bade him toil on to make them sport;
Demanded for their niggard pay,
Fit for their loose souls, a looser lay.
Licentious satire, song and play,
The world defrauded of the high design,
Profaned the God-given strength and
marred the lofty line.
(Marmion: Intro. Canto I)

14. (Act I, scene 1).
The end of the seventeenth century was not a favorable period for a work of high imagination, and although Dryden had genius, he was too much a child of the times not to succumb to popular tastes. The influence of the age, however, did not deter Sir Richard Blackmore from producing two long, dull didactic epics which enjoyed a certain fleeting popularity but which now are quite justly forgotten. Blackmore's poems are political allegory, celebrating the triumphs of the Revolution, and the achievements of the new king at home and abroad. Arthur is William, who fights Octa the Saxon (James II) and Clotar the Frank (Louis XIV) and marries the Saxon Princess Ethelina (Mary). The Christians are the Protestants, the pagans are Catholics. Because of the allegory Blackmore is forced to depart radically from the traditional story: he obviously cannot have any adultery, and indeed must entirely omit such key figures as Guinevere, Lancelot and Mordred.

As evidence that the rationalistic temper of the early eighteenth century practically disqualified contemporary writers from dealing with romantic themes, Henry Fielding's The Tragedy of Tragedies or The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great (1731) will serve. The play is a mock-heroic tragedy, a travesty of current high dramatic style, and faintly resembles the original Arthuriad. Arthur's wife is Dollalolla, his first lieutenant Tom Thumb, the tiny hero of juvenile fiction. Arthur loves a captive giantess, while his queen desires amours with

Tom. It is amusing farce, but Arthur's boorishness, his Queen's stupidity, the suggestion of a parallel between Tom and Lancelot, and the crude licentiousness of everyone concerned is a far cry from the noble spirit of Malory.

Perhaps MacCallum most effectively sums up the antithesis between romance and the Neo-Classical period:

It was an age of prose, which exalted common sense as the idol of culture, and paid no great heed to the spiritual or the picturesque. Hence everything with the cachet of the Middle Ages was remote from its sympathies. Their dim religious half-lights were yielding to a glare of Illumination. Gothic, the description of their noble architecture, had the secondary meaning of barbarous, and romantic was used as a term of reproach...The pity and terror of Arthur's story...would have been as uncongenial in the saeculum rationalisticum as the apparation of Earl Gorlois' ghost in a company of bewigged and bepowdered beaux. The typical hero of imaginative fiction is not now King Arthur but Tom Jones...It seems natural that to such a time, on account of its strengths no less than its weakness, the characters of Arthurian tradition, if they were recalled at all, should present themselves in a ludicrous light.16

After Fielding there was nowhere for the Arthurian legend to go but up, and indeed the gradual movement away from an artificial and unnatural classicism, so at odds with the romantic English temper, boded well for Arthur and his knights. In 1776 William Hilton produced an indifferent tragedy, Arthur, Monarch of the Britons, which in spite of its lack of merit was significant in its fidelity to the original story of Geoffrey.17

After a long absence, Guinevere reappears as Mordred's lover. Richard Hole in 1789 finished a poetical romance, Arthur, or

17. Cited in MacCallum, op. cit., p. 163.
The Northern Enchantment, which is unusual in that Lancelot is depicted as the commander of the British forces and dear friend of Arthur—but before Arthur has yet won his kingdom. Naturally, Guinevere is absent, so Hole has no adultery to manage; however, there is a renewed reverence for the traditionally elevated positions and noble personalities of the principal figures.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century Arthurian stories were again well established as legitimate subject matter. Henceforth writers were usually to show considerable respect for the incidents and spirit of the ancient legends, to seek in them a deeper lesson for their own times, and to make greater efforts to get at the motives of the characters. The first major poet of the romantic age to treat the Arthuriad, however, belies this judgment; Sir Walter Scott, in his The Bridal of Triermain (1813), takes radical freedoms with the story.

The Bridal of Triermain is a rather incongruous potpourri of the Arthuriad and the Sleeping Beauty legend. Scott wants an explanation for the long sleep of the heroine Gyneth, so he utilizes Arthur and his court, particularly the enchantments of Merlin. Arthur leaves his court in search of adventure, because he loves the "crash of a foeman's spear" better than the perfumed bowers of Guinevere:

\begin{quote}
And the frank-hearted Monarch full little did wot That she smiled, in his absence, on brave Lancelot.
\end{quote}

The king is ingenuous as ever about the passion of his wife and

20. The Bridal of Triermain, (Canto I, xi).
chief knight, but any indignation of the reader over the deception is quickly dispelled when Arthur comes to the castle of the seductive witch Guendolen, who finds Arthur willing to go to bed with almost indecent haste. He dallies for some weeks:

He thinks not of the Table Round;  
In lawless love dissolved his life,  
He thinks not of his beauteous wife.  

Guendolen has done what beautiful Guinevere could not do: make Arthur forget the heathen crests and pagan swords and be content with her brown tresses and perfumed bosom. He finally comes to his senses and leaves the pregnant witch, rashly promising that if the child is a son he will inherit the kingdom, if a girl she will marry the finest knight in a Round Table tournament.

Many years later, Gyneth, the fruit of the union, appears before Arthur and all his court to ask the King to make good his promise. He is not in the least embarrassed, but proudly proclaims her as his bastard daughter:

Then, conscious, glanced upon his queen:  
But she, unruffled at the scene,  
Of human frailty construed mild,  
Look'd upon Lancelot and smiled.

The Queen is tolerant; she understands human weakness. It is further evident that Scott's Guinevere is rather smug and condescending when she discovers her husband's infidelity. She is certainly not angry, but rather relieved to find mutual guilt. No doubt in the future her glances at Lancelot will be far less furtive.

This Arthurian segment in the Bridal is basically the old story of past sins returning to extract retributive justice.

22. Ibid., (Canto II, xv).
Its main interest lies in Scott's handling of the adultery relation­ship; Arthur is no longer the wronged husband, but a lusty warrior who surrenders rather too quickly in temptation, and who later is rather proud, not apologetic, when his sin is revealed.

From the great Romantic poets, who would be expected to breathe new vigour into the legends, practically nothing is heard. Coleridge thought that the legend would be a profitable source for a great national epic, but did not deal with it himself; neither did Byron, Shelley or Keats. In his declining years Wordsworth brushed the material in his *The Egyptian Maid* (1830), telling the story of a drowned maid touched by a series of knights who seek a sign from God to indicate who will resurrect and marry her. Several fail before Lancelot makes the attempt:

from Heaven's grace
A sign he craved, tired slave of vain contrition;
The royal Guinever looked passing glad
When his touch failed.

Evidently Wordsworth thought of Lancelot as plagued by a conscience too weak to break the bonds of the flesh, and of Guinevere as a proud queen jealous of her hold over him.

Maynadier suggests that perhaps the great Romantics did not write on the legend because it was by then virtually unknown, and its popularity as a theme was not proved. There are two immediate objections to this judgment; first, it creates a rather absurd picture of the poetic genius of the age sitting around wondering what would sell quickest on the current market, and afraid to experiment in case the grocery bills should go unpaid. Second, that there were two editions of Malory in 1816,


and a third edited by Southey in 1817 is ample evidence that the stories enjoyed some popularity at the time.

Before Tennyson there are two treatments of the main adultery theme that indicate the growing delicacy of moral consciousness in the nineteenth century. In 1841 Reginald Heber's *Morte Arthur*, an unfinished poem in Spenserian stanzas, was published, and in 1848 appeared Bulwer-Lytton's poem *King Arthur*. Both authors admire Arthur, who is obviously the wronged party, but they also feel the usual attraction for Lancelot and Guinevere. To accept the traditional story and still maintain such sympathy for the adulterers would be contrary to conventional moral standards, so both authors contrive rather flimsy extenuating circumstances. Heber depicts Guinevere as a country maid, not a king's daughter, who has fallen in love with Lancelot, disguised as a forester, long before her marriage to Arthur; in the meantime, Lancelot has disappeared and Guinevere has presumed him dead. It is a cruel stroke of fortune that her first and only real love should turn out to be her husband's best friend. Bulwer-Lytton ingeniously explains away the scandal by assuming that there were two ladies, beloved by Lancelot and Arthur respectively, called Genevra and Genevieve; in other words, there is really no adultery at all!^25

It was Tennyson who finally realized that there is no need to seek excuses for the immorality of the Arthuriad. The essence of the story is how moral corruption leads to final tragedy and to the shattering of a system built on the idealistic premise^25. Cited in MacCallum, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

that human nature will always strive for the Good if it is pointed out:

Tennyson...effected finally the reconciliation between the Lancelot story and the modern moral consciousness...by placing the following conditions: a great resistance but a greater temptation, a great sin, but the sinner's great remorse, the author's severe condemnation of the sin, but understanding and sympathy for the sinner.27

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* was the first sincere attempt to delve into the psychology of the characters, to face their guilt squarely, and thus, by an examination of the motives and consequences, to draw from the Arthuriad some lessons for contemporary man. This has been the pattern of most major treatments of the adultery since Tennyson, a period of splendid fruition for the Arthurian legend.

The tremendous success of Tennyson's *Idylls* discouraged any further lengthy treatments in the nineteenth century of the central adultery of the Arthurian legend. Authors turned rather to the Tristram and Iseult story, which Tennyson had not developed to any extent, or to more minute analysis of single characters and episodes. Arthur remains a shadowy background figure, while Lancelot and Guinevere monopolize the action. With the exception of Swinburne, the general tendency was to recognize the guilt of the adultery, and to soften the judgment of the reader and to encourage his sympathy for the lovers by stressing their remorseful awareness of guilt.

Excluding the Tristram-Iseult legend, the most famous poem on a genuine Arthurian theme in the century is William Morris' 27. *App., op. cit.*, p. 268.
The Defence of Guenevere, which with typical Pre-Raphaelite fidelity to pictorial and psychological detail, presents Guinevere at the stake before her rescue by Lancelot. In this modified dramatic monologue, Guinevere, whose personality through the centuries had been conventionally passionate, suddenly becomes an extremely interesting woman, weeping and even sweating in her defiance and desperation.

Morris allows the Queen to excuse herself by letting her speak of her relationship with Lancelot in deliberately vague and ambiguous terms. Not once does she acknowledge adultery, but there is a tacit admission of guilt in her defiant justification of her warm friendship with Lancelot, who simply supplied the flashes of warmth and color that her marriage lacked. She is essentially the love-starved Guinevere of Tennyson when she complains:

I was bought
By Arthur's great name and his little love,
and when she refers to her wedding vows as

a little word
Scarce ever meant at all.

Her cold life with a king who knows nothing about pleasing the delicate tastes of his wife is suggested in her wistful comment:

For no man cares now to know why I sigh;
And no man comes to sing me pleasant lays,
Nor any brings me the sweet flowers that lie
So thick in the gardens.

"King Arthur's Tomb," another lyric by Morris, is set at the Glastonbury convent during the final meeting between Guinevere and Lancelot. Lancelot here is more sensual, and desires a renewal of the affair, but the conscience-stricken queen repels him; Lancelot remembers when he had kissed her feet.
Guinevere desires to kiss the feet of Christ and humbly repent her sins. She fondly remembers Arthur as a noble king, but her mention of his "kingly kiss" again suggests their passionless marriage. In "Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery," Morris has Christ speak in a vision to Galahad about the adultery:

Lancelot in good time shall be my servant too,  
Meantime, take note whose sword first made him knight,  
And who has loved him alway, yea, and who  
Still trusts him alway, though in all men's sight,  

He is just what you know, O Galahad,  
This love is happy even as you say,  
But would you for a little time be glad,  
To make ME sorry long day after day?  

Her warm arms round his neck half-throttle Me,  
The hot love-tears burn deep like spots of lead.

This judgment of the adultery from the divine rather than from the human point of view is unique, and adds a fresh note of spiritual profundity to the theme of moral guilt.

In 1862 James Knowles produced his Legends of King Arthur, a popularized abridgment of Malory which avoids any mention of the adultery. After the Grail quest Lancelot is worried because he does his feats of arms for his lady rather than for his Creator; conventionally, it is his love affair that plagues him. A.D. Gordon was more honest in his Rhyme of Joyous Garde (1868), a soliloquy by Lancelot after the deaths of Guinevere and Arthur. Full of self-reproach, the knight reflects on his absence at the final battle:

And the once loved knight, was he there to save  
The knightly king who that knighthood gave?  
Ah Christ! will he greet me as knight or knave  
In the day when the dust shall quicken?

29. Ibid., p. 192.  
30. App cites two other obscure poems of the same decade: Hawker's Quest of the Sangraal (1864), in which Lancelot carries a
Although Swinburne's main interest lay in the Tristram-Iseult story, his *Tristram of Lyoness* (1882) touches on the Camelot adultery in a way that reveals the author's rebellion against the morality of Victorian society. Tennyson, for instance, had ignored the incestuous relationship of Arthur with his half-sister, Queen Morgause of Orkney, in order to maintain an unblemished figure of ideal manhood. Swinburne returns to Malory's version, in which this sin of the king's youth returns to ruin him in later life. Swinburne's approach to the Lancelot-Guinevere adultery is similar to that of the early French romances in that he not only refuses to find excuses for the lovers, but even insists that their guilty love is their greatest glory; Swinburne's attitude is like that of the courtly love cult—the lovers are not great in spite of their adultery, but because of it.

