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ARTHURIAN MYTHOLOGY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
T.H. WHITE AND JOHN STEINBECK'S INTERPRETATIONS
OF MALORY'S MORTE DARTHUR

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ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to analyse and evaluate T.H.White's *The Once and Future King* and John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, two novels based on the Arthurian legend, and to investigate their reliance on Malory's *Morte Darthur*. A close critical reading of both texts is provided.

The thesis begins by setting the novels in the context of the body of twentieth-century literature inspired by the Arthurian legend, and notes that both aspire to provide a fresh interpretation of the *Morte Darthur*.

A broad outline of certain themes in the *Morte Darthur* which become central concerns in *The Once and Future King* and *The Acts of King Arthur* is given. A mythopoetic approach to the *Morte Darthur* is used, and it is examined as tragic and elegiac mythology in which archetypal characters appear.

In the treatment of T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, selective use is made of various contextual approaches to literature. In the first volume, *The Sword in the Stone*, the interaction of the work with the genres of comedy and fantasy is examined, and it is concluded that White makes use of both to create a pastoral idyll. It is suggested that the next three volumes, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Candle in the Wind*, demonstrate a progressively tragic vision in which the idealism of the first volume is sorely tried by the relentlessness of fate, and the machinations of human beings. It is indicated that White creates his most successful balance between romantic idealism

and pessimistic realism in *The Ill-Made Knight*. It is also argued that *The Candle in the Wind* fails to maintain the intensity of Malory's tragedy and that *The Book of Merlyn*, the author's alternative ending to the saga, provides a more fitting ending to the entire cycle, although marred by White's bitterness and polemic argument.

John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* is examined in the light of the author's original aims to translate the *Morte Darthur*. It is suggested that the first chapters in which he does this are flat and sometimes laboured in comparison with the original, but that his last two sections, *Gawain, Ewain and Marhalt* and *The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot*, provide a fresh and inventive approach. It is argued that in *The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot*, Steinbeck comes to grips with the drama at the heart of the *Morte Darthur* as he introduces the eternal triangle in which the central characters are situated, and explores the potential for failure, even chaos, within the Round Table itself.

The thesis concludes by drawing parallels between the two works and comparing their respective merits. It is maintained that while Malory's *Morte Darthur* cannot be improved upon, it is transmuted in the hands of White and Steinbeck into rich, lively and thought-provoking novels.

This piece of work is dedicated to my mother, Dinah Rance
Moffett, who always said that one should go to university to
learn the truth.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like many before me, I was enchanted by the tales of Arthur and his knights from early childhood onwards. I first began thinking seriously about the mythic potency of the legend during my first year at UCT, after having heard Prof. John Cumpsty lecture on the topic "A myth is neither true nor false, but dead or alive". A year later, I was fortunate enough to be introduced to the wealth of Arthurian literature by Mrs Ruth Boxall's excellent course on the Arthurian legends. Researching and writing this thesis has been an ideal opportunity to combine my fascination with the strangely perennial power of certain narratives and myths to seize the creative imagination, and my love for the story of Arthur itself.

In preparing this text, I made use of three different editions of Malory: D.S. Brewer's *Malory: The Morte Darthur, Parts Seven and Eight*, Janet Cowan's *Le Morte Darthur by Sir Thomas Malory* and E. Vinaver's *Malory: Works*. I used Brewer as a guideline in referring to Malory's great work as the *Morte Darthur* rather than *Le Morte Darthur*, and in order to regularise spelling, have quoted from either Brewer or Cowan's editions, which make use of modern spelling techniques. It will be noticed, however, that the spelling of the names of certain Arthurian characters differs from chapter to chapter. I have followed Malory's spelling according to D.S. Brewer for the first chapter, and have not altered White and Steinbeck's spelling of

proper names in my second and third chapters respectively. I have also left unchanged sexist and (regrettably, on one occasion) racist language when quoting from the texts, but have attempted to use inclusive language in the body of my thesis.

In researching this thesis, I was struck by the dearth of critical work published on the Arthurian novels of White and Steinbeck. Both warrant a page or two in overviews of the Arthurian legend, and *The Once and Future King* is occasionally briefly referred to in dissertations on fantasy literature. As far as more comprehensive studies go, there is very little material on the subject of White's writings. Apart from a few articles in journals and books, the only major contributions are those of John Crane and Sylvia Townsend Warner. The latter, herself a writer and poet of remarkable ability, produced a sensitive biography on White which included some instructive commentary on his written work. Although I found her book invaluable in preparing my chapter on *The Once and Future King*, it remains primarily a source of biographical rather than critical data. The only critical survey, at present, of White's work as a whole is John Crane's self-confessedly superficial commentary. For my purposes, I found this to be too simplistic to use extensively. In the case of Steinbeck, there was no shortage of critical material on the broad spectrum of his novels. Most of these critical works, however, do not deal with *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, or refer to it only glancingly. Several journal articles on Steinbeck's Arthurian work have appeared, but these have without exception concentrated on the relationship between *The Acts of King Arthur* and Steinbeck's other novels, or have

examined it for evidence of its author's creative processes. These approaches, while interesting, differed from mine to the extent that I could make little use of the information or insights offered.

It should be stated that I make no comprehensive effort to locate the Arthurian novels of White and Steinbeck within the context of the body of their other works. For the purposes of this thesis, their interpretations of Malory are the primary focus of my attention. It will be seen that I devote more space to White's Arthuriana than to Steinbeck's. This is partly dictated by the differing lengths of the novels. White's work consists of five volumes which comprise more than 700 pages in total length, whereas Steinbeck wrote less than half this amount. More significant than the difference in length is the discrepancy between the two texts in terms of revision. Although *The Once and Future King* as it stands omits some of the material White dearly wished to include, he himself prepared it for final publication. Moreover, its constituent volumes had been carefully revised before their earlier publication as separate books. Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* is both unrevised and incomplete. Put together for publication only after his death, it is clear that parts of it require extensive rewriting, if only to bring about consistency. The state of the text then, dictates a more tentative approach; it seems unjust to subject it to rigorous and detailed critical evaluation.

One of the paradoxes of writing a thesis is that while it is ultimately a task for which the writer alone must take responsibility, it also necessitates the involvement of a

supportive network. This thesis thus owes its existence to various individuals and institutions. Chief among the latter is the HSRC, which provided vital financial assistance, as did the University of Cape Town. While marking my gratitude, it must also be said that the opinions expressed and conclusions reached in this thesis are not necessarily those of the HSRC or the University.

Special thanks are due to my supervisor, Ms Lesley Marx, for her meticulous supervision and dedicated involvement. It is thanks to her encouragement and commitment that writing this thesis has been relatively free of traumas. I am also grateful to Dr David Chidester of the Department of Religious Studies, for guiding my reading on the topic of mythology, and for obtaining for me material from America that would otherwise have been inaccessible. Various members of the English Department and of the Department of Religious Studies have provided invaluable advice, moral support and commiseration, and I am grateful to them all. Paul Meyer and Mary Lister of Jagger Library were most helpful both in the early stages of my research and in the last minute rush to find stray references. Helen Laurenson kindly offered to proofread and edit my thesis in its final stages, thus relieving me of an onerous task, and Jane Keen provided much appreciated practical assistance at the eleventh hour. Paul Germond, whom I have found to be a constant source of academic stimulation over several years, deserves special mention for providing companionship, comfort and inspiration during many long hours of study together. I doubt whether this project could have been undertaken without his support, and I value his contribution, both tangible and

intangible, to my thesis.

In producing this thesis, I joined the ranks of those who make use of computers without understanding how they work. As such, I relied heavily on the help of those more knowledgeable than me: Steve de Gruchy, who initially taught me to use a word-processor, Woody Williams, who retrieved my thesis through mysterious electronic processes when I lost three-quarters of my manuscript six weeks before the due date for handing in, and Dr Nick Visser, who provided technical information during the printing stage.

Finally, I must express my indebtedness to Michael, my original preux chevalier, and to the fellowship of Paul and Susan, whose gallantry and courage have made the writing of this thesis more than just an academic exercise.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a quality about Malory's *Morte Darthur* which seizes the imagination. It is a saga of glory, shame, love, pain and anguish, an epic of sweeping broadness of vision, which at the same time charts the frailties and limitations of human nature. It both records and creates an ethos of gallantry and chivalry which has persisted to the present day. Its power and appeal are seemingly evergreen, and the symbolism of its characters continues to strike chords in the modern imagination. Although the text itself has only in the last century been thought worthy of critical investigation and acclaim, its legends have been used continuously since the fifteenth century by writers who found them applicable, even vitally true, to their human experience. Hence the steady flow of both memorable and mediocre literature based on, or inspired by, the *Morte Darthur*.

Popular treatments of the Arthurian legend have burgeoned in the twentieth century. It has been the subject of films, musicals, and even a comic strip. Various scholars have remarked on this phenomenon; the most rigorous examination of literature derived from Arthurian sources in recent times is E. Brewer and R.H. Taylor's *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature since 1800* [1]. This contains possibly the most thorough overview of relevant material, as

1. Cambridge and Totowa, New Jersey: D.S. Brewer and Barnes & Noble, 1983.

well as an exhaustive bibliography. R.H. Thompson, in *Return to Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction* [2], focuses specifically on modern treatments of Arthurian themes, but chooses to deal only with certain works, which he sees as slotting into broad categories. An interesting commentary on the proliferation of Arthurian novels swelling the ranks of pulp literature is provided by Sandra Obergfell in "Popular American Arthuriana: A Cultural Context" [3].

One noteworthy characteristic of much recent literature on the subject has been the tendency to abandon Malory and other medieval Arthuriana as source material, or rather, to try to uncover the historical basis of the legends. Many of the better written novels are set against a realistic and unromantic backdrop of Britain in the fifth century, and make for extremely interesting reading: Marion Bradbury's *The Mists of Avalon* [4] and Mary Stewart's four Arthurian novels [5] (the first three written from Merlin's perspective, and the last from Mordred's) are good examples of carefully researched presentations of Arthur's life and times. However, this kind of approach often sacrifices the nostalgic and mystical aspects of the legend for the sake of historical accuracy. (Rosemary

2. London: Greenwood Press, 1985.

3. *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 27 (1984): 113-9.

4. London: Sphere Books, 1984.

5. *The Crystal Cave* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970); *The Hollow Hills* (1973); *The Last Enchantment* (1979); and *The Wicked Day* (1983).

6. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.

Sutcliffe's *Sword at Sunset* [6] provides an immediate exception to the rule: it combines prosaic historical and realistic detail with the glamour of high ideals, without compromising the sense of tragedy that is intrinsic in the legend.)

Yet it is interesting that two of the most memorable Arthurian works written in the last half-century, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* [7] (written during the years 1936 - 1942) and John Steinbeck's incomplete *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* [8] (worked on intermittently from 1956 -1965) are not only attempts to recreate a world of chivalric medieval idealism, but are based directly on Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Both authors felt that the legends that Malory had transformed into an expression of his times, solace and inspiration for a grievous age, needed to be readdressed to the modern era. Malory's sparse style especially lent itself to their creative and individual responses, because (compared with, for example, Tennyson's lush detail and overt moralising in *The Idylls of the King*), he provides sufficient detail to engage and enthrall, while still leaving plenty of room for the reader to flesh out imaginatively the bones of his terser passages. Neither White nor Steinbeck could resist the temptation to commit to paper their contributions to the sometimes tantalisingly flimsy or bare patches in the *Morte Darthur*. While not concerned with historical realism, they did not relinquish any twentieth-century curiosity in their response to

7. Collins, 1958. London: Fontana, 1982.

8. New York and Toronto: Ballantine Books and Random House, 1977.

the medieval inscrutability of the characters, whom they attempted to round out psychologically and emotionally. Like the Elephant's Child, they ask how and why as they retell Malory's story. Both were aware of the academic debates on technical aspects of the *Morte Darthur*, but considered these to be often distracting or irrelevant to their interpretations. Steinbeck, especially, took pains to investigate every critical work he could find that concerned Malory, and even consulted Eugene Vinaver (one of the leading British experts on Malory during the fifties and sixties), but remarked early on in his work-diary that many of the more abstruse points of discussion acted as diversions from real engagement with the text - certainly for purposes of rewriting [9].

The burning issues raised in the *Morte Darthur* were, for White and Steinbeck, the more personal ones: their fascination with the characters, their recognition and exploration of the contrapuntal moral structure that runs throughout, and their empathy with, and expansion of, the theme of human suffering.

A close study of *The Once and Future King* and *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, including their utilisation and interpretation of Malory, will form the basis of my thesis. As both authors swear allegiance to the *Morte Darthur* as the matrix for their novels, a brief commentary on those aspects of Malory's work(s) which form central concerns in White and Steinbeck's novels, will be useful in providing proper grounding and clarification. This will be the subject of my

9. *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*, Appendix 357.

first chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

The *Morte Darthur* was written under paradoxical circumstances. As the Middle Ages drew to a weary close, an English knight who had written no other known work translated the prevalent medieval French and English Arthurian materials into one monumental, relatively coherent work (or series of works) [1], which immortalised and idealised the ethos of chivalry. A nostalgic celebration of noble and magnanimous ideals, it was supposedly written from prison by a cattle-thief and alleged rapist. (A certain amount of confusion and debate surrounds the identity of Sir Thomas Malory and his reputed authorship of the *Morte Darthur*. There seems to be, however, a solid case for believing Malory to be a Warwickshire knight who was brought to

1. Some might feel that the latter is the correct term: Vinaver certainly did. To discuss whether Malory wrote one book or many is not an aim of this chapter. However, I find the arguments of J.A.W. Bennett (ed.) in *Essays on Malory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Charles Moorman in *The Book of King Arthur: The Unity of Malory's Morte Darthur* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), D.S. Brewer (ed.) in *Malory: The Morte Darthur, Parts Seven and Eight* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968) 20-3, Louis Halle in *The Search for an Eternal Norm* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981) 187-91, R.M. Lumiansky (ed.) in *Malory's Originality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1964), and especially Robert Kelly in his sensitive article "Arthur, Galahad and the Scriptural Pattern in Malory", *The Benedictine Review* 23 (1972): 9-23) convincing. To simplify considerably, they posit that unity of tone, purpose and mythological intention in the *Morte Darthur* buttress unity of structure. See "A Review of Earlier Malory Scholarship with Some Suggestions for Further Study", the first chapter of Elizabeth Pochoda's *Arthurian Propaganda: Le Morte Darthur as an Historical Ideal of Life* (North Carolina: Chapel Hill, 1971) for a brief survey of the critical material on the subject of the structure of the *Morte Darthur*.

trial for raiding and rape, and eventually imprisoned for his political allegiances - no unusual fate for a fighting man during the turbulent Wars of the Roses [2]).

Great literature written in interesting times and under difficult conditions seems to hold a particular attraction, especially for other writers. Teasing out the allure of the **Morte Darthur**, which so fascinated White and Steinbeck, reveals several separate contributing factors.

The Morte Darthur as myth

First of all, it must be said that the **Morte Darthur** can be described as quasi-religious literature [3]. Supporting the grandeur and ambition of the story-line is a complex and convoluted web of divinely or mystically ordained principles and ordinances, sacred laws which define wrong and right: in short, an evolved ethical mythology. The Oxford English Dictionary defines mythology as the exposition, interpretation and symbolic meaning of fables, allegories, parables; also as a body of myths relating to a particular person, or belonging to the religious literature or tradition of a country or people. It also defines myth as a fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions or events, and

2. See P.J.C. Field's "The Last Years of Sir Thomas Malory", **Bulletin of the John Rylands Univ. Library of Manchester** 64/2 (1982): 433-56 for a useful summary of Malory's life and times, as well as a bibliography of the scholarship relevant to this area.

3. For my purposes, the term quasi-religious must be understood in its broadest possible context, as anything outside a particular religious tradition which nevertheless touches on the spiritual evolution, needs and crises of humankind.

embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena. However, the concept of mythology has undergone considerable development in certain disciplines. For the purposes of the study of religion, various typologies of mythology have been created in order to categorise myths according to their content, explanatory and emotional uses, and spiritual intentions. Thus one can have myths of origin, historical myths, ritual myths and so forth. As the study of religious mythology has interacted and combined with other areas of study, a considerable amount of cross-disciplinary blurring and borrowing has taken place, as well as an increasing sophistication of theories. A Jungian definition of mythology, for example, would have to include the theory that myths arise out of the collective unconscious, giving expression to the spiritual yearnings and emotional needs of humanity [4]. Considerable critical interest has been brought to bear on the relationship between literature and mythology, resulting in greater awareness of the mythological functions and content of much writing [5].

I shall work on the assumption that the *Morte Darthur* has status as secular literary mythology. The distinction between

4. See Carl Jung (ed.), *Man and His Symbols* (London: Aldus Books, 1964).

5. This is of necessity a mere glossing over of the subject of the study of mythology, and its relation to literature. See William Righter's exquisitely written *Myth and Literature* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) and Vickery's *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice* (Lincoln: Nebraska U.P., 1969) for some examples of further discussion.

sacred and secular literary mythology is usefully articulated in Northrop Frye's *The Secular Scripture*. In brief, he argues that secular myths in literature deal with the subject of human romance, and that the ideals they express are thus necessarily different from those myths which illustrate eternal verities or philosophical truths [6]. It must be admitted that the *Morte Darthur* may not be a collection of parables, and does not deal primarily with supernatural persons, although Malory describes plenty of supernatural beings and events representing both pagan and Christian traditions - one thinks of the enchantresses, wizards, spells and superstitions that abound, as well as the more specifically Christian prophecies, visions and miracles. There are even saints: the knights who achieve the Grail Quest begin as mortals, but are transformed into heavenly beings. The mythology of the *Morte Darthur*, however, goes beyond mentioning the occasional miracle or enchantress. Deeply rooted in the medieval Christian tradition, it is both pervasively secular (in that, with the possible exception of *The Book of the Sangreall*, its plot reflects essentially romantic interests and formulas) and yet a summation of the spiritual essence, beliefs, and values of the culture and society of Malory's time, as he perceived it. But more than that, it includes the longings, hopes, fears and dreams of its era: all those intangibles that are invested in, and form part of, the spiritual and transcendent experiences of men and women. These values and ideals are infused into the text in

6. *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1976).

various ways; for example, the character of Lancelot becomes a vessel for the concept of sacrificial love, and a symbol of chivalry that still retains its potency today.

The Morte Darthur as tragedy

The mythology of the **Morte Darthur** addresses itself, among other things, very specifically to that particularly fraught area of human experience - suffering. It is a work of great tragic stature, running the gamut from the intimate and personal suffering of individuals to the cataclysmic destruction not only of human life, but also of the civilisation so painstakingly created and nurtured by Arthur. D.S. Brewer remarks: "The **Morte Darthur** tells the story of a tragedy, and if modern definitions of tragedy cannot encompass it, so much the worse for their definitiveness" [7].

A simple narration of the bare outline of the Arthurian legend as told by Malory provides ingredients worthy of a full-blown Greek tragedy: King Uther's lust for Igraine leads to the violent death of her lawful husband, Gorlois, and the precipitate conception of Arthur by magic and trickery. The mystery which shrouds the circumstances of Arthur's birth later leads to his committing unwitting incest with his half-sister, who gives birth to Arthur's illegitimate son Mordred, who is to be the king's bane and eventually his allotted executioner. The incest takes place early in the narration, so for the duration of the lengthy story which follows, the reader knows

7. Ed., Malory: **The Morte Darthur**, Parts Seven and Eight (London: Edward Arnold, 1968) 31.

that the seeds of destruction have been sown and that the whirlwind must be reaped.

Arthur, now established as king of England, marries Guenevere and assembles his company of knights around him. Lancelot, the king's best and most honourable knight and his closest friend, falls deeply in love with Guenevere, who returns his love. As all the members of this ménage à trois like and respect one another, a triangle of particularly poignant dynamics is created; the erring queen and knight assume a burden of perpetual guilt. Moreover, as Guenevere's adultery constitutes treason for which the penalty is death, and since Lancelot's hopeless love for her is the flaw which disqualifies him from achieving the Grail and spiritual peace, their respective fears and regrets make for painful tensions within the relationship itself, as well as its eventually tragic repercussions. Meanwhile, Arthur's knights split into two factions: the Orkneys and their followers (related to Arthur), who are bound together by blood, against the French knights (headed by Lancelot), whose blood-ties and shared nationality are reinforced by chivalric principles of loyalty. Eventually the hatred of Mordred for his father (who tried to destroy him as a baby) and Agravaine's jealousy of Lancelot lead them to plot to expose the adultery of the queen and Lancelot.

From here onwards, one disaster follows the other in a relentlessly tragic progression. Arthur is obliged to sentence his wife to be burnt, and must witness the death of dear friends and kinsmen at the hands of his chief knight. (Lancelot manages to rescue Guenevere, but in the process slays

Gareth - whom he himself knighted.) Following this, Arthur is forced to lay siege to Lancelot's castle. The Pope orders the reconciliation that the three main characters long for, but this is ruined by the rage and desire for revenge of Gawain (Gareth's brother, and the king's nephew.) Arthur is obliged to banish Lancelot and then remove to France to wage unwilling war on him. Here he hears tidings of Mordred's treachery (he has announced that his father is dead, usurped his throne, and declared himself betrothed to the queen); he recrosses the Channel and loses Gawain (his last faithful kinsman) in the battle on landing. He is now forced to lead his men to civil war, and in the final Armageddon-like battle, during which all is laid waste and the fellowship of the Round Table destroyed, he and Mordred slay one another. In the quiet that follows this obliterating destruction, Lancelot and Guenevere's respective deaths come as codas, but are nonetheless moving. This harrowing sequence of events offers the basic details as Malory has them.

If one may make a rather simplistic generalisation, tragedy itself seems to stem from two sources in the classic tragic works of literature: the so-called fatal or tragic flaws within the characters themselves, and the resulting errors they make, or sins they commit; and outside circumstances, fate, fortune and destiny over which the characters have no control. For example (to refer briefly to Shakespeare's canon of tragedy), were it not for Othello's jealousy or Lear's vanity, their tragedies might never have happened. Romeo and Juliet, however, are ultimately victims of the capriciousness of fate;

if Juliet had awakened five minutes earlier from her death-like sleep, Romeo would not have killed himself.

The tragedy of the *Morte Darthur* has its roots in both these sources; the role of circumstance will be discussed below. What is apparent, even from the skeletal story-line described above, is that each of the leading characters has a failing or commits a mortal sin. Lancelot and Guenevere wilfully commit adultery, a sin doubly grave, not to say dangerous, because of Lancelot's sworn oath of fealty to king Arthur, and because of Guenevere's vulnerable and exposed position as queen. Arthur, although sinned against, is not without sin: he has committed incest, and compounds this crime by attempting to murder the resulting offspring. However, like Lear and Othello, Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot all repent bitterly of their sins, and this is essential (at least according to the Aristotelean model) to the moral viability of their tragedy.

Circumstances beyond the control of the characters compound the suffering caused by their failings: as mentioned above, the medieval concept of Fate, or Fortune, plays an important role. The night before the final battle against Mordred, Arthur dreams of being tossed by the wheel of fortune from the richest heights to the foulest depths, an obvious metaphor for his situation. There is a sense of inexorability, of loss of control, especially towards the end of the *Morte Darthur*. This is clearly demonstrated when Guenevere is returned to court: thanks to the Pope's demand for reconciliation, there is a fragile chance of peace. But Lancelot, in rescuing the queen, has accidentally killed Gareth and Gaheris, his fellow-knights,

Gawain's brothers and Arthur's nephews. The slaying of Gareth is a poignant "if only", as Lancelot, who gave Gareth his patronage, was bound in a close relationship of protection, love and loyalty with the younger knight. Worse still, he knows that it will incur Gawain's implacable hatred. Gawain demands revenge, and Arthur is obliged to support his only remaining loyal kinsman. At this stage, neither Arthur nor Lancelot has the slightest desire for conflict; yet both are trapped within an unalterable pattern of revenge. Arthur in particular seems impotent as he is drawn along in the wake of Gawain's towering rage and grief.

The final twist of fate comes in the shape of an adder (a familiar symbol of evil in the Christian tradition) which causes a knight to draw his sword to kill it, thus setting in motion the fateful battle at Salisbury - Arthur's day of destiny in which he finally meets his nemesis at the hands of Mordred.

The Morte Darthur as elegy

The elegiac characteristics of the Morte Darthur are less obvious than its tragic ones, as it describes the collapse of Arthur's civilisation in a slow downward spiral, and gives comparatively little attention to the ascension of hope and comfort from the ashes - a primary function of the elegiac genre. According to Peter Knox-Shaw, "...the ascent from death is the concern of the elegy. While it begins in lament the

8. "The Novel as Elegy", *English Studies in Africa* (1986) 32.

elegy ends by offering consolation" [8]. However, this movement from grief to renewal does feature right at the end of the work; for example, the magical dispatching of Arthur's sword, after which he is borne away by four enchantress-queens, creates a sense of wonder and mystery about Arthur's death which hints at the faint possibility of his being restored; even, perhaps, that he is immortal. This is reinforced by the cryptic words on his tombstone: "HERE LIES ARTHUR, ONCE AND FUTURE KING". This has given rise to the legend that Arthur is sleeping somewhere concealed, and will rise again should England one day be in need - a patriotic resurrection.

Elegiac expressions of loss often merge with mythology, as they give expression to the rites of passage into death, reflecting the need for personal and individual grief to be translated into archetypal and universal terms. Separate incidents of mourning form a small but memorable part of the text of the *Morte Darthur*. In contrast to the sense of shocked awe one feels on witnessing the devastation of an entire society, the scenes of personal grieving for the loss of beloved individuals are intimately presented, and are frequently the most moving. They are often characterised by piercing regrets; as Guenevere mourns her husband when she finally renounces Lancelot, and as the latter weeps on the grave of his former king and queen, both are consumed with contrition for their part in their loved ones' downfall. Arguably the most beautiful and well-known articulation of grief is Sir Ector's threnody over Lancelot's grave - words that have been borrowed to express loss down through the centuries, and which were even used by American

historians to eulogise President John F. Kennedy after his assassination [9].

However, perhaps it can be said that the *Morte Darthur's* elegiac qualities are better represented by its tone than by its content. An elegy not only for what was lost, but also for what never was, it is a pervasively nostalgic look at the failed potential of the passing Middle Ages, and the reluctant relinquishing of the increasingly invalid medieval vision. Malory describes the Middle Ages, chivalry and royalty as they should have been, rather than as they were. It is a common tendency to invest the near past with glamour when the present is brutal, sordid and unsettled; and the vagaries and the insecurities of living and fighting during the Wars of the Roses no doubt lent a sense of wishful thinking, and shining of tarnished armour to much of the *Morte Darthur*. Although it too ends in civil war, at least its characters and their doings are for the most part glorious; moreover, the civil war which blots out the Arthurian civilisation destroys not only good, but evil. It cleanses, and provides the possibility of a fresh start. It acknowledges the inevitability of conflagration, but holds out a promise of peace, a peace that must have been longed for by English men and women, weary not only of a century of war, but of the waning Middle Ages.