Swinburne's reversion to the amoral philosophy of the medieval French romance had no influence on subsequent treatments of the theme before the end of the century, or indeed on any in the twentieth. Comyns Carr's play *King Arthur*, for instance, produced in London in 1895, ennobled the principal characters after the fashion of Tennyson.31 Lancelot meets Elaine before Guinevere, and would have loved her except for the greater charm of the queen.32

shield crested by a lily with a broken stem, symbolizing the lost chastity of adultery; and Westwood's *Quest of the Sanctreall* (1868) which is of interest only because of its fanciful depiction of Lancelot as lured away to sensual pleasures by sea syrens.

32. This attraction of Lancelot for Elaine foreshadows Lord Ernest Hamilton's novel *Lancelot* (1926), in which Lancelot loves not Guinevere, but Elaine, and finally marries her.
The final work of note in the century was John Davidson's *The Last Ballad*, an analysis of the mental state of Lancelot, who feels a stern sense of duty to the King, but whose waking hours—even during the Grail quest—are haunted by sensual visions of the Queen:

He saw her brows, her lovelit face,  
And on her cheeks one passionate tear;  
He felt in dreams the rich embrace,  
The beating heart of Guinevere.33

Davidson suggests that his devotion, although adulterous, ennobles the knight, who spares his foe in battle when he thinks of her. This touch of courtly love philosophy, however, is secondary to Lancelot's despair and shame, which drive him mad:

The exceeding anguish of his mind  
Had broken him. "King Arthur's trust,"  
He cried: "ignoble, fateful, blind!"  
Her love and my love, noxious lust!"

Shortly before the turn of the century, Mark Twain took up the Arthuriad and produced *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the author's death wish on European aristocracy, a torrent of hate and ridicule for knighthood, chivalry, the Catholic religion and monarchy, all the elements which compose the very essence of the Matter of Britain.34 In spite of his lack of sympathy with the Middle Ages, however, Twain is finally drawn to conventional admiration of at least two of the three principal figures of Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere.


34. The only later author to follow Twain's path was Philip Lindsay, whose novel *The Little Wench* (1935) depicts the knights of the Round Table as murderers and rapists. A drunken Lancelot seduces Elaine and beats Galahad in a story that shows a general contempt for morality and the traditional nobility of Camelot.
Early in the book Twain describes the court as

...just a sort of polished-up court of Comanches, and there isn't a squaw in it who doesn't stand ready...to desert to the buck with the biggest string of scalps at his belt. 35

This view of the moral level of the Round Table is coarse enough, but Twain deals with the adultery much more gently. Although everyone at court knows of the queen's sin, Arthur is not suspicious simply because he is not capable of thinking evil of a friend. Such nobility is in the best Tennysonian tradition, but is extremely naive in view of the fact that Arthur himself says of his queen, "Where Lancelot is, she noteth not the going forth of the king, nor what day he returneth." The Yankee thinks that Guinevere is "pretty slack" because she is forever fretting about Lancelot's whereabouts.

The Yankee likes Lancelot, who is consistently brave, polite and magnanimous:

He was a beautiful man, a lovely man, and was just intended to make a wife and children happy. But, of course, Guinevere—however, it's no use to cry over what's done and can't be helped. 36

Here Twain is understanding enough of the human condition to strike at the core of pathos that has always been inherent in the Guinevere-Lancelot-Elaine relationship: the lost potential of Lancelot as a fine husband and father.

The insistence of the twentieth century on realism in situation and action, and on profundity of character analysis, would suggest that the past fifty years should have been a new waste-


36. Twain, op. cit., p. 237.
land for the Arthurian legend. The material had the added disad-
advantage of being sympathetic to aristocracy and privilege—a
 unpopular sentiment in a democratic age. The entire Middle
Ages, finally, are somewhat in discredit—the word "medieval"
is commonly used as invective. What chance for popularity and
respect had the Matter of Britain in such an alien atmosphere?

If a contemporary writer is to handle the Arthuriad success-
fully, he must have at least one of two qualifications:
either the ability to probe the personalities of the traditional
characters so as to make them fresher and more varied, or an ex-
tensive knowledge of medieval life plus the ability to reproduce
the humor and pathos of a long dead age, so as to make them
its people seem as familiar and human as close neighbors.
Because Edwin Arlington Robinson saw the psychological potential,
and T.H. White the humanity, both have been eminently successful
in re-creating the legends for contemporary man.

Robinson's Arthurian trilogy consists of rather sombre
introspective studies which see Camelot and its champions beset
by essentially the same social and spiritual problems as face
modern man. Robinson's approach is conventional insofar as the
main action is concerned, but is strikingly original in his de-
piction of a Hamlet-like Lancelot, an unusually intellectual 
Guinevere, and an extremely human Arthur, who is finally rescued
from his stock roles as either an idealized figure of super-human
proportions, or as a wronged husband of slight interest.

Between Robinson and White, three interpretations of the
love affair merit some mention. Laurence Binyon's drama Arthur,
published in 1923 is traditional; John Masefield's collection of poems, *Midsummer Night* (1928) is extremely unconventional, and Maurice Baring's *Dead Letters* (1935) is humorous.

In Binyon's play Lancelot is the protagonist, an adulterer who is nevertheless noble, and who eventually manages to break off the affair in spite of the advances of Guinevere. In the final battle he confesses publicly to Arthur and asks for execution which, of course, is not given.

Masefield takes considerable freedoms with character and plot. Lancelot is Arthur's cousin, aspires to the kingship, and gives Guinevere a child. The king even hides the lovers after the ambush, and aids their escape. A deathbed message from Lancelot, finally, causes Guinevere to break her religious vows and rush vainly to his side. In attempting to inject new interest into the story, Masefield warped and distorted it beyond legitimate bounds. He failed to see, as Robinson and White did see, that the story will hold its own without severe plot manipulations.

Baring's *Dead Letters* contains a chapter of supposed letters between Guinevere, Lancelot, Arthur and Iseult. The humor is heavily ironic, as in a letter from Guinevere to Arthur concerning who will stay at the castle during the big jousts:

I thought it was no use asking poor little Elaine because she never goes anywhere now and hates the Jousts...Oh! I quite forgot. There's Lancelot. Shall we ask him to stay? He's been so often, so if you would rather not have him we can quite well leave him out this time. I don't want him to think he's indispensable to you.

---

40. Ibid., p. 86.
With his usual naivete Arthur replies that he "cannot see any possible objection to his coming," and Guinevere answers that she entirely "gives in" about Lancelot. The Queen then writes to Iseult of Ireland about Tristram's wedding to Iseult of Brittainy:

...she was a dream of beauty. Tristram was looking quite well and in tearing spirits. He's grown quite fat. Isn't that funny?  

But Iseult can hold her own in the catty exchange:

Isn't Lancelot competiting for the diamond this year? I hear he's afraid of being beaten. Isn't it absurd. People are so spiteful... By the way, it isn't true that Lancelot is engaged to Elaine?...She is quite lovely, but I never thought that Lancelot cared for young girls.  

When Lancelot wears Elaine's sleeve in the tournament, the Queen is her traditionally jealous and tempermental self:

I must say I did not suspect you of playing this kind of double game. I do hate lies and liars, and, above all, stupid liars. It is... very humiliating to make such a mistake about a man. But I hope you will be happy with Elaine, and I pray Heaven she may never find you out.  

The success of Terence Hanbury White's novels about the Arthurian legend is due principally to two things: his scholarly attention to detail that makes daily life in medieval castles very real, and his humanizing of the epic characters so that they think, talk and behave very much like the people that the reader meets every day. A confirmed traditionalist, White never deviates from the version of Malory as long as he is dealing

41. Baring, op. cit., p. 87.  
42. Ibid., p. 88.  
43. Ibid., p. 88.
with it; the genius of White's approach is that he is able to give new life to the legend by creating whole sections of background to the main story, particularly in his entirely original sketches of the boyhoods of the main characters. White has written a fine story, but the history of the Arthuriad makes it rash to say that not much more can be done with the legend.44

44. Lerner and Lowe, the American song writers, have recently completed the stage musical Camelot, based on White's novel. Best known for their adaption of Shaw's Pygmalion as a musical comedy, Lerner and Lowe have never produced tragedy. What they have done with the adultery and death of the Arthuriad is as yet unknown. In any case, White's story is a rich field for their considerable talents, and the musical is a further demonstration of the flexibility of the legend.
Alfred Tennyson, who reflected the ideals and fears of his age possibly more precisely than did any other writer in English literature, felt that if a man was to maintain and improve the standard of life that he had achieved, he must learn self-control, fulfil his social and moral duties, and increase his reverence for himself as the most precious of God's creatures, possessed of a soul and a spiritual destiny. As a result of discoveries in biology in the nineteenth century, the coinage "human animal" had become current; it was against the assumption that man was no more than a physical being that Tennyson protested. Insisting that man had a soul, a divine spiritual quality within himself, Tennyson declared that mankind must "let the ape and tiger die" by resisting the brute passions and pursuing all that is pure and noble. If man surrenders to his baser instincts, then only chaos and decay in civilization can result. This is the belief that prompted the writing of The Idylls of the King and determined the manner in which Tennyson would handle the Arthurian adultery.
The Victorian confidence that society was steadily progressing for the better in all spheres of human endeavor had a material basis in the solidarity of English political, social and commercial institutions, and a biological and ethical basis in theories of physical and moral evolution. Order, stability and caution were necessary if progress was to be maintained; the highest duty of the statesman or patriot was to control the aimless impulse and reduce chaos to order. The well-rooted tradition behind the monarchy, the parliamentary system, the Church, the legal and banking systems, and the universities had taken hundreds of years to mature, while Nature had evidently required several million to lift man from the primordial slime to an English drawing room. The Victorians saw unity and harmony transcending diversity, and were confident that the process would continue as long as people did not let ambition or impatience goad them into rash demands for rapid and sweeping changes.

Because Tennyson revered stable institutions, firm leadership, and the traditional Christian virtues, he would naturally be attracted to that champion of Christendom who

Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reign'd. 1

Although in Malory's account Arthur had been sometimes stupid and rash, even homicidal, nevertheless tradition had generally credited him with being an upholder of order, justice, loyalty and piety. Tennyson realized that it would require only slight alterations in Arthur's character to turn him into the ideal man,

into a man who constantly followed the dictates of his reason and conscience. Perhaps it was with the description of Wordsworth's "Happy Warrior" before him that Tennyson idealized Arthur as Soul personified, the human perfection towards which every man should struggle.\textsuperscript{2} Guinevere was to be the Flesh, to which the Soul must be joined if it is to accomplish its work on earth. The defection of Lancelot and the Queen, the subsequent corruption of the Round Table, and the fall of Camelot—Arthur's \textit{Civitas Dei}—were to illustrate the consequences of man's failure to follow high principles.

2. "Who is the happy warrior? Who is he / That every man in arms should wish to be?" asks Wordsworth. This perfect man is one

Who, with a natural instinct to discern  
What knowledge can perform, is diligent to learn;  
Abides by this resolve, and stops not there,  
But makes his moral being his prime care.  

........................

More skilful in self-knowledge, even more pure,  
As tempted more; more able to endure,  
As more exposed to suffering and distress;  

........................

He labours good on good to fix, and owes  
To virtue every triumph that he knows.

Because Tennyson's Arthur is bitter about the loss of his kingdom, he does not fulfil Wordsworth's last qualification:

Who, whether praise of him must walk the earth  
For ever, and to noble deeds give birth,  
Or he must fall, to sleep without his fame,  
And leave a dead unprofitable name—

Finds comfort in himself and in his cause;  
And, while the mortal mist is gathering, draws  
His breath in confidence of Heaven's applause.

It is not entirely fair, of course, to apply Wordsworth's ideal to Tennyson's Arthur, whose chagrin has as much allegorical as literal significance. Considered as a man, Arthur falls short of Wordsworth's standard, but such a standard is inapplicable to the King's transcendent role as Soul.
It was a noble aim, but Tennyson's failure to maintain the story at an allegorical level has encouraged entirely literal readings, with the ironic result that Lancelot and Guinevere invite sympathy, while Arthur's cold self-righteousness alienates the reader until the final book. Tennyson's final correction of the Idylls was the addition in the Epilogue of a description of Arthur as Ideal manhood clothed in real man.

This is tantamount to saying that Arthur represented perfection in imperfection, which is impossible. Tennyson wanted to make the "real humanity" of the king perfectly clear, but because there is no such thing as a perfect man the introduction of such a transcendental Arthur into the legend confuses his relationship with Guinevere and Lancelot. It is well that Tennyson did not insist on the allegory, that he failed to make it convincing; it would be difficult to imagine an abstraction as a wronged husband, or to sorrow for the death of a man who, after all, is only Soul leaving a cruel world and returning to a happier Avalon.

It is sufficient to say that Tennyson sublimated Malory's Arthur by removing most of his weaknesses of character in order to adapt the tale to his purpose of "shadowing Sense at war with Soul," so that it might point a moral to his own generation. Guinevere, and particularly Lancelot, are as admirable as ever, but the irresponsibility of their great passion prevents them from acceding to the demands of duty, from fully accepting their obligations, and from exercising enough will power to keep their respective loyalties uncompromised. Application to duty, self-

control and fidelity: these were the ethics of a Victorian middle class influenced by the morality of evangelical Christianity; if such grand and noble people as Lancelot and Guinevere—and indeed, Merlin and the members of the Round Table—could fail to meet such standards, how much more diligent must Tennyson's readers be in shunning temptation and aspiring to civil and moral goodness!

Because Tennyson chose to idealize Arthur by omitting Merlin's warnings about marrying Guinevere, and particularly by avoiding the incest theme in which Mordred is the avenging agent in a tragedy of Nemesis, a larger portion of the guilt for the ruin of the Round Table was bound to fall on the lovers. Tennyson does not dwell much on Guinevere. She does little except love, then repent pathetically during her final parting with Arthur. During the affair she evidently suffers from no spiritual conflict. It is different with Lancelot, who emerges as the most interesting and human personality in the Idylls.

Through Malory Tennyson inherited from the French romances an immoral situation that was distasteful by Victorian standards. Any justification once supplied by the mores of courtly love was now untenable, yet Tennyson's purpose would not have been served by defaming Lancelot in the same way that he dismissed Tristram and Gawain as ignoble sensualists. Tennyson developed Lancelot as a conventional tragic hero, possessed of all the virtues and graces, and yet blighted spiritually by a single weakness of character which led eventually to disaster.

Victorian morality stressed the necessity of strengthening the will, so that the individual might readily sacrifice self-
interest to the common good, and lay aside animal sensuality in favor of the demands of duty. Each right choice makes the next easier, until correct behavior becomes a habit of mind. If everyone were willing to make such sacrifices, the human race would arrive sooner at spiritual perfection. If Lancelot and Guinevere had been able to conquer the baser tendencies within themselves on that first Maytime ride through the flowers, they might have spiritualized their love and turned it into an agent of glory for themselves, and of noble inspiration for others.

This type of love is described in *Balin and Balan*:

> But this worship of the Queen,  
> That honor too wherein she holds him---this  
> This was the sunshine that hath given Lancelot  
> A growth, a name that branches o'er the rest,  
> And strength against all odds.  
> (11. 170-74)

Such a virgin love would have been the equivalent of the old courtly ideal of "pure love"—dedication and service without carnal knowledge—but the lovers were unequal to it, and in their sin encouraged the advent of that civil and social disorder which, to Victorian minds, inevitably followed a decline in moral standards and high ideals.

Lancelot is a noble man who must nevertheless struggle hard for his salvation. It is as if the torment of his guilty passion were a cross that he must bear in return for his many gifts. He has even aged prematurely:

> The great and guilty love he bore the Queem  
> In battle with the love he bare his lord,  
> Had marr'd his face, and mark'd it ere his time.  
> (11. 244-46)

A lesser man, says Tennyson, who sinned in such magnificence with the fairest woman in the land, might be proud and delighted, but

5. *Lancelot and Elaine*, (11. 244-46).
not Lancelot:

His mood was often like a fiend, and rose
And drove him into wastes and solitudes
For agony, who was yet a living soul.6

Even Elaine noticed his moodiness:

She still took note that when the living smile
Died from his lips, across him came a cloud
Of melancholy severe.7

Lancelot's irrational devotion to the queen debases him when it prompts him to tell what is perhaps the first lie of his life. When about to leave with Arthur for a tournament to win the last of a series of diamonds for Guinevere, he thinks that a languid glance from the queen is asking him to stay, so he lies to the king about his old wound, and remains. She chides him for his tactlessness, and he rides sadly away, cursing himself for his useless falsehood, and bemoaning his readiness to compromise himself at her slightest whim.

Lancelot is fully aware of his vassalage to the pleasures of the flesh and his unlawful fidelity to Guinevere; he is further tormented by the fear that his sin will corrupt the morals of the rest of the Round Table. In a psychologically profound soliloquy after the death of Elaine, he considers his failure to rise above the demand of love and aspire to the full goodness of Arthur's principles:

what profits me my name
Of greatest knight? I fought for it, and have it.
Pleasure to have it, none; to lose it, pain;
To make men worse by making my sin known?
Or sin seem less, the sinner seeming great?
Alas for Arthur's greatest knight, a man
Not after Arthur's heart!8

Thus far Lancelot's love for the queen had contradicted only his personal and political loyalties to the throne; after the

6. Lancelot and Elaine, (ll. 250-52)
7. Ibid., (ll. 321-23).
8. Ibid., (ll. 1402-09).
Grail quest, an added sense of spiritual corruption drives him to the point of madness, and he groans his envy of those who can avoid thinking about their moral duties:

0 King, my friend, if friend of thine I be,
Happier are those that welter in their sin,
Swine in the mud, that cannot see for slime,
Slime of the ditch.

He and Guinever are eventually able to agree to sacrifice their personal happiness in order to avoid the ruin of the life work of Arthur, but other evil forces have been gnawing at Camelot, and it is too late to salvage anything but spiritual peace.

Lancelot was bound to present something of a dilemma to Tennyson. Although he allowed his sexual instinct to compromise what the Victorians considered sacred vows, Lancelot nevertheless possessed to the fullest degree most of the virtues attributed to a saint. Tennyson could not excuse him, but neither could he shame him. He rather laid stress on Lancelot's spiritual turmoil:

as one
That in a later, sadder age begins
To war against ill uses of a life,
But these from all his life arise, and cry,
'Thou hast made us lords, and can's not put us down.'

Because Lancelot was finally able to put down his brute passions, Tennyson allowed that it was only just that he should die "a holy man."

It is curious to note the final relationship between Arthur and Lancelot. The warmest of personal friends during life, Arthur often calls Lancelot "noblest," and even "blessed" after he has received his glimpse of the Grail. The king tells Lancelot

10. Gareth and Lynette, (ll. 1100-04).
that the grossest sin could not stamp out all of his knightly virtues. Yet after the crisis, when Arthur returns from fighting Lancelot in France, he remarks to Guinevere that Lancelot had yet the grace of courtesy in him left, He spared to lift his hand against the King Who made him knight.  

It is petty and unfair to damn Lancelot with such faint praise. The reader knows, and Arthur had admitted, that one fault does not mean that Lancelot is almost entirely corrupt. Even if Arthur is speaking in his allegorical role, it is still a bitter and uncompromising attitude towards a man to whom Arthur owes a tremendous debt of gratitude for helping him to bring Order out of Chaos, and to establish the civilized and spiritual reign of the Soul.  

Arthur's treatment of Guinevere in the parting scene at Almsbury is easier to understand. Here is the one point in the Idylls, as Baum points out, when Tennyson escapes mainly into pure allegory: 

If the two speeches in Guinevere are to be read as the words of a self-righteous husband or a king charging his Queen for the loss of his kingdom, then they are intolerable...If they are read as a divine voice condemning evil in the world, as the Soul against the flesh, then Arthur's arrogance and self-satisfaction disappear, and the grovelling of the Queen becomes a symbol. Tennyson probably intended a bit of both, and loses the effect.  

11. Guinevere, (ll. 433-35) 
12. No one, incidentally, has thought to ask what Arthur was doing in France in the first place. To recover his queen, who, he thinks, is being held there? He tells Guinevere later that he would never take her back. To comply with the wishes of Gawain, as in Malory, and avenge the deaths of Gareth and Gaheris? Obviously not, since in Tennyson's version they are not killed. There seems to be no explanation for Arthur's aggressive war against Lancelot.  
Nowhere else in Arthurian literature is the king so bitter toward Guinevere; nowhere else does he blame her entirely for the ruin of his life's work, or heap such unqualified invective on her sin. His slighting reference to Lancelot shows that he feels no less keenly about his former friend. But to say that the feelings of Arthur are the feelings of Tennyson is illogical in view of the poet's obvious sympathies for the lovers everywhere else in the Idylls. This is not to suggest that Tennyson sides with the lovers against Arthur, but to make it clear that the Almsbury speech does not summarize the poet's attitude toward Lancelot and Guinevere on a literal level.

It is true that elsewhere in the Idylls Tennyson describes tragedy that is indirectly traceable to the adultery. In Balin and Balan and Pelleas and Ettarre, for instance, Balin and Pelleas are finally turned into shrieking wild men when they are disillusioned about the purity of Guinevere. These episodes, however, are plainly not intended mainly as illustrations of the evil effects of bad example. The reader's sympathy remains with the lovers, not with these melodramatic knights whose ruin is principally due to personal weakness. Balin, Tennyson makes it clear, has long been plagued by a suspicious, angry nature that leads him into repeated acts of discourtesy and violence. Tormented by a sense of unworthiness, and even by the illusion that the rest of the Round Table dislike him, he allows his judgment to be distorted by "chained rage that ever yelped within."

Pelleas is reckless and immature; when he sees Ettarre,

The beauty of her face abashed the boy,
As tho' it were the beauty of her soul.

(11. 74-75)
His slavish devotion to this worthless beauty is pathetic. He is the true courtly lover, willing to suffer any indignity for even a glimpse of his lady's face. Tennyson certainly frowns on this sort of foolish and degrading passion--perhaps this idyll is the poet's indictment of courtly love. When Pelleas hears of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, like Balin he goes insane with anger; he runs down a crippled serf on the road; he shouts that Camelot is a "black nest of rats"; he shrieks hysterically for death when Lancelot overpowers him. When Lancelot, the great sinner (and, Tennyson suggests, the best knight of them all), calls him a weakling, the reader agrees. The lesson of these two idylls seems to be that one must separate the institution from the supporters, the ideals from the aspirants. Weakness in a follower of a creed does not imply weakness in the creed itself. The older knights of the Round Table have always been willing to overlook the adultery, while at the same time retaining a high regard for the many virtues of Lancelot and Guinevere. Neither Balin nor Pelleas has any understanding of human weakness, and they attack the failing of Lancelot and Guinevere instead of overcoming their own vices. If these were noble knights who suffer revulsion and disillusion, then it would be assumed that Tennyson meant their stories to be criticisms of the adultery. The adultery, it is true, acts as a catalyst in the spread of corruption in Camelot, but it is the weak knights, not the virtuous, who are corrupted. The lovers sin because they are unable to reach Arthur's superhuman perfection, but they finally master their passion. In doing so, they become truly noble---unlike Balin
and Pelleas, who let their passions master them. In the end, Lancelot and Guinevere come strikingly close to achieving Arthur's ideal.

The Almsbury speech is not consistent with the tone of the rest of the work because Arthur and Guinevere have suddenly been allegorized into Soul and Flesh. One may criticize Tennyson for expecting too great an adjustment from his readers, but this mechanical deficiency should not be mistaken for a lapse by the poet into smug and prudish moralizing. The passage must be read in isolation from the Idylls as a statement of the high social and spiritual aims to which man must aspire if the work of moral evolution is to continue: to love justice, truth, and chastity; to hate coarseness, slander, and brutality.  

The polemical nature of much Victorian writing has prompted G.M. Young to conclude that of the many doctrines, creeds and institutions of the period, only two were not at some time widely debated or assailed. One of these was the Victorian ideal of the family, the basic unit of social organization and a divine institution for the comfort and education of mankind. 15 One of the most cherished beliefs of the middle class was that a pure and stable wedded love and the raising of a closely-knit family were the chief means to perfection of man's social life. To break

14. It has been customary in recent years to criticize Tennyson as a poet too conscious of his role as teacher and guide to his fellow Victorians. It is frequently assumed rather than demonstrated that he was overly anxious to cater to the sensitivity and sentimentality of the middle class. The Idylls have been so condemned, and condemned mainly on the basis of Arthur's words to his wife in Guinevere. One reply to this criticism is that it is based on a misreading of Tennyson's allegorical intent.

the bond of marital affection and faith was to destroy human society at its foundation. Thus Tennyson, eager to inspire his contemporaries with noble ideals, could rely on a problem of domestic morality to interest his readers.

The necessity for purity and permanence in family life is basic to Tennyson's philosophy. The highest ideal of love is the pure passion of marriage; such love is the source of man's loftiest ideas, and the inspiration of his noblest deeds. 16 Although the reaction against Tennyson in the twentieth century prefers to call Victorian domesticity an obsession rather than an ideal, the temperate and sympathetic treatment of the Guinevere-Lancelot adultery in Tennyson's version of the Arthurian indicates that he was well able to face the reality of human weakness manifest in even the grossest and most calamitous marital infidelity. The only direct evidence in the Idylls that he abhorred such weakness is found in Arthur's final speech to the shamed and grovelling Guinevere, but that this is the least typical passage of the work, and that it may be justly interpreted mainly in allegorical terms, have already been indicated.

No sound judgment of the Idylls is possible if they are assumed to be the product of a priggish Laureate blushing through his beard at every line. This excessive sensibility is the most durable of Victorian phantoms. In defending Tennyson against his critics, an apologist is justified in rejecting the charge that the poet's view of life was distorted by an artificial bourgeois morality. It is more fruitful to examine the Idylls as the work of a happily married modern English gentleman who was wise enough

16. Nicolson has, ludicrously, gone so far as to suggest that "it was painful for him (at least in his published works) to contemplate the idea of [adultery]." In Tennyson, London, Constable. 1923. p. 247.
not to apply too strenuously a relatively rigid Victorian morality to a situation inherited from a completely alien twelfth-century French court.