9. See William Manchester's *One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983) i. It is a fascinating coincidence that John Steinbeck quoted the same threnody in a letter of consolation to the slain President's widow. See John Fraser's *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 13.

The Morte Darthur - the moral system

Both the elegiac and tragic aspects of the Morte Darthur are derived largely from the complex, yet clearly defined moral system on which it is based, which dictates the punishment of evil and the rewarding of good. Such moral laws which govern the world and the people therein are implicit in an evolved mythology. What is noteworthy in Malory is the inescapable nature of these laws. The breaking of the incest taboo, for example, is always punishable by death, regardless of the circumstances. Thus Arthur's innocence of his half-sister's parentage when he conceives Mordred upon her cannot protect him from the consequences of his sin. From this moment, Arthur is under sentence of death, and his misbegotten son is ordained to be his slayer. That Arthur afterwards realises these fatal implications is demonstrated by his reprehensible (and unsuccessful) attempt to destroy the fruit of his sin by drowning the infants of the realm. The enactment of Arthur's execution is choreographed by the intangible, yet implacable forces of destiny or fate, rather than by a human system of justice, such as deals with Guenevere's adultery. It is demonstrated that while the punishment meted out by men can be evaded (Guenevere is rescued from the stake and is eventually even briefly restored as queen), the inflexible justice dealt out by the God of medieval times can only be delayed. Not even the inviolable and sanctified nature of kingship, which made it treasonable to accuse a king of crime as if he were an ordinary mortal, can shelter Arthur. Royal or not, he cannot be exempted from the dire consequences of his flouting of the ancient law

claimed by the Church to be instituted by the King of Heaven. Mordred's escape from the slaughter of the innocents, more than anything else, underwrites the folly of attempting to divert the course of destiny. It is to Arthur's credit that he does not again try to alter the fate that is his.

Incest, the venerable taboo dating from the earliest pagan religions, is not the only unforgiveable sin: plotted patricide and the more modern evils of treason and regicide are seen as sufficiently heinous to warrant inescapable punishment by death. Adultery has an uneasy position; while not automatically punishable by death (Guenevere is sentenced to death because her adultery is considered a treasonable offence against the king), it violates the moral bounds of society so severely that it endangers the proper functioning of that society. The adultery of Lancelot and Guenevere, which is constantly portrayed as damaging and threatening not only to the unhappy individuals concerned, but also to the fabric of relationships around them, is eventually one of the causal factors that brings Arthur's court to collapse. However, it would appear that earnest repentance and renunciation of sin could ensure that the errant parties lived to a ripe old age!

This implies that the moral structure which governs the **Morte Darthur** allows for a hierarchy of sin, as well as for redeeming qualities which may remove or soften the punishment allotted to a wrongdoer. These valuable or good attributes (such as Arthur's sense of justice, Lancelot's courtesy, courage and loyalty, and Guenevere's love, as well as the generosity with which they all forgive one other and shoulder responsibility

for their sins) combined with the crucial elements of repentance and magnanimity, can occasionally invite mercy - or at least a temporary withholding of punishment.

The moral laws which permeate the work are further highlighted by the scriptural patterns which can be traced throughout. A society accustomed to the domination of the Church over most aspects of everyday life would easily have identified Biblical motifs and parallels in the doings of Arthur and his knights. To begin with, the ancient curse that the sins of the fathers would be visited on future generations, is one of the chief dynamics of the *Morte Darthur*. There are obvious parallels between King Uther and King David of the Old Testament. Both covet the wives of their commanders and resort to murder in one case and open warfare in another to satisfy their lust, thus setting in motion inescapable chains of reaction with dire results. By the same token, Arthur himself shares easily recognised characteristics with King David, King Solomon and, on a darker note, King Herod. He emulates the latter in arranging the death of the infants, but nevertheless builds up a rich and stable kingdom, like David and Solomon, who respectively founded and developed a flourishing society. There are even similarities between Merlin and the prophet Samuel: both give their kings political counsel and military advice, pronounce God's wrath and predict divine retribution. Moreover, both Lancelot and Galahad can be understood as messianic figures, although both fail to deliver the Arthurian society from its travails. Lancelot is unable to overcome his own humanity, and hence hastens the coming of the nemesis of

Camelot, while Galahad, having achieved the highest spiritual goals in the Grail Quest, ascends into heaven, abandoning earth to its fate.

The place of innocence in Malory's architectural complex of moral governances is an interesting one. As has already been demonstrated, it carries no guarantee of protection; rather, it makes one frighteningly vulnerable. Both Gareth and Elaine of Astolat, though morally blameless, become victims caught up in a maelstrom of love and hatred beyond their control. Theirs are the pathetic, senseless deaths that often result when larger forces and passions enter into conflict. It would seem that only acute perception in combination with foreknowledge vouchsafed in the form of visions, prophecies and the like, allied with strict purity (in Galahad's case, amounting practically to isolation from the influence of fallen humankind), can ensure moral blamelessness and personal inviolability.

It can be concluded that the code of laws and principles in the **Morte Darthur**, further complicated by the rules and regulations of chivalry, provides a strictly ordered system within which the sufferings of its characters are set in motion, channelled and governed. Transgression means punishment and therefore pain; but the structure allows for redemption and healing.

The Morte Darthur - its characters

Finally, what of the characters upon whom these laws are enacted, and who form the dramatis personae of the Arthurian tragedy? How sympathetically does Malory treat the legendary

figures with whom he is dealing? His contribution is to people the *Morte Darthur* with memorable characters, many of whom are unmistakably human and accessible, yet possessed of powerful symbolic auras, and resonant with evocative regal and chivalric qualities. Yet this is not necessarily the first impression one receives of Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere. They are without doubt medieval figures, and in the words of Barbara Tuchman, "People of the Middle Ages existed under mental, moral and physical circumstances so different from our own as to constitute almost a foreign civilisation" [10]. The power of Malory's characterisation, however, overcomes the distance of five hundred years. Today one perceives his characters in a kind of double vision, overlaid as they are with centuries of accumulated associations - romantic, nationalistic, magical and so forth. Few other sets of characters have exerted so strong a pull on the imagination. People still ask whether Camelot and all its inhabitants existed, and are peculiarly disappointed to find its position in history so tenuous. Certain of the *Morte Darthur's* figures possess such symbolic potential and richness that it is with regret, perhaps even with a sense of personal loss, that one consigns them to the realms of fiction. Yet the fiction continues to sustain us, where historical reality seldom does.

The creative tension between the archetypal status and the humanity of the characters is reflected in the virile mythology that results. Those who are godlike and yet at the mercy of

10. *A Distant Mirror* (London: Macmillan, 1979) xiv.

the gods have always fascinated those conscious of their own mortality. However, the disparity between the human fallibility and the exalted positions held by at least the major protagonists of the *Morte Darthur* becomes more often than not a source of distress and friction for them. It has already been seen that Guenevere's adultery, which would have resulted in disgrace and divorce had she been an ordinary woman, becomes a crime punishable by death because of her status as queen of all England. Arthur's position is even less enviable: as the architect and enforcer of justice in his realm, it is his unavoidable duty as king both to sentence to death and watch the aborted execution of his wife, and later to banish his dearest friend and best knight to France, and follow him to wage unwilling war on him. Lancelot also suffers from the tension between the expectations placed on him as the greatest knight in the kingdom, and his painful self-knowledge and shame at his failings. His relief at being spared the humiliation of demonstrating his inadequacy and guilt, in the scene where he heals Sir Urry is expressed in a flood of tears.

The above trio of characters is at the centre of the *Morte Darthur* and is especially satisfactorily treated by the author. Sometimes they appear inscrutable, in keeping with the lofty roles that are theirs; at other times, they are presented with appealing subtlety. They are surrounded by a wide range of characters whose development runs the gamut from cardboard saints with an abundance of good works and a shortage of personality (for example, Galahad, and Percival's sister - who does not even have a name conferred on her) to thoroughgoing,

dyed-in-the-wool villains (such as Agravaine and Mordred). One can arrange Malory's characters into certain categories corresponding with their standing in the structured maze of moral laws mentioned earlier: there are the punishing and the punished - such as Mordred; the punished, punishing and redeemed - Arthur and Gawain; the punished and redeemed - Guenevere; the punished, redeemed and redeeming - Lancelot; and the redeemed and the redeeming - of which Galahad is possibly the best example. It is the characters at the extreme ends of this spectrum who tend to be two-dimensional; obviously, personifications of virtue and evil do not succeed as engaging characters.

However, those beleaguered characters whose efforts to lead lives of normal decency are sabotaged not only by events and forces dictated by fate or fortune, but also by their own faults and quirks, are the ones who capture the imagination. Arthur, Lancelot, Guenevere and, to a lesser extent, Gawain [11], are presented as constantly developing, rather than static figures. As they grow and suffer, their strengths and weaknesses are consistently presented, and this underlines their humanity. For example, one knows that Lancelot struggles to maintain a life of purity and blamelessness by always attempting to do the good and right thing; yet with respect to committing adultery with his best friend and liege lord's wife, he will always fail. It is this fallibility that makes him

11. I am of necessity omitting characters such as Balin, Gareth, Tristram and Isolde, and the chief Grail knights, to whom Malory devotes a great deal of time and material.

accessible to the reader; yet it is combined with a quality of trustworthiness that holds one's admiration. There is no likelihood of his being unfaithful to Guenevere except by trickery, unlike Tristram, who in a similar situation has no qualms about his absent-minded affairs with women other than his beloved. Moreover, Malory has welded his central characters together with strong bonds of love and blood-kinship. It is the mutual love between Arthur, his wife and his best friend that makes their situation so poignant. Guenevere and Arthur have real affection for one another, and it is clear that Lancelot genuinely and hopelessly loves both his king and his queen. If he could relinquish his love for one of them, the tragedy inherent in his situation would dissipate; yet if he foreswore his allegiance to and friendship with Arthur, he would no longer command respect, and if he nobly set Guenevere aside, he would seem irritatingly cold and righteous. Instead, he never ceases to love either, not even after their deaths, and it is the generosity of this dogged and heart-splitting loyalty that gives Lancelot such enduring appeal.

Thus it can be seen that those who enact the drama of the **Morte Darthur** and so enter into the realm of myth are flesh and blood, capable of intense passions and human foibles. At the same time they have the faculty to be invested with the imaginative projections of their audiences and cloaked with their dreams.

As pointed out in the introduction, White and Steinbeck were determined to add their own personal dimension to Malory's

characters, to elucidate the maze of ethical ideals that permeate the *Morte Darthur*, and to recreate its sense of tragic power. In my next chapter I shall provide a detailed analysis of T.H. White's interpretation of Malory, and in my third chapter, I shall move on to discuss Steinbeck's unfinished Arthurian work derived from the *Morte Darthur*.

CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCTION

In dealing with T.H. White's Arthurian writings, one encounters a technical problem: there is no final, satisfactorily unified and consistent version of White's work. He himself wanted a five-volume edition of the *The Once and Future King*. Although his original ending of the epic was contained in the fourth book in the series, *The Candle in the Wind*, he decided to alter this, and add a fifth volume (*The Book of Merlyn*) which would provide a more developed finale, and round out the structure of the entire work. Unfortunately, his publishers quite legitimately refused to publish such a lengthy work under war-time conditions, and were rather disparaging about the merits of the project [1]. After an increasingly heated correspondence on the subject, the embittered White (who further complicated the issue by insisting that he could do no final alterations to the text until he received the galley proofs) changed publishers; but the restrictions imposed by the war prevailed, and by now White had lost the impetus of his earlier enthusiasm. The five-volume project was waived, and it was not until more than a decade later that the author was made an offer for an omnibus version of *The Once and Future King* - but revised and in four volumes only. White's subsequent revision was diligent, but half-hearted, and the first volume,

1. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T.H. White: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape and Chatto & Windus, 1967), 186-90.

The Sword in the Stone, suffers the most by it. The author inserts the magic metamorphoses of Arthur into the communities of wild geese and ants (integral parts of his final effort, The Book of Merlyn) into the first book. Here they stand uneasily alongside the original transformations into animals effected by Merlyn. The additions have a seriousness and didactic weightiness inappropriate to the light-hearted and joyous tone of The Sword in the Stone. What is more, perhaps to shorten the first volume, and perhaps to smooth out some of the resulting unevenness of tone, White omits some of the (arguably) most enjoyable parts of the original, and alters others. The exciting escapade at Madame Mim's cottage falls by the way, and with it the first intimations of the Wart's royalty, as well as a demonstration of the courage, clear thinking, and self-sacrifice that will one day make him a good leader [2]. Also, the beautifully written passage describing the Wart's visit as an owl to Athene is replaced by the visit to the wild geese, thus omitting the dream-vision of the stones, which ends in the tragic murder of Abel by Cain - a precursor of the fate that is one day to overtake Arthur and his reign, a reign which is to end in civil war, with father and son slaying one another. For purposes of my discussion, I have decided to use as a text the following: the original version of The Sword in the Stone, the second, third and fourth books of The Once and Future King, namely The Queen of Air and Darkness, The Ill-Made Knight, and The Candle in the Wind; and the posthumously and

2. The Sword in the Stone (Collins, 1938. London: Fontana, 1971) 75+

separately published fifth volume, **The Book of Merlyn**. This is not to suggest that this text, or combination of texts, is ideal; but it nevertheless comes close to the author's original design. Although one is still left with the awkward problem of the two different endings in the fourth and fifth volumes, these may be profitably compared.

The next important consideration to bear in mind when dealing with **The Once and Future King**, is the historical context and personal background against which it was written. A certain amount of biographical detail about the author, judiciously used, may also provide enlightenment, given the assumption that the text cannot be severed from its author and the

3. David Daiches' **Critical Approaches to Literature** (London: Longman, 1956) 321-93, and Northrop Frye's **The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism** (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1973) provide some examples of this argument. (The latter work is especially useful in that it warns the reader of the pitfalls and abuses to which this approach is open.) Recent critical works on both Malory and modern manifestations of the Arthurian legend are often written from the viewpoint that the text cannot be divorced from its context, and either endorse or criticise the social, cultural, economic and political milieu from which it arises. Examples are Pochoda's **Arthurian Propaganda**, which discusses the political implications and messages inherent in Malory, Stephen Knight's **Arthurian Literature in Society**, (London: Macmillan, 1983), which claims that "The Arthurian legend ... is about power in the real world: the texts are potent ideological documents through which both the fears and the hopes of the dominant class are realised" (xiv), and R.H. Thompson's **Return from Avalon: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in Modern Fiction**, which leans heavily on categories derived from the study of fantasy literature. Myth criticism goes a step further, and explores the spiritual context or need out of which literature arises, as well as examining the text itself for archetypal mythical features. Its exponents argue that while acknowledging the importance of the cultural and socio-political matrix of a text, it takes a more over-arching view than the approaches of those committed to a sociological, psychological, Marxist, feminist or humanist standpoint (see Vickery's introduction to **Myth and Literature** and also Righter's **Myth and Literature**, in particular 87-8).

circumstances under which it was written [3].

T.H. White was a passionate, enthusiastic, eccentric and lonely figure. Alienated from his father in his teens, and hampered by a capricious and unhealthily smothering mother he first adored, then grew to loathe, he had no other family of his own. A series of pets were for the most part of his life the sole recipients of his lavish and frustrated affection. Homosexual by inclination, with a proclivity for sadism, he was also perpetually engaged in fighting off incipient alcoholism. It is perhaps not surprising that most of his life was marked by unhappiness and regrets. Yet he was never incapacitated by misery; rather, he drove himself from project to escapade to plan in an attempt to find peace of mind, and wholesome occupation. In a lecture delivered in America in the last year of his life, he expanded on his favourite dictum - one he had put into Merlyn's mouth in *The Sword in the Stone* - "The best thing for being sad ... is to learn something" [4]. Detailing a long list of painstakingly learnt accomplishments (from mixing concrete to falconry to translating medieval bestiaries) he revealed the source of many of the exuberant and learned asides in *The Once and Future King* - asides on subjects as diverse as diving suits, heraldry, archery and medieval cuisine. The headlong pursuit of knowledge was for him clearly the best prescription for a troubled mind.

Malory was one of several of White's abiding passions, and one might somewhat fancifully draw a comparison between the two

4. Warner 9.

writers: both fallible, with a strong sense of sin, both imprisoned (one literally, one figuratively) on account of their rather sordid histories, both with a fascination that was sometimes wistful, sometimes fanatical, for the high ideals, the glamour and the gallantry symbolised in the Arthurian legends. White first encountered the *Morte Darthur* when taking his Tripos at Cambridge, on which occasion he submitted a facetious essay on Malory. The examiners were unimpressed, and it was not until ten years later that White idly leafed through the *Morte Darthur* again - and was transfixed. In a letter to a former tutor, he wrote: "...I was thrilled and astonished to find (a) that the thing was a perfect tragedy, with a beginning, a middle and an end implicit in the beginning, and (b) that the characters were real people with recognisable reactions which could be forecast. Anyhow, I have started writing a book" [5].

Writing a book inspired by the *Morte Darthur* was to become more than a project fuelled by enthusiasm and interest. It was 1938, and the first ominous rumblings of impending war were beginning to be discerned even in the quiet rural backwater in which White had secreted himself. Rewriting Malory was to become inextricably tied up in White's search for an appropriate reaction to the hideousness of war. According to Sylvia Townsend Warner, he had all the revulsion for conflict of the generation that had grown up under the shadow of the Great War: "War was a ruinous dementia. It silenced law, it

5. Warner 98.

killed poets, it exalted the proud, filled the greedy with good things, and oppressed the humble and meek; no good could come of it, it was hopelessly out of date" [6]. For the next six years, White was to struggle with the moral dilemma of how to respond to the war with Germany. His diaries and letters show him wavering from one stance to the next: to conscientiously object, to flee, to find useful non-combatant work, to enlist against the menace of Hitler; he even contemplated entering the Church and so withdrawing from the world. From the beginning, however, he felt that his work on the *Morte Darthur* was of primary importance. In a letter to Sydney Cockerell, five months before England was officially at war, he announced: "I have made up my mind about this war at last. I am not going to fight.... You Anglo-Normans can do as you please, but I am a Bard, and ... my person is inviolable. Seriously, I shall refuse to fight or run. My most important business is to finish my version of Malory, and so I shall tell any tribunal which sits on me. I cannot finish it if dead; I am the only person who can finish it. I have been at it unconsciously ever since I was at Cambridge, when I wrote a thesis on Malory; anybody can throw bombs" [7].

However, this was just the first of many "final" decisions. He did run; or rather, he stayed in Ireland, where a period of relaxation became a long exile. The question of war remained a torment; at regular intervals he drew up balance sheets

6. Warner, Prologue to *The Book of Merlyn* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977) 15.

7. Warner 123.

detailing the pros and cons of fighting. His work on the **Morte Darthur** had become centred on the problem of the right use of Might, and as White was plagued by doubts and shifts of thinking, so Arthur agonises over the rights and wrongs of the use of force. At the beginning of **The Queen of Air and Darkness**, Arthur, Merlyn, Ector and Kay earnestly debate the issue, in what must have been a reflection of the debate in White's mind. Every angle of the problem is given a good airing. Yet there is still a sense of intellectual naivety, a belief that the tool of reason is an adequate one. The moral issues seem fairly simple, and Merlyn's teachings on the subject are clear: "Any reasoning man ... who keeps a steady mind, can tell which ^{side} is the aggressor in ninety wars out of a hundred.... He can see which side began to make the threat of force or was the first to arm itself. And finally he can often put his finger on the one who struck the first blow ... in those wars...it might be the duty of decent men to fight the criminal. If you aren't sure ^{that} he is the criminal - and you must sum it up ^{with} every ounce of fairness you can muster - then go and be a pacifist by all means" [8].

War was not fun, but it was necessary. This simplified version of the just war theory was eventually to undermine White's security; in the meantime, adhering to it destroys Arthur's peace. Fairly early on in the narrative, Arthur briefly considers abdicating to prevent the impending battle, and Kay

8. **The Once and Future King** (hereafter referred to as **TOAFK**) 230.

abolition of war from animals?... To most other animals our warfare would seem much more deplorable than civil war seems to us" [12]. He then went on to prove, in his new book, that nothing was more hideous, senseless and insane than war. The descriptions of Arthur's experiences with the ants and the wild geese reek of White's voluble and righteous pacifism [13]. Unfortunately, having exhausted his indignation at the ludicrous and criminal nature of war, he is left with the problem of bringing Malory's epic - which ends in cataclysmic, but cleansing civil war - to a dignified close. He can only do this by rescinding; in Chapter 18 of *The Book of Merlyn*, Arthur gazes over his sleeping kingdom, and contemplates the blind honour and gallantry of the thousands of young men, "martyrs, ... who had gone out even in the first joy of marriage ... who had gone although they hated it" [14], who marched off to die for what they believed was right. Thus, although Arthur returns to battle determined to make peace, his failure to do so is not an ignoble one. With characteristic agility of mind, White has convinced himself that the final conflict is unavoidable, that evil must be expurgated and its challenge faced - in the hope that the inherent goodness in human nature will assert itself, that future generations might learn from the past, and that the values of truth and idealism might

12. Warner 176-7.

13. Examples are legion: see, for instance, *The Book of Merlyn* (hereafter referred to as TBOM) 63-6, 71-2, 98-100 (in which the usual human justifications for war, aped by the ant community, are savagely lampooned), 107-8, 123-4, 168. For further discussion of this point, see 123-4 below.

14. TBOM 155.

prevail.

The last three chapters of *The Book of Merlyn* are a fitting tribute to Malory. White returns to a close following of the narrative of the *Morte Darthur*, and creates his most moving effect in the process. The battle at Salisbury is shown to be inevitable and tragic, rather than ugly and senseless. The author, having no taste for a close description of the clash (the earlier verve with which he described the battle of Bedegraine having quite gone), circumvents it, providing only a glimpse of Arthur vainly trying to stem the tide of Might with his bare hands. Thus none of the solemnity, cathartic power and mysterious aura of the original is tampered with or degraded. The truth seems to be that no amount of reworking can equal, let alone improve Malory's last book, a problem that John Steinbeck was more fully aware of than White [15]. Malory's descriptions of Guenever on her death-bed, turning her face to the wall to avoid the temptation of one last look at her lover, the awe-inspiring rituals surrounding Arthur's death in the hush that follows the battle and Lancelot weeping on the grave of his former king and queen ("...my sorrow ... is not for any rejoicing of sin, but my sorrow may never have end ... when I remember me how by my default, my orgule and my pride that they were both laid full low ... this remembered, of their kindness and mine unkindness, sank so to mine heart that I might not sustain myself" [16]), cannot usually be enlarged on

15. See 173 below.

16. Malory: *The Morte Darthur, Parts Seven and Eight*, ed. D.S. Brewer (London: Edward Arnold, 1968) 155.

or rewritten without detriment. Part of the problem seems to be their reflection of the medieval milieu, which did not demand rational explanations or psychological scrutiny - hence the mystique of these passages in modern terms. It is the element of mystery that invites elucidation, but which is destroyed by the same.

Unfortunately, by keeping faith with the spirit of Malory, White was condemning himself to a course of action he shrank from: on completing his fifth volume, he wrote "...I am returning to England to join the war. I suppose I had to find good reasons against the war, while I was finishing my book. But the book itself, particularly Book 5, Chapter 18, is my reason for going back. If you write that and believe it, you must back it up by going." In a more self-pitying vein, he complained to David Garnett: "...Naturally I don't want to leave here in order to be starved or blown up. But unfortunately I have written an epic about war, one of whose morals is that Hitler is the kind of chap one has to stop. I believe in my book, and, in order to give it a fair start in life, I must show that I am ready to practise what I preach" [17]. Ironically enough, having steeled himself to join the war-effort, he could not penetrate the plethora of red tape and regulations that surrounded service in the Forces. He was too old and unhealthy for conscription, did not have enough flying experience to become a pilot, and was considered by the RAF as having "insufficient qualifications" for membership in their

17. Warner 183-5.

reserve. Half-relieved, half-disappointed, White was obliged to wait out the duration in Ireland, an uneasy and unsettled spectator of England's bitter conflict. Having just had his magnum opus rejected by his publishers, he was not even able to indulge in the cold comfort of having had the courage of the convictions of his book.

This, then, was the history of the writing of *The Once and Future King*. The mythology of the *Morte Darthur* provided White with irresistible analogies for the troubled days in which he lived. More than this, it provided a method for coping with his own guilt and confusion. Its high ideals (especially those of Lancelot) on the vexed question of violence provided both comfort and inspiration; and at first, as has been noted, White felt that the transmitting of those ideals was the most valuable contribution towards the war effort he could make.

However, although White has Arthur recognising the incongruity of fighting force with force, it is not certain that he himself fully realised the contradictions inherent in changing the *Morte Darthur*, with its tenor of almost casual violence (especially in the earlier tales) and its minute recounting of every blow struck, into a manual of pacifism. Its two heroes are a king and a knight, among whose respective functions in life are waging war and fighting in tournaments, duels and single combat. Even Guenever, when she first makes an appearance in Malory, takes an enthusiastic interest in violent matters, visiting battlefields, admiring the evidence of victory (large numbers of the slain enemy) and praising knights for deeds of physical prowess and valour.

Nevertheless, although there is no indication in the **Morte Darthur** that Malory was sickened and enraged by the use of force the way White was; there is no doubt that the former recognised the tragic impulse in violence: in its very inevitability lay its tragedy. It was this theme that White fastened onto with such desperate conviction, that he believed could be fashioned into an eloquent plea for sanity as Europe spiralled towards the brink of war. Surely the telling of the tragedy of war by a fifteenth-century, English, experienced professional soldier had relevance and meaning for Britons of the twentieth century; surely King Arthur could be made to arise from the pages of literature to advise England, in her hour of need, of the values of peace.