It is a serious error to suppose that Tennyson intended the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere to represent the Victorian ideal. On the contrary, their union lacked at least three elements considered by Tennyson as generally essential to full satisfaction in marriage: romantic love, cooperation between husband and wife in the performance of their respective duties, and a family. To Tennyson, a marriage lacking any one of these is seriously hampered; a marriage lacking all three is doomed.

Guinevere did not love Arthur, nor did she have any choice about marrying him. Smitten by a glimpse of the "fairest under heaven" while riding anonymously through the streets among his knights, Arthur promptly served rather summary notice upon King Leodogran for the hand of his daughter:

If I in ought have served thee well,
Give me thy daughter Guinevere to wife.

Impressed with the prestige of Arthur, and overcome with gratitude for his services, Leodogran acquiesces in the royal desire. In the best tradition of feudal nobility, the emotions of Guinevere are not considered important; indeed, she has never seen her prospective bridegroom. All of this is in keeping with the traditional Arthurian story, but quite contradicts everything that Tennyson himself believed about the basis of marriage. One of the most important principles of his philosophy was the freedom

of the will, which is realized in choice. If there is no free choice, an action can have no moral consequences. That Guin­evere had no free choice in making her marriage, then, is a primary reason why Tennyson is lenient in his final judgment of her failure as a wife. Furthermore, such a cold-blooded marr­riage contract lacked all the warmth and passion and romance so vital to the Victorian ideal. If Tennyson had expected his rea­ders to sympathize with a wronged Arthur and to condemn Guinevere as severely as does Arthur later, surely he would have made some changes in the story at this point. He did not do so, but in fact emphasized the situation by contrasting the cold remoteness of Arthur at Camelot with the colorful immediacy of Lancelot, come as emissary for the bride.

The Victorian insistence on romantic love is nowhere more apparent than in Tennyson's repeated stress throughout the Idylls on the warmth and lushness of the return of Lancelot and Guinevere to Camelot:

And Lancelot past away among the flowers---
For then was latter April---and returned
Among the flowers in May, with Guinevere. 18

Even after the catastrophe, when she is sorrowing in fear and shame at Almsbury, Guinevere indulges in reverie of the "golden days" when she first met Lancelot and rode with him

Under groves that look'd a paradise
Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth. 19

At the end of their idyllic journey Guinevere gets her first sight of Arthur, and thinks him

High, self-contained, cold and passionless,
Not like him, 'Not like my Lancelot'. 20

20. Ibid., (11. 402-4).
Tennyson again and again insists on the contrast:

For who loves me must have a touch of earth; \textsuperscript{21}
and,

I yearn'd for warmth and colour which I found
in Lancelot. \textsuperscript{22}

Writing at the same time, William Morris likewise dwells on the
grayness of her marriage in the passages where Guinevere sighs
for the songs and flowers that no one bothers to offer any longer.

Tennyson's invention of the initial meeting of the lovers---
and Guinevere's tragic mistaking of Lancelot for Arthur---was not
the result of a desire to color the narrative with a pastoral
description; rather, it was a deliberate attempt to underline
the romantic elements of an adultery which to Tennyson was hardly
graver than the consummation of a unilateral and passionless
marriage contrary to the religious and social standards of his
age.

Once again, however, one must guard against too great an
emphasis on the attraction of romantic love for Tennyson. Morris
shows no sympathy for the king, and seems ready to excuse Guinevere
on the grounds of passion. Tennyson falls into no such
moral error. In the final analysis, Lancelot and Guinevere were
wrong. Tennyson's deliberate degrading of the Tristram-Iseult
story indicates that he did not consider passion more important
than duty. The reason why he is easier with Lancelot and Guinevere
than with Tristram and Iseult is that the lovers in Camelot---
particularly Lancelot---are conscious of guilt; they do not

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Lancelot and Elaine}, (l. 121).
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Guinevere}, (l. 608).
reveal the amoral indifference of Tristram and Iseult, who are much closer to the old tradition of courtly love, which Tennyson would certainly condemn. The most that can be said is that Tennyson, consciously or not, did not feel completely happy with the kind of marriage forced on Guinevere, and although he was obliged to chastise her according to Victorian moral standards, he did not do so without qualification.

The Victorian wife admittedly had fewer economic and political rights than does her twentieth century counterpart, but she was not the submissive victim of a masculine autocracy. Then, as now, she could expect co-operation and respect from her husband in successfully building a marriage, home and family. To say that she expected and received full equality would be a distortion. Even in his most generous moods, Tennyson implies that a certain child-like quality is desirable in a wife, a certain sweet innocence; it is not her role to enter the world arena where leadership and intellect are the chief virtues. The male learns gentleness and moral fortitude from the woman, but does not relinquish his position as guide in the practical affairs of life.

If Guinevere was a failure as a wife, Arthur was no less a failure as a husband. He had sinned by neglecting her, by denying her the love and attention implied in the marriage contract. Had Arthur been a better husband, Guinevere might have been a better wife. If she needed guidance in aspiring to his elevated spiritual level, he should have offered it; rather he left her to grope alone, and in doing so, he failed as a husband by Victorian
standards. Furthermore, Tennyson believed that a woman should set herself to man, Like perfect music unto noble words, if the hymn of marriage was to be complete. The problem in the *Idylls* is that Arthur has both the music and words without Guinevere—she has nothing to supply. Guinevere is willing to attempt the reformation of her character, but without her husband’s sympathy and assistance, she is unable to persevere.