However, the logistics of resurrecting Arthur by transmuting the **Morte Darthur** into a form easily assimilated by the modern reader were not simple. The most obvious obstacle was the sheer bulk of Malory's work. To transcribe the entire work, explore its issues and add authorial detail and original touches of colour, was clearly impractical. Yet White had committed himself to not tampering with the spirit of the original. Editing of some kind was clearly necessary, and the first step was to either compress or omit the tournaments and battles, described with journalistic ease by Malory, yet tedious for a modern reader with no interest in medieval warfare. White recognised this, and likened Malory's careful notation of who struck whom, when, where and how, to the

present-day reporting of a cricket-match [18]. But even without the tournaments, it was still not possible to use all of Malory's material. White was therefore obliged to be selective in choosing what to use, and throughout *The Once and Future King* one is aware of the broader and more convoluted tapestry of the *Morte Darthur* behind and beneath it. Should one be in danger of forgetting this, White refers to the tutelage of his guide, either quoting directly from Malory, or acknowledging him as his source: "If people want to read about the Corbin tournament, Malory has it....There is no need to give a long description of the tourney. Malory gives it....If you want to read about the beginning of the Quest for the Grail ...and of the last supper at court, when the thunder came and the sunbeam and the covered vessel and the sweet smell through the Great Hall - if you want to read about these, you must seek them in Malory. That way of telling the story can only be done once" [19]. What is interesting is that Malory makes use of the same device in narration, repeatedly writing "As the French book maketh mention ... as the French book sayeth", thereby giving White a respectable precedent to follow [20].

Having established the reliance of his book on the broader base of Malory's, the author can relegate entire sections (such as *The Tale of Sir Gareth* and *The Book of Sir Tristram*) backstage, thereby focusing the attention on the famous trio at Camelot -

19. TOAFK 486, 346, 432.

20. Malory cites the "French book" as his source seventy times; see P.J.C. Field's *Romance and Chronicle: A Study of Malory's Prose Style* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1971) 145.

Arthur, Guenever and Lancelot. Occasional references to the adventures of Gareth, Tristram and others are made in flashback fashion, and are seen through the eyes of the central figures. They are important only in that they shed light on the personalities of the main characters; for example, the story of Gareth's arrival at court underlines Lancelot's kindness and generosity ("It has come to be ^{quite} a legend how [Gareth] arrived at court anonymously ... and how you were the only person who was decent to him..." [21]) and the discussion between the king and his best friend about whether Tristram behaved like a buffoon or a cad in his affair with Isolde illustrates Lancelot's idealisation of sexual fidelity and Arthur's compassionate understanding of infidelity [22].

This telescoping of Malory's material is best made use of in White's account of the Grail legends. Instead of following each knight on his quest, he has them explain their understanding of their Grail experiences on their return to court. This gives one access to a double insight: one shares the insight (or lack of it) of different characters, as well as the eager and anxious reactions of the listeners, Arthur and Guenever, who are respectively awaiting confirmation of their own visions and fears. Moreover, this method of presentation acquaints us with the chief Grail legends at the same time as providing a searching study of the different Grail knights - the choleric Gawain, the irritatingly righteous Galahad, the

21. TOAFK 423.

22. TOAFK 494.

endearingly naive blunderer Percival, the striving Bors and, most sensitively dealt with, the tortured Lancelot. Here White is at his most adroit; he combines skilled characterization with clever use of the ingredients provided by Malory, to create a penetrating, while delicate, interpretation of the legends describing Lancelot's encounters with God while on his sacramental quest.

White did not allow his selective use of Malory's material to repress his own creative responses to the text. Although he omits or docks substantial parts of the *Morte Darthur*, his novel also includes much of his own inventive material, as can be seen in the first volume of *The Once and Future King*.

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

As much as White juggled with the different components of Malory's lengthy narrative, he claimed to make no alien additions to it. However, he was nothing if not innovative, and his biggest structural contribution to the bones of the *Morte Darthur* was to insert the childhood of Arthur. In Malory, the bare facts of the adoption of the unknown princeling by Sir Ector are given, together with the story of Arthur's successful attempt to remove the sword from the stone, thereby proving himself to be the heir to the throne of England.

The joyously funny and fantastic first volume that White contrives to weave from these scanty details, *The Sword in the Stone*, immediately raises questions about the genre of *The Once and Future King*. The introduction of magic as a modus operandi for the education of the young king seems to be a factor that contributes towards the tendency among literary critics to categorise the entire work as a fantasy. Kathryn Hume in *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Beverley Taylor and Elizabeth Brewer in *The Return of King Arthur*, R.H. Thompson in *The Return to Avalon* [23] and Rosemary Jackson in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* are some who have done so, although all except the latter recognise that realism is blended into, and even dominates the fantasy devices. Rosemary Jackson, however,

23. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984) 165; Taylor and Brewer 291; Thompson 126+. Others who have enlarged on this topic are J.K. Crane in "T.H. White: The Fantasy of the Here and Now" *Mosaic* 10/2 (1977): 33-46, and C.N. Manlove in *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 67-83.

uncompromisingly names it a fantasy - one, moreover, that she consistently categorises with works by deliberate writers of "pure" fantasy: "...those romantic fictions produced by Lewis, Tolkien, T.H. White and other modern fabulists, all of whom look back to a lost moral and social hierarchy, which their fantasies attempt to recapture and revivify... romances of integration by Le Guin, Lewis, White, etc..." and more harshly, "C.S. Lewis' Perelandra trilogy, his Christian parable *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, T.H. White's medieval romances (sic) such as *The Once and Future King*, Stephen Donaldson's imitative 'Tolkien' trilogy ... are all of the same kind, functioning as conservative vehicles for social and instinctual repression" [24].

It might lend clarity to include my definition of the term "pure" or "thorough" fantasy at this stage. By this category I refer to works which consist entirely, or almost entirely of fantasy as a literary technique. This can take the shape of the creation of an entirely new universe (as in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy and various science fiction novels) or perhaps the invention of a world parallel to and existing alongside the known one (as in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*), and would include the transformation by fantasy of

24. **Fantasy: The literature of subversion** (London and New York: Methuen, 1981) 2, 154-5. It is worth noting that Stephen Knight, who proceeds from a similiar ideological position, has a different attitude to *The Once and Future King*: "The other major areas of the contemporary Arthurian legend are not radical and searching like the work of ... White. Rather, they use the legend as a means of constructing ideological edifices that support existing authorities..." (*Arthurian Literature and society* 206).

external and internal realities, or "givens". In this respect, White's book refers to the known world, and even to a recognisable, if idealised, period in history. The way in which he uses this very history for fantastic purposes in order to translate it into mythology, however, will be discussed later [25]. Thus, in response to Jackson, it must be said that to be included alongside such determined (and illustrious) writers of the genre of fantasy as Tolkien, Lewis and Le Guin did not seem to be an aim of White. His writing in general displays realism and attention to historical and natural detail, and usually conforms to the conventions and restraints implicit in referring to the real and actual world. To categorically state that his Arthuriana constitutes fantastic literature is to blunt its complex and innovative interaction with the genre of fantasy. White mostly uses fantasy, or a fantastic motif, as a device to provide both parable and humour or the contrast of surprise in a situation that otherwise resembles normality - in other words, a play with fantasy occurs.

Thus, in *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, written shortly after the first four volumes of *The Once and Future King* were completed, White has the Angel Gabriel making an impressive entrance (down the chimney) into the home of an Irish country family, to announce tidings of a second flood. The author originally planned to use as a supernatural messenger the Holy Ghost Itself, to arrive as the household at devotions sang

25. See 54-56 below.

"Veni, Spiritus Sancti", but altered it, regretting that its impact might be construed as blasphemous rather than as amusing. This fabulous device is one example of the tongue-in-cheek kind of fantasy that White chose to employ.

To return to **The Sword in the Stone**, the only one of the five volumes which can seriously be described as fantastic, one finds that here, too, the fantastic elements are inverted, even domesticated, by invariably humorous subjugation to the claims of realism. The young Arthur finds a tutor who can work magic and transform him into animals; but Merlyn's spells have none of the solemnity, mystery and quasi-religious aura of magic rituals in more thoroughly fantastic works. His magic is hilariously muddled with the mundane: when performing a show of his abilities for his new employer, Sir Ector, every display of magic is undermined by reminders of practical realities which rob the spells of mystique. When producing testimonials from the air, the effect created by the tablets and parchment signed respectively by Aristotle and Hecate is amusingly deflated by their juxtaposition with "some type-written duplicates signed by the Master of Trinity who could not remember having met him." On the same occasion, Merlyn's ability to tinker with the weather does not render him above the need for everyday necessities: "'Snow,' said Merlyn. 'And an umbrella,' he added hastily." This undermining effect is reinforced by the response of his audience; there is no awe, no prostration, no recognition of forces superior to those of the known world. Rather, Sir Ector explains the extraordinary transmutations away: "'They do it with mirrors ... It's done by hypnotism... Like those wallahs

from the Indies'", and the nurse's response to the intrusion of magic into her realm of experience is to remark, "'Enough to give a body a pewmonia ... or to frighten the elastic commissioners!'" [26].

Throughout *The Sword in the Stone*, the escape from the bounds of normal laws of the universe implied by magic is combined with burlesque: from its first intimations, when Merlyn's walking mustard-pot is rapped on the head for giving itself airs, and the cutlery, when commanded to wash itself up, promptly decides to duck the teapot [27], to the Wart's first transformation, when the magic formula is simply an ordinary greeting said backwards, and Neptune subsequently appears on a cloud with "an anchor tattooed on his tummy and a handsome mermaid with Mabel written under her on his chest" [28], it is made clear that the very suspension of disbelief necessary for one to enter into the spirit of a work of fantasy has comic potential [29]. White intends the reader to enjoy rather than

26. *The Sword in the Stone* (hereafter referred to as TSITS) 45-6.

27. TSITS 38, 43.

28. TSITS 53-4.

29. This is not to suggest that comedy invariably dilutes the effect of fantasy: Don D. Elgin in fact argues that they are intrinsically related, claiming that in opposition to tragedy, comedy, no matter how farcical, advances towards restoration or restitution. Thus the use of fantasy to create a sense of otherwise unattainable harmony is often comic, and humorous details serve to inform the totality of the comic vision. See *The Comedy of the Fantastic* (London: Greenwood Press, 1985) 21-7. Tolkien bears this out, stating that "The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending ... [gives] a fleeting glimpse of Joy beyond the walls of the world..." *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975) 68.

seriously engage with the magical sequences, and the reader is occasionally distanced from the book's extraordinary dimension by the often juvenile flavour of the accompanying comedy. However, the humour employed does not necessarily mitigate against the fabulous; while the latter becomes domestic, cosy, and seemingly confined to the familiar realm of childhood, it is no less wondrous. It must also be said that comedy is not invariably blended with fantasy in *The Sword in the Stone*. A notable exception is White's description of the Wart's journey, as an owl, to visit Athene. This fantastic journey to "the undiscovered country whose latitude is 91 degrees north and longitude 181 degrees west" is reverently described [30], and Athene is an awesome and mysterious figure ("to be her was terrible, ~~whereas~~ to be with her was the only joy") who is treated by White with a respect that is conspicuous by its absence in his earlier description of Hecate, who puts on a "celluloid eyeshade" to umpire the duel between Merlin and Madame Mim [31]. The dreams vouchsafed to the young Arthur by Athene are mystical rather than humorously informative, and end with a vision of primeval fratricide - a tragic presentiment.

The character who experiences a sense of wonder is of course the Wart, who feels the enchanted curiosity of a child on whose behalf an enthralling new realm of entertainment and edification has been opened up, and who knows that he is immune from any danger of these exciting new magical powers being

30. TSITS 222-231.

31. TSITS 79.

exercised against him. (Merlyn's threat to turn him into a piece of bread and toast him does not give him a moment's concern [32]). The fact that all this magic, no matter how significant its didactic value, has as its focus of instruction the person of a child perhaps explains the juvenile bent of much of the accompanying comedy. The acrimonious relationship between Merlyn and the confused genie whose task it is to materialise whatever the magician needs results in much schoolboy humour. More slapstick stems from the often fallible spells, to the embarrassment of Merlyn and the delighted glee of his charge. The former blows himself to Bermuda on the utterance of an unwitting oath [33], and when attempting to transform the Wart into a hawk, instead turns himself into a condor ("with a bright orange head and a magenta carbuncle") and blusteringly blames "this by-our-lady spring cleaning" [34].

What, then, is the purpose of a breathlessly funny, magical romp as an introduction to a legend which the author repeatedly acknowledges to be tragic? ("The whole Arthurian story is a regular greek doom" and "a perfect tragedy" [35]). At a first reading, one is caught up in the author's satisfaction at creating the ideal environment for a near-perfect childhood, where the enthusiasm, eagerness and insatiable curiosity of the

32. TSITS 107.

33. TSITS 126.

34. TSITS 109.

35. The Book of Merlyn 13; Warner 98.

Wart are never checked or stifled. It is only after reading all five volumes that one recognises the first one as an idyll. Its one thoroughly fantastic hallmark is the principle of goodwill upon which the world of Gramarye seems to turn. There are no really evil characters in it; witches (such as Morgan le Fay) and horrid beasties behave in a conventionally wicked fashion, but pose no serious threat to the serenity of society, or none that cannot be countered by a simple formula of courage and perseverance. Everyone and everything else (from outlaws to villeins to knights to the weather) are governed by a general principle of benevolence. Nature conspires to add to the well-being of all: "in^{the} Old England ... the weather behaved itself. In the spring all the little flowers came out^{...} in the meads ... in the summer, it was beautifully hot ... and, if it did rain...they managed to arrange it so that it rained while you were in bed; ... and in the winter, which was confined by statute to two months, the snow lay evenly...and never turned to slush. [On] Christmas night...[it hung heavily on the battlements, like extremely thick icing on a very good cake ...and occasionally slid off the roofs^{...} when it saw a chance of falling^{...} on some amusing character and giving pleasure to all." Even the wolves slaver "in an appropriate manner" [36].

A principle of co-operation is seen in action, creating a blissfully Utopian world where problems are solved by a touch

36. TSITS 187-8. It was this idyllic vision that was transposed onto celluloid in the film *Camelot*, which was loosely based on White's work.

of magic and a magnanimity that transcends the confines of reality far more thoroughly than any of Merlyn's enchantments. However, while ensuring an idyllic existence for the Wart at the heart of the harmony around him, the very absence of evil and conflict is dangerous. Naivety resulting from a belief in the benevolence of all components of his surroundings turns the young Arthur into a vulnerable adult. Both he and the eccentric and absent-minded tutor who shapes his mind are true innocents. The basic goodness of the child is fertile ground for the ethical idealism of his teacher, and the seeds of doom are planted alongside those of compassion and justice. The young Arthur is not wholly sheltered from evil; in his transformations into animals, he is often faced with dangerous or life-threatening situations. However, the Wart learns that he can invariably overcome these by the appropriate use of his own resources. Thus evil is mistakenly understood as a force that can always be controlled, if not conquered, by the proper use of bravery, determination and kind-heartedness; and potentially even more ominous, it is encountered by the boy only as an outside entity. Thus he is unaware of his own potential for sin, and ignorant of those evils which cannot be countered, or contained by the power of goodness.

Similarly, the fallibility of Merlyn's magic is cloaked by mirth, even when his ineptness at the castle of the giant Galapas proves nearly fatal. Thus the threat of disaster, which his muddled progress backwards through time makes only too possible, is not recognised until too late: the addled magician remembers to inform Arthur of his maternal parentage

only after he has unknowingly committed incest with Morgause and spawned Mordred.

However, this shadow is yet to fall; the seduction of the child-man Arthur by his half-sister, which marks the turning-point by which he loses forever the halcyon days of his childhood, takes place only at the end of the second volume, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*. The presentiment of tragedy in *The Sword in the Stone* comes significantly enough in a poignant discussion of evil between the romantically idealistic youth and his more conscious tutor. The conversation takes place in the down-to-earth surrounds of the kitchen, where the Wart is contemplating not the mysteries of knighthood, but those of saffron, herbs and roast boar. Ironically enough, he has resigned himself to being a humble squire rather than a knight, and when he confesses this to Merlyn, the latter replies approvingly, "Only fools want to be great." His pupil takes this remark at face value, but both Merlyn and the reader know that the Wart is destined for greatness beyond imagining, and that his eschewing of ambition will be a valuable quality when he is king. As the two converse, Arthur says dreamily:

"... If I were to be made a knight ... I should pray to God to let me encounter all the evil in the world in my own person, so that if I ~~was~~ conquered, there should be none left, while if I were defeated, it would be I who would suffer for it."

"... you would be conquered, and you would suffer for it" [Merlyn] said. "... Suppose they didn't let you stand against all the evil in the world?"

"I could ask..."

"You could ask", repeated Merlyn. He thrust the end of his beard into his mouth, [and] stared tragically into the fire... [37].

This passage operates on several levels. Arthur is seen to "choose", in a sense, the destiny that is already ordained for him, and that Merlyn is unhappily aware of: he is fated to spend most of his life pitting himself against the forces of evil (which White considers interchangeable with those of Might) and eventually to be slain by that distillation of evil - symbolised by Mordred - which he himself has fathered. Arthur's prayer "to encounter all the evil in the world in my own person" is more than prophetic, however; it also illustrates his tragically dangerous innocence of his own capacity for evil which has been discussed above. The young Arthur cannot yet imagine his fate, which will be to commit sinful incest, and thus create with his own person, a child who will grow up to be the personification of all the evil that he has never been able to comprehend or acknowledge. The corruption that is to be his downfall is to stem from his own body, unrecognised by him as a possible source of sin [38]: not only is he to be betrayed by the treachery of his son, who is his own "flesh and blood", but his wife-to-be, by virtue of marriage also one flesh with him, is to betray him and undermine his court by her adultery.

However, this is the only time in this volume that the hints of Arthur's destiny are tinged with darkness. There are intimations of his future royalty throughout, but these usually

38. In this respect, the young Arthur is even more naive than the youthful Lancelot, who anxiously, even obsessively, guards the purity of his body, fearful of the consequences of physical incontinence.

consist of recognition of the noble and magnanimous qualities that will serve him well as a king. The Wart, metamorphosed into animals, undergoes a remarkable series of ordeals, in which courage, and a cool, but compassionate head, are vital. During his very first transformation, into a fish, Merlyn says, just before introducing his pupil to the sinister pike who is lord of the moat, "You will see what it is to be a king" [39]. And it is the pike's lecture on the subject of power which introduces the debate of "Might is Right" versus "Right against Might" that is to become a crucial ideological struggle during Arthur's reign. During the Wart's next escapade, when he is imprisoned by Madame Mim, he frees her goat rather than himself. The animal responds in a prophetic manner: "'Master,'" said the goat ... and it put one leg out and laid its double-knobbed forehead on the ground in the salute which is given to royalty. Then it kissed his hand as a friend [and] gave him the Emperor's salute of both feet..." [40]. Then there is his more formal ordeal in the hawks' mews, after he has been transformed into a bird. After he has successfully completed this, the merlin Balan cries, "'Mark my words ... We shall have a regular king in that young candidate!'" [41]. (It is worth noting that it is only members of the animal kingdom which possess the perspicacity to recognise the Wart's princely qualities.)

39. TSITS 61.

40. TSITS 74:5.

41. TSITS 120.

These hints at Arthur's future are fairly unobtrusive, and the acknowledgement of his royalty (apart from the title of this volume, which immediately suggests the Arthurian tradition) does not become overt until Chapters 22 - 24, when White turns to Malory and closely transmits (albeit in colloquial fashion) his material concerning the drawing of the sword and the subsequent recognition of Arthur as rightful king of Britain.

This raises the question of how much reliance *The Sword in the Stone* places on Malory. As has been noted, this volume is largely innovative, and consists for the most part of a creative blend of fantastic and legendary ingredients, together with a meticulous recording of everyday and natural surroundings, which at a first reading seems to have very little to do with the *Morte Darthur*. The tone is idyllic and the material used is mostly White's own.

However, elements of Malory are incorporated in various ways. To begin with, constant use is made of devices which conjure up an atmospheric sense of the *Morte Darthur* [42]. This is a feature of all five volumes, and is largely a result of White's awareness of the sense of double historical vision in dealing with Malory's text, which overlays real history with a nostalgic sense of ideal history. He was also conscious of the fact that his own position in the twentieth century cast a

42. An interesting aside is the question of medieval sources for TOAFK other than Malory: the description of the boar hunt in TSITS is strongly reminiscent, both in tone and detailed content, of the narration of a similar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. As there is no documented evidence of this, however, this theory must remain a speculative one.

particular shade on his perception of the *Morte Darthur*. In a long and not altogether coherent letter to Sydney Cockerell (who urged him to make his version of the Arthurian legend as historically authentic as possible), White explains: "...I am trying to write of an imaginary world which was imagined in the fifteenth century... I am looking through 1939 at 1489 itself looking backwards" (his own italics). Claiming that both he and Malory were "dreaming" in the process of creation, he went on to state that although the *Morte Darthur* was partly a historical reflection of the fifteenth century, by virtue of being written at the end of that century, its author made no attempt to transmit the sources he used in a way that was historically accurate or consistent. He therefore had an unassailable precedent for likewise refusing to do so. Rather, he intended deliberately to combine Malory's information with anachronisms (for purposes of commentary or humour) in a potpourri of real and imagined history, regardless of whether or not it could be verified. In this way, he could (and did) blatantly contradict historical facts in the process ("I state quite explicitly that Arthur, and not Edward, was on the throne in the latter half of the 15th century"), and he was able to pool medieval details from the 5th to the 15th centuries into Arthur's lifespan, and enliven these with a scattering of modern details [43]. The literary critic for the *New York Times* was able to say of the resultant work, "A glorious dream of the Middle Ages as they never were but as

43. Warner 132-135.

44. TOAFK endpapers.

they should have been" [44] - an accolade that must have given White some proof that he had achieved his aim of creating imaginary history in such a way that it transcended actual history.

In *The Sword in the Stone*, White intersperses snippets of information that are reminiscent of Malory with references to romanticised medieval figures such as Robin Hood and Maid Marian. (It is possible that the presentation of Maid Marian as an energetic outdoor woman who goes to war with her man, is partly derived from the presentation of Guenever in Malory's earlier books. The Wart even decides that "'If I am ever ^{made} to get married ... I will marry a girl like this: a kind of golden vixen.'" [45]) The result is an atmosphere in which Malory's material is implicit (the hawking merlins are named Balin and Balan after two knights who feature early on in the *Morte Darthur*, and the people of Castle Sauvage sing, "God save King Pendragon/ May his reign long drag on" in honour of Uther), and yet subordinated to the overriding sense of a medieval Eden, where figures of legend live in pastoral bliss and satisfaction. The irony of this, of course, is that the reader is to discover that the Wart himself is a romantic and evocative figure, and that the hitherto familiar and even domesticised group of characters at the heart of the first volume (the young Arthur, Merlyn and, to a lesser extent, Sir Ector and Kay) are actually the stuff of legend, and themselves semi-fantastic creations.

45. TSITS 149.

These are the only characters in *The Sword in the Stone* drawn from Malory, with the exception of King Pellinore, whose transposition from the *Morte Darthur* is worthy of comment. In Malory, Pellinore is first seen in search of the Questing Beast. A competent fighting man, he forcefully takes the adult King Arthur's horse, and later fights with him, and nearly slays him in single combat. Meanwhile, Merlin prophesies a future both great and tragic for Pellinore: he is to father sons who will be among the best knights in Arthur's realm; yet, as punishment for not saving his own daughter's life while intent on his quest, he is to be slain at the hands of somebody he trusts. One also learns that he sires "half by force" a son, Torre, on a milkmaid [46].

When one encounters White's version of King Pellinore in *The Sword in the Stone*, the only thing he seems to share with Malory's Pellinore is the Questing Beast, which itself is no longer Malory's formidable monster; White turns it into a rather lovable pantomime animal, which adores the man who hunts it. Although in the later volumes of *The Once and Future King* White's Pellinore follows the original in destiny, if not in character, his presence in the first volume is chiefly a humorous one. Although Malory makes only one knight (Sir Dinadin) a comic figure, White marks Pellinore as his clown from the beginning of his book. One certainly cannot imagine him seducing a milkmaid! Nonetheless, the enthusiasm for knighthood and noble duties that he inspires in Arthur as a

46. J. Cowan, ed., *Le Morte Darthur* by Sir Thomas Malory (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 55+.

child is not entirely removed from the respect with which Malory's Arthur regards the king who displays such chivalric determination.

The first duel in the *Morte Darthur* featuring Pellinore is transposed to *The Sword in the Stone* much altered and undermined. Instead of a deadly serious struggle between Pellinore and King Arthur, it now shows Sir Grummore as Pellinore's opponent in a mock battle that has more elements of slapstick than any of real danger. The main purpose of this scene in White is to demonstrate the author's pet theory - the ludicrous folly of any kind of combat. Here it is trivialised and made ridiculously funny - the warriors use Malory's language in addressing each other, but it is reduced to a formula they stumble over; their horses run away with them, they fall off their mounts ("Clang! said the armour, like a motor omnibus in collision with a smithy...") and blunder around "listening, clanking, crouching, creeping, peering, walking on tiptoe, and occasionally making a chance swipe behind their backs" [47]. However didactic its purpose, the entire sequence is a burlesque inversion of Malory's descriptions of combat, and the fascination of the Wart, on whose behalf the event has been organised, perhaps stems from Malory, whose Arthur takes great pleasure in being a spectator at jousts and tournaments. Certainly, the wish that the Wart expresses just before the farcical combat is conjured up comes almost directly from Malory: "I should have had a splendid suit of armour and

47. TSITS 97, 102.

dozens of spears and a black horse ... and...called myself the Black Knight. And I should have hoveed at a well or a ford or something and made all true knights that came that way to joust with me for the honour of their ladies, and I should have spared them all after I had given them a great fall..." [48].

As stated before, the most comprehensive reference to the *Morte Darthur* occurs towards the end of *The Sword in the Stone*. Malory's tale of the news of Uther's death, the materialisation of the mysterious sword in a stone, together with the inscription "Whoso Pulleth Out This Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of All England" [49] and the subsequent journey to London of Ector, Kay and Arthur in order to participate in the tournaments that were called as a result, is carefully retold by White. Although much enlarged on, both with humour (Pellinore tells the news of the sword in the stone in his usual muddled fashion) and ebullient detail, as in the lyrical description of the winter landscape through which Sir Ector's party travels, White's version, for the first time, pays meticulous attention to each item of information provided by Malory. For example, the phrase in the *Morte Darthur*, "Sir Ector, that had great livelihood about London" becomes "Sir Ector ... [owned] a little land on Pie Street, on which there stood a respectable inn...and ... drew most of his dividends

48. TSITS 89. This quotation illustrates the problem of resolving the discrepancies that arise when the pacifist White draws on the somewhat bloodier Malory!

49. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 16; TSITS 271.

50. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 16; TSITS 276.

from this source" in *The Sword in the Stone* [50]. As White moves towards the end of his volume, which comprises the drawing of the sword by the Wart and his installation as the king of England, much of the embellishment is dropped, and the narrative becomes in parts his personal translation of Malory's text. The animals, vegetables and minerals that featured in the Wart's unorthodox education make their last appearance, giving advice and encouragement to their pupil, who then draws the sword "as gently as from a scabbard" [51]. Kay's attempt to appropriate the sword, and his subsequent renunciation thereof, Sir Ector's humble obeisance to his ward, and the young Arthur's distress at the implications of his feat are described in modern idiom, which, in losing a little of the dignity of the original, increases its tenderness. The *Morte Darthur* is directly quoted from, now with serious rather than comic effect: "'Nay, nay, my lord', said Sir Ector, with some very feeble old tears. 'I was never your father nor of your blood, but I wote well ye are of an higher blood than I wend ye were'" [52]. Several precedents are created here. For one, direct use of Malory's language is no longer trivialised or used in a humorous context. Also, the invention that is a feature of the first volume is largely over. From this point onwards, White remains closer to his august source, although he does not relinquish his right to authorial excursions and comments.

Although the final chapter of *The Sword in the Stone* is a

51. TSITS 281.

52. TSITS 282-3.

reassuringly lighthearted one, which has Merlyn arriving in the form of a coronation present alongside various souvenirs of Arthur's childhood, such as the Questing Beast's fewmets and the owl Archimedes' great-great-grandson, a shift in tone has taken place. The newly-crowned Arthur may not understand Merlyn's words, "I know the sorrows before you, and the joys ... In future it will be your glorious doom to take up the burden and to enjoy the nobility of your proper name..."[53], yet they provide a new focus and a starting point for the following volumes, in which White turns his attention to the serious business of describing and enlarging on the theme of "glorious doom."

53. TSITS 285.

THE QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS

The second part of White's epic, *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, is possibly the least satisfactory of the revised volumes. Originally called *The Witch in the Wood*, it was rewritten several times, but seems to have been the section that least interested White. After having written it at his usual breakneck speed, he was deep into the third volume and absorbed in the process of bringing his version of Lancelot to life when his publishers returned it for rewriting. This was substantially, if impatiently done; however, the final version is still hampered by irritating flaws. The description of the early days of Arthur's reign often degenerates into transparent (and sometimes tedious) debate on the subject of Might versus Right, and the development of the cruel and neglected Orkney children is uneasily juxtaposed with the rather juvenile antics of a trio of visiting English knights.

The Queen to whom the title refers is the witch Morgause - Igraine's daughter and Arthur's half-sister - whose powers are capricious and ominous. Presented as both compellingly beautiful and loathsomely corrupt, she makes a dramatic entrance immediately after her children have recited Pendragon's wrongs against the clan of Cornwall. She is made a more powerful figure than in the *Morte Darthur*, where she is simply a cipher. Sent by her husband, King Lot, to "espy the court of King Arthur", the reader is only told, "For she was a passing fair lady, therefore the king cast great love unto her,

and desired to lie by her. So they were agreed, and he begat upon her Mordred ... But all this time King Arthur knew not that King Lot's wife was his sister" [54]. This uncompromising and bald statement of the incest that is to bring about Arthur's downfall does not state whether the lady concerned is aware of her relationship to the king. White, however, cannot paint Morgause black enough. She is the only important character in the work who is presented as being wicked without good reason or mitigating factors. (Even Mordred has various excuses for being evil and embittered - not the least of these being that he is raised exclusively by Morgause.) In the original drafts of this volume, it is clear that she is based on the persona of his own mother, and even in the final version, the hatred that White obsessively exorcises in the descriptions of Morgause lends a sense of imbalance to this volume. In the words of John Crane, "Morgause ... comes alive in the novel as a hated person rather than a hated character" [55]. Paradoxically, this vitriolic treatment also makes her too dominant a figure. She is first presented in the gratuitously cruel process of boiling a live cat to death - a sequence described in meticulous and repellent detail. (Cruelty to animals is an interesting moral acid test for White's characters: he himself lavished love and attention on his pets, and *The Sword in the Stone* is remarkable for the reverence it displays towards the animal kingdom. The image of Morgause boiling the cat for frivolous purposes makes her

54. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 45.

55. T.H. White (Boston: Twayne Publishers 1974) 86.

indictment absolute; and it is suggested that she has inculcated in her children a similar lack of concern: "The idea which the children had was to hurt the donkeys. Nobody had told them that it was cruel to hurt them ..." [56]). One also learns that she is excessively vain, sexually rapacious, and (apparently most damning of all) a bad mother. Although one is told that "She was not a serious witch... for her head was too empty to take any great art seriously, even if it were the Black one" [57], she is nevertheless able to enchant not only all her sons, but the seemingly hapless Arthur as well. Presumably this is done by exercising her sensual powers. Sylvia Townsend Warner makes the interesting point that the incest White found truly morally abhorrent was "the maternal rape on the child" [58] that he himself had dimly experienced in the nursery. This perhaps explains the constant emphasis on the difference in age between Morgause and her lovers: "...she is making a dead set at Pellinore's son Lamorak now, although she is a grandmother.'... '[But] Lamorak is hardly of age!'" [59]. And in the scene where she meets Arthur prior to seducing him (at least, this is what White suggests - although he avoids dealing with the actual sexual liaison), one reads "It is impossible to explain how these things begin.... Perhaps it was because she was twice his age, so that she had twice the power of his weapons.... Perhaps it was because he had never

56. TOAFK 238.

57. TOAFK 213.

58. Warner 130.

59. TOAFK 424.

known a mother of his own, so that the role of mother love, as she stood with her children behind her, took him between wind and water" [60].

Thus Morgause's sexual and maternal functions are inextricably confused, and even interchangeable - an unnatural mingling of roles that the reader is no doubt meant to recoil from. In the process Arthur, although now a seasoned and glamorous fighting man, capable of having an affair with Lionore, reverts to the position of a powerless child. It is also implied that he loses the innocence that had been one of his characteristic traits. ("Arthur was happy. Like the man in Eden before the fall, he was enjoying his innocence and fortune" [61]). Certainly he reappears in the third volume an older, wiser and sadder man, perceptive where before he had been naive, diplomatic where previously direct, philosophic where previously joyful. However, the entire process is implicitly rather than explicitly dealt with. For the most part, White skirts round the delicate areas; he manages the tricky problem of reconciling his representation of the young Arthur as brave and honourable with his Herod-like drowning of the infants of the realm by avoiding it entirely - or rather, he deals with it retrospectively, softened by the distance of 250 pages. It is only in the fourth volume that Arthur, by now a venerable and respectable figure, takes his wife and best friend into his confidence and confesses to the massacre that still haunts him:

60. TOAFK 309.

61. TOAFK 223.

"'You musn't forget the ^{other} babies... I dream about them.'" The act is seen, once again, as the panic-stricken reaction of a frightened child: Lancelot responds indignantly, "What you did was done to you, when you were too young to know better" [62]. The emphasis on childhood innocence as an excuse for all transgression is reiterated even at this stage. However, the problem of evil, and adult responsibility for evil, that was rigorously excluded from the Edenic first volume, has to be accommodated.

In order to do this, there has to be an acknowledged transition from the fantasy world of idealism to a more pessimistic realism. This is first demonstrated in the subverted representation of childhood. This is no longer the halcyon period of order, comfort, enjoyment and stimulating education that the young Arthur was vouchsafed. (According to White, the role of education was a vital factor in the moral development of his characters: he states that "All three [families] had a resident genius ..., halfway between a tutor and a confidant, who affected the character of the children in each" [63]. The Gaelic princes, however, have access only to a bastardised version of Merlyn in the form of St. Toirdealbhach, who is morally degenerate and espouses violence.)

To begin with, the grim existence of the Orkney children (who are even undernourished, in fine Dickensian tradition) is further tainted by their mother's obsession with revenge.

62. TOAFK 544.

63. TOAFK 319.

Although, like Arthur, they are victims of adult powers of manipulation (exercised in both cases by Morgause), they are nevertheless venal whereas the young king is depicted as blameless. In the first chapter, which is in sharp contrast to anything found in the preceding volume, the children's capacity for hatred is revealed against a backdrop of insecurity and discontent. Even the physical environment suggests unease: "There was a circular room at the top of the tower, curiously uncomfortable....It was like a wind-tunnel.... the room was full of peat-smoke ... The stone walls sweated in damp weather. The furniture ... consisted solely of heaps of stones ... together with a few rusty Genoese cross-bows with their bolts and a pile of turfs for the unlit fire. The four children had no bed" [64]. In these dark and noisome conditions, surrounded by stones and weapons suggestive of both aggression and neglect, the young Orkneys - Gawaine, Agravaine, Gaheris and Gareth - rehearse the tale of Uther Pendragon's rape of Igraine, their mother's mother, after he had slain her husband. The story of the forced marriage is told in a mixture of Gaelic dialect, childish hyperbole, and Malory's original prose ("King Uther Pendragon was wonderly wroth.... So he sent our Grandfather a letter which bid him to stuff him and garnish him, for within forty days he would fetch him out of the strongest castle that he had!" [65]). This unvarnished version of the very first pages of the *Morte Darthur* captures the violent flavour of the original more accurately than any

64. TOAFK 209.

65. TOAFK 211.

passage in *The Sword in the Stone* does. Not only does it introduce Malory's sombre theme of internecine strife for the first time, but the telling of the story introduces the characters of its narrators. One learns that Gawaine is stubbornly loyal to his clan, Gaheris colourless, Agravaine sadistic and Gareth compassionate. ("They killed the horses under^{neath} them', said Agravaine. 'So they did not, then,' said Gareth" [66]).

This passage also underlines several other aspects of the corruption of the Orkneys' childhood. Subject to the whims of an unpredictable mother who alternately neglects and punishes them, they nevertheless adore her and vie for her attention, seemingly incapable of discerning her moral turpitude. Although they exhibit a fierce loyalty to each other, this seems to stem from clannish fervour rather than genuine fraternal comradeship, and a state of tension and discord exists between the young princes. Agravaine in particular constantly picks arguments with his brothers, and on one occasion sparks off Gawaine's rage with nearly lethal effects. ("Gawaine, with his hands round Agravaine's throat, was ferociously beating his head on the floor. Gareth took hold of Gawaine's shirt at the neck and twisted it to choke him. Gaheris, hovering at the edge, ferreted for the dirk" [67]).

66. TOAFK 211.

67. TOAFK, 272. This scene is in fact a precursor of the strife between the adult Orkneys that results when Agravaine and Mordred threaten to confront Arthur with Guinevere's adultery: "Agravaine went backward... with Gawaine on top of him. The dagger rose in venom to complete the work - but Gaheris caught it from behind.... Gareth held Mordred" (TOAFK 523).

Arthur's childhood squabbles with his foster-brother Kay are light-hearted in comparison, and have none of this black and violent intensity. It would seem that childhood can no longer be assumed to be a time of peaceful harmony. (Lancelot's childhood too is contrasted with that of Arthur: like the Gaelic children, his youth is a time of hardship, even misery, although not because of parental omission or malice. Rather, it is a period of wearying toil and self-denial, as well as private fears, doubts and nightmares; it is possibly more realistic than either Arthur's idyll or the Orkneys' brutal upbringing.)

The transition to a realm of existence where stability and order are at risk, beauty and harmony are tenuous and fragile, and happy solutions to all problems can no longer be expected, is demonstrated not only by the altered state of childhood, but also by the slaughter of an archetypal creature of romantic fantasy - the unicorn. This significant incident provides a metaphoric lens through which the reader can look both backward and forward at certain events in the novel's treatment of the legend in its entirety. It acts as a presentiment of Agravaine's murder of Lamorak and Morgause [68], which is to take place much later. But the killing and subsequent mutilation of the unicorn by the Orkney children (the most

68. "'My brother has killed our mother, because he found her sleeping with a man.... Agravaine cut off her head.... Like a unicorn.' [Gareth said.] 'Was Lamorak the unicorn?' asked the King gently" TOAFK 425-6.

distressingly gruesome scene in the entire work) is more than a warning of specific events to come. It seems to symbolise the death of fantasy, both as a playfully effervescent and joyous device in the novel, and as a mode of perception that propagates innocence. The relationship between fantasy and primeval innocence is a significant one in White's schema [69]; hence the choice of a fabulous animal to be sacrificed to the real and irrational forces of human brutality and stupidity. The wonder and edification which fantastic devices inspire in *The Sword in the Stone* seems to be available only to the "pure in heart" - to Merlyn, who is idealistically educated in "white" magic, and Arthur, who responds with childlike joy and innocence. The Orkneys, who are perverted in spite of being children, give the lie to the tragic belief (and trust) in the basic goodness and innocence of youth. Thus the fabulous loses its power to appeal to those whose corruption makes them incapable of an attitude of wonder towards or appreciation of the unusual or the extraordinary, no matter how beautiful or awe-inspiring its form or medium is. Throughout the second, third and fourth volumes there are elements of elegiac mourning for the loss of the innocent and ideal constituents of the the first book, which, as it recedes into retrospect, is more and more clearly perceived as a pastoral idyll. Thus the death of the mythical beast marks the passage from a setting that is naturally nurturing to one in which bloody realism and the savage element in human nature hold sway - and where magic has no place, and no power to redeem the environment.

69. See 49-52 above.

Several things are highlighted in the passage in which the unicorn is destroyed. The servant girl who lures the animal is press-ganged into acting as bait for it by the bullying princes. Far from deliberately betraying it, she has to be tied down in order to co-operate. Yet she is genuinely virginal and pure in heart, as Morgause (whose attempts to trap a unicorn herself have sparked off her sons' determination to get one for her) could never be. The unicorn itself is a magical, almost sacred creature of beauty, whose loveliness is closely described:

The unicorn was white, with hooves of silver and a graceful horn of pearl. He stepped daintily over the heather... and the wind made waves in his long mane ... The glorious thing about him was his eye. There was a faint bluish furrow down each side of his nose, and this led up to the eye-sockets, and surrounded them in a pensive shade. The eyes, circled by this sad and beautiful darkness, were so sorrowful, lonely, gentle and nobly tragic, that they killed all other emotion *except* love [70].

It would seem that this is a creature of the enchanted forest of the first volume rather than the harsh moors of the North. It combines romantic, fairy-tale qualities with the knowledge and weight (reflected in its eyes) of suffering and tragedy - not unlike the Arthurian legend itself. It becomes the victim of Agravaine's twisted and jealous love for his mother: he goes against the pre-arranged plan to capture it alive (just as he is later to betray Lancelot and Guenever against the express wishes of the rest of his clan) and slays it in a long-drawn-out orgy of sadism, repugnantly described. ("There

70. TOAFK 254.

was a choking noise from Agravaine ... [he] began jabbing his spear into its quarters,...its slim belly, into its ribs ... The blood...spurted out upon the blue-white coat the unicorn... quivered, trembling in the agony of death.... Agravaine bawled, 'This girl is my mother. He put his head in her lap. He had to die'" [71]). The shocking (and unexpected) ugliness does not stop here either; the mutilation of the animal's body is equally closely treated, and the contrast between its original beauty and the grisliness of the inexpertly hacked corpse is repeatedly stressed, with horrifying effect. Spurred on by the hope of their mother's praise, the children all participate in this dreadful chore, which is White's version of the original sin that mars the young princes. They are literally and symbolically stained: "The ^{three} butchers were daubed with sweat and blood, and ... Agravaine had been sick twice" [72]. Morgause, whose preoccupation with the visiting English knights has driven her sons to this violent slaughter in order to win her attention, is portrayed as the serpent, and the unicorn becomes the symbol of Edenic beauty that is despoiled and violated [73].

71. TOAFK 255-6. The unfortunate creature takes two pages to die, and the carving up of its body takes another three. This of course relates to the presentation of cruelty in this volume: see 63-4 above.

72. TOAFK 258.

73. Gareth's response to the killing is a poignant one; he recognises the senselessness of destroying something of beauty and intrinsic value, and grieves for it. What he does not know is that this death is to have parallels with his own pointless and tragic killing at the hands of his friend and mentor, Lancelot.

A sombre change has taken place in White's telling of the Arthurian story: he has proved that despite the comedy of the first volume, he does not intend to flinch from dealing with the violence and agony that is characteristic of much of the *Morte Darthur*. From now on, one does not doubt that *The Once and Future King* will ultimately deal with the tragedy of Arthur's reign. Perhaps it is significant that in the very next chapter, which returns to the scene at Camelot, one finds Merlyn telling Arthur, "'There are some things^{...} which I have to tell you, whether you believe them or not. The trouble is, I can't help feeling there is one thing which I have forgotten to tell. Remind me to warn you about Guenever another time.'" This is not only the first time that the premonition of Arthur's marital trauma casts its shadow; the king responds, "'I get muddled up with half the questions I want to ask you.... For instance, who was my ...'" only to be interrupted by Kay [74]. The implication is that Arthur is about to ask for details of his maternal parentage, and Kay's diversion is a fatal one, as it is Arthur's ignorance of Morgause's relationship to him that allows him to fall into her net. Merlyn only remembers that he has omitted to tell Arthur who his mother is on the very night of Mordred's conception, and postpones informing him until the next morning, when the damage is already done. White states the obvious: "If only he had spun himself to Carlion at once, before it was too late!" [75].

74. TOAFK 262.

75. TOAFK 308.

However, the movement in the direction of tragedy is incongruously combined with the ludicrous story of Pellinore's love-affair. Not only is he parodied as a caricature of the broken-hearted lover, but White includes a very funny, if inappropriately slapstick cameo in which Sir Grummore and Sir Palomides disguise themselves as the Questing Beast in the hopes of diverting Pellinore from his misery, and inspire instead the devotion of the real Questing Beast. The buffoonery that results is out of place not only in the austere environment of Lothian, but also alongside the misery and mess of the unicorn incident. The strands of horror and humour combine uneasily, since the behaviour of the English knights, and indeed the presence of the now amorous Questing Beast [76], imply that they still belong in the fantastic-comic world of the first volume. Yet this world has been exploded, and its values no longer hold sway. This makes the clownish benevolence of the knights seem especially alien. Structurally, too, this is clumsy: White's partial return to invention wars with his by now more orthodox following of Malory in the retelling of Arthur's first battles. He has Morgause realise à propos of her unsuccessful attempts to entrance the visiting Englishmen that "asses do not mate with pythons" [77], a maxim that he would have done well to apply to the composition of this section of the novel.

76. The re-introduction of a fabulous beast after the physical and metaphorical killing of the traditionally fantastic unicorn is in particular thematically awkward and untidy.

77. TOAFK 269.

This volume suffers more than any of the others (with the exception of *The Book of Merlyn*) from White's hasty exuberance. He includes too much extraneous material, which results in a diffusion of interests. Allowing his personal distractions to enter into the text, he cannot resist indulging both his hatred of his mother and his sense of fun. He also transposes onto the Gaelic setting his vivid perceptions of the Irish countryside and its people [78]. The former he enthused over in lyrical descriptions, and the latter he mocked - not always affectionately. When Pellinore, Grummore and Palomides arrive in Lothian they are surrounded by the local people, of whom one is told: "Their stare was not exactly an offensive one, nor was it friendly.... in the minds of both women and men, irrespective of age and circumstance, there began to grow, almost visibly, almost tangibly..., the incalculable miasma which is the leading feature of the Gaelic brain.... The people of the circle closed in, ... their faces assuming an expression of dogged stupidity even more vacant than they actually were" [79].

Despite the diversions, there is much in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* that contributes to the development of the Arthurian mythology. White exercises his talent for psychological scrutiny to good effect in his examination of the young king and the Gaelic princes, although his efforts are occasionally

78. White removed to Ireland halfway through writing what he then called *The Witch in the Wood*, and also revised it while there.

79. TOAFK 239-40.

reminiscent of rudimentary psychoanalysis; for example, one learns that "Agravaine...had curious feelings about his [mother], which he kept to himself" [80]. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the main characters provides a sensitive interpretation of material in the *Morte Darthur*: the Orkneys in particular are easily recognisable as Malory's figures, while at the same time satisfactorily rounded out in a fashion that is unmistakably White's. The passage where the young princes tell of the grievances of their clan [81], is a good demonstration of White's method of having characters narrate certain passages of the *Morte Darthur*, thereby simultaneously revealing their personalities, and reminding the reader of the source from which White has drawn them. This technique of providing indirect authorial comment on Malory is usually skilfully used (as has already been noted of the Grail legends), and is more satisfying than omniscient authorial interjections, which occasionally tend to be over-explanatory and even patronising. (For example, he writes: "It was not really Eton [Sir Ector] mentioned, for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440, but it was a place of the same sort. Also they were drinking Metheglyn, not Port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel" [82]. This kind of comment is not only superfluous, but tends to distance the reader as well.)

80. TOAFK 214.

81. See 67-8 above.

82. TOAFK 8-9.

The examination of the Orkneys' childhood is to add special resonance to their role and actions as adults at Arthur's court. When Pellinore's son Aglovale announces his intention of killing the Northern knights in revenge for their murder of his father and brother, Arthur says: "'It is a pity you never had the opportunity of seeing the Orkneys at home. They didn't have a happy family life...'" [83]. In actuality, Arthur has not seen them at home; but the reader has been shown their family life, with all its peculiarities and excesses, at first hand - which illuminates their later intrigues and quarrels.

The development of Arthur in the early days of his kingship is also carefully presented. The immaturity and foolhardiness of Malory's young king is preserved, although the latter is now viewed as the product of youthful high spirits. Arthur's penchant for violent duels and battles in Malory is muted by White into thoughtless boisterousness, which is in any case scathingly attacked by Merlyn. When Arthur (who despite his new status still relies on his erstwhile tutor for information and guidance) enthuses about the "jolly battle" he has just won, Merlyn points out that while the mounted and armed knights fought unscathed, the foot soldiers suffered wholesale slaughter, and winds up his denunciation of Arthur's attitude with the words: "^{But} look at the country. Look at the barns burnt, and dead men's legs sticking out of ponds, and horses with swelled bellies by the roadside, and mills falling down ...

83. TOAFK 446.

That is chivalry nowadays.... And then you talk about a battle being fun!" [84]. The king, however, is contrite; so much so that he devotes the rest of his life to the monumental and daunting task of redirecting chivalry into peaceful channels. Although White's Merlyn is more benevolent than Malory's; both follow the pattern of confronting their monarch with trenchant criticisms, thereby prompting moral growth and constitutional development - a process that is implicit in Malory and made explicit in White.

Skilful employment is made of direct quotations from Malory. Rather than being used for satirical purposes, the text of the *Morte Darthur* is now treated as history, which makes for fresh and exciting reporting of the battle scenes. When King Lot is ambushed at Bedegraine, White borrows his response from Malory as if the latter had written a news brief: "'Oh, defend us from death and horrible maims', he is reported to have said, 'for I see well we be in great peril of death'... he is even supposed to have wept 'for pity and dole.'" ^[84a] Like many chroniclers of history, White is not above tinkering with the very data that he quotes. He notes that the battle is characterised by "arms, shoulders, and heads flying about the field and blows ringing

84. TOAFK 219-21. The presentation of chivalry in both works can be profitably compared. Malory has Arthur create a system of chivalry based on the medieval principles of a chivalry that had already existed, in theory and literature, if not in practice; White's Arthur attempts to reform and purify chivalry. Both writers combine idealism with the tragic acknowledgement of the inherent flaws in the system that will inevitably undermine it. Both write, as noted before, with ardent nostalgia for what never was, but what could have been.

84a. TOAFK 299.

85. TOAFK 294.

by the water and the wood" [85], a précis of Malory's version thereof: "...Brastias smote [a knight] on the helm, that it went to the teeth, and he rode to another and smote him that the arm flew into the field; then he went to the third and smote him on the shoulder that shoulder and arm flew in the field....And Griflet smote a knight on the temples, that head and helm went to earth..." [86]. However, whereas it is clear that in Malory it is the fighting knights themselves who are carving each other up, White remarks that "...the arms, shoulders and heads would be those of the villeins, and the blows which rang, without removing many limbs, would be exchanged by the iron nobility" [87]. While making a valid point about the inequities of the feudal system in battle, White seems to have extrapolated an unfounded faith in the efficiency of armour from the *Morte Darthur*.

The real significance of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, for my purposes, is that it sets in motion the tragic impulse in the Arthurian legend. White at last makes explicit his initial perception of the *Morte Darthur* as a Greek tragedy [88]. At the very end of the second volume, he writes: "Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail ..., the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is

86. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 34.

87. TOAFK 294.

88. See 30 above.

the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy of sin coming home to roost" [89]. The concluding sentence states: "... it seems, in tragedy, that innocence is not enough." This remark shows an insight that is far more satisfactory than the tendency in much of twentieth century Arthuriana to provide a rationale for the inexorability of the tragic motif that is eventually to overwhelm the entire panorama [90]. White,

89. TOAFK 309-10. As an author rather than a critic, he notes simply that it is the tragic nature of the **Morte Darthur** that conveys unity of purpose and direction. This viewpoint obviously brings him down on the side of those scholars who argue for the unity of Malory's work: Brewer, Moorman, Lumiansky, Loomis, Halle, et al. For a more comprehensive note on the debate surrounding the structure of the **Morte Darthur**, see 1 above.

90. See, for instance, Mary Stewart's Arthurian novels, **The Crystal Cave**, **The Hollow Hills**, **The Last Enchantment** and **The Wicked Day**, where the conception of Mordred and the adultery of Guinevere and Bedivere (Stewart's Lancelot figure) are unfortunate problems rather than dire happenings which carry the threat of disaster. Stewart's Arthur approves of the relationship between his wife and best friend, and befriends and empowers Mordred, who proves to be a trustworthy ally. The debacle that ends Arthur's reign is explained as a series of unlucky misunderstandings - Arthur is genuinely (although mistakenly) reported dead in Brittany, and Mordred's subsequent kingship is construed as traitorous only by the jealous Constantine (Arthur's ward and appointed heir until Mordred makes his appearance); the battle on landing is actually forced by Saxons who panic at the sign of Arthur's warships, and so forth. In fact, the only villain is the inexorable progress of history, and the chief causal factor behind tragic events is the pressure of Saxon settlement. Marion Bradbury, in **The Mists of Avalon**, likewise presents a realistic historical explanation for the tragedy of Arthur's civilisation. Her primary reason for the inevitable destruction of Camelot and the death of Arthur is the growing conflict between the demands of the ascetic new religion, Christianity, which demands total loyalty and denounces all other religions as blasphemous, and the older natural religions, which deplore the exclusivity of the new faith and its emphasis on sin and guilt. Arthur is doomed, not for committing incest, but for betraying his original and pledged faith; and while Morgause and Morgan le Fay are the priestess heroines, it is Gwynhaver whose hysterical and obsessive Christian piety divides and finally destroys the court.

however, simply preserves the pitilessness and the purity of the tragic force in the *Morte Darthur*. This passage also demonstrates that, for someone who professed to be wary of the spiritual and ethical implications of, for example, the Grail legends, White's commentary on moral areas is both delicate and intriguing.