Tennyson summed up his marital ideal in these wise and beautiful lines from *The Princess*:

```
either sex alone
Is half itself, and in true marriage lies
Nor equal, nor unequal. Each fulfils
Defect in each, and always thought in thought,
Purpose in purpose, will in will, they grow,
The single pure and perfect animal.
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(vii, 283-88)

Arthur himself, as he contemplates marriage with Guinevere, says much the same thing about the necessity for the male and female personalities to complement each other in a successful marriage:

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But were I join'd with her,
Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything,
Have power on this dark land to lighten it.
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It is quite apparent that no such communion of spirits was ever achieved in the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere. On the allegorical level, of course, it was impossible, since Arthur was perfection of soul and Guinevere the imperfection of flesh. But abstractions do not commit adultery, and the allegory must

be set aside to permit an objective analysis of the marriage as one between two human beings.

Even allowing that Arthur symbolized all the highest aspirations of the human spirit, there seems to be no reason why he could not have shown more tenderness, sympathy and guidance to his wife. Guinevere is exceedingly bitter about his aloofness when she complains,

'Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King, That passionate perfection, my good lord—- But who can gaze upon the sun in heaven? He is all fault who hath no fault at all'.

Excess of virtue is not in itself a fault, but when it results in detachment from the struggles and emotions of daily life, then it is a very real failing. Guinevere grumbles that the king is so

Rapt in this fancy of his Teble Round
that he has no time to spare for his wife. If he were interested in me, she adds, surely he would question me about the rumors of my infidelity, but

He never spake word of reproach to me,
He never had a glimpse of mine untruth,
He cares not for me.

In the final scene at the nunnery, Arthur's disappointment is not a personal one; he loathes her because she has wrecked his Round Table, the only object that he has ever really loved. In a semi-hysteria of remorse Guinevere finally accepts the full burden of responsibility for the failure of the marriage, but the reader

is not convinced. Nor would Tennyson expect his audience to sympathize with the severe strictures of Arthur on a literal level. He is speaking mainly as an allegorical figure, but even so, "...a little more humanity would have compensated for a little less piety"—the humanity that he had rarely shown during their years of married life, the humanity without which no satisfying union between man and woman is possible.

Completely devoted to the affairs of state, Tennyson's Arthur should never have married, because he was not willing to assume the responsibilities of wedlock. He expected Guinevere to climb unaided to

that fine air,
That pure severity of perfect light—

in which he moved. A Victorian family man who realized the necessity for mutual co-operation and understanding in marriage, Tennyson could sympathize with her failure.

The Victorian ideal of marriage assumed the presence of children around the hearth. There is repeated emphasis in the poetry of Tennyson on children, particularly babies, and their ability to touch and soften the human heart, especially that of the female. Even Arnold, who cannot be accused of a tendency to sentimentalize, does his best writing in Tristram and Iseult when he leaves the illicit lovers and describes the domestic scenes involving Iseult of Brittainy and her children. Since there was no question in the Victorian mind that procreation was the purpose of marriage, and that children were the cement of a firm

domestic structure, it is possible that Tennyson's judgment of the adultery was influenced by the fact that Guinevere was childless.

Would Guinevere have been unfaithful if she had a family? It is impossible to say whether the question occurred to Tennyson, but a bit of original plot that he added to The Last Tournament shows that he was extremely sympathetic to the loneliness and frustration of the barren queen as she wore out the years in her silent castle. When Arthur and Lancelot find a baby in an eagle's nest, they give it to Guinevere to rear. Reluctant and cool at first, she is soon softened,

and after loved it tenderly,
And named it Nestling; so forgot herself
A moment and her cares.

(11. 24-26)

Why should Tennyson add this passage if not to increase sympathy for the woman, and perhaps to intimate that if she had borne children toward which to direct her love, she would not have thirsted so after the warmth and tenderness of Lancelot. Certainly Arthur cannot be excused for his cruel cut during their scene of parting:

Well it is that no child is born of thee.
The children born of thee are sword and fire,
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws.28

Arthur's disappointment at the ruin of his life's work is understandable, but to reduce the political situation to such painful personal terms is too harsh.

Guinevere made a good nun, and perhaps would have made a better wife had she been given more of

what every woman counts her due,
Love, children, happiness.29

29. The Princess, (III, 228-29).
In his "Dedication" of the *Idylls* Tennyson praises Queen Victoria as a good wife, mother and queen; she and Albert represented the Victorian ideal of marriage. Eminently regal and beloved, Guinevere was a good enough queen, but because she had less chance than Victoria to be a successful wife and mother, Tennyson does not insist on a comparison. He does not absolve Guinevere, nor does he condemn her; he does not gallantly dismiss her failure to strengthen her will against temptation, and her reluctance to assume the moral responsibilities and duties of marriage, but he had enough understanding of the human condition to pity her in her empty and unnatural marriage, to understand her weakness, and finally, to grant her a holy and peaceful death.

Tennyson was immensely attracted to the story of the fatal love of the lily-maid Elaine for Lancelot, a love that has always been one of the most touching and popular episodes in the legend. Tennyson's treatment is faithful to that of Malory in its broad outline, but his special emphasis on the compatibility of Lancelot and Elaine as man and wife shows that he was again influenced by the Victorian ideal of marriage. He would have agreed that Bradley's definition of tragedy applies to some extent to Lancelot's rejection of Elaine: here was pathetic waste, a lost potential for the most admirable sort of family and home.

At no time did Lancelot ever attempt to fulfil the last vow required by Arthur of his Table-Round—to love and cleave to one maiden, and to win her through years of noble deeds. It is sophistical to argue that he was true and faithful to Guinevere, for the vow obviously assumed a pure love. It is not until the *Elaine*
idyll, however, that this failure bears any deadly fruit. Until then, the only pain is that inflicted on the conscience of the lovers by their guilt. Lancelot in particular is shaken by the death of the broken-hearted maiden; he had, in fact, had a premonition of tragedy when he left her father's castle on his way to the tournament:

> Then came on him a sort of sacred fear,  
> For silent, tho' he greeted her, she stood  
> Rapt on his face as if it were a god's.  

(11. 352-54)

Indeed, Lancelot had eventually come to love her, but not in passion; he loved her for her humility, her fidelity, her innocence. It was only the shackles of his desire for Guinevere, says Tennyson, that prevented the knight from surrendering completely to Elaine:

> And peradventure had he seen her first  
> She might have made this and that other world  
> Another world for the sick man.  

(11. 867-69)

Smarting from the stormy excesses of the queen's jealousy, a remorseful Lancelot reflects on the unselfish surrender of the lily-maid to her great passion, and he bemoans the trickery of the human heart that prevented him from returning her passion:

> Know that for this most gentle maiden's death  
> Right heavy am I; for good she was and true,  
> But loved me with a love beyond all love  
> In women, whosoever I have known.  
> Yet to be loved makes not to love again.  

(11. 1282-86)

Arthur agrees—ironically, in view of his rather high-handed election of Guinevere as his wife—that one can not be forced to love, but he is filled with genuine regret that Lancelot could not have loved
this maiden, shaped, it seems,
By God for thee alone...
Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man
Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons
Born to the glory of thy name and fame. (11, 1355-61)

In keeping with the mores of his age, Tennyson here voices compassion for a man who possessed fame, honor, power and riches, who was the flower of courtesy and the man most beloved by rich and poor, yet whose life was essentially empty and meaningless because his one weakness denied him the comforts and joys of a wife, children and home.

Tennyson was more interested in the effects of sin on the individual and on society than he was in the passion itself. He was certainly attracted by the color and romance of the adultery, but he avoided almost completely any direct description of sensuous intimate conversation or physical contact. In the Idylls there is no fascination or compromise with passion when it conflicts with higher obligations. Tennyson at all times insists on strict adherence to noble principles; he stresses duty, and control of the will to make for righteousness.

The Idylls depicts the grand romance of Lancelot and Guinevere as a gentle yielding to a great temptation, but accompanied by greater remorse. Lacking the skill of Shakespeare or Browning in individualizing characters, Tennyson fails to achieve any truly tragic effect, but Lancelot and Elaine in particular are real enough to evoke considerable pathos. As Stopford Brooke says, it is the humanity, not the metaphysics, that is the interesting thing.

Although they were both born and raised in the nineteenth century, Lord Tennyson and Edwin Arlington Robinson had little in common. Tennyson was a conservative English royalist; Robinson was a liberal American democrat. Tennyson was a traditional Protestant Christian; Robinson was a virtual agnostic. Tennyson enjoyed fame, prosperity, and a happy family life, was reasonably satisfied with his age, and felt that men could build a better world for themselves if they would do their duty according to the dictates of a healthy moral sense. Robinson, a lonely bachelor, spent most of his life in poverty and obscurity, was skeptical about the future of western civilization after the catastrophe of a world war. The most important divergence, however, was in their approach to their subject matter. Both wanted to find solutions to the moral and social problems of society, but Tennyson concentrated on analysis of the problems themselves, often through the use of myth and allegory, and laid less stress on psychological portraiture. Robinson ignored myth and allegory almost entirely, and established his reputation as an analyst of human character. This difference in technique is strikingly apparent in their respective versions of the Arthuriad.
Robinson wrote three poems dealing with Arthurian themes: *Merlin* (1917), *Lancelot* (1920), and *Tristram* (1927). The last poem deals exclusively with the tragedy of Cornwall, and is of no importance to a study of the main adultery. The first two works, which the author intended to be read as a unit, trace the fall of Arthur's kingdom and the fates of the various principal figures. Robinson's pages, however, contain none of the stock figures of romance, no idealized characters, no allegory. Robinson has put the stamp of twentieth-century realism on Camelot.

Robinson's Arthurian poems are a series of introspective studies in which the author attempts to probe to the core of personality so as to trace the vicissitudes of the human soul. He is not particularly interested in teaching moral lessons, or in describing action for its own sake, but in populating Camelot with people who talk and act in ways that reveal certain truths about the human heart. What Robinson loses in pageant and color he gains in emotional intensity and psychological depth. It was well said that Robinson believed that the people of Arthur's court and those in the New York slums have the same basic mental and emotional conflicts.¹

An author's conception of the character of King Arthur is vital to his final verdict on the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere, and it was in his treatment of the king that Robinson was most influence by the political events in Europe during the first two decades of this century. The Communist Revolution and the World War had resulted in the dissolution of several monarchies and in a general loss of faith in the ability of many political, social, and religious institutions to create a better world for man.

Robinson's Arthur was a far less admirable man than he had been in the versions of Malory and Tennyson. Malory allowed some of Arthur's personal weaknesses in the French romances to stand, but he revered the king's ability to command loyalty, bring order to the country, and to build a glorious Camelot admired by all Christendom as a type of Utopia of chivalry. Tennyson idealized Arthur, and sublimated Camelot as a social and spiritual kingdom to which men in their weakness were unable long to aspire. Robinson had no such respect for royalty or their kingdoms, nor did he assume that Camelot was for a time the best of all possible worlds. Arthur himself admits that because of his own youthful lust and pride he thought himself

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{a little less} \\
&\text{Than God;} \quad \text{a king who built him palaces} \\
&\text{On sand and mud, and hears them crumbling now,} \\
&\text{And sees them tottering, as he knew they must.} 
\end{align*}
\]

In dispelling the illusion of the greatness of Arthur and Camelot, Robinson anachronistically turns Lancelot, that traditional bulwark of monarchy, into a New England republican:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{What are kings?} \\
&\text{And how much longer are there to be kings?} \\
&\text{When are the millions who are now like worms} \\
&\text{To know that kings are worms, if they are worms?}
\end{align*}
\]

This questioning of the intrinsic worth of Arthur's realm is a radically new note in the history of the Arthurian legend. Although Robinson admired Tennyson, his version of the story seems to be almost a deliberate reaction against the *Idylls* in that

2. *Lancelot*, p. 251. All quotations are from *Collected Poems*, New York, Macmillan, 1924. The lines are not numbered.

Arthur is so weakened as to become often pathetic—a stubborn, jealous, indecisive man who realizes that he has built a vain and empty kingdom for whose ruin he is chiefly responsible.

In selecting a framework for his characters, Robinson is almost completely faithful to the traditional incidents in Malory's version, but he goes beyond Malory into the French romances, and revives the rumors of Arthur's immorality; Sir Lamorak, the outspoken old veteran, growls,

The story is that Merlin warned the king
Of what's come now to pass; and I believe it.
And Arthur, he being Arthur and a king,
Has made a more pernicious mess than one,
We're told, for being so great and amorous.4

Lamorak is not touched by the king's worries about his unfaithful wife:

As for the King, I say the King, no doubt,
Is angry, sorry, and all sorts of things,
For Lancelot, and for his easy Queen,
Whom he took knowing she'd throw sparks already
On that same piece of tinder, Lancelot.5

Malory never attempted to explain why Arthur flouted Merlin's warnings about Guinevere; the reason, of course, is a very simple and human one, and Robinson disposes of it in two lines:

Because the King—God save poor human reason!—
Would prove to Merlin...that he was wrong.6

Having formerly trusted Merlin absolutely, Arthur allows his passion to distort his reason in this case, and he must bear the burden of the consequences.

Robinson also returns to the ancient theme of Nemesis as the main cause of the tragedy. Arthur has begotten Mordred by his half-sister, and the guilt of this early incest returns to destroy

5. Ibid., p. 248.
6. Ibid., p. 248.
him: Mordred lurks as silently and evilly as ever in the background, awaiting the opportunity to say the "one word" that will enable him to publish the royal scandal and divide the kingdom.

Because he was immoral during the early years of his reign, because he incestuously fathered Mordred and later ignored Merlin's advice about marrying Guinevere, Arthur prepared the ruin of his kingdom. But the king's greatest mistake is allowing himself to brood over the consequences of his early life instead of exercising his mastery as a warrior king to cure his cankerous realm. Rather he indulges in self-pity and lapses into passivity. Merlin returns from his self-imposed exile with Vivian in idyllic Brocéliande to warn the languishing king that he must forget Guinevere's infidelity and attend to the duties of state:

For you are King,
And if you starve yourself, you starve the state;
And then by sundry looks and silences
Of those you loved, and by the lax regard
Of those you knew for fawning enemies,
You may learn soon that you are King no more.

Merlin is direct in telling Arthur where the real danger lies:

For it is Mordred now, not Lancelot,
Whose native hate plans your annihilation---
Though he may smile till he be sick, and swear
Allegiance to an unforgiven father.

"Trust him not," says Merlin:

For should your force be slower then than hate,
And your regret be sharper than your sight,
And your remorse fall heavier than your sword---
Then say farewell to Camelot, and the crown.

Crusty Sir Lamorak is disgusted that the king whom he had once admired and followed "through blood and iron" will let his kingdom topple and "go rolling down to hell" because "a pretty

8. Ibid., p. 253.
woman is a fool". He asks,

"Is the King sick?...
"Is the King blind—with Modred watching him?
Does he forget the crown for Lancelot?
Does he forget that every woman mewing
Shall some day be a handful of small ashes?"

Lamorak knows that Arthur had married with his eyes open, and
thinks he is a fool to brood about what he knew to be inevitable:

It's that unwholesome and inclement cub
Young Modred I'd see first in hell before
I'd hang too high the Queen or Lancelot.11

If Arthur is worth his salt, he will gracefully concede defeat
in love, and accept what Merlin suggests is the will of the gods:

This coil of Lancelot and Guinevere
Is not for any mortal to undo,
Or to deny, or to make otherwise.12

The hopes of Lamorak and the renewed warnings of Merlin
are vain. Arthur is no longer a noble king, but simply a dis-