Although *The Once and Future King* is distinctly colloquial, its moral framework is largely that of the *Morte Darthur* - a complex weight of injunctions imposed by transcendent and implacable forces. This becomes especially clear in the next two volumes, *The Ill-Made Knight* and *The Candle in the Wind*. These are superior to *The Queen of Air and Darkness* for a number of reasons: White clings still more closely to Malory as a source, and the narrative framework is now distinctly an abridged version of the last five major sections of the *Morte Darthur*. This is not to deny the power of White's innovative ability; however, as has been seen, it can act to diffuse the tragic thrust of the work. Like Malory, whose writing becomes increasingly powerful and poignant in the second half of his work, White's novel improves as he focuses his attention on the potential for glory and tragedy at Camelot. Conscious of the increasing seriousness of his subject-matter, his propensity for satire dwindles (although his sense of humour never deserts him; for example, the child Galahad has a doll he calls "Holy Holy" [91]) and his ability to provide minute and compassionate character analysis comes into its own. This is first - and

91. TOAFK 410.

best - demonstrated in **The Ill-Made Knight**.

THE ILL-MADE KNIGHT

The title of this volume indicates its focus of attention. As in Malory, the spotlight shifts from Arthur to the figure of Lancelot, who is to dominate the narrative until almost the end of the story. Also like Malory, White seems to have felt more personally involved with and fascinated by the persona of Lancelot than with Arthur. The latter, although treated with warmth to the point of familiarity, never wholly loses the inscrutability (partially explained by White as the dignified silence dictated by "beautiful manners" [92]) that Malory's Arthur has. Lancelot, however, is treated with greater intimacy: Warner remarks that White felt of Malory's Lancelot that "[this] fellow's character I understand ... it is my own" [93].

Nevertheless, it was clear to White that the figure of Guenever should also be closely attended to. Even in the unarguably male-dominated *Morte Darthur*, unusual stress is laid upon her role as Queen, consort and lover, and Lancelot's fate is inextricably intertwined with hers. Before beginning *The Ill-Made Knight*, therefore, White carefully researched both characters. He drew up a painstaking and sympathetic list of Lancelot's personal traits gleaned from Malory, stating, "I know about half the kind of person he was, because Malory contented himself with stating ... the obvious half" [94]. In

92. TOAFK 385.

93. Warner 150.

94. Warner 148.

fact, his summary reflects a subtle and imaginative reading of Malory. White saw in the character several quirks of his own; he notes that Malory's Lancelot is tempted to inflict pain, ("Probably sadistic or he would not have taken ^{such frightful} care to be gentle" [95]) and tentatively queries "Homosexual? Can a person be ambi-sexual - bisexual or whatever? His treatment of young boys like Gareth ... is very tender and his feeling for Arthur profound. Yet I do so want not to...write a 'modern' novel about him. I could only bring myself to mention this trait, if it is a trait, in the most oblique way" [96]. However, except for the beginning of *The Ill-Made Knight*, where one finds Lancelot suffering from a potent crush on Arthur, he later makes a romantically heterosexual figure as the Queen's lover. He is tortured, yet glorious. As White himself was constantly tortured by his animal nature, it is possible that the figure of Lancelot provided him with a certain amount of wish-fulfilment: to be splendid even in suffering at the mercy

95. Warner 149.

96. Warner 149. These remarks reveal perhaps more about the author than his subject: White saw in Lancelot's championing of younger knights his own hopeless penchant for youths. Even more suggestive of personal experience are the words, "I could only bring myself to mention this trait ... in the most oblique way." Especially as he grew older, he found his sexual preferences increasingly difficult and humiliating to communicate (he told David Garnett of his erotic inclination towards sadism only after 25 years of friendship); in his own life, repression obliged him to be silent - or oblique.

97. It is tempting to speculate that Lancelot and Agravaire may reflect opposite, yet similar, sides of White. Both are sadistic, and subject to peculiar (sexual) desires; yet Lancelot becomes the greatest knight in the realm, whereas Agravaire, perpetually jealous of the man who shares some of his more shameful moral blemishes and yet achieves greatness, is miserable, mean and petty - perhaps an incarnation and expiation of the shadow the author felt within himself.

of one's own baseness [97].

White's homework on the Queen was as thorough as that on Lancelot. She is the author's first real woman - largely thanks to Ray Garnett, David Garnett's wife, who took a deep interest in his creation of Guenever, and offered encouragement and ideas. Although he was initially critical, even suspicious, of the emotionally tempestuous figure that emerges in Malory, commonsense and prudence overcame his initial aversion and caution. He writes: "She must have been a nice person, or Lancelot and Arthur (both nice people) would not have loved her.... I have already had one unattractive woman in the epic - Morgause - and it goes against the grain to have two, especially if Lancelot is to love her" [98]. Fortunately, the condescending attitude revealed in these remarks was absent from the written work that resulted. He was able to recognise that Guenever's character was that of a real person - a combination of great failings and remarkable strengths:

"She was insanely jealous of Lancelot; she drove him mad; ... she made no bones about being unfaithful to Arthur; she had an ungovernable temper; ... she was beastly to Elaine; she was intensely selfish ... She was brave, beautiful, married young by treaty. ... She had very little control over her feelings, which were often generous: ... She chose the best lover she could have done, and she was brave enough to let him be her lover; she always stuck to Arthur, though unfaithful to him, possibly because she really liked him; when finally caught, she faced the music..." [99].

98. Warner 150.

99. Warner 150-1.

This accurate, if severe, catalogue of features is White's response to Malory's Guenever [100]; his own Guenever is somewhat softened. His depiction of her is understanding, and at times compassionate - no mean feat for someone who disliked and feared women, and generally viewed them with incomprehension.

Moving from the basis of this preparation, White proceeded to create two undeniably fallible characters. The very human treatment of the lovers raises questions about the status of *The Once and Future King* as mythology. Once Arthur becomes fully adult (which occurs not when he ascends the throne, but when his boyhood tutor, Merlyn, disappears from the scene) he is no longer treated with the intimacy, even familiarity, which White now turns towards Lancelot and Guenever. Richard Barber remarks that they "lose a little of their aura in the retelling" [101], and this is demonstrably true. To a certain extent, their characters are demythologised. For example, Lancelot is shown vomiting behind a bush after his failure to prevent the gory decapitation of a woman by her husband; and Guenever is seen to be both pathetic and reprehensible as she tries, ineptly, to attack Elaine and spit at Lancelot after the

100. White adopts a position on Malory's Queen similar to that of Mary Scott Etta in "The good, the bad and the ugly: a study of Malory's women" (*Mid-Hudson Language Studies* 5 (1982): 45-55), in which it is argued that Guenever is neither a saintly virgin such as Percival's sister or Elaine of Astolat (the "good") nor an evil, vengeful or depraved witch, such as Morgan Le Fay (the "ugly"), but rather a real flesh-and-blood character, with human traits of frailty mingled with better qualities (the "bad").

101. *King Arthur in Legend and History* (Ipswich, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1973) 168.

latter pair have spent the night together: "...in her trembling, her hair began to come down. She looked hideous....[She] ran up to [Elaine] with tottering steps. She wanted to hit Elaine in the mouth...[She] tried to spit on [Lancelot], but she had never practised spitting" [102]. In Malory's equivalent of this scene, Guenever is equally enraged, but less pitiable. White further strips the mystique from his Queen by showing her suffering from the symptoms of menopause, and anxiously painting herself with rouge for Lancelot's return from a quest [103].

The presentation of romantic figures as only too human, however, is never harsh or derisive. The author, while maintaining a clear eye for objectively noted detail, suffuses his treatment of this section with compassion. The resulting equilibrium is not only shown in White's increasing powers of characterisation, but in the vividly and sensitively realised interaction between the central characters. The love shared between Arthur, Lancelot and Guenever tears all three to pieces; yet there are no merciless close-ups of humiliation and furtiveness, or farcically bawdy scenes of cuckoldry. White for the most part resists glamourising the Arthurian ménage à trois, and does not undercut the real pain and tension it engenders. However, his version thereof does soften the bare facts: the bitterness that could easily colour the narration is only allowed in, personified in the form of Mordred, towards

102. TOAFK 391-2

103. TOAFK 455, 469.

the end of the work. (Mordred is the only character who speaks crudely and openly of the adultery that the court suspects but ignores: "'Aunt Jenny'! 'Sir Lancelot'! ... And they are probably kissing now") [104]. As a rule, the author avoids detailing any sexual encounters; he treats the liaison between Lancelot and Guenever only slightly more directly than the incest circumvented in the previous volume. Curiously enough, the most closely described sexual encounter is the occasion when Elaine tricks Lancelot for the second time, under Guenever's own roof. The joy and renewed sense of courage that Lancelot derives from what he believes to be a reconciliation with the Queen is cruelly shattered when Elaine's treachery is revealed. This increases the poignancy of his position when the enraged and betrayed Guenever rejects him. The peace and renewal he experiences after the love-making in question, and his subsequent determination to do the honourable thing is in stark contrast to his graphically presented collapse into madness under the hail of Guenever's accusations. Both he and the Queen are so dramatically presented as suffering intolerable hurt and betrayal that Elaine's pathetically simple excuse "I could not live without him" is overwhelmed by comparison. Nevertheless, she is not entirely blackened for her part in her rival's agony and Lancelot's breakdown: she ends the scene with the moving cry, "You have a fine husband....You are a Queen, with honour and happiness and a home. I had no home, and no husband, and my honour was gone

104. TOAFK 554.

105. TOAFK 392-3.

too. Why would you not have let me have him?" [105].

It can be seen that the familiarity with which the characters are treated, while undermining their stature on the one hand, increases their value as accessible symbols. To return to White's seemingly controversial treatment of the character of Lancelot, it can be seen that the process is more complex than simple reduction of a heroic figure. The author's initial concern, in the very first chapters of this volume, seems to be to debunk the lush romantic aura contributed by Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites (among others) to Lancelot's character, stating drily that "Three years of discipline made...not a merry heart and a capacity for singing tirra-lirra" [106]. His Lancelot is hideously ugly, is seen to age, and is prone to nervous breakdowns and insanity. This appears to point to uncompromising realism in the treatment of Lancelot. However, as the humorous presentation of fantasy in the first volume nevertheless left intact (and even heightened) its genuinely fantastic qualities, and left undisturbed its moral basis of unrealistic innocence (with its potential for tragedy), the initially unadorned presentation of Lancelot is the basis for an ultimately idealistic and romantic presentation of the character. He is heroic in spite of his ugliness, his mortality and his mental and moral flaws - and thus doubly inspiring and endearing. What is more, this reflects the spirit (if not the letter) of Malory, as it is doubtlessly Lancelot's humanity, illustrated by his moral fallibility, that

106. TOAFK 319.

makes him, and not the perfect and therefore alienating Galahad, the accessible focus of attention and the quintessence of the symbolic knight in shining armour.

It is by means of this technique - intimate treatment that invites compassion rather than repulsion - that the central characters remain fascinating. Lancelot, especially, is presented as consistently noble, even when deranged. In fact, some of the most convincing scenes of his courage and chivalry are enacted during his spell as a madman, when he attacks two dastardly knights while unarmed, and impresses the community at King Pellles' castle with his dignity and presence [107]. Yet the lovingly idealistic presentation of a man who inspires respect, even awe, while acting as a Court Fool and bedding down in a cage, is constantly balanced against a context of realism. For example, there is now a recognition that violence, the ritualised enacting of which is an integral part of Lancelot's life, can kill and maim, regardless of the armour of the protagonists [108]. When Lancelot battles with Sir Turquine, one knows that this duel is very different in purpose, although not in form from those that the court applauds on the jousting greens of Camelot. The surrounding ground is bloodstained, and the final killing is baldly presented: "They drew their

107. TOAFK 394-402.

108. See 58-59 and 78-9^{above}. In *The Ill-Made Knight* violence is no longer presented as burlesque, exciting, or even as the unpleasant, but necessary dynamic of warfare. Jousting, sword-play, and so forth are sometimes presented as graceful components of an aristocratic sport; however, their lethal potential is no longer glossed over.

misericordes for the close work. Turquine bounced and shuddered and was dead" [109].

It is in *The Ill-Made Knight* that the balance between heroic idealism and tragic realism is most satisfactory; and it is Lancelot, to whom this volume belongs, who carries the burden of both. In the first chapter, White penetrates the mystique that surrounds the greatest knight by exploring his lonely and awkward teenage years, demonstrating that the young Lancelot is neither joyously innocent, as Arthur was, nor corrupted by maternal neglect and hatred, as the Orkneys were. (His parents, in fact, hardly feature at all, and he seems indifferent to them. This is demonstrated in the discussion of how they will react to his sudden departure for England [110]). He is simply deeply unhappy, and his state of mind does not spring from his circumstances, but from secret and compelling self-loathing. This elicits a new response from the reader: compassionate interest in a character who is lovable yet miserable, convinced as he is of his inward flaws.

What is more, the young Lancelot is convinced that his repulsive outward appearance reflects the shameful lack he feels within: "[He] thought about the face [reflected] in the metal, and about the thing which must have gone wrong in the depths of his spirit to make a face like that.... So far as he could see - and he felt that there must be ^{some} reason for it

109. TOAFK 351.

110. TOAFK 323-4.

somewhere - the boy's face was as ugly as a monster's ... He looked like an African ape" [111]. As mentioned above, this initially strips Lancelot of accumulated romantic associations, leaving the author free to begin afresh. It also provides a subtle pointer towards Lancelot's future development: trapped between a grotesque outward shell and an inner sense of shame, his hopes of achieving perfect knighthood are doomed never to be fully realised. Even the title of this volume stresses that he is ill-formed for the task that he sets himself. From early childhood, he knows intuitively that he will ultimately fail in the quest of excellence. In the very first chapter, he is haunted by a prophetic dream:

Lancelot said: "Go we and seek that which we shall not find." (my italics) ... But a Man or a Power set upon Lancelot, and beat him and despoiled him, and clothed him in another array which was full of knots, and made him ride on an ass instead of on the horse. Then there was a beautiful well, with the fairest waters he had ever seen, and he got off his ass to drink out of it. It seemed...that there could be nothing in the world more beautiful than to drink of this well. But as soon as he stooped his lips towards it, the water sank away ... sinking and sinking from him so that he could not get it. It made him feel desolate, to be abandoned by the water of the well [112].

The dream foreshadows Lancelot's experiences in quest of the Grail, but it also reveals that the consummation of his hopes will always remain beyond his grasp. In spite of this subconscious recognition of the failure his particular taint of original sin will make inevitable, Lancelot nevertheless strives bravely to attain his goals. With no illusions about

111. TOAFK 313-4.

112. TOAFK 313.

himself, he is still able to commit himself to noble ideals, and to hope that he will be worthy of them. It is this very striving in the face of his own inadequacies that makes Lancelot a figure that inspires hope. C.S. Lewis's remark, à propos of Christ, "He must have been a weak and struggling man, for, if he had been strong, it would have been the same for many of us as if he had not been human at all" [113], can be applied in a secular sense to Lancelot. The invulnerable and the perpetually successful are alienating, and although Lancelot does achieve a string of victories, on and off the battlefield, he does so diffidently; the shadow of potential failure never leaves him.

Nevertheless, somewhere between his grotesque exterior and the shrinking fears and doubts within, he finds the strength and dogged perseverance to set about becoming worthy of Arthur's vision for the future. He commits himself to three years of bruising toil, increasing and perfecting his athletic ability and strength. (White softens the blunter picture, presented by Malory, of a man trained to kill and defeat, by describing what are actually fighting skills in the language of the public school. Lancelot is recognised by Arthur as being "good at games" [114]).

113. *Inklings: collected sayings*, Calendar: 1980.

114. TOAFK 312.

But more important than the dubious virtues of being able to joust and duel [115], Lancelot is able to fix on the ideal of strength tempered by justice (Might for Right) with a passion that amounts to fanaticism. Not satisfied with mere competence in sporting ability, he aims for perfection in this area - in the naive and touching hope that this will earn him Arthur's love. His spiritual yearnings are equally ambitious; he longs to compensate for his secret failings by working a miracle - one that would be achieved through his own adherence to a pristine set of morals: "...he gave thirty-six months to another man's idea because he was in love with it. He supported himself meanwhile on daydreams. He wanted to be the best knight in the world, so that Arthur would love him in return.... He wanted, through his purity and his excellence, to be able to perform some ordinary miracle - to heal a blind man...for instance" [116]. It is the courage of this commitment to ideal values, maintained at first with hard work and hopeful dreams and later with increasing pain and cost, in the face of

115. The emphasis on what Merlyn contemptuously calls "Games Mania" (TOAFK 57) is one of the weaknesses of Arthur's new order, as he himself later comes to realise. (See TOAFK 429). The evil and the immoral are as able to cultivate their strength as the good: the villainous Sir Bruce Saunce Pite even breeds especially fast horses for quick getaways from the scene of the crime. What is more, the dissatisfaction of those knights physically unable to compete in this area reveal the inequities of the system. It is the crippled Mordred who bitterly echoes Merlyn's words: "Personal combat has no meaning. It is an unfair justice anyway. It is the thugs who win" (TOAFK 552). Thus when Mordred schemes to subvert the court, the unchivalrous plans he lays are beyond the reach of the old values, and can no longer be controlled or silenced by trial by combat in the way that the accusations of Sir Mador and Sir Meliagrance were.

116. TOAFK 319.

gnawing self-hatred and paralysing self-knowledge, that moves one to acknowledge Lancelot's integrity. White also recognises the ironic dynamic that this perpetual struggle to do the right and honourable thing contributes to the tragedy that is finally to overwhelm the chief characters: "People have odd reasons for ending up as saints. A man who was not afflicted by ambitions of decency ... might simply have run away with his hero's wife, and then perhaps the tragedy of Arthur would never have happened. An ordinary fellow, who did not spend half his life torturing himself by trying to discover what was right so as to conquer his inclination towards what was wrong, might have cut the knot which brought their ruin" [117].

Lancelot's adventures continually highlight the tension between external and secular realities and spiritual verities, and indeed the discrepancy between his inevitable triumphs in tournaments and in single combat and his personal sense of sin and inadequacy becomes a metaphor for this tension. The irony of his successes in trial by combat against Sir Mador de la Porte and Sir Meliagrance (both of whom lay charges against the Queen) demonstrate that in a corrupt environment (both the knights he defeats are personally treacherous and mistaken in their accusations) he will invariably triumph.

It is on the Quest for the Holy Grail that Lancelot faces the moral inadequacy of his code of conduct on a spiritual dimension. His is a searing confrontation with the unworthiness that will always bar him from the mystical

117. TOAFK 335.

consummation he desires. Nevertheless, he is permitted a glimpse of the vision of holiness and beauty he has longed to discover since childhood. The spiritual and moral travail he undergoes and the self-knowledge that results, while agonising at the time, ultimately bring him the only experience of peace that he knows while a knight. The problem is that he has to return to court to face the anguish of attempting to live a pure life in a microcosm of society that is rapidly becoming morally bankrupt, and that needs his presence all the more as a result. His narration of his adventures to Arthur and Guenever, on his return to Camelot, is one of the most moving parts of *The Once and Future King*, and its poignancy is increased when one realises that it is well-nigh impossible for him to maintain his new-found state of grace and serenity:

'...This must seem untrue as I tell it. I don't know a way of putting it in words. Behind the last door there was a chapel. They were at Mass....It was, oh, the shout of it - the power and the glory. It seized on all my senses to drag me in.... The Grail was there, Arthur, on a silver table But I was forbidden to go in, for all my yearning at the door.... I did go in, to help [the priest].... I only wanted to help, Arthur, as God was my witness. But a breath smote my face at the last door like a blast from a furnace, and there I fell down dumb' [118].

It is his painful readjustment to life at court after the Grail Quest that highlights the problem of Lancelot's split loyalties. Throughout *The Ill-Made Knight*, he is portrayed as torn between his King and Queen. Unable to love himself, he loves them both with a combination of rare generosity and desperation that renders him unable to relinquish his love for

118. TOAFK 466.

either, even for the sake of his own happiness. As a result, he is tortured by loyalty to both that constitutes a disloyalty to each.

Furthermore, his situation is further complicated by his devotion to his God. Sensitive to the "eternal quadrangle" [119] inherent in Malory's eternal triangle, White presents Lancelot in a double conflict. His relationship with Guenever was not only with his loyalty to Arthur, but also with his love for God, whom he regarded as a Being who warranted his allegiance and merited his love: "The knight's trouble ... was that for him God was a real person.... he had been confronted by two people whom he loved. The one was Arthur's Queen, the other a wordless presence who ^{had} celebrated Mass at Castle Carbonek. Unfortunately, as so often happens in love affairs, the two objects of his affection were contradictory" [120]. Thus, when it seems that God relentlessly establishes himself at the top of Lancelot's list of priorities, it is Guenever who suffers the hurt and humiliation of rejection and betrayal. Her lover is only too aware that he has abandoned her, and this adds an extra dimension of difficulty to his already unenviable position. White remarks that "The hearts of these two lovers were instinctively too generous to fit with dogma. Generosity is the eighth deadly sin" [121], and it is to this deadly sin that the beleaguered knight finally succumbs. When he resorts

119. TOAFK 480.

120. TOAFK 480.

121. TOAFK 472.

once again to the Queen after rescuing her from Meliagrance, the impression is given that he does so believing that she needs him more than God does: "Even if God's need for him was the greater in normal times, now it was obvious that his first love's need was more pressing" [122]. Overwhelmed on all sides by conflicting tides of compassion and loyalty, Lancelot is obliged to relinquish his hard-won state of grace, at terrible cost to his peace of mind. Yet he embraces the secular values of the degenerating court with magnanimity, setting aside his personal and poignant tragedy without reproach or self-pity.

White's portrayal of Lancelot is remarkable for its minute scrutiny. In charting the development of Guenever's character, he uses the same blend of intimacy and compassion. Although she is a less overt protagonist of the tension between idealism and realism, her role in the overarching tragedy of Camelot is imaginatively explored. For example, he provides an excellent description of the Queen in her early twenties, singing of the man she has fallen in love with, as she embroiders in her tower - an archetypal image from medieval and fairy-tale literature and romance, and one which has increasingly come to symbolise feminine enclosure, isolation and an enforcedly passive quality of waiting. He combines objective distance with compassionate insight in delineating a young girl who has not chosen her position as Queen, and who longs to be simply human: "Guenever was doing some petit point in the gloomy room, which she hated doing.... 'Oh, Lancelot', she sang as she stitched at the

122. TOAFK 480.

shield-crown. '...come back to tell me that it does not matter whether love is a sin or not. Come back to say that it is enough that I should be Jenny and you should be Lance, whatever may happen to anybody'" [123]. Ray Garnett's recommendation that White read Tolstoy in order to enhance his understanding of women bore positive fruit; later, when describing the Queen's possessive jealousy, he likens her emotional impasse to that of Anna Karenina: "Seeing so much further into the future than he did, she pressed towards it with passionate tread, wrecking the present because the future was bound to be a wreck" [124]. The imaginative empathy of this insight makes for a distinct improvement on the author's initially patronising attitude towards Guenever [125].

In spite of the fact that it is her sexual transgression that incurs so much damage to the society of Camelot, she is presented as healthily sensual rather than as a potentially lethal vamp. Although one of the reasons for her flaring temper is later frankly given as sexual frustration, she is relatively gently treated in this respect: there is no trace of Morgause's devouring nymphomania in her. Warner remarks that "Guenever is [White's] only full-grown woman drawn without

123. TOAFK 374-6.

124. TOAFK 385. White in fact acknowledges his indebtedness, writing to David Garnett: "It will be through [the Russian novels], but particularly through Ray that Guenever has turned out to be a living being ... I have attended to [her] with something more than respect. With fear, almost" (Warner 166).

125. See 83 above.

dislike of her shape" in spite of the fact that her creator confessed "I dislike the shape of women very much..." [126]. He generously gives Guenever "a splendid figure" [127], describing her as raven-haired and full-breasted. Interestingly enough, she is increasingly sensually treated as she ages. In the autumn of her life, Lancelot is described lavishing compliments on her physical attributes: he sings the praises of her arms and her hair [128] in true courtly love fashion, although the effect is touching rather than bombastic or hyperbolic.

White goes further than simply providing an attractive characterisation of Guenever; he attempts to add an enlightening dimension to the often blunt presentation of the Queen as hysterical, jealous and selfish in the *Morte Darthur*. It is remarkable that the misogynist White is the first author in five centuries to draw attention to Guenever's inability to have children. (Since then, most twentieth-century treatments of the legend have highlighted this, some of them detailing the suffering caused by repeated miscarriages and stillbirths.) This contributes to the dramatic irony of the Arthurian tragedy, because the reader has irrefutable proof, in the shape of Mordred, that it is Guenever, not Arthur, who is barren. What is more, it is her failure to present an heir that allows Mordred so dangerously (and eventually, fatally) close to the

126. Warner 152.

127. TOAFK 417.

128. TOAFK 536, 561.

throne. Apart from this ominous irony, her childlessness causes the Queen immense misery. The author points out that not only did she lack a child on which to lavish her love and attention, but that nerve-stretching inactivity and emptiness must have been a result: "...she was the one of the three who most ought to have had children, ... and whom God had seemingly made for breeding lovely children - she was the one who was left an empty vessel, a shore without a sea. This was what broke her when she came to the age at which her sea must finally dry....Guenever ... could not vanish into the English forest for a year's adventure with the spear. It was her part to sit at home, though passionate, though real and hungry in her fierce and tender heart" [129].

Yet, as with the men she loves, the one attribute Guenever is singularly lacking in is self-pity. White salutes the forthright courage with which she faces the obstacles of her difficult and demanding life: "Generosity, courage, honesty, pity, the faculty to look short life in the face - certainly comradeship and tenderness - these qualities may explain why Guenever took Lancelot as well as Arthur. It was courage more than anything else - the courage to take and give from the heart, while there was time. Poets are always urging women to have this kind of courage. She gathered her rosebuds while she might, and the striking thing was that she ^{only} gathered two of them, which she kept always, and that those two were the best"

129. TOAFK 469.

130. TOAFK 468-9.

[130].

White's portrayal of Malory's Lancelot and Guenever is one of the most satisfactory aspects of *The Ill-Made Knight*. The fascination of their characters mitigates against the dense and complex plot. The structure of this volume is convoluted, but not confusing to a reader familiar with Malory, as White simply traces the fortunes of Lancelot right through the *Morte Darthur* and combines them into one volume. Thus he includes most of the material in Malory's "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake", those sections in "The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones" and "The Tale of the Sankgreal" which tell of Lancelot, and most of "The Book of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere" [131]. The form of this section, then, is determined by Malory's narrative, as is the development of its hero's character. Where Malory's Lancelot is naive and unrealistically idealistic, so is White's. Similarly, as Malory's Lancelot becomes a saddened, thoughtful and compassionate man, enduring his heartbreak with wisdom and perception, so White's character develops and matures.

This volume has as its broad focus the potential for tragic chaos engendered by the relationship between Lancelot and Guenever. It is here that one becomes intimately acquainted with the anguish of the individuals involved, and the complex dynamics of their affair. It is in the next volume that the

131. For the sake of expediency, I have used Vinaver's headings.

destructive ramifications of their love for one another are finally realised.

As Malory ends "The Book of Lancelot and Guenever" with the healing of Sir Urry, so does White; and this scene becomes a celebration and vindication of his idealistic portrayal of Sir Lancelot. The latter considers suicide before the test of his moral integrity, for every inner lesson he has painstakingly learnt points towards his public humiliation and disgrace. Yet his previously implacable God allows a miracle, enabling Lancelot to fulfill his childhood dream. This points to the possibility of magnanimous grace intervening on behalf of the intrinsic integrity of a flawed and blameworthy human being who nevertheless does his best, and who is thus allowed temporarily to transcend the inexorable process of punishment. Recognising the spiritual implications of this event, White remarks, "The miracle was that he had^{been} allowed to do a miracle" [132]. As Arthur is to realise much later, in *The Book of Merlyn*, a degree of redemption can be experienced through one's desire to do good, even if one falls hopelessly short of one's standards in practice.

However, this demonstration of gracious reprieve from the consequences of personal sin is a stopgap, and no such miracles are present in the following volume, which charts the events of the final section of the *Morte Darthur*. It is significant that the final words of *The Ill-Made Knight* describe, in Malory's solemn prose, Lancelot's tears: "'And ever,' says Malory, 'Sir

132. TOAFK 511.

Lancelot wept, as he had been a child that had been beaten'" [133]. It is as if Lancelot begins a process that continues throughout the next volume, where grief becomes the keynote: Arthur, Guenever, Gawaine, even Mordred weep tears of grief, hopelessness, rage and frustration. Thus the next section of **The Once and Future King** is cloaked in an atmosphere of mourning.

133. TOAFK 511.

THE CANDLE IN THE WIND

This is the final and briefest volume of the revised 1958 omnibus version of *The Once and Future King*. In the structure of the latter, the two middle sections are each named for the person they focus on. Here the title suggests a metaphor for the condition of the Arthurian society, as did the title of the first volume. Just as the sword in the stone was both a physical reality and a symbol for the unrealised potential of Arthur's reign, so the candle in the wind signifies those ideals which have become a frail light (but a light, nonetheless) against the impending storm which will inevitably extinguish them. Yet this book is also a sequel to the second volume, as it fulfils the promise of darkness suggested in *The Queen of Air and Darkness*. The grievances of the adult Orkneys, simmering since childhood, now pose a serious threat to Arthur's court. The ominous hints of strife are fully realised and Mordred, whose conception took place in the second volume, is now old and strong enough to avenge himself on his father. White also provides a link with the previous volume by continuing the history of Lancelot and Guenever. Thus he draws together various threads from all three previous books in *The Candle in the Wind*.

This volume opens in an atmosphere of treachery and intrigue, as Agravaine and Mordred rehearse their grudges, voice their dissatisfaction with Arthur's reign and plan rebellion. Having thus set the stage for the collapse that is to follow, White then turns to a glowing description of the last flowering of Arthur's world, which his son is so anxious to destroy. The

third chapter of this volume comprises a colourful composite picture of medieval life. Here White's exuberance, his eye for the witty or unusual detail, and his delight in historical quirks (indulged to the full in his book on the late eighteenth century, *The Age of Scandal: An Excursion through a Minor Period* [134]) are given free rein for the last time in *The Once and Future King*.

Now, safe in the apple-green sunset ... stretched the fabled Merry England of the Middle Ages, when they were not so dark.... under the window in Arthur's Gramarye, the sun's rays flamed from a hundred jewels of stained glass in monasteries and convents, or danced from the pinnacles of cathedrals and castles, which their builders had actually loved.... Picture the insides of those ancient churches ... insides blazing with colour, plastered with frescoes in which all the figures stood on tiptoe, fluttering with tapestry or with brocades from Baghdad.... Lastly there were ... the coruscating mixture of oddities who reckoned that they possessed the things called souls as well as bodies, and who fulfilled them in the most surprising ways. In Silvester the Second, a famous magician ascended the papal throne, although he was notorious for having invented the pendulum clock. A fabled King of France called Robert, who had suffered the misfortune to be excommunicated, ran into dreadful troubles about his domestic arrangements, because the only two servants who could be persuaded to cook for him insisted on burning the saucepans after meals.... It was the age of fullness, of wading into everything up to the neck.... Arthur was the heart's king of a chivalry which had reached its flower perhaps two hundred years before our antiquarian author began to work. He was the badge of everything good in the Middle Ages, and he had made these things himself [135].

This joyous and audacious blend of historical fact and fiction is presented with elegiac nostalgia, tempered as it is by the knowledge that the serenity and harmony that allow for such

134. London: Jonathan Cape, 1950.

135. TOAFK 527-9.

diversity are shortly to be destroyed. White shows that the imminent collapse of Arthur's court will also mean the demise of the rich civilisation that is attributed to his reign, and thus underlines the enormity of Mordred's planned revolt.

As in Malory's last book, the focus returns to Arthur. White combines the image of a leader with the reins slipping from his fingers, with that of a respected sovereign in the final flowering of greatness. Presented as a seasoned and regal savant, with an unshakeable sense of justice and duty to his subjects, his character is a far cry from that of the eager youth who relied on his tutor and foster-family for support and advice in the early days of his reign. Nevertheless, he retains the qualities of generosity and bravery that marked his boyhood. His courage is now tried by a sequence of far more sombre ordeals than those of his unusual education. These revolve around a choice that is no choice at all: to allow the destruction of Camelot and all it stands for, or publicly to flout the values that he has cultivated throughout his reign, and which he has finally codified into a legal system of justice. White once again highlights an irony that is only implicit in Malory: Arthur is forced into this appalling position by his own life's work. This is articulated by Agravaine once he and Mordred have manouvered the king into a confrontation: "'Hoist with his own petard!'" [136]. Thus Arthur is obliged to co-operate with the rebel Orkneys in their plot to expose Lancelot and Guenever, be present at the

136. TOAFK 554.

subsequent attempted execution of the Queen, banish his chief knight and follow him to France to make war on him, all in the name of the justice he himself has created. This explains his inability to act in the scene where Lancelot returns Guenever to court, only to be sentenced to banishment for killing Gareth. Condemned by Gawaine, Lancelot begs Arthur to announce his own wishes:

"If it is the King's judgement, I shall accept it."

"The King is agreed with me already, before ye came."

"Arthur..."

"Speak to the King by his title."

"Sir, is this true?"

But the old man only bowed his head.

"At least let me hear it from the King's mouth!"

Mordred said: "Speak, father."

He shook his head like a baited bear. He moved it with the heavy movement of a bear, but would not look from the floor [137].

White tries to maintain a careful balance between presenting Arthur's helplessness as he is manipulated by his son and nephews, and his dignity as a king determined to be just and gracious even as his kingdom collapses about his ears. However, his tactic of humanising Malory's awe-inspiring characters does not operate as smoothly as in the previous volume; the figure of Arthur seems to present more problems than Lancelot or Guenever. In the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's symbolic role as king overrides his human foibles. This reflects the medieval belief that the concept of kingship was inviolable, just as the image of the Papacy was in itself

137. TOAFK 599-600.

138. C. Erickson, *The Medieval Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 129-134.

sufficient to withstand many a bad Pope [138]. Steinbeck notes that "...Malory considered [Arthur] a hero, but he was also a king anointed. This second quality tended to make him remote.... As a person, Malory's Arthur is a fool. As a legend he is timeless" [139]. This may be why the attempt to restore Arthur's mortality is problematic. White does not always succeed at this onerous task, and the tension between his presentation of Arthur both as a legendary king and as a bewildered and grief-stricken old man is occasionally strained. The discrepancy between his venerable dignity ("He looked old.... But it was the noble oldness of self-respect" [140]), and his human limitations ("... a lonely old gentleman who had worn his crown for half a lifetime in the teeth of fate" [141]) becomes too marked at times, a problem which persists in *The Book of Merlyn*.

White's gift for characterisation is nevertheless at its most polished in this book, and he rounds out not only Arthur, but other chief characters as well. Lancelot and Guenever, already familiar, receive a special gloss, and vivid thumbnail sketches of the Orkneys are provided. Of the latter, White pays especially close attention to Mordred, whose star is in ascendancy as the villain who sets in motion the final tableaux of disaster and tragedy. It is only in post-war Arthurian fiction that Mordred has been presented as essentially good,

139. *The Acts of King Arthur*, Appendix 390, 418.

140. TOAFK 539.

141. TOAFK 550.

but mistaken or misunderstood [142]; White follows in the tradition of describing him as unmitigatedly evil. He loses none of his virulent hatred of all that represents good in the author's hands, but according to White, his is not "motiveless malignity". He has suffered that which White considered to be the root of all evils: an unhappy childhood, and an unhealthy relationship with a smothering mother who poisoned his mind. ("I expect she ate Mordred...like a spider" [143]). He is also hampered by a hunched back, which would have disqualified him from the usual feats of arms by which an ambitious knight might prove and advance himself. As an embittered and power-crazed cripple, he bears a resemblance to Shakespeare's Richard III; but White likens him to a far more modern despot - Hitler himself - to the extent of having Mordred give hysterical, rabble-rousing speeches about Jews. This is one reflection of the author's horror of the war in which Hitler had embroiled Europe; the problem is that by making the history of Mordred's rise to power into an overt allegory of the events taking place in war-torn Europe, he dates his work somewhat [144]. Like Hitler, Mordred ends up more than a little mad. While he plots the downfall of Camelot, one notes with a measure of respect

142. See Taylor and Brewer 302: "The historical rather than the romantic approach also allows authors more freedom in presenting other characters Mordred assumes a variety of different guises and is often presented sympathetically."

143. TOAFK 606.

144. White was not alone, however, in likening the villain of his piece to Hitler; in Mervyn Peake's *Titus* books, begun during the war, the satanic Steerpike is also metamorphosed into a Hitler figure. See Lesley Marx's ^{The} *Dark Circus: A Study of Mervyn Peake*, unpublished thesis, UCT: 1983.

his combination of intelligence and sheer nerve. He rapidly assesses and exploits every situation that might advance his cause, and his powers of manipulation border on the hypnotic. The blunt and guileless Gawaine seems to be clay in his hands as Mordred incites him to revenge: "'We had the same mother, Gawaine.... And she was Gareth's mother too...'" [145]. However, once Arthur is in France, and the deviousness of Mordred becomes increasingly incredible, culminating in his false report of the king's death, and his intention of marrying the Queen, White no longer finds redeeming qualities or logical motivation and diagnoses insanity. What is more, this is no ordinary insanity: Mordred is described as finally possessed by the persona of his mother. White cannot resist one more bitter fling at the mother whom he blamed for ruining his life: "It is the mother's not the lover's lust ~~that~~ rots the mind. It is that which condemns the tragic character to his walking death.... Desdemona robbed of life ... is nothing to a Mordred, robbed of himself - his soul stolen,... wizened, while the mother-character lives in triumph,...with stifling love endowed on him.... Mordred ... stayed alone with her for twenty years - her living larder. Now that she was dead, he had become her grave. She existed in him like [a] vampire" [146].

This volume represents White's closest following of Malory, although he no longer provides a narrative flow comprising sequential adventures from the *Morte Darthur*. Instead he

145. TOAFK 594.

146. TOAFK 610.

selects the chief events of Malory's final book and fashions them into a series of tragic cameos. The author originally envisaged this section as drama, but the play he wrote (also called *The Candle in the Wind*) was ponderous and slow-moving [147]. Although he reworked it substantially to transform it into a suitable conclusion to his saga, the shape of the play still shows: the action takes place in a series of halls, castles, tents and bedchambers, and events are largely described secondhand in lengthy portions of dialogue, as the focus shifts from one closely described scene to the next. These are seemingly isolated, yet connected by a causal relationship of disaster.

White now simply amplifies Malory's presentation of events, rather than explicating them. Even the dialogue in many of the chief scenes is simply an expanded and embellished rendering of that in the *Morte Darthur*. As in "The Book of the Dolorous Death and Departing of King Arthur", this section is the one in which everybody's sins come home to roost, and the tragedy inherent in the complex situation at Camelot is finally realised. Arthur is confronted with the product of his incest in the form of the treacherous Mordred, whose bitterness and resentment are fanned by the knowledge that his father tried to destroy him as an infant. It is merely a matter of time before Mordred openly rebels against Arthur and divides England against itself. The adultery of Lancelot and Guenever is finally and inevitably made public, and the subsequent events -

147. Warner 175-6.

Lancelot's rescue of the Queen from the stake, and the ensuing siege of Benwick - lead irrevocably towards the separation of the lovers. Their last scenes together are movingly described: having wrestled with the presentation of their characters in the previous volume, White feels at ease describing the Indian summer of their love. He takes a leaf out of Malory's book in applauding their constancy: "In those days people loved each other for their lives ... They had a God in heaven and a goddess on earth ... [whom] they neither chose...by the passing standards of the flesh alone, nor abandoned it lightly when the bruckle thing began to fail" [148]. Having suffered the pangs of guilty love for a quarter of a century, their tragedy is perhaps the most human and intimate of all the disasters that befall the court, and as such is the most adroitly handled by the author. His description of their penultimate parting is bittersweet without verging on sentimentality:

With a lifted head [Lancelot] raised their tragedy to nobleness and gravity.

"Well, madam, it seems that we must part." He took her by the hand ... translating her into his remembered lady.

Something in his grip, in his step, in the fullness of his voice, made her bloom again - it was their last partnership - into the Rose of England. He lifted her to a crest of conquest which they had forgotten.... There, poising her flushing, the archstone of the realm, he made an end....

"I stand...for the last time as the Queen's champion. I stand to tell you, lady and madam, in the presence of all this court, that if any danger may threaten you in future, then one poor arm will come from France to defend you - and so let all remember."

He kissed her fingers deliberately, turned stiffly, and began to pace in silence down the long length of the room" [149].

148. TOAFK 524.

149. TOAFK 601.

However, White does not deal with the entire sweep of tragedy in Malory's last book as skilfully. One problem that he encounters is that the final section of the *Morte Darthur* represents Malory's writing at its best. The difficulty of 'improving' on Malory has already been discussed; and here the method that White used in the previous volume, of recounting Malory's story with added detail and emotional elucidation, becomes over-burdened. The stark tragedy of the events must be delicately handled, and although White does an admirable job, it is difficult to avoid piling one anguishing scene on top of another. This sometimes borders on bathos: one example is the scene where Gawaine discovers that in rescuing the Queen, Lancelot has slain Gareth. To begin with, the spectacle of Arthur's dreadful turmoil as he gives the order for his wife to be burnt, prior to witnessing the execution, is harrowing enough: "'What is right?' cried the old man ... with a face of misery. 'What is wrong? If Lancelot ^{does} come to rescue her, he may kill those innocent fellows ... which I have set to burn her. They have trusted me and I have put them there to keep him off, because it is justice. If he saves her, they will be killed. If they are not killed, she will be burned. But burned to death, Gawaine, in horrible burning flames - and she is my much-loved Gwen'" [150]. This cry of anguish from the tortured king, with the touching inclusion of his private pet-name for the Queen, is uttered against a backdrop in which Mordred has shown indecent eagerness for the execution to take

150. TOAFK 575.

place, Gareth and Gaheris have reluctantly agreed to form part of the Queen's guard, trusting that Lancelot will spare them when he sees them unarmed, and Gawaine - who refuses point-blank to take any part in the proceedings - has remained behind to comfort and support Arthur. The scene is made yet more pitiful as they kneel to pray; however, White now briefly swings the pendulum from pathos to endearing humour. The king and his nephew practically dance with glee as Lancelot carries away the queen, and even order a celebratory drink afterwards. The warmth of this touch is welcome ("[Arthur's] age, the suggestion of infirmity, had lifted from him.... 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'" [151]), but one cannot help suspecting White of deliberately exploiting the reader's emotions, since the moment of relief is immediately followed by Mordred's announcement, painfully drawn out, of the slaying of Gareth and Gaheris. The celebration in the King's chamber is cruelly translated into a wake, and although the description of Arthur's stunned sense of shock and Gawaine's overwhelming grief is genuinely pathetic, it loses the sense of dignity essential to tragedy, and becomes simply tear-jerking: "Blubbering and still running, the red, mountainous man was in the room once more. He was running to Arthur like a child. He was sobbing: 'It is true! It is true! I found a man wha' saw it done. Poor Gaheris and our brother Gareth - he has killed them both, unarmed.' He fell on his knees. He buried his sand-white head in the old King's

151. TOAFK 581.

mantle" [152].

This disproportionate accumulation of pathos is repeated elsewhere. Lancelot's desperate plea for reconciliation before the assembled court, useless in the face of Gawaine's bitter desire for vengeance and the King's helpless misery, is another such scene: "The ill-made knight turned to his oldest friend, to the first person he had loved He dropped the language of chivalry, falling into the simple tongue. 'Can't we be forgiven? Can't we be friends again? We have come back in penitence, when we needn't have come at all. Won't you remember the old days, when we fought together and were friends'" [153]. The sense of Lancelot's heartbreak, and the intimate, almost wheedling words turn the screw of misery too far: they are top-heavy, coming as they do after the drawn-out distress of the siege, and the awkward return to court in the face of Mordred's malevolence and Gawaine's unappeased rage. The inevitable comparison with the imposing and stately purity of the original further dilutes the tragic reach of this passage. Malory's words are:

"'Sir, the king may do as he will,' said sir Gawaine, 'but wit thou well, sir Lancelot, thou and I shall never be accorded while we live, for thou hast slain ... my brethren ... traitorly and piteously, for they bore none harness against thee ...'

'Sir, God would they had been armed,' said sir Lancelot, 'for then had they been on live. And wit you well ... as for Gareth, I loved no kinsman I had more than I loved him I will bewail sir Gareth his death ... for many causes which cause me to be sorrowful. One is that I made him knight ... anon as I heard that sir Gareth was dead, I knew

152. TOAFK 584.

153. TOAFK 598.

well that I should never after have your love ... but everlasting war betwixt us.... And as Jesu be my help, and by my knighthood, I slew never sir Gareth nother his brother by my willing, but alas that ever they were unarmed that unhappy day!" [154].

This speech diminishes White's rendition:

Gawaine flung back his head.

"The King may do as he will. My mind was made up six months ago, when I found Sir Gareth in his blood - unarmed."

"I would to God he had been armed, for then he might have withstood me. He might have killed me, and saved our misery."

"A noble speech."

The old fellow cried out passionately and suddenly, to anybody who would listen: "Why will you believe that I wanted to kill them? I knighted Gareth. I loved him. The moment I heard he was dead, I knew you would never forgive me. I knew it meant the end of hope. It was against my interest to kill Sir Gareth" [155].

Yet White's difficulty with the adequate presentation of tragedy is not an unusual literary phenomenon in the modern age. Committed as he is to a certain convention of rhetoric - the colloquialisms of his time, nation and class - he is hampered by what George Steiner calls the "paucity of tragic language". Discussing the failure of some modern tragedies, the latter writes: "The thinning out of language has condemned much of recent literature to mediocrity.... The brute snobbish fact is that men who die speaking as does Macbeth are more tragic than those who sputter platitudes..." [156]. (This perhaps explains why many recent Arthurian novels attempt to create pseudo-historical conventions of speech, thus giving

154. *The Morte Darthur* (ed. Brewer) 125.

155. TOAFK 598-9.

156. "The Retreat from the Word" in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958 - 1966* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967) 50.

themselves greater dramatic allowance in communicating the tragedy of the legend.) Perhaps White could not marry the grandeur of Malory's tragedy with the characters - lovable, accessible, yet slightly diminished in stature - that he had drawn. It is interesting that the flawless tragic poignancy he sought to create here is more successfully achieved in his earlier novel *Farewell Victoria* [157], which traces the history and quiet decline of a humble man whose simple life as a groom is slowly destroyed by the inexorable inroads of progress into post-Victorian society.

The idealism which White has infused throughout the rest of the book seems to falter in this section. One interesting example of this is the constant stress on the physical ageing of the protagonists of the legend. Close descriptions of greying hair and wrinkles remind the reader of the mortality of the characters, and provide a rationale for their inability to maintain control. What is significant is that those who are essentially good and who propagate the values of idealism (Arthur, Lancelot, Guenever and eventually Gawaine) are portrayed as growing older and, by implication, weaker. Mordred - the personification of evil - is the only one who is presented as ageless: "Mordred, the cold wisp of a man, did not seem to have any age. His years, like the depths of his blue eyes, and the inflexions of his...voice, were non-committal" [158]. As White's vision darkens, he presents the forces of

157. Collins, 1933. London: Jonathan Cape 1969.

158. TOAFK 512.

good as physically frail, with the tiredness of old age; whereas wickedness springs up with perennial vigour.

This clouding of idealism becomes apparent as White attempts to bring Malory's epic to a close. Arthur's musing on the failure of his efforts, and his attempts to find some crumb of comfort, reflect White's own struggle to find some uplifting motif that will mitigate against the anguish and despair of the cataclysm with which the legend ends. Disillusioned by the grinding process of war, it is possible that he now found the *Morte Darthur*'s parallels with his own time distressing rather than challenging. Fast losing hope that his fellow people would recognise the imperative need for peace, he struggles to salvage some faith in humankind, while at the same time disappointed, even sickened, by the human penchant for repeating the same dismal mistakes over the centuries. The occasional tone of reproach in *The Candle in the Wind* ("They were always saying that the present [war] was to be the last" [159]) reflects the bitterness of a man who had lived through the war to end wars, and was now being dragged yet again into a world war. Hence the mental effort of the aged king to find some key that would both explain and eliminate the human tendency towards violence.

White finds his initial solution in returning to the concept of youth, which symbolised both idealistic purity and the desire to learn in *The Sword in the Stone*: "[Arthur] observed the boy

159. TOAFK 630.

.... It was a long time since he had seen youth's innocence and certainty" [160]. Just as the education of the eager and fresh boy Wart was to become the genesis of the high ideals and gallantry of the Round Table, so Arthur instructs a young page in his beliefs, and commissions him to pass them on to future generations. What is more, the twelve-year old page is none other than Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel himself [161]. This apocryphal device is charming, and the ceremony in which the young Malory is knighted and charged to "carry the light" makes for a comforting cadence. It is after this gesture of perpetuation, that Arthur is able to relax his dogged effort to find some solution to the wickedness of humankind. Having entrusted the ideals of chivalry to an appropriately youthful (and therefore uncorrupted) vessel, the king finds a measure of peace, and the last words of *The Candle in the Wind* describe him facing his death graciously: "The fate of this man ... was less than a drop, although it was a sparkling one, in the great blue motion of the ^{sunlit} sea. The cannons of his adversary were thundering in the tattered morning when the Majesty of England drew himself up to meet the future with a peaceful heart" [162].

However, this ending is both too abrupt and too vague, and the young Tom is too slender a straw to siphon off the sense of

160. TOAFK 633.

161. This was long before W. Matthews published *The Ill-Framed Knight* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), and opened the debate as to which Malory wrote the *Morté Darthur*.

162. TOAFK 638.

tragedy already engendered. One is able to witness the resolution of Arthur's anguish, but no final glimpse of Lancelot and Guenever is provided. In the light of their importance in the complete work, this gives a sense of omission and incompleteness to this volume. It also seems strange that in the final analysis White, who was committed to presenting his Arthurian saga as a tragedy, should shrink from presenting the rest of Malory's final volume. Perhaps he did not feel equal to recreating the pitiless purity of the final tragic sweep of the *Morte Darthur*. Nevertheless, although the last battle at Salisbury and its aftermath are described by Malory with a measure of ruthlessness, they are imbued with a sense of inevitability, and form the climax of the entire work. The *Morte Darthur*, named for Arthur's death, progresses inexorably to this end; and by flinching from presenting the full complement of death and disaster with which it ends, White robs his initial conclusion of a full sense of catharsis.

White was well aware of the deficiencies of this attempt, and the very fact that he was unhappy with the ending of *The Candle in the Wind* points one in the direction of *The Book of Merlyn*.

THE BOOK OF MERLYN

Arthur is presented as having found an answer to the questions that were troubling him at the end of *The Candle in the Wind*, but White had found neither comprehensive answers to the problem of violence, nor peace of mind. It would seem as if he was seeking a happy ending - not to the Arthurian tragedy, but to the saga of humankind's appalling and ferocious blunders. His determination to write an alternative final volume for *The Once and Future King* stemmed from more than one source. His dissatisfaction at his personal failure to discover and preach a sane alternative to warfare, and an attempt to remedy this, was one driving force. Another was the realisation that having brought the tragedy of the *Morte Darthur* so far, it was necessary to go through with Malory's rendition of the ending, and complete the story of the death and destruction of Arthur and his Round Table.

Unfortunately, White confuses these motives, with unhappy results for *The Book of Merlyn*. Carried away with enthusiasm for his new project, he wrote to his former Cambridge tutor: "You see, I have ^{suddenly} discovered that...the central theme of the *Morte Darthur* is to find an antidote to war ..." [163]. Not only is this a highly debatable claim, but it works in opposition to his original response to the *Morte Darthur* as a tragedy, which he would have done well to stick to. The ensuing volume becomes schizophrenic in its attempts to marry these perceptions, and one cannot help sharing Warner's sense

163. Warner 178.

of frustration when she writes, "It is *asthough* the book were written by two people: the storyteller and the clever man with a notebook who shouts him down" [164]. As has been mentioned, White notes that "Pendragon can still be saved, and elevated into a superb success by ... taking Arthur back to his animals" [165], but it is the Arthurian legend's status as tragedy that requires attention at this point, rather than its problem of violence. The result was that *The Book of Merlyn* was ultimately a better idea than a book. The exasperating thing is that thorough revision could have transformed it into a fitting finale to *The Once and Future King*, but White never saw it in print, and thus did not rework it.