appointed and disillusioned husband beset by fear, doubt and
despair. He knows that his own infirmities are responsible for
his plight, but he hates to admit his failure. Angry in his woun-
ded pride, he feels he can trust no one but Dagonet, the fool;
alone in his cold, quiet room at night, he vilifies his knights
as "dubious knaves" filled with disloyalty and ingratitude. He is
akin to Lear as he reflects on his isolation and on Merlin's words
concerning the love of Guinevere:

'The love that never was!'...Fool, fool, fool, fool!

This is an Arthur unknown before in the development of the
Arthuriad. In the past, Arthur had always been more concerned
for the fate of his Round Table than for the loss of his wife;

11. Ibid., p. 252.
12. Ibid., p. 252.
Robinson's king loses his wife, and so cares nothing for his kingdom. This twentieth-century Arthur is less admirable, but more human. One of Robinson's chief lessons seems to be that kings are men, and that they and their kingdoms are subject to all the weaknesses inherent in humanity. This is not the view of romance, but of realistic psychology and democratic politics.

Robinson's insistence on realism of character is reflected in his treatment of Guinevere, who had hitherto exhibited little more than the stock emotions of love, anger, jealousy and remorse---and these in a superficial and uninteresting manner. Robinson was aware of her undeveloped potential:

I don't know whether I deserve a crown or a foolscap for trying to make Guinever interesting---a fact that hasn't to my knowledge been accomplished heretofore---but she must have had a way with her or there wouldn't have been such an everlasting amount of fuss made over her. Robinson devoted as much space to Guinevere as he did to any of the male figures, and endowed the queen with considerable intellectual depth and conversational skill. She has a sharp intelligence which sometimes awes Lancelot with the relentlessness of its logic. During the siege of Joyous Garde by Arthur and Gawaine, for instance, she attacks Lancelot for his tender conscience about fighting Arthur:

And if the world
Of Arthur's name be now a dying glory,
Why bleed it for the sparing of a man
Who hates you, and a King that hates himself?

13. William Morris' poem is, of course, and exception; however, his sketch falls far short of a complete portrait.

If war be war...why dishonor Time
For torture longer drawn in your slow game.
Of empty slaughter? Tomorrow it will be
The King's move, I suppose, and we shall have
One more magnificent waste of nameless pawns,
And of a few more knights. God, how you love
This game! --- to make so loud a shambles of it,
When you have only twice to lift your finger
To signal peace, and give to this poor drenched
And clotted earth a time to heal itself.
Twice over I say to you, if war be war,
Why play with it? 15

One of the fruits of the modern emancipation of woman is her freedom to choose a husband without undue parental pressure.

Because of the allegory and his conception of Arthur's personality, Tennyson avoided discussion of what must have been to him the rather distasteful summons of Arthur to Guinevere's father. Malory, of course, never considered it a problem at all. In establishing motivation for the adultery, Robinson supplies a graphic picture of the young princess who must be a reluctant pawn in this game of kings:

I wronged him, but he bought me with a name
Too large for my king-father to relinquish—
Though I prayed him, and I prayed God aloud
To spare that crown. I called it crown enough
To be my father's child—until you came.
And then there were no crowns or kings or fathers
Under the sky. 16

Robinson has retained Tennyson's innovation of using Lancelot as emissary: when Guinevere sees him, she recognizes the great passion of her life, and is ready to abandon all duty and loyalty in surrender to her instinct; the darkness has suddenly been made light:

For me there was no dark until it came,
she tells Lancelot much later,

When the King came, and with his heavy shadow
Put out the sun that you made shine again. 17

16. Ibid., p. 423.
Guinevere loves Arthur "something less than cats love rain," as Gawain says; after he vengefully sentences her to be burnt, she loathes him. When the Pope orders Lancelot to return her to Camelot---where Robinson's very human Arthur is quite ready to receive her---she passes through the pathetic phases of love's agony: fury, reproach, frantic supplication, despair. Is there no house in France where she may hide? She could love the bats and owls there better than her husband! She could never forgive the king---perhaps she might kill him:

Home! Free! Would you let me go there again---To be at home? Be free? To be his wife?To live in his arms always, and so hate himThat I could heap around him the same faggotsThat you put out with blood? Go home, you say?Home? -- Where I saw the black post waiting for meThat morning?  

In this scene Guinevere is a creature of emotion and impulse. She is not interested in what the Pope commands, what Arthur expects, what duty impels or what conscience dictates. She desires rather to seize the present hour instead of deferring the issue until some dark time in the future. Full of fear, she loses all dignity and grovels at the feet of Lancelot, begging him to carry her away to France. The scene is peculiarly similar to the famous---some would say infamous---parting in the Idylls when the queen's golden hair is spread at the feet of the king. There is no repentence here, however; Arthur is all too human, the virtue of his Camelot all too questionable, to work remorse in this woman who now desires only a few years of calm happiness with the one man she has loved. But Lancelot knows that they could never hide from the world:

18. Lancelot, p. 422.
He shook his head,
Slowly, and raised her slowly in his arms,
Holding her there; and they stood long together.
And there was no sound then of anything,
Save a low moaning of a broken woman,
And the cold roaring down of that long rain.  

Guinevere's final decision to embrace a physically arduous life of penance and prayer at Almsbury reflects Robinson's philosophy that fortitude and endurance are the greatest virtues in life; even after all hope is gone, one must continue to meet the fluctuations and harshness of fate. Critics have variously traced Robinson's stoicim to his New England background or to his personal sorrows and privations. Whatever the source, the poet leaves the queen, shorn of her hair and dressed in black, her old enemy, to work out her salvation. Robinson did succeed in his attempt to make Guinevere emotionally and intellectually "interesting," and the legend is the richer for it.

In psychological realism and introspective detail, Robinson's approach to the character of Lancelot is similar to that employed for Guinevere. In essence, the personality and reactions of this noblest of the knights are unchanged from the versions of Malory and Tennyson. Lancelot is still the splendidly morose hero, unable to act according to his convictions, and aware of his weakness. Robinson, however, has changed the direction of his sorrow. Lancelot feels less guilty about his disloyalty to the king than he does about his failure to work out some kind of personal salvation. He does not feel that he and Guinevere are much responsible for the decay of Camelot, nor does he care that Arthur's world is passing away.

Two strains of Robinson's thought are evident in his sketching of the mental turmoil of Lancelot: he was an agnostic, and was attracted to a rather vague transcendentalism. Malory and Tennyson had no trouble explaining what it was that Lancelot was seeking: the sinful knight wanted enough moral strength to break with Guinevere, atone for his sins, and die a good Christian in order to gain heaven. Robinson rejected formal Christianity, and in doing so he created a problem that he failed to solve. What is it that Lancelot hopes to achieve by renouncing Guinevere? Certainly not a clean conscience about Arthur and Camelot, for he has said that both are ripe to die. Not a sense of having done his duty: duty to what or whom? Robinson is irritating in his avoidance of any exact statement about the nature of Lancelot's aspirations, and falls back weakly on a fuzzy mysticism which has the knight following a Light, or a Vision, and listening to the call of some Voice. The commentators have been ready with explanations of what Robinson means. One says that the Light is self-knowledge—a meaningless cliche in that Lancelot knew himself quite well, but still went to bed with the queen. Another says that Lancelot desires an encounter with higher and more permanent ideals. Ideals based on what? Not on Camelot. Not on the revealed wishes of God. Here is a knotty problem which shows the danger of lifting the characters of the legend too much out of their historical context. The Arthuriad as it came to maturity in the twelfth century was intimately bound to a Christian atmosphere. To deny


this religious element is to rob both Guinevere and Lancelot of their main motivation for remorse.

The Light that Lancelot wishes to follow seems to be somehow bound up with the Grail quest, for when Lancelot returns from his Grail adventures he tells Gawain:

> When I came back from seeing what I saw,  
> I saw no place for me in Camelot.  
> There is no place for me in Camelot.  
> There is no place for me save where the Light  
> May lead me; and to that place I shall go.  

From this one might conclude that Robinson does indeed intend Lancelot to be a Christian seeking conventional salvation; the trouble is that Robinson has not definitely said what this Grail symbolizes. If it represents all that is pure and holy and sacred in Christianity, does Robinson mean the traditional Catholic Christianity, or a modern Protestantism? Apparently he does not intend a Catholic interpretation, for Guinevere tells Lancelot,

> The Light you saw  
> Was not the Light of Rome; the word you had  
> Of Rome was not the word of God.  

Is Lancelot a Protestant, then? Since Robinson himself was not a Protestant, why should he wish to convert Lancelot? Furthermore, it would be foolish to assume that a modern Protestant intellectual would ride off in search of a glimpse of an extremely mystical and medieval Catholic symbol.

Whatever this Light means, it is apparent that Guinevere stands between it and Lancelot; as he says,

> Once I had gone  
> Where the Light guided me, but the Queen came,  
> And then there was no Light.  

To find the Light requires some sort of spiritual death and rebirth; conventionally, it would be the renunciation of a sensual life in favor of a holy religious life, but it is unlikely that Robinson means anything so simple. After leaving Guinevere for the last time, Lancelot rides away:

"Where the Light falls, death falls; a world has died For you that a world may live. There is no peace."

But the Voice within him said: "You are not free. You have come to the world's end, and it is best You are not free. Where the Light falls, death falls; And in the darkness comes the Light."  

In a general way, Arthur and Camelot represent the civilization of Europe after World War I. The European Camelot that Robinson saw falling to ashes was one based on hereditary social and political privilege, rigid class structure and unjust distribution of wealth. Commenting on *Merlin* in 1918, the poet makes an unusual statement about the figure of Lancelot: "If one insists, Lancelot...may be taken as a rather distant symbol of Germany."  

What Robinson probably meant was that the actions of both Lancelot and Germany precipitated a war which was to lead to the fall of a system that was already passing. When Arthur and Gawain go to France to fight Lancelot, the friends of the exiled knight beg him to kill the king and his vengeful lieutenant, and thus end a useless war that is costing many lives. Stricken in conscience, Lancelot cannot bring himself to the deed. In the same way, perhaps Germany could have obtained its objectives without such wholesale carnage. It is a rather strained interpretation,

of course, but it is nevertheless a further reflection of a modern mind seeing in the legend certain parallels to contemporary events.

Edwin Arlington Robinson has made a major contribution to the development of the Arthurian story. His modern interest in psychology gives the characters greater profundity. Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot are finally made worthy of attention for what they think as well as for what they do. Their speech, however, is a bit too intellectually precise to convince the reader that they are real, because real people do not speak with such consistently elevated thought or vocabulary. The long speeches lack the quickness of ordinary life, and the displays of intellectual cleverness are alien to the more simple, colloquial talk of the average man. What Robinson's characters lack is a bit of the earth to give them some of the warmth, humor and incisive pathos necessary really to humanize these misty figures of legend.

Robinson also failed to achieve much variety of tone, nor did he come to grips with the problems of hatred, oppression, and war that are common both to the Arthurian legend and to the twentieth century. He assumed that Camelot was corrupt, and monarchy outdated, but he made no real attempt to explain the reasons for Arthur's failure. It remained for T.H. White to undertake a more complex and subtle treatment.

This is not to suggest that realism is necessarily the major criterion for judging the quality of literature. The point is that the prime contribution of the twentieth century to the Arthurian is a more minute analysis of formerly conventional figures of romance, with greater stress on realism of thought, action and setting. Robinson achieved much, but White—partly because prose is a better medium for realistic writing—did more. Whether White's book is better than Robinson's poems involves a comparative judgment that is outside the scope of this thesis.
There is a temptation for a student of the Arthurian legend to lapse into superlatives when discussing Terence Hanbury White's *The Once and Future King*. Anyone acquainted with the history of the legend is bound to be even more impressed and delighted than the general reader with this book about (as one reviewer of Robinson's poems called them) "that over-worked and much over-poeticized Camelot crowd." White's tetralogy of novels is an extraordinary achievement in that he has told the familiar story with almost complete fidelity to the main plot and characters of Malory, and yet has made the well-worn Matter of Britain more exciting, and the tragedy more apparent, than they have ever been before. His success is due to a happy blend of imagination, scholarly research, psychological insight and humor.

Unlike most authors who have taken up Arthurian materials, White does not rely solely on literary sources---mainly Malory---for his subject matter. He is qualified not only as an artist, but also as a scholar who is intimately acquainted with medieval

life. His imagination has enabled him to invent background which more fully explains the motives of the characters, but which at the same time is entirely faithful to the spirit of the early legend. His academic interest in the minutiae of medieval civilization has kept his story rooted in realism. This unique blend of creative imagination and scholarship, which makes the legend much richer, is the main reason for White's success.

More important to a study of the adultery is the author's awareness that the principal characters of the legend, if they are to be acceptable to a twentieth-century reader, must reveal normal emotional and intellectual reactions. Malory made no attempt to analyze the characters or to explain the inconsistencies of his idealized chivalric heroes; Tennyson robbed his characters of most of their reality by making them semi-allegorical; Robinson indulged in profound introspection of character, but his Camelot was too somber and intellectual to be really human. White has not adopted the stereotyped Middle Ages of most fiction; his characters are simple, but not quaint, nor are they impossibly noble or impossibly evil. This "Camelot crowd" gossips, changes fashions, serves on juries, suffocates in cumbersome armor, pays feudal dues as tokens of homage to the king, and builds great cathedrals as tributes to an intensely personal God. The men grow old, and the women plump.

This realism of action is balanced by truth of psychological insight. White succeeds with his characters because he has not attempted to fashion them in his own image. They do not judge life through the eyes of a medieval figure of romance, of a nineteenth century moralist, or of a twentieth-century intell-
ectual. Although White's work reveals the influence of his age in other respects—including its naturalism of speech, its leaning to Freudian psychology, and its concern with the problem of war—his characters are universalized insofar as they consider their problems and relationships with a simplicity of emotion common to average human beings in every age; as a result, the reader can share their joys and woes, because he identifies himself with them on a basis of common humanity.

It would be grossly unjust to call White a mere humorist. On the other hand, in spite of the serious intent and essentially tragic implications of the tetralogy, one of the chief impressions left with the reader is that this is the work of a man with a puckish, sometimes broad and farcical, often satiric humor. Judging by the nature of Arthurian material over the past seven centuries, one would think that nothing funny ever happened in the Middle Ages. Malory, Tennyson, and Robinson treated the story with intense seriousness. But laughter is a characteristic of life anywhere, and no society lacking it is truly credible. White's wise and successful evocation of laughter in Camelot, including his playful use of anachronism, is a distinguished contribution to Arthurian literature.

3. Dryden, Fielding and Twain, of course, used Arthurian material for comedy, but they made no attempt to tell any of the traditional story.

4. Some of the best writing in Robinson's Arthurian trilogy is found in the passages involving the rough and garrulous Lamorak, whose outspoken and earthy roars the amused reader leaves with regret after the first few pages of Merlin.
White has heightened the realism by avoiding archaisms of speech except for humor. His characters speak in simple, even colloquial terms. They do not, furthermore, exhibit that turn for subtle intellectual analysis which, in some of Robinson's passages, suggests a remoteness from real life. After all, there never were any very profound intellects in Arthurian romance.