As it stands, *The Book of Merlyn* is written in a fashion that is by turns impulsive, improvident, overly self-confident and strident. It contains some of White's worst writing together with his best, a mixture that results in extreme unevenness of tone. One redeeming quality is the leaven of humour the author distributes throughout: for example, one of Merlyn's spells goes astray, causing the badger to "rummage in its chair, ... turning up slips of paper covered with Merlyn's handwriting in all directions.... [One] said briefly: 'Half a rose noble each way on Golden Miller.' The [next], which smelt strongly of *QuelquesFleurs* ... said: 'Queen Phillipa's monument at Charing Cross, seven-thirty ...' There were a lot of kisses on the bottom, ^{of it} and ... some notes for a poem [which] said: Hooey?

164. TBOM 24.

165. Warner 176'. See 33 above.

Coué? Chopsuey? The poem itself, which began 'Cooee/ Nimue' was erased" [166].

White's intentions ("I shall have the marvellous opportunity of ... ending on an animal note like the one I began on. This will turn my^{...} epic into a perfect fruit, 'rounded off and bright and done'" [167].) are not entirely undermined by the violent polemic of *The Book of Merlyn*. There is a sense of circularity in the return to the teacher and the animals that sets the rise of idealism in motion, and in fact Merlyn's first words to his former protégé on his return are, "The wheel ~~is~~ come full circle: I am here" [168]. The return to the fantasy devices employed in *The Sword in the Stone* is structurally satisfying, as Arthur is once again transposed back to the magical world where animals speak and Merlyn's spells are genuinely extraordinary, even if still characterised by comic disorganisation. ("[Merlyn] extended his hand into the ether, with a well-remembered gesture, and the apparatus began to materialise obediently: muddled up as usual" [169].) Even the animals are the same ones, miraculously untouched by age, who shared his adventures as a child; the owl Archimedes, the Wart's favourite dog Cavall, the badger who gave him his last lesson, even the goat who was the first to give him the emperor's salute, are all present. However, although Arthur's

166. TBOM 81-3.

167. Warner 179.

168. TBOM 33.

169. TBOM 46.

reunion with the animals of his childhood is a happy occasion, the vital quality of youth itself is no longer present, and the idyllic bliss associated with the use of fantasy in the first volume is lacking. The tragedy has progressed too far to be alleviated by the glow of childhood joy, and the doomed and traumatised king's grief is too serious to be eased by a spell. Magic may still be useful as an instrument of instruction, but it is powerless to provide any remedies for the perennial problem of suffering. Thus, a complete rejuvenation is impossible, and the aged king in fact refuses Merlyn's offer of the elixir of life with dignity: "No", he said, with a sort of firm apology. 'I have earned my body and mind with many years of labour. It would be undignified to change them.... If it were my body which were to be made young, it would be unsuitable to keep an old mind in it. While, if you were to change them both, the labour of living all those years would turn to vanity.... We must keep the state of life to which it has pleased God to call us'" [170].

Having once drawn Arthur into the badger's sett, White appoints Merlyn as his spokesman on the subject of the gross failings of the human race, in particular, its seemingly innate tendency to violence. The deviation from the Matter of Britain that follows is both hectoring and at times tedious. A typical diatribe is one on the subject of the mania of warfare:

'Where is this marvellous superiority which makes the twentieth century superior to the Middle Ages, and

the Middle Ages superior to primitive races and to the beasts of the field? Is man so particularly good at controlling his Might and Ferocity...? He massacres the members of his own species like a cannibal! Do you know that Lapouge has reckoned that nineteen million men are killed in Europe in every century, so that the amount of blood spilled would feed a fountain of blood running seven hundred litres an hour since the beginning of history? ... War, in Nature herself outside of man, is so much a rarity that it scarcely exists.... If Nature ever troubled to look at man, the little atrocity, she would be shocked out of her wits' [171].

It seems reasonable to assume that this denunciation, and those that follow are coloured by White's bitterness. The rural lifestyle that gave him solace, and which he extols throughout *The Once and Future King* was especially vulnerable to the ravages of warfare, and this perhaps accounts for the note of desperation in Merlyn's stridency. The author's personal indignation at his own unhappy situation is reflected in the complaint "...the one unutterably wicked thing about a war is conscription'" [172]. To aggravate the situation, White (in the guise of Merlyn) further alienates one by patronising his audience, and by implication the reader: "'Perhaps I have painted a dark picture of the humans,' said Merlyn doubtfully, 'not very dark, but it might have been a shade lighter. It was because I wanted you to understand about looking at animals.... In the course of a long experience of the human race, I have learned that you can never make them understand anything, unless you rub it in'" [173]. It would appear that the disillusioned White has entirely forgotten the allegory

171. TBOM 65.

172. TBOM 168.

173. TBOM 80-1.

that the Wart heard on his first boyhood visit to the badger's sett, when he was told a charming version of the Creation story, in which the human species is appointed God's favourite, and given the Order of Dominion on account of its wisdom and potential. [174].

What is ironic is that White has the animals recognise that the voluble fulminating of Merlyn (and by proxy, White) is at best tactless, and at worst arrogant in view of the terrible suffering that Arthur has undergone as ruler and representative of an entire kingdom of human beings; yet he is unable to check the flood of evidence for the prosecution of humankind, which C.N. Manlove refers to rather disparagingly as "Merlyn's unchecked blare" [175]. Although the good-natured monarch at first welcomes the intellectual wrangling that takes place as a distraction from his personal griefs, he is increasingly disheartened by Merlyn's relentless judgement of the evil of the human race. Eventually stung into responding ("I suppose I had better go away and drown myself. I am cheeky, insignificant, ferocious, stupid and impolitic. It hardly seems to be worth our going on" [176]), he is soothed by the animals, who chide Merlyn for his harsh words. However, to the detriment of the story, the soapbox-orator instinct in White remains unassuaged until nearly a hundred pages later.

174. TSITS 265-7.

175. "Listening to the Wizard", Times Literary Supplement (21 April 1977): 451.

176. TBOM 76.

Hardly surprisingly, the transformations into animals that follow are overtly didactic. Arthur is metamorphosed first into an ant, then into a goose, but this time the experiences are sobering ones. These lessons no longer take the form of the joyous romps of his childhood. The king himself has altered beyond remedy, and is incapable of feeling the appropriate excitement. "This, his faculty of wonder, was gone from inside him, however much Merlyn might have furbished up his brain. It was exchanged - for the faculty of discrimination, he supposed.... He did not feel proud of the change" [177]. The totalitarian nightmare of life among the ants is in any case entirely removed from the exciting, challenging and amusing adventures of *The Sword in the Stone*. Nevertheless, like the boy he once was, the king is still courageous to the point of foolhardiness. Horrified by the senselessness and the false premise of the ant war, he turns to face their army, "ready to oppose their passage with his life" [178] in a precursor of the gesture with which he tries to halt the march of his own army at Salisbury. Although White tries to cram too many analogies into the description of the ants (at times one is not certain whether he is satirising the human propensity for warring on its own kind, the fascism of the Axis powers, or the communist practice of nationalising property), the very repulsiveness of the ant community tells its own story: Arthur's response to them is to cry, "'The most dreadful thing about them was that they were like human beings - not

177. TBOM 85.

178. TBOM 102.

human, but like humans, a bad copy'" [179].

The description of Arthur's experiences among the geese which follows, is radically different in tone, if not in intent. Here White borrows substantially from material he had written two years previously, for a book that was never completed - **The Grief of the Grey Goose**. The four chapters that follow are a reminder of the author's remarkable descriptive and evocative powers. His imaginative vision of the world from a bird's eye view is not only lyrically beautiful, but vivid with life and texture. The Lincolnshire sea-marsh, the cry of the birds, the changes of wind and sky - these are described with the authentic ring of experience. Life with the geese-flock is punctuated by lessons on the merits of peaceful anarchy, but is mainly characterised by the pleasures of a free and untrammelled life among the natural elements of sky, sea and wind. The elation of experiences such as flying through cumulus clouds is closely conveyed:

Wraiths of mist suddenly moving like serpents of the air would coil about them for a second. Grey damp would be around them, and the sun, a copper penny, would fade away.... And there they would hang in chartless nothing, seemingly without speed or left or right or top or bottom, until as suddenly as ever the copper penny glowed and the serpents writhed. Then, in a moment of time, they would be in the jewelled world once more: a sea under them like turquoise, and all the gorgeous palaces of heaven new created, with the dew of Eden not yet dry [180].

Not even in the first volume are the transformations into beasts and birds so intensely realised, or so imaginatively

179. TBOM 104.

180. TBOM 133.

described as in this section. In Warner's words, "The old patch [from *The Grief of the Grey Goose*] shames the new garment" [181].

The episode with the geese highlights a marked deviation from Malory's presentation of Arthur. In the final book of the *Morte Darthur*, the king, although tormented by nightmares and regrets, never contemplates escaping his fate; in *The Book of Merlyn*, the brutal snatching away of the king from his haven of peace among the geese reinforces the urgent longing of White's Arthur to evade his destiny. ("He proposed [to Lyo-lyok] one afternoon, not ardently, for he had known the world too long, but gently and hopefully ... He told her how, by joining her, he hoped to escape from Merlyn and the world.... But a dark hand came to fetch him ... He found himself swept backwards, not on pinion ... but dragged down into the filthy funnel of magic" [182].) This demonstrates that the presentation of the king in the previous volume as lovable and human, rather than austere and inscrutable, is being continued and developed. White's Arthur is at his most vulnerable and endearing in this book, and also at the furthest remove from his namesake in Malory. On occasion, the author goes too far in his treatment of his hero as a mere mortal: for example, he makes the patronising observation, "Perhaps, after all, the whole of our long story has been about a rather dim old gentleman, who would have been

181. TBOM 23.

182. TBOM 139-40.

better off at Cranford ... arranging for the village cricket and the choir treat" [183]. Apart from such lapses, however, the presentation of the old monarch is invariably respectful. Although often miserable and bewildered, he remains stately and dignified, usually referring to himself in the third person as befits a royal personage. His efforts to cling to his dignity in the face of the giddy events of the night are moving, as is the fortitude with which he finally accepts his impending death.

The scene in which Arthur finds both comfort and strength to face the morrow, as he contemplates the moonlight prospect of the kingdom he has ruled and served, seems to be more authentic than the flicker of peace the king experiences in the last few pages of *The Candle in the Wind*. The sheer miracle of existence, combined with the gladdening beauty of the English rural landscape softens Arthur's perception of the people who populate his beloved country:

He[^] felt the intense sad loveliness of being as being, apart from right or wrong: that, indeed, the mere fact of being was the ultimate right. He began to love the land under him with a fierce longing, not because it was good or bad, but because it was: because of the shadows of the corn stooks on a golden evening; because ... the lambs, sucking, would revolve their tails in little eddies; because the clouds in daylight would surge it into light and shade;..because the smoke from homesteads was a blue beard straying into heaven; because the stars were brighter in puddles than in the sky; because ... there were...dung hills with poppies on them; ... because in the moonlight there below, God's greatest blessing to the world was stretched, the silver gift of sleep.... He found that he loved it - more than Guenever, more than Lancelot ... It was his mother

and his daughter.... England was at the old man's feet, like a sleeping man-child. When it was awake it would stump about, grabbing things and breaking them ... nourishing its ego with amoral and relentless mastery. But in sleep its masculine force was abdicated. The man-child sprawled undefended now, vulnerable, a baby trusting the world to let it sleep in peace [184].

This interlude comes as a welcome relief after the expostulations of gloom and savage bitterness in the badger's den. In having Arthur turn to the beauty of landscape for solace, White is following in a time-honoured literary tradition [185]. More significantly, a compromised and workable form of the originally almost ingenuous idealism that marks much of *The Once and Future King* resurfaces. The implication now is that idealism no longer seeks perfection; rather, it can be contented simply with the hope of some loveliness from the dross of life. It is enough for Arthur that "stars were brighter in puddles than in the sky" and that "dung hills [had] poppies on them". This is validated by the grass-adder's final benediction: "...failure builds success, and nature changes. A good man's example always does instruct the ignorant and lessen their rage, little by little through the ages, until the spirit of the waters is content: and so, strong courage to Your Majesty, and a tranquil heart'" [186].

In the last chapter of *The Book of Merlyn*, the author's concern

184. TBOM 154-5.

185. An interesting aside is that Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poetry often celebrates the inspiration, joy and comfort to be found in natural beauty, was White's favourite poet. See C.N. Manlove, "Fantasy and Loss: T.H. White" in *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 97.

186. TBOM 176-7.

to provide a fitting ending to Malory's tragedy is once again in evidence. In marked contrast to the impulsive polemic and pontification of previous chapters, White's writing now becomes exquisitely controlled, even understated. The tapestry of Arthur's doom is no longer embroidered with pathetic details as in *The Candle in the Wind*, and it takes White only a few deft strokes to evoke a pitch of tragedy appropriate to the final obliterating battle. Although a return to a close following of the *Morte Darthur* is effected, White's presentation of Arthur as peace-loving holds sway to the extent that he is not shown slaying his traitorous son; rather, the last view one has of the benighted king is his attempt to halt the process of fighting: "...as King Arthur ran towards his own array, an old man, with white hair trying to stem the endless tide, holding out the knuckled hands in a gesture of pressing them back, struggling to the last against the flood of Might which had burst out all his life at a new place whenever he dammed it, so the tumult rose, the war-yell sounded, and the meeting waters closed *above* his head" [187].

White now turns to the fate of Lancelot and Guenever, and in a few lucid pages, describes their respective gentle deaths. The author wisely no longer attempts to transform Malory's moving speeches into touching modern dialogue, complete with melodramatic and sentimental detail, and aims for simplicity of narrative instead. (He does, however, provide a few characteristic touches; one learns that Guenever wears scented

187. TBOM 179.

linen, which is against the rules of the convent to which she retires, and that Lancelot becomes an excellent gardener.) Thus he circumvents Malory's rendition of Guenever's tender and painful renunciation of her lover, complete with the personal pronouns of intimacy and closeness: "'Through this same man and me hath all this war be wrought, and the death of the noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we loved together is my most noble lord slain.... And therefore, sir Lancelot, I require thee and beseech thee heartily, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, that thou see me no more in the visage.... And therefore go thou to thy realm and there take a wife, and live with her in joy and bliss.'" [188]) Instead, he provides a brief and sensitive summary of the situation: "The truth was that she was old and wise: she knew that Lancelot did care for God most passionately, that it was essential he should turn in that direction. So, for his sake, to make it easier for him, the great queen now renounced what she had fought for all her life, now set the example, and stood to her choice. She had stepped out of the picture" [189]. Lancelot's unflinching chivalry ("he climbed the convent wall with Gallic, ageing gallantry" [190]) and Guenever's sacrificial generosity in renouncing that chivalry are evoked as a means of resolving the lingering sense of tragedy, rather than as agents of intensification. Likewise, Malory's picture of Lancelot weeping with remorse on Arthur's grave after burying Guenever

188. Malory: *The Morte Darthur* (ed. Brewer) 151-2.

189. TBOM 180.

190. TBOM 180.

in it, is omitted. White's concern is now to communicate a sense of calm tranquillity, and he does so by enlarging on the happier details provided by Malory. The latter's description of Lancelot's life as a monk, the Bishop's joyous dream of Lancelot's ascension into heaven, and the subsequent discovery of his body ("he lay as he had smiled" [191]), surrounded by the savour of sainthood, are gracefully transcribed:

As for Lancelot, he became a hermit in earnest.... and lived in glad austerities apart from man. He even learned to distinguish bird-songs in the woods ... When his own death-hour came ... The old abbot dreamed of bells sounding most beautifully, and of angels, with happy laughter, hauling Lancelot to Heaven. They found him dead in his cell, in the act of accomplishing the third and last of his miracles. For he had died in what was called the Odour of Sanctity. When saints die, their bodies fill the room with lovely scent: perhaps of new hay, or of blossom in the spring, or of the clean sea-shore [192].

Finally, acknowledging that the threnody that Malory has Sir Ector speak at his brother's funeral cannot be bettered [193], White quotes directly from the *Morte Darthur* with respect and affection:

'Ah Lancelot, thou wert head of all Christian knights! ... there thou liest, that...were never matched of earthly knight's hand. And thou were the courtliest knight that ever bare shield! And thou were the truest friend of thy lover that ever bestrode horse, and thou were the truest lover, of a sinful man, that ever loved woman, and thou were the kindest man that ever strake with sword. And thou were the godliest person that ever came among press of knights, and thou were the meekest man and gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies. And

191. Malory: *The Morte Darthur* (ed. Brewer) 156.

192. TBOM 181-3.

193. "Sir Ector's "keen [is] one of the most touching pieces of prose in the language." TBOM 183.

thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that
ever put spear in rest.' [194]

Steiner warns that "Modern authors rarely quote their betters with impunity" [195], but in this case White is well aware of Malory's superiority, and in quoting him for the last time, does obeisance to the master who had so inspired and enthralled him. It is a fitting salute as well to White's portrayal of Lancelot, who, whatever his griefs and failures have been, has consistently sought to do his best. Malory's threnody, borrowed by White, further reinstates faith in the ascendancy of idealism tempered by actuality; paradoxically enough, the romantic and chivalric values this eulogy celebrates are true of the character who has been White's chief protagonist of the struggle between tragic realism and glorious idealism.

Having brought the tale of the eternal triangle at Camelot to a quiet and courtly end, White now provides both comfort and a necessary sense of distance, as he mentions the various myths surrounding Arthur's possible return. More overtly omniscient in this volume than any other, the author not only presents the theories that surround the subject, but contributes his own: "...I am inclined to believe that my beloved Arthur of the future is sitting at this very moment among his learned friends, in ... the College of Life, and that they are thinking awayⁱⁿ there for all they are worth, about the best means to help our curious species: and I for one hope that some day, when not only England but the world has need of them ... they will issue

194. TBOM 183-4; Malory: The Morte Darthur (ed. Brewer) 157.

195. Steiner 63.

from their rath in joy and power: and then, perhaps, they will give us happiness in the world once more and chivalry, and the old medieval blessing of certain simple people - who tried ... to still the ancient brutal dream of Attila the Hun" [196]. This, the end of White's Arthurian saga, once again resorts to the mode of fantasy to communicate hope. More than this, the author has an awareness of contributing, if not to the Arthurian resurrection, then certainly to the Arthurian renaissance. This is clearly shown at the beginning of the volume, where his consciousness of following in the long and honoured tradition of transmitting the story of Arthur is expressed with a depreciation that does not hide his satisfaction:

'There was a king,' [Merlyn] said, 'whom Nennius wrote about, and Geoffrey of Monmouth. The Archdeacon of Oxford was said to have a hand in him, and ... Gerald the Welshman. Brut, Layamon, and the rest ... what a lot of lies they all managed to tell! ... a romantic Elizabethan called Hughes recognised his extraordinary problem of love.... [Then] came masters of music like Purcell, and later still such titans as the Romantics, endlessly dreaming about our king.... After a bit there was poor old White, who thought...we represented the ideas of chivalry. He said that our importance lay in our decency, in our resistance against the bloody mind of man. What an anachronist he was, dear fellow!' [197]

In this way White both begins and ends the last book by deliberately placing his contribution to the Arthurian legend alongside other versions of the myth.

In conclusion, it can be seen that White has produced an

196. TBOM 187-8.

197. TBOM 34-5.

Arthurian novel that comprises a skilful blend of innovation and interpretation. Beginning by setting his characters in a pastoral fantasy world of idyllic happiness and edification, he then moves towards painting an increasingly tragic picture, which seems particularly dark in contrast with the golden period of innocence with which the work began. Although the author falters when it comes to presenting the full cataclysmic sweep of Malory's tragedy, he nevertheless creates a dramatic sense of tension in which the potential for chaos hovers in the wings, especially in the volume which deals with the eternal triangle at Camelot. White is also the first twentieth-century author to present the glamorous Arthurian characters as mortal, frail and endearing, and this contributes to the accessibility of his work. His final volume, although flawed, provides a worthy finale to a work claiming to be an interpretation of the *Morte Darthur*. Although occasionally sentimental and self-conscious, the novel as a whole has a satisfying complexity of texture, borrowing as it does from fantastic, comic, romantic and tragic modes of expression.

CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION

The text of John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* was assembled for publication eight years after his death. Compiled from the unfinished drafts of his reworking of the *Morte Darthur*, it includes his own introduction and dedication, as well as an appendix consisting of his correspondence with his editors while working on the project. This addendum is particularly useful in that it provides a valuable counterpoint to the unpolished manuscript it accompanies; his letters outline the author's vision of what he was attempting to do, and invite speculation as to his plans for the entire project.

Steinbeck's fascination with the *Morte Darthur* has a long history. A simplified version of the legend (Sidney Lanier's *A Boy's King Arthur* [1]) was one of the first books he learnt to read as a child. Its mysteriously archaic language, tales of high adventure, and fairy-tale characters held talismanic qualities for the young boy. In his introduction to *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, he writes: "... gradually, the pages opened and let me in. The magic happened.... For a long time, I had a secret language - yclept and hyght, wist - ... The very strangeness of the language dyd

1. Fraser 191.

2. *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (hereafter referred to as *The Acts*) 3-4.

me enchante, and vaulted me into an ancient scene" [2]. Steinbeck's interest, however, was to develop into more than childlike wonder at the mysteriousness of the tale. It was from this seminal contact that he culled a value-system. A little further into the introduction, he states, "And in that scene were all the vices that ever were - and courage and sadness and frustration, but particularly gallantry - perhaps the only single quality of man that the West has invented. I think ~~the~~ my sense of right and wrong, my feeling of noblesse oblige, and any thought I may have against the oppressor and for the oppressed, came from this secret book" [3]. Coming from a writer whose commitment to the poor, the disinherited, the outcast and the misfit in society is powerfully demonstrated in novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* [4] and *Of Mice and Men* [5], this is no small claim. He remained passionately attached to Malory throughout his adult life, and inserted esoteric and oblique references to the *Morte Darthur* into both his writing and the texture of his life. His book about Mexican paisanos in Monterey, *Tortilla Flat*, was written in an affectionate parody of the style of Malory, and drew deliberate parallels between the fellowship of the Round Table and the camaraderie shared by the hero, Danny, and his friends. The preface states that "...when you speak of Danny's house, you are understood to mean a unit of which the parts are men, from which came sweetness and joy, philanthropy and ... a mystic sorrow. For

3. *The Acts* 4.

4. Heinemann 1939. London: Pan, 1975.

5. Heinemann 1937. London: Pan 1974.

Danny's house was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny's friends not unlike the knights of it. And this is the story of how that group came into being, of how it flourished and grew to be an organisation beautiful and wise" [6]. Disappointed when most critics and readers missed the significance of the Arthurian allusions, he wrote to his agents: "I had expected that the plan of the Arthurian cycle would be recognised, that my Gawaine and Launcelot, that my Arthur and Galahad would be recognised.... The form is that of the Malory version, the coming of Arthur and the mystic quality of owning a house, the forming of the round table, the adventures of the knights ... However, I seem not to have made any of this clear" [7]. For a long period of time, he worked in a self-built office, which had the sign "Joyous Gard" over the door. Even his third wife, Elaine Steinbeck, was nicknamed "New Style Elaine" as opposed to the ill-fated "Old Style Elaine" of the *Morte Darthur* [8].

In 1956, Steinbeck's devotion to Malory was to lead him into a much closer literary involvement with the *Morte Darthur* than before. What he did not know then was how sorely his love would be tried. Chase Horton, the owner of a large and respectable bookstore, and a close friend of Elizabeth Otis, Steinbeck's editor at that time, felt that there was a need for

6. *Tortilla Flat* (New York, 1935. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 9.

7. Arthur F. Kinney, "The Arthurian Cycle in *Tortilla Flat*" Ed. R.M. Davis, *Steinbeck: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972) 36.

8. Jackson Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1984) 783, 791.

a modern, updated version of the *Morte Darthur*. When the possibility of this project was mentioned to Steinbeck, he was seized with enthusiasm, and set to work at once. His approach was serious to the point of reverence. He read every critical work on and around the subject that he could obtain, studying material that ranged from *The Merchant of Prato* (collected fourteenth century business correspondence from Tuscany) to Wylie's edition of *Henry V* [9]. In addition, he visited appropriate libraries in America and Europe, consulted scholars and critics who specialised in the field of medieval Arthuriana (notably Vinaver), inspected the Winchester manuscript of the *Morte Darthur* and visited the Arthurian sites in England "to get a sense of topography, colour of soil, marsh, moor, forest and particularly relationships of one place to another" [10]. In fact, a substantial portion of *The Acts of King Arthur* was written in Somerset near Glastonbury, where the author hoped to be inspired by proximity to the roots of the legend [11].

The decade during which Steinbeck worked on *The Acts* was to provide allegorical impetus to his writing, and the increasingly tragic vision which pervaded his writing towards the end was possibly related to the changing historical and social circumstances which pressed on the politically aware and active author. The latter half of the text as it stands was written at the peak of America's success under Kennedy, whose

9. *The Acts*, Appendix 362, 373.

10. *The Acts*, Appendix 371.

11. *The Acts*, Appendix 396.

government was repeatedly referred to in Arthurian terms: Theodore H. White and William Manchester were among those who coined the phrase "the American Camelot" to describe this phase of political glory. Yet there was a sense of potential disaster and disintegration. Kennedy was assassinated during this period, and the shadows of Vietnam, then Watergate - defeat, then disgrace - hovered on the horizon. This movement from light to darkness is exquisitely summed up by John Fraser:

...Arthurianism ... [became] established at the centre of liberal America's political imagery as the gleaming towers of Camelot aspired above the Washington mists, and youth and beauty and gallantry came into their own at last, and the arts and graces mingled in a shining throng... under the aegis of a brilliant, gay, fearless young ruler aided by a beautiful, charming, intelligent and adored young consort. The young ruler perished tragically just as he was coming into his prime and was about to transform the rest of the kingdom into a realm of grace and power; and his natural successor, the next of the extraordinary brothers, soon followed him into the shades. Thereafter drabness and darkness lay on the land... [12].

In presenting a vision of a glorious fellowship threatened by decay and corruption, Steinbeck utilised and created his own brand of the mythology of the Arthurian legend for purposes not dissimilar to White's twenty years earlier, and Malory's five-hundred years previously.

However, this was yet to come. Writing to Elizabeth Otis in 1956, Steinbeck says "I am going to start the *Morte* immediately. Let it be private between us until I get it done. It has all the old magic." [13] It seemed that magic

12. Fraser 13, 133.

13. Benson 804-5; *The Acts*, Appendix 353.

was not enough; or even, that the enchantment that the **Morte Darthur** exercised over Steinbeck mitigated against objective work with the text. For various reasons, although he worked intermittently on his version of the **Morte Darthur** with varying degrees of satisfaction and frustration for a period of ten years, he did not even come close to finishing it, dealing with approximately a quarter of Malory's text. The resulting manuscript is not only incomplete, but inconsistent, incorporating very different approaches to the opening books of the **Morte Darthur**.