In an age that has managed to survive two world wars, and is preparing for a third, White attempts to find in the Arthurian legend some answer to the puzzle of how mankind can achieve a stable, progressive society. Malory said that men must be chivalrous; Tennyson said that men must subdue their animal instincts and behave like Christians—which is virtually what Malory meant by chivalry. Robinson suggested that man must follow the beckonings of some higher life, of the Light, but he failed to make his meaning clear. White's message is that force never solves anything, and that might is not the means to the end of a peaceful civilization characterized by liberty, equality, and a well-formulated code of Christian law.

White is an Englishman, proud of his British heritage, proud of the traditions of the Crown, and proud of the Law as the foundation of democracy. Like Tennyson, he believes that firmly established institutions are vital to order and progress. This is not to say that he is antagonistic to change. As a conservative democrat, however, he is suspicious of any movement that threatens to substitute group interest for national interest, or violence and oppression for the peaceful working of just laws. The task
of King Arthur in White's book is essentially the same as it was in Tennyson's *Idylls*: to raise men above a bestial condition of bloody anarchy, and to create a well-ordered civilization out of social and political chaos. Tennyson said that men must follow the dictates of conscience and duty if they hoped to better themselves; White says much the same thing, but in a more practical way. As an historian he is aware that the Law has been the greatest single civilizing influence in British history, so he depicts Arthur as its original champion, a man whose life's work is to control force and brutality by subjecting them to a codified system of justice.

This theme of Civil Law as the basis of Arthur's kingdom is new in the history of the legend. There have always been vague references to the "law", but the law of Camelot has usually been a personal and arbitrary system of the king, used to punish those who had committed some offense against the throne. Robinson depicts Arthur as using the law for purposes of spite and revenge:

> It is -- it must be fire. The law says fire.  
> And I, the King who made the law, say fire!  
> For they are new to law and young to justice;  
> But what they are to see will harden them  
> With wholesome admiration of a realm  
> Where treason's end is ashes. Ashes. Ashes!  
> Now this is better. I am King again.

Apparently Robinson's Arthur equates the law with his personal desires---it is his to employ or dismiss. Tennyson's king is also able to lay the law aside if he finds it offensive; he says to Guinevere:

> The wrath which forced my thoughts on that fierce law,  
> The doom of treason and the flaming death,—  
> When first I learnt thee hidden here, --- is past.

White's Arthur, however, cannot be so arbitrary. He is a constitutional monarch, who is as subject to the law as the meanest villain. Arthur's early training under Merlin had convinced him that killing people, that being a tyrant, was wrong, and that a good king must set the example if he hopes to bring peace to his country. When he first became king, Arthur was forced to use violence to bring the "gangster barons"—the "conservatives" who believed in no government except the rule of force—under control, but he comes to realize that the Round Table cannot survive so long as its supremacy is founded on brute strength. Right must be established by Right. When order is achieved, there is nothing for his fighters to do but feud among themselves. The Grail quest provides a temporary outlet for their energies, but no permanent civilization is possible until Arthur introduces the rule of law, his final effort against Might.

It is a tragic irony that the king's justice precipitates the crisis which results in the dissolution of the Round Table and the destruction of all that Arthur achieved. Mordred, who hates the king for reasons of a family feud, and Agravaine, who detests and envies Lancelot, are a pair of medieval fascists who desire to found a totalitarian state. They know that they can never seize power so long as the old friendship continues between Arthur and Lancelot. Because they are aware that Arthur is too loving and charitable, too concerned for the peace and prosperity of the state, ever to accuse his precious wife and dearest friend of treason, they decide to lay a trap for the lovers in order to obtain legal evidence of adultery. When faced with such evidence, the king will have no choice but to condemn Lancelot and Guinevere
in keeping with the laws that he himself had instituted. Arthur
is aware of their enmity, and tries gently to warn Lancelot and the
queen that the law is more powerful than he:

"You see, Lance, I have to be absolutely just...
The only way I can keep clear of force is by justice.
Far from being willing to execute his enemies, a
real king must be willing to execute his friends."

"And his wife?" asked Guenever.

"And his wife," he said gravely.

Lancelot moved uncomfortably on the settle, remarking
with an attempt at humor: "I hope you won't be cutt­
ing off the Queen's head very soon?"

"If Guenever or you, Landelot, were proved to be
guilty of a wrong to my kingdom, I should have to
cut off both your heads."

"Goodness me!" she exclaimed. "I hope nobody
is going to prove that!"

"Mordred is an unhappy young man, and I am afraid
he might try any means of giving me an upset. If,
for instance, he could see a way of getting at me
through you, dear, or through Gwen, I am sure he
would try it...So if there should ever come a
moment when either of you might, well...might give
him a sort of handle...you will be careful of me,
won't you? I am in your hands, dears."

But the habits of twenty-four years of love are too strong
for Lancelot to resist. He goes to the queen while the king is
away hunting, is caught and challenged by the plotters, and must
flee the court. Arthur's confidence that Lancelot will rescue the
condemned Guinevere presents him with a further dilemma: should
he strengthen the guard because he expects a rescue, or should he
ignore the possibility of rescue and post the usual number of
knights to supervise the execution? He does not want Guinevere
to die; in fact, he ardently desires that Lancelot will rescue

her. But he must be fair, and it pains him to know that some good knights must die during Lancelot's attempt. He feels no personal grudge, and although the lovers are technically guilty according to law, he knows they are not traitors, but rather two of his strongest and most trusted supporters. Arthur, as the gloating Agrava in exults, is "Hoist with his own petard!"

When the rescue is accomplished, Arthur is like a delighted child. Standing at the palace window, he asks Gawaine if he should wave to the queen as she rides away, but the grand old soldier, speaking with an outland. Gaelic accent, does not think it would be right:

"Well, then, I suppose I must not. Still, it would have been nice to do something, as she is going." Gawaine turned upon him with a swirl of affection. "Uncle Arthur," he said, "ye're a grand man. I telled ye it would come to right."
"And you are a grand man, too, Gawaine, a good man and a kind one."
They kissed in the ancient way, joyfully, on both cheeks.
"There," they said, "There."


The old King looked about him as if he were searching for the thing to do. His age, the suggestion of infirmity, had lifted from him. He looked straighter. His cheeks were rosy. The crow's feet round his eyes were beaming.
"I think we ought to have a monstrous drink to begin with."
"Verra guid. Call the page."
"Page, page...Where the devil have you gone? Page! Here, you varmint, bring us some drink."

The scene not only reveals Arthur's boyishness and affection, and his total lack of any sense of personal wrong, but also is an excellent example of White's ability to blend humor and pathos. In retrospect, the scene has great pathos, in view of the imminent

deaths of Gareth and Gaheris. Arthur is even ready to make excuses for the lovers---although he knows the truth:

Perhaps we can make Lancelot apologize, or some arrangement like that---and then he can come back. We would get him to explain that he was in the Queen's bedroom because she had sent for him to pay the Maliagrance fee, as she had briefed him, and she didn't want to have any talk about the payment. And then, of course, he had to rescue her because he knew she was innocent. Yes, I think we could manage something like that. But they would have to behave themselves in the future.9

His desire to effect a reconciliation is dictated not by fear of Lancelot or slavishness to the body of Guinevere---it arises out of his unselfishness. He had known that they were sinning, but he had fatalistically conditioned himself to accept the situation. He knows that if he now insists on obtaining conventional satisfaction for his wounded honor, it will mean the end of all he has worked for and loved. The plans of Arthur and Gawaine are short lived, however, as the snarling Mordred comes with the news of Gareth and Gaheris. The laughter dies, and the "monstrous drinks" go untouched.

What manner of man is this Arthur conceived by a modern writer, this man who values his erring wife and her lover more than he values his own royal honor, who warns the lovers that they are in danger, and is ready to lie in their defence, and who, finally, reverences the Law above all things? Is he a genius or a fool? A saint or a spineless weakling?

In retelling the Arthurian legend, White had to choose between two methods: he could, like Tennyson, and Robinson, take the characters and incidents from Malory that suited him, or he could be faithful to Malory, and supply acceptable psychological

motivation for the unexplained and sometimes incongruous incidents in Malory. The character of Arthur has always been the weightiest problem: how can a king be the glorious patron saint of chivalry and yet have fathered a couple of bastard sons? Would a nearly perfect king attempt the wholesale murder of a shipload of innocent babies? Malory made no attempt to explain these contradictions that he inherited from French romance. Tennyson ignored Arthur's weaknesses, and emphasized his strengths. By overstating the king's faults, Robinson robbed him of the dignity and nobility which he must possess if there is to be any tragedy in his fall. White chooses to minimise neither the good nor the evil. Because he reveres his British heritage, including its literature, and because he has a scholar's tenderness for the Middle Ages, White has faithfully adhered to Malory, his master.

The Arthur of The Once and Future King is a simple, affectionate man, who has been carefully nurtured by Merlin for the single task of taming anarchy in England and bringing security to everyone by formulating a system of Civil Law. He is a kind, conscientious, peace-loving monarch who fights well and commands allegiance from a variegated assortment of young knights from all over Europe who idolize him as the most famous defender of liberty and justice. Among these eager young men is Lancelot, the self-termed Chevalier Mal Fet, an ugly youth from France who has spent most of his eighteen years in perfecting the knightly arts so as to be worthy of his hero.

Although White is a realist in his handling of character, he has no qualms about using magic or prophecy in his plot. Merlin has warned the young king that his queen will be unfaithful, but when Lancelot arrives at court, Arthur is so attracted to him
that he has doubts about Merlin's warnings. As their friendship develops, the king finds it increasingly difficult to believe that Lancelot could be his best friend and his betrayer at the same time. Arthur's intellect is not subtle, so he chooses to put the prophecy to the back of his mind and see what develops.

Because he is dealing with a simple, forthright character, White keeps his psychology on an elementary level. When Arthur becomes aware that Lancelot and Guinevere are in love, he establishes a sort of mental block whereby he hopes to overcome the trouble by refusing to think about it. Subconsciously, says White, he knows that they are sleeping together, but he loves them both too much to make an issue out of it; perhaps things will work themselves out if he is patient.10

One phase of the relationship between Arthur and Lancelot that is likely to bother the modern reader who is familiar with Malory and Tennyson is Arthur's seeming indifference to Lancelot's professions that he is a sinful man, that he bears a heavy burden of guilt because of his secret sin. Never once does the king ask his dearest knight exactly what is troubling him. White cannot ignore this touchy problem, for to do so would be quite unrealistic. He explains it simply and naturally:

Lancelot, with an uncontrollable desire to get some of his misery off his chest by telling about it—and yet unable to tell the true story to this particular listener—began a long rigmarole about Elaine. He began telling Arthur half the truth: how he was ashamed and had lost his miracles. But he was forced to make Elaine the central figure of this confession, and, after half an hour, he had unwittingly presented the King with a story to believe in—a story with which Arthur could content himself if he did not want to be conscious of the true tale. This half-truth was of great use to the poor fellow who learned to substitute it for the real trouble in later years.11

11. Ibid., p. 408.
It is true that Arthur's attempts to turn his back on this personal wrong are sometimes pathetic, but they may also indicate largeness of heart and mind. White, whose conservatism makes him skeptical of much that is considered progressive in modern civilization, uses the situation to satirize his own age in words heavy with irony:

We civilized people, who would immediately fly to divorce courts and alimony and other forms of attrition in such circumstances, can afford to look with proper contempt upon the spineless cuckold. But Arthur was only a medieval savage. He did not understand our civilization, and knew no better than to try to be too decent for the degradation of jealousy.12

The satire becomes universalized as White pursues his analysis of Arthur's character:

Arthur...had been beautifully brought up and protected with love...he had grown up without any of the useful accomplishments of living...without malice, vanity, suspicion, cruelty, and the commoner forms of selfishness. Jealousy seemed to him the most ignoble of vices. He was sadly unfitted for hating his best friend, or for torturing his wife. He had been given too much love and trust to be good at these things.13

It is the first time in the history of the Arthurian legend that a writer has repeatedly looked at the adultery through the eyes of the king. The lovers have always received most of the attention. Probably it has usually been supposed that Arthur's reactions would be fairly predictable: the anger, resentment, jealousy and desire for retribution of the wronged husband. But it is inconsistent from the point of view of realistic psychology to say that a man is a great and a noble leader, the flower of Christendom and the finest product of chivalry, and yet show him

12. White, op. cit., p. 408.
unable to reconcile himself to an adultery about which he has been explicitly warned, and which he is powerless to prevent or change. Most authors have ignored the inconsistency and concentrated on the lovers, but White has centered his book on the king, and the question is bound to arise. White simply decides that Arthur is too much of a Christian gentleman to allow himself the luxuries of jealousy and spite.

Traditionally, it is Lancelot who suffers a torment of conscience over the adultery; Arthur either is ignorant of it, or ignores it, but he never worries about it. In White's version, however, Arthur is as anxious as the lovers that the affair be kept private, for its discovery would mean the end of their friendship, and perhaps the breaking up of the realm. Arthur is troubled because his knowledge of the adultery, of Lancelot's divided loyalty, gnaws at his peace in spite of all his efforts to ignore it. He is concerned for Lancelot's spiritual torment, for the embarrassment and guilt of the lovers on awkward occasions, and for the use that some of the evil powers in the country might make of the adultery if they had enough evidence to turn it into a public scandal.

Arthur is never worried about himself. He understands, with almost superhuman generosity and unselfishness, that men and women can love for different reasons. He is too wise and humble to be surprised or hurt when he discovers that Guinevere and Lancelot are in love. After all, it had been a "made" marriage, fixed by treaty with her father, King Leodegrance. No doubt the youthful, idealistic Arthur had hoped that his wife would come to love him, and indeed, it is to Guinevere's credit that she accepted the
union and tried as hard as possible to love the king and make him happy. But Arthur is no fool. White does not say so directly, but there is little doubt that Arthur had not deluded himself into believing that his wife's affection was passion. Robinson's Arthur, when told by Merlin after many years of marriage that his wife has never loved him, curses himself as a fool because he never realized it. This is not realistic psychology, for no woman is clever enough to maintain the illusion of love over a prolonged period—particularly, as is the case with Robinson's Guinevere, when she detests her husband. White's Arthur knows that his wife loves Lancelot with a grand passion, but he also knows that she still loves him:

...before Lancelot came on the scene the young girl had adored her famous husband. She had felt respect for him, with gratitude, kindness, love and a sense of protection. She had felt more than this—you might say that she had felt everything except the passion of romance.14

Arthur accepts this duality in his wife's emotions—affection for him and passion for Lancelot—while expecting only that she will be loyal to him in all other things, and discreet enough to prevent his enemies from making political capital of the affair. This acceptance is plausible, because White has given Arthur a heroic stature that includes profound wisdom, humility and generosity.

Arthur is also aware of Lancelot's sense of guilt about his divided loyalty, but the king realizes that his commander-in-chief is only technically a traitor. Arthur knows that Lancelot has fought a courageous battle against temptation, but has failed. The king is not so free of faults that he cannot sympathize with

human weakness; after all, he had allowed himself to be seduced in his youth, and then frightened into the attempted murder of innocent babies. Lancelot, furthermore, is hardly a promiscuous wife-stealer. His integrity of spirit is flawed only by his fatal obsession with the queen. The only remedy for his passion would be to flee to France, but both he and Arthur know that England and its king would be the poorer for his exile.