Part of the problem seemed to be lack of clarity on Steinbeck's part as to his specific goals for his contribution to the Arthurian legend. In his introduction, he clearly sets out his original intentions:

"For a long time I have wanted to bring to present-day usage the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.... in our day, we are perhaps impatient with the old words and ^{the} stately rhythms of Malory.... I wanted to set them down in plain present-day speech ... to set the stories down in meaning as they were written, leaving out nothing and adding nothing.... If I can do this, and keep the wonder and the magic, I shall be pleased and gratified. In no sense do I wish to rewrite Malory, or reduce him, or change him, or soften or sentimentalise him. I believe the stories are great enough to survive my tampering, which at best will make the history available to more readers, and at worst can't hurt Malory very much" [14].

The not inconsiderable task of exploring the mythological power of the legend was to be confined to an introductory essay, of which the author wrote, "I shall...try to put down what I think has been the impact of this book on our language, our

14. The Acts 5-6.

attitudes, and morals, and our ethics [15].

Although Steinbeck at first visualised simply translating the *Morte Darthur* into a more accessible form, he found this approach problematic almost from the beginning. The task of rewriting, "leaving out nothing and adding nothing" was creatively constricting, especially for as versatile and innovative a writer as Steinbeck. Although he at first attempted to curb his own commentary and kept additions to the text to the bare minimum, traces of his own unmistakable authorial imprint can be detected even in the first few sections, in which he diligently follows Malory, chapter and verse.

Moreover, the work which resulted from this system of reworking the *Morte Darthur* was unsatisfactory from a literary point of view. Something Steinbeck did not initially take into account was that the very "stately rhythms" of the *Morte Darthur* that he planned to modernise, constituted a significant ingredient of the powerful charm of the original. One of the results was that his first attempts comprised in essence a reduction of the opening books of the *Morte Darthur* into plain and sometimes pedestrian language. Thus, Malory's text is divested of the very mystique that originally held Steinbeck enthralled, with little beneficial addition of new verve or colour. The opening chapters, although readable and interesting, invite comparison with the *Morte Darthur* by their very closeness to it, and thus

15. The Acts, Appendix 354.

16. See 155 below for examples.

seem wooden and deflated alongside the energy of the original [16]. Although Steinbeck found the project of simply updating Malory refreshing at first, the fact that he altered his treatment of the legend dramatically as he continued to work on it, indicates that he recognised the limitations of his initial approach.

An added pressure was the dissatisfaction of Elizabeth Otis and Chase Horton, now managing editor of the proposed book, with the initial drafts of Steinbeck's transcription. Otis in particular constantly pressurised Steinbeck to create his own individual Arthurian novel, and became increasingly impatient with Steinbeck's scholarly approach, and his insistence on researching the historical aspects of the *Morte Darthur*. Although at first tolerant of the academic tangents he pursued (for example, he became absorbed in the questions surrounding Sir Thomas Malory's exact identity) in the hope that the result would be a novel in the style of *The Once and Future King* [17], she preferred Steinbeck the writer to Steinbeck the researcher and translator. According to Benson, she was to develop such antipathy to the project that eventually "she could not bear to hear the name of Malory spoken in her presence" [18].

Finally, Steinbeck's own combination of reverence and fascination for the *Morte Darthur* worked against the plan for a

17. Steinbeck read and enjoyed *The Once and Future King*, but said of it "It is a marvelously wrought book.... But that is not what I had wanted, and I think still do not want to do." (*The Acts*, Appendix 419.)

18. Benson 811.

simple translation of Malory into "plain, present-day speech". When referring to his feelings for the legend, the author constantly refers to its "magical" or "enchanted" qualities. This is clearly different to the magical sense of fantasy that White wove into his Arthurian work; for Steinbeck, the magic that characterised the *Morte Darthur* was the enchantment and alluring glamour of high romance and chivalry. He pursues this romanticism in most aspects of *The Acts of King Arthur*: for example, the dedication, written in illuminated Gothic script by the author himself is couched in the elevated language of the fifteenth century. Addressed to his sister Marie, it hails her as his faithful squire and raises her to knighthood: "And fro thys hower she shall be hyght Syr Mayrie Stynebec of the Vayle Salynis/ God gyvve hir worshypp saunz jaupardye" [19]. Yet the attraction of the *Morte Darthur* was more than that of medieval chivalric and courtly romance. Apart from evoking comparison with the present age (Steinbeck writes that "...the parallels with our own time are crowding me" [20]), it also stimulated personal response and creative contribution, and Steinbeck eventually could not resist transforming some of the material into his own unique and inventive rendition of the Arthurian tales. Thus *The Acts* displays a stylistic split between a slightly amplified and modernised version of Malory and Steinbeck's own artistic interpretation of the *Morte Darthur*.

19. *The Acts* ii.

20. *The Acts* 361.

Steinbeck himself worked from the Winchester manuscript prepared by Vinaver, and thus used the latter's headings as chapter divisions; however, for purposes of this discussion, I have tentatively divided the text into three sections according to the different styles of writing that Steinbeck modulated to and from. The first section includes Merlin, The Knight with the Two Swords, The Wedding of Arthur and The Death of Merlin; the next consists of Morgan Le Fay and Gawain, Ewain and Marhalt; and the final one comprises The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot.

**Merlin, The Knight with the two Swords, The Wedding of Arthur,
and The death of Merlin**

It is in these chapters that Steinbeck primarily confines himself to a translation and updating of Malory's material. A comparison of the two texts reveals that he follows the original closely: in the first chapter in particular, Steinbeck seems to be intent on altering only the archaic spelling and syntax of the *Morte Darthur*. He occasionally simplifies the more convoluted parts of Malory's opening sections, and prunes excess detail from the less interesting genealogy-like lists of nobles and knights and the descriptions of the battles and tournaments. These are usually shortened and streamlined rather than simply omitted. Nevertheless, to the modern reader expecting a more accessible version of Malory, these often remain too lengthy. One example is Steinbeck's list of the rebel kings who form an alliance against the newly-crowned Arthur. This begins, "These were the leaders and the numbers of their forces. The Duke of Cambenet brought five thousand mounted men at arms. King Brandegoris promised five thousand. King Clarivaus of Northumberland three thousand ..." [21] and continues in the same vein for half a page. Although one third of the length of the original excerpt in Malory, this list is one of those that seems excessive.

Steinbeck also provides some commentary, amplifying and clarifying confused or sketchy parts of the *Morte Darthur*, and

21. The Acts 31-2.

adds the occasional descriptive phrase or paragraph, although at first these additions are scanty. What is often implied by Malory is made explicit by Steinbeck's insertions, and they also provide a rationale for behaviour that is left unexplained in the *Morte Darthur*, bearing in mind that Steinbeck visualised children reading his retelling of the legend [22]. His very first addition comes in the transcription of Igraine's plea to her husband to take her from Uther's court. Malory has: "And then she told the duke her husband, and said, 'I suppose we were sent for that I should be dishonoured, wherefore, husband, I counsel you that we depart from hence suddenly, that we may ride all night unto our own castle'" [23]. Steinbeck translates this into "She spoke privately to the duke, her husband, saying, 'I believe that you were not sent for because of transgression. The king has planned to dishonour you through me. Therefore I beg you, my husband, that we may creep away from this danger and ride ~~in~~ in the night to our own castle, for the king will not tolerate my refusal'" [24]. This demonstrates the author's original technique of elucidating Malory: he reiterates details provided earlier by Malory, in this case the duke's summons to the court to explain his warfare against his liege lord, and makes it clear that the planned seduction of Igraine constitutes disgrace not only to her, but to her husband. The one entirely fresh detail he adds ('the king will not tolerate my refusal') is perhaps implicit

22. *The Acts*; Appendix 353.

23. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 9.

24. *The Acts* 9.

in Malory; Steinbeck uses it to provide a revealing glimpse of the hard-pressed duchess, whose position is both desperate and delicate. There is thus an added dimension to the author's explanatory asides: they begin the gradual process of expanding Malory's characters, a process which finally results in their transformation into Steinbeck's creations.

One example of this is the treatment given to the actions and speech of Malory's Merlin. When he is first encountered dressed in rags, Steinbeck explains the magician's motivation for disguising himself as a beggar: "Now Merlin was a wise and subtle man with strange ~~powers~~ and secret powers of prophecy and those deceptions of the ordinary and ^{the} obvious which are called magic. Merlin knew the winding channels of the human mind and also he was aware that a simple open man is most receptive when he is mystified, and Merlin delighted in mystery. Therefore, as if by chance, the searching knight Sir Ulfius came upon a ragged beggar in his path..." [25]. Here an understanding of the character is given in order to provide some explanation of the often arbitrary and inexplicable actions of Malory's Merlin. The definition of the magic that Merlin practices is especially interesting; while Steinbeck does not attempt to provide a rational explanation for all Merlin's magical powers, he suggests that the magician's ability to bewitch those around him is due to his superior psychological skills and powers of manipulation and mystification rather than to straightforward spells. While

25. The Acts 10-11.

Steinbeck has his Merlin follow the exact fortunes of Malory's wizard, the additional touches he provides combine to suggest a more defined representation of his character. In his hands, Merlin emerges as an awe-inspiring, mysterious and powerful man, part sage and part capricious child, who "delighted in surprises" and "took joy in causing wonder" [26]. Although this still constitutes reading into the details provided by Malory, rather than inventing or improvising material, Steinbeck does not remain an invisible translator; he imparts his own impressions to the reader. At this stage, however, these remain muted, and the characters remain essentially Malory's. The young Arthur especially, while more fully-drawn, is a faithful representation of Malory's lusty, often foolhardy and likeable fledgling king.

Although most of the descriptive additions consist merely of adjectives and adverbs interpolated into the text ("Merlin said brusquely" ... "the curt reply"), Steinbeck uses the occasional descriptive paragraph to heighten a sense of atmosphere. Some of the more notable examples of these accompany Uther's wild gallop to Tintagel, and the battle scenes. In the former, the passionate king rides to his magical assignation shrouded in mystery: "When Uther and Merlin ... rode through the starlit darkness toward the sea, the fog moved restlessly over the moors like wispy ghosts in floating clothes. Half-formed mist people crept with them and the forms of the riders grew

26. *The Acts* 11, 23.

27. *The Acts* 12.

changeable like figures of cloud" [27]. Malory simply remarks that Uther is changed into the likeness of Igraine's husband, whereas Steinbeck actually describes the extraordinary transmogrification effected by Merlin's spell. In the later descriptions of the battle scenes, Steinbeck has no qualms about elucidating Malory's gorier details, and his depiction of the battle of Bedegraine echoes the grim realism of Malory's text more accurately than White's abhorrence of physical violence could allow him to do. His recounting of the actual damage done follows Malory exactly: "[Brastius] struck the first on the visor so hard that his blade went into his teeth. He caught the second at elbow with a swinging stroke and cut his arm cleanly off and it fell to the ground. He struck a third at shoulder where the armour meets gorget, and shoulder and arm were carved off" [28] Moreover, he follows this bloody recital with a graphic picture of the overall battle, extrapolated from Malory's brief phrase, "they fought together that the noise and sound rang by the water and wood" [29]:

The earth was heaped with the broken killed and the struggling wounded, and mounded with dead and floundering horses, and the ground was slippery with blood. The voices of the battle echoed back from hill and forest - clash of sword on shield and crashing grunt of spearmen colliding with equal might, war cries and shouts of triumph, and yelled curses and screams of dying horses, and the sad moaning of men wounded to death [30].

This is typical of the Steinbeck who refused to "soften" or

28. The Acts 36. See 78-9 above.

29. Le Morte Darthur (ed. Cowan) 34.

30. The Acts 36.

"sentimentalise" the *Morte Darthur*, or to "clean it up" for children [31]. This characteristic toughness is earlier demonstrated, for example, by the realistic and harrowing description of the illness and death of Jody's horse in *The Red Pony*.

Possibly the most significant descriptive additions to Steinbeck's first section are the foreboding details included after Arthur sleeps with his half-sister. The author follows Malory in portraying both partners as unaware of their blood relationship, and in showing that the liaison is contracted purely through Arthur's lust, thereby making him more blameworthy than White does. After the lady in question leaves the court, Arthur's dreams and troubled mood are described by Steinbeck as increasingly dark, until Merlin confronts him with his sin under an ominous and lowering sky. In fact, the point is laboured, and the gloomy atmosphere overstressed; one is told seven times in the space of four pages that Arthur's portentous dream, "black and foreboding" darkened both the day and his mood, ending with the words:

A heavy cloud blotted out the sky and a quick wind rattled in the tops of the forest trees.... Arthur looked upward and he said, "It's a black day, a troubled day." [Merlin replied] "It is a day, simply a day. You have a black and troubled mind, my lord" [32].

The author seems determined to mark the fatal significance of Arthur's incest, which has irretrievably sealed his fate.

31. The Acts 353.

32. The Acts 49.

Steinbeck follows this pattern of transmitting Malory in his first four chapters. As he progresses, however, his authorial insertions become longer and more inventive, until they comprise a significant proportion of the text, although he still follows the dictates of the *Morte Darthur* scrupulously, omitting none of its details, and adding only what sheds light on Malory's possible intentions.

The disadvantage which hampers Steinbeck at this point is that nobody can write the *Morte Darthur* as well as Malory did; thus the first few chapters of *The Acts* seem laboured and even tedious at times. He had set himself an almost impossible task in updating the august language of Malory. Although at times, the modern phrases he substitutes for Malory's more archaic ones are worthy of their predecessors (Malory's "there were sent forth fore-riders" becomes "[they] moved southward with scouts flung out ahead of them" [33]), they are more often mundane in comparison with the musical phraseology of *the Morte Darthur*. Dialogue especially suffers in the translation. For example, Malory's "'for I have followed this quest this twelvemonth, and either I shall achieve him, or bleed of the best blood of my body'" becomes "'I have followed my quest for twelve months, and I must go on'" [34]. Similarly, the courtly words "'That is me loth,' said the knight, 'but sith I must needs, I will dress me thereto'" is translated, "'It is not fair,' said the knight, 'but under knightly rules I must if you

33. *The Acts* 32.

34. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 46; *The Acts* 47.

insist on it'" [35]. Even the more repetitive parts of Malory's first books have an incantatory quality that makes Steinbeck's equivalent sections seem prosaic. The omniscient commentary also occasionally acts to distance the reader from the flow of the narrative, and this inteferes with the magnetism and fascination of the original. These chapters are Malory's trial ones as well, and they present structural obstacles that cannot be circumnavigated without greater licence than Steinbeck initially allows himself. Finally, he can no longer stifle his own creative response to the tantalising lack of detail in parts of the Morte Darthur.

35. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 51; *The Acts* 53.

Morgan Le Fay and Gawain, Ewain and Marhalt

It is in Steinbeck's fifth chapter, *Morgan Le Fay*, that the reader realises that a shift in presentation is taking place. To begin with, the author omits the preceding section in the *Morte Darthur* which chronicles Arthur's wars against the Emperor Lucius. Although Steinbeck seemed to feel no personal reluctance in presenting the earlier battle scenes, he did experience some difficulty in conveying them in an engrossing fashion, recognising as White did, that they would not ordinarily interest the modern reader [36]. This perhaps explains his reluctance to leave the scene at Camelot, with which he was becoming increasingly absorbed, in order to annotate the details of yet more battles. This omission represents his first major departure from Malory's text.

His method of presenting the story of Morgan Le Fay's treachery against her half-brother does not actually differ remarkably from his treatment of the *Morte Darthur* in his earlier sections. It follows his original procedure of providing descriptive commentary on the events dictated by Malory. It nevertheless marks a transition point, as it is here for the first time, that the commentary outweighs the straightforward transmission. Morgan's enchantments and the duel between Accolon and Arthur are closely described and transformed into

36. Whereas White compared Malory's fight scenes to present-day reporting of cricket-matches, Steinbeck presents the American version: "Present-day people can read unlimited baseball scores in which the narration isn't very great, and fifteenth-century people could listen to innumerable single combats with little variation." *The Acts* 403.

dramatic events, alive with colourful details. For example, Malory's unadorned statement "And on the morrow King Uriens was in Camelot abed in his wife's arms, Morgan Le Fay. And when he awoke he had great marvel how he came there" is expanded to become "In the dawn Sir Uryens opened his wine-swollen eyes and saw that he lay in his own bed in his own lodgings in Camelot and Morgan Le Fay seemingly asleep beside him.... He studied his wife through slitted lids, for there were many things he did not know about her and many other things he did not want to know. And so he held his peace and concealed his wonder" [37].

It is not until Steinbeck begins the chapter **Gawain, Ewain and Marhalt**, however, that he allows himself free rein to invent his own material in order to present a more personal view of the characters that people the Arthurian scene. He creatively adds to the tale of the three questing knights, a section which is almost brusquely treated by Malory. This results in a satisfying and close-textured examination of the different aspects of training for true knighthood, peppered with typically humorous observations on human nature. Steinbeck's Gawain, Ewain, Marhalt and their ladies come alive as engaging and real characters, in a way that the often stilted characters of the first four chapters do not. This is due in no small measure to the attention that the author pays to the emotional dynamics between the characters. To begin with, the fellowship between the adventuring knights is articulated and examined. All three ponder what it means to be bound together by the

37. *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Cowan) 126; *The Acts* 135-6.

intangible complexities of knighthood, and reveal much of their characters in the process.

Gawain, self-satisfied with his own prowess as a knight and extremely conscious of his status as a member of Arthur's Round Table, is an expert on knightly theory, but not much good at its practice. He pompously lectures Ewain for the artless curiosity with which the latter enquires about Marhalt's lady: "'Cousin, your question is unmannerly. What a worthy knight does not tell of his own accord he does not wish to tell. Perhaps there was an oath, perhaps a jealous husband. You are young. You must learn'" [38], a rebuke accepted more graciously than it is given. However, there is little of this delicacy in Gawain's actions: he brags shamelessly to the damsel who accompanies him on his quest, and seduces the lady adored by the knight Pelleas, whom he has sworn to help.

Marhalt, a seasoned fighting man with the wisdom of experience, is more genuinely gallant. Yet he is not idealistic about his calling in life; practical, even wily in his approach to the business of questing and fighting, he does not subscribe to many of the popular beliefs of his fellows. After slaying a pathetically childish giant, he responds to his retainer's conventional salutation, "'Victory, my lord. It was beautiful'" with the curt words, "'It was horrible'" [39]. He has neither lofty aspirations nor flamboyant technique and, when questioned by his companion damsel, tells her, "I am a

38. The Acts 163-4.

39. The Acts 203.

good knight, well-trained and skilful, and although I have many faults, I think I also have some virtues. But do not think I take jousting lightly . . . There are many knights whom I could name, who, if I saw them ride at me over my leveled spear, would turn my blood to water" [40]. Nevertheless, he considers himself wholly committed by birth both to his brother knights and to the chivalric way of life. When presented with the tempting offer of settling down with a wife, he replies, "I was born noble, trained nobly, aimed like a well-directed spear at the life I lead. One might as easily reverse a charging horse as change a knight born to his knighthood" [41].

Ewain, the youngest and the least experienced of the three knights, is the most idealistic. In fact, his knightly ideals are remarkable for their naivety, and he is often bewildered by the surprises in store for him on his quest. His task is to learn that there is more to the logistics of knighthood than initially meets the eye, and that mere observance of the proper conventions, no matter how earnest in intent, is not sufficient.

The concern which Steinbeck demonstrates for the physical and spiritual intricacies of being a knight, and the especial attention he devotes to the business of questing is not only a token of his romantic attachment to the ideals of chivalry. In spite of the fact that much of his material is now freely improvised, he nevertheless reflects what seems to be the chief

40. The Acts 191.

41. The Acts 185.

aim of Malory in the original version of this section. This is to create what Beverley Kennedy calls a typology of knighthood, and to establish a sense of the proper laws of knightly conduct. Kennedy claims that in the *Morte Darthur*, "[the] second triple quest becomes even more significant ... in terms of the social, political and judicial obligations of knighthood" [42]. Certainly Steinbeck's counterpart section establishes a particular code of chivalric conduct, and makes clear that the goal of knighthood is worthy of the suffering that Ewain undergoes in his toilsome initiation.

Steinbeck's enthusiasm for chivalry, so clearly illustrated in this chapter, is not without an alloy of scepticism. The American attitude to the myth of Arthur has often included an element of suspicion, which is perhaps most clearly articulated in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in the Court of King Arthur* [43], a vigorous but unsympathetic satire debunking the glamour and the mystique of the *Morte Darthur* in particular and the Arthurian saga in general. Thus, although the American reading of the Arthurian legend tended towards romanticism, there was a tradition of black humour to draw from [44]. Steinbeck was not immune to his cultural heritage, and his intellectual honesty, combined with an eye for the underdog

42. *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge and Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer and Boydell & Brewer, 1985) 69.

43. 1889. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

44. Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex: A Legendary Novel* (New York: Delacorte Press/ Seymour Lawrence, 1978), a merciless parody of Arthurian material told in a mock-heroic style that is unabashedly bawdy and violent, appeared only a year after the publication of *The Acts*.

prompts him to present a glimpse of knighthood from the perspective of those excluded from the nobility: the questing Marhalt encounters a yeoman who remarks "'I know your kind, a childish dream world resting on the shoulders of less fortunate men'" [45]. The author also has the lady Lyne demonstrate the future demise of knighthood, at the hands of trained archers, to the indignant Ewain who fumes, "'Everyone knows no peasant will stand up to a noble knight, a man born to arms'" [46]. This archaic snobbery is doomed, and the author exposes the frailty of the system of knightly chivalry at the same time as he venerates it [47].

A welcome addition to the treatment of the legend manifests itself in this chapter. This is Steinbeck's lively characterisation of some of the many women who appear in the *Morte Darthur* as ciphers, or who are used by Malory only as agents to advance the narrative. Steinbeck has none of White's reticence in dealing with the women who provide the inspiration for so much knightly activity, and treats them with warmth and familiarity. Although Gawain behaves like a conventional cad towards the women he encounters, Marhalt and Ewain's relationships with their damsels are unusual and intriguing. Steinbeck relies on innovation in this area, with pleasing

45. The Acts 187.

46. The Acts 220.

47. This tension is a reflection of what Stephen Knight, proceeding from a socialist perspective, describes as the most potent aspect of the legend: "[It is] compelling both as a model of glory to be relished as the product of power, and as a stern message ... about the instability of such a position." (*Arthurian Literature and Society*) xiv.

results. One learns that Marhalt's lady is a practical and intelligent woman who provides him with both the comforts of home and domestic squabbles, and the description of their very human relationship is possibly the most humorous part of **The Acts**. The venerable damsel who takes charge of Ewain is even more singular; she takes the role of a medieval sergeant-major who expertly drills young and green knights in the arts of riding, jousting and weaponry, vicariously enjoying the fighting life through her charges. The entire section in which she bullies and coaches Ewain in the skills of knighthood is Steinbeck's own, and it provides a thought-provoking commentary on the roles and frustrations of women in a society which, by idolising them, excluded them from taking part in exciting activities [48].

However, the close characterisation of both knights and ladies creates fresh problems for the author. In Malory, their counterparts are sketchily treated in keeping with their status as minor characters (with the exception of Gawain, who, interestingly enough, is the least fully treated of the trio of knights in **The Acts**.) Steinbeck, however, invests energy and appeal in characters who then disappear almost completely from the **Morte Darthur**. This implies a change of focus which wars with the author's initial project to transcribe and amplify

48. A feminist reading of the role played by women in modern Arthuriana deserves further exploration; Mary Scott Etta ("The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: A study of Malory's women") and Steven Knight in his chapter on the patriarchy of Tennyson's **Idylls of the King** (**Arthurian Literature in Society** 153-185) provide useful starting points. Marion Bradbury's novel **The Mists of Avalon** is also inherently feminist in its treatment of female characters.

Malory's concerns: Gawain, Ewain and Marhalt is a brightly depicted section that diverts the attention from the central focus of the *Morte Darthur*, Arthur and his court, to its peripheries. It is also impractical as a narrative technique: if the author were to continue to embroider his presentation of Malory's many lesser characters, the resulting text would eventually become cloying, and then exhausting. In addition, if this was consistently adopted as a method of interpretation, the resulting work would run to thousands of pages.

Nevertheless, Steinbeck's elaborately detailed and inventive treatment of the legend makes for lively and interesting reading; he has obviously settled into his stylistic stride. It would seem that his perception of the *Morte Darthur* as a novel, a viewpoint he arrived at only after working on the project for some time [49], freed him to transform his own Arthurian work into a form approaching that of a novel.

49. "The *Morte* is the first and one of the greatest novels in the English language." *The Acts*, Appendix, 363.

The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot

Providing critical commentary on this section is complicated by the fact that Malory's baroque plot-line, which Steinbeck follows faithfully, makes it difficult to chart a clear passage through the text, with its conglomeration of quests, counter-quests, promises that require fulfilling and interrupted adventures. I therefore propose to approach the text through the characters, examining the themes that they suggest. It should also be noted that there are marked similarities between Steinbeck and White's approaches to this section, especially with regard to the character of Lancelot, who is the protagonist of most of the action in the *Morte Darthur*. Thus one finds oneself resorting to the same language in describing Steinbeck's treatment of Lancelot as in the corresponding section on White.

Of the various constituent parts of *The Acts*, *The Noble Tale of Sir Lancelot* constitutes the most satisfactory contribution to the development of the Arthurian legend. It is here that Steinbeck combines his talent for personal interpretation with the centre of interest of his initial sections - the court of King Arthur - with creative results. Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere become the focus of attention, and are this time treated with the authorial freedom that made Ewain and Marhalt such pleasing characters.

As in Malory, (and White) it is Lancelot who is the most enthralling character. Pascal Covici argues that Steinbeck felt a personal link with the figure of Lancelot, and quotes

him as saying: "'I like Lancelot. I recognise him because in some ways he is me'" [50]. Like White, Steinbeck responded to the combined qualities of heroism and fallibility in Malory's character. He writes: "He is tested, he fails the test and still remains noble. That's why I love Lancelot I guess" [51].

Moving on to those Lancelot loved so deeply, Steinbeck, like White, paid close (if not always respectful) attention to Guinevere. When Elizabeth Otis reminded him not to neglect his treatment of the queen, he responded, "...I too have felt this lack about Guinevere. She has always been the symbol when in fact she must have been a dame" [52]. In the final analysis, he presents Guinevere as attractive, perceptive and shrewd; confident of her powers, she is a force to be reckoned with at court. Her