White's insistence that men can love for different reasons, and his analysis of the adultery as having inherent in it several different kinds of love, is an original contribution to the Arthurian legend. There are loves, he says, that are as great, or greater, than, passionate love between man and woman; there is love of a friend, of a leader, of a great nation. If one postulates, furthermore, that the people concerned possess strong characters and noble ideals, these loves can co-exist, even when they seem to conflict. That White's Arthur realizes this is one reason why he is great. That the kings of Tennyson and Robinson did not realize this is the main reason why they do not claim the reader's sympathy and compassion.

In developing the character of Lancelot, White employs the same method that he used with Arthur in "The Sword in the Stone," the opening section of the novel. In keeping with the techniques of modern psychology, the author first delves into the childhood of the knight in order to discover some explanation for his sorrows and joys, for his successes and failures, later in life. The original French romances depicted Lancelot as growing up at the bottom of a pond under the tutelage of the mysterious Lady of the
Lake. Malory omitted this story, and White, although he has no objections to casual magic, is too much concerned with realism to employ this ancient legend, which makes Lancelot a fairy knight rather than a human being.

Lancelot is an introspective, solitary child, who has dedicated himself to a life of holiness and service under King Arthur. White says that he was not the romantic, debonair figure that Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites imagined, but a sullen fellow who spent much of his youth in the Armoury at Benwick Castle, ferociously driving himself under the brutal tuition of Uncle Dap, the best swordsman in France. He bore his harsh training patiently, because he knew that when he became the greatest knight in the world, King Arthur would love him.

At eighteen Lancelot is ready for Camelot, and White describes the climactic moment with the humorous understatement so typical of him. Merlin comes bumbling into the court at Benwick with the news that Arthur wants Lancelot to join the Round Table. Lancelot asks,

"Is everything well?"
"Yes. He sent you his love."
"Is the King happy?"
"Very happy. Guinever sent her love too."
"Who is Guinever?"
"Good gracious!" exclaimed the magician.
"Didn't you know about that? No, of course not. I have been getting bejingled in my brains."  

15. Probably White is thinking of Tennyson's Lancelot in The Lady of Shalott. The Lancelot of the Idylls is remorseful and sad, not dehonair.

Lancelot is disappointed, and a bit jealous. He had hoped to be the first member of the Round Table to be knighted, and he certainly had not counted on some "scheming woman" capturing the love for which he had toiled so long. This is convincing adolescent psychology, and if the reader still has any doubts that this Lancelot is a genuine medieval youth, and not a stock figure of romance, they are quickly dispelled by Lancelot's trip to England. During the Channel crossing, this destined champion of the Round Table, this most graceful and strongest of knights, this epitome of chivalry, is seasick.

Malory did not describe the first meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere; after several books, the reader simply discovers that they have been in love for some time. Tennyson invented the romantic meeting when Lancelot goes as emissary to bring Arthur's bride home to Camelot. Robinson follows Tennyson, but makes more of the vital moment when the future lovers first come face to face with a thunderclap of passion. The trouble is that things do not usually happen this way in real life. White returns to Malory's version, in which Lancelot comes to court some time after Arthur's marriage. He comes ashamed of his jealousy of this mincing wife, but he is unable to overcome his emotions immediately, and kisses Guinevere's hand coldly:

He did not notice anything particular about her, because his mind was filled with previous pictures which he had made for himself. There was no room for pictures of what she was really like. He thought of her only as the person who had robbed him, and, since robbers are deceitful, designing and heartless people, he thought of her as these.17

Guinevere is startled at Lancelot's twisted gargoyle face, but she is not frightened.

White describes in a very natural way the incident which leads to the first stirrings of love. Because there is a shortage of hawking assistants in Camelot, Guinevere, who realizes that the new knight does not particularly like her, offers to assist Lancelot in the field. She tangles up the creance to which the hawk is attached—much as a woman who is learning to fish will foul up a reel—and Lancelot wrenches the ball away with extreme impatience:

"That's no good," he said, and he began to unwind her hopeful work with angry fingers. His eyebrows made a horrible scowl.

There was a moment in which everything stood still. Guinevere stood, hurt in her heart. Lancelot, sensing her stillness, stood also. The hawk stopped bating and the leaves did not rustle.

The young man knew, in this moment, that he had hurt a real person, of his own age. He saw in her eyes that she thought he was hateful, and that he had surprised her badly. She had been giving kindness, and he had returned it with unkindness. But the main thing was that she was a real person. She was not a minx, not deceitful, not designing and heartless. She was pretty Jenny, who could think and feel.18

Tennyson simply said that they went hawking together among the Maytime flowers. By adding a few vivid strokes, White lifts the scene off its medieval tapestry and roots it in a world of fact.

The final episode of the series that develops the early relationship of the lovers is perhaps the best of all because of its humor and irony. The flinty and irrepressible Uncle Dap takes his pupil aside when he notices the blossoming of romance:

"God's Feet!" said Uncle Dap, with other exclamations of the same kind. "What is this? What are you doing? Is the finest knight in Europe to throw away everything I have taught him for the sake of a lady's beautiful eyes? And a married lady too!"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't know! Won't know! Holy Mother!" shouted Uncle Dap. "Is it Guinever I am talking about, or is it not? Glory be to God for evermore!"

"...please don't talk to me about the Queen. I can't help it if we are fond of each other, and there is nothing wrong in being fond of people, is there? When you begin lecturing me about her, you are making it seem as if there was something wrong between us. It is as if you thought ill of me, or did not believe in my honour. Please do not mention the subject again."

Uncle Dap rolled his eyes, disarranged his hair, cracked his knuckles, kissed his fingertips, and made other gestures calculated to express his point of view. But he did not refer to the love affair afterwards. 19

It is the old story of solicitude leading to infatuation, and thence to love. One reason why Lancelot falls in love with Guinevere, White says, is that the first thing he did was to hurt her. Lancelot is depicted as not only physically ugly, but also basically cruel. He likes to hurt people. The influence of modern psychology is evident as White makes Lancelot's life one grand compensation. Far from being natural to him, his famed gentleness and courtesy are the result of his attempt to compensate for and guard against this lack of benevolence. He saw the pain in Guinevere's eyes, and so befriended her in an attempt to make amends. It was to be a fatal kindness.

There is no need to multiply instances of White’s ability to humanize his Arthurian characters. It is necessary, however, to mention two other attitudes of White that dictated his treatment of the Arthurian adultery: his love for the simplicity of medieval life, and his disdain for the refinements of modern life. He employs the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere to satirize what he finds distasteful in love and marriage conventions in this ostensibly enlightened twentieth century.

White admires the fidelity implicit in courtly love. He is disgusted with the instability and transience of modern love:

For in those days love was ruled by a different convention from ours. In those days it was chivalrous, adult, long, religious, almost platonic. It was not a matter about which you could make accusations lightly. It was not, as we take it to be nowadays, begun and ended in a long weekend…It is a story of love in the old days, when adults loved faithfully—not a story of the present, in which adolescents pursue the ignoble spasms of the cinematograph.

Whatever the weaknesses of Lancelot and Guinevere, the lovers were at least faithful. This is one reason why Malory admired them. Lancelot had the fatal medieval weakness of loving the highest when he saw it; so, apparently, had Guinevere. White has no argument with people who love the best and are willing to die for it. He pursues his attack on contemporary standards:

We, who have learned to base our interpretation of love on the conventional boy-and-girl romance of Romeo and Juliet, would be amazed if we could step back into the Middle Ages—when the poet of chivalry could write about Man that he had “en ciel un dieu, par terre une déesse.” Lovers were not recruited then among the juveniles and adolescents; they were seasoned people, who knew what they were

about. In those days people loved each other for their lives, without the conveniences of the divorce court and the psychiatrist.21

Because he considers the love and fidelity between Lancelot and Guinevere a grand and noble thing, White is careful to avoid taxing the lovers with responsibility for the fall of Camelot. White blames the tragedy on the rot of fashion and modernity that undermined the simple ideals of Arthur; perhaps men are basically good, and can be shown how to live in peace and brotherhood, but the process requires much more time than the reign of one king. It is the greed and selfishness and violence in the heart of man that must be eliminated; no kingdom falls because of the bad example of a single romance.

In the final chapter of White's novel, on the eve of the last great battle, Arthur reflects on the reasons for his failure to build a permanently stable civilization, but he is too wise and honest to think that it is the fault of the adultery. The story, as White tells it, is an Aristotelian tragedy because Arthur overestimates the goodness and perfectibility of men. The questions that puzzle him are the same that bewilder many modern statesmen. The king dies wondering if the energies of men can ever be channelled into constructive rather than violent and destructive action. After two world wars, the question is of major importance to White, so he universalizes the reasons for the fall of Camelot to serve as a parable for society. He does not blame the tragedy on a splendid passion, a passion that was used by evil men to destroy everything beautiful in the civilization that the idealistic King Arthur had struggled to build.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

One of the major advantages of a comparative study of Arthurian literature is that the legend has never inspired a universally accepted masterpiece. The treatment of no single author stands supreme. Malory, Tennyson, Robinson and White each has his peculiar merits, and each complements the others by variations in tone, point of view, and emphasis. If one version were distinctly superior, it would become the central point of reference, and a balanced comparison would be impossible.

It is a further advantage that the legend has remained largely unchanged for seven hundred years. Since all four of these major Arthurian writers deal with the same material, it is possible to make valid judgments on the effects of their historical backgrounds on their attitudes.

There are also enough social, temporal, and geographic differences among these authors to guarantee a variety of dispositions toward the characters and themes of the legend. Malory was a fifteenth-century English aristocrat, Tennyson a member of the Victorian middle-class, Robinson an early twentieth-century American, and White is a modern Englishman. Two of the versions,
Finally, are prose, and two are verse. Few subjects of equal importance in English literature offer such an opportunity for comparison.

The major aim of the French romance writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was to tell an interesting story. They garrulously described heroic warriors, passionate lovers, evil witches and miracle-working saints with slight heed to unity or consistency. There were, of course, certain lessons to be learned along the way: one must be courageous, courteous, pious and faithful, but these were lessons incidental to the romantic, picaresque story. Malory selected and condensed the episodes of these romances in order to remind his contemporaries of the necessity for more loyalty and leadership in fifteenth-century society. Bequeathed the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere by the old cult of courtly love, he maintained sympathy for them by stressing their admirable fidelity and their sense of guilt. Whatever his weaknesses, Malory produced the definitive version of the main strands of the legend, and no later author produced anything important on the Arthuriad without staying fairly close to the basic characters and incidents of the Morte Darthur.

Tennyson saw the tragedy of Camelot as a failure of men to aspire to spiritual perfection. A traditionalist who disapproved of the materialism of a utilitarian nineteenth century, Tennyson used the legend to remind his generation that strength of soul was vital to moral evolution. The failure of Arthur's subjects to rise to the king's high moral and ethical level symbolizes the failure of sensual men in every age to work toward perfection. On an allegorical level, the lovers represent the weakness of the
Flesh, and are blamed for the ruin of Camelot; on the literal level, Tennyson found in their relationship grounds for sympathy.

Although the Arthurian poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson are the most unorthodox in their attitude toward Arthur and Camelot, his treatment of the other characters and incidents is perhaps closer to that of Malory than is Tennyson's version. Robinson gives the main figures considerable conversational skill and speculative ability, and lets them analyze their personal problems and the problems of a crumbling system of privilege and aristocracy. He emphasizes the defiant hedonism of Guinevere, the weaknesses of character in Arthur, and the spiritual conflict in Lancelot, who is no longer a Christian knight, but a vague symbol of a man who has a destiny in a new world society. Robinson makes a valuable contribution to the evolution of the legend by minutely examining the psychological processes of the characters, but he fails to probe the more basic problems of good and evil in man and society that are inherent in the Arthuriad.

The popularity of the Arthurian legend is easy to explain. It dramatically describes the rise and fall of a great king and a magnificent kingdom. It has Lancelot, a splendid hero tormented by a single fault. It has a grand and tragic love affair, at the basis of which is the familiar conflict between the conventions of society and the demands of the heart. It contrasts the world of the flesh with the world of the spirit, and worldly aspirations with religious aspirations. It deals with divided loyalties, with honor and passion, with feud and revenge. It possesses, finally, a great variety of character and incident, a vast fund of raw material on which the imagination can work.
All of these elements involve problems that face mankind in every age. It is, therefore, a hasty and erroneous judgment to accuse an author who treats Arthurian themes of attempting to escape from the conflicts of his age, or of retreating from reality to the dim fields of romance. Tennyson was certainly not in retreat, nor was Robinson. Both interpreted the legend in terms of the interests and problems of their own society.

The reader familiar with the rich imagery of Tennyson will perhaps find the homely, matter-of-fact prose of T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* a little bare. This latest treatment of the legend does not provoke the wistful sense of loss, of poignant regret for the passing of an older civilization, that remains with the reader at the close of Tennyson's more romantic idylls. Furthermore, White does not reveal Robinson's ability to intensify and maintain the mood of a character or situation. He compensates, however, by employing a much wider range of mood than does either of these authors. If his simplicity of style lacks the elevation of the blank verse of Tennyson and Robinson, it is a more effective medium for humanizing the characters.

Because the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere bears in some way on most of the major themes of the Arthuriad, it has served as the focal point from which to judge the reactions of a variety of authors, whose attitudes are conditioned by the society in which they live. In such a comparative study, the adultery theme offers sufficient scope for a dissertation.

However, whether Lancelot can serve two masters, whether adultery is sometimes permissible, or whether the lovers are to blame for the fall of Camelot, is not the most fundamental problem of the story. The central mystery of the Arthuriad is the
failure of Arthur's kingdom to endure. One may blame Nemesis, personified in Mordred, or the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, or the loss of Merlin to the wiles of Vivien, but none of these explanations is really satisfactory. King Arthur is a great leader; the kingdom he establishes is characterized by peace, justice, prosperity, and freedom from oppression. What more do men want? Why should the love of Lancelot and Guinevere have the power to corrupt the other knights, to turn them against their king? Why should Mordred be able to gain the support of many members of the Round Table, and of a significant portion of the population? Malory said that the people were "new fangle," but what new political or social philosophy could improve on an established Arthurian ideal of honor, justice and truth? If men are not satisfied with these things, what do they desire?

In the final chapter of *The Once and Future King*, White asks the most vital question of all: Is man perfectible? After all, it is on this assumption that King Arthur always acts. If man is not capable of indefinite improvement, if he does not really desire peace, order and prosperity, then the work of the king is essentially vain. If man is intrinsically evil, or simply an amoral animal in an insensate universe, then there is not much point in attempting to set up high ideals for society. Tennyson assumed that man was capable of perfection; after two world wars, White is not so sure. Perhaps visionaries such as King Arthur are too optimistic about the human race. If man can never reconcile his nature and his ideals, then no real progress is possible, and hopes for peace and goodwill in the world are chimerical.
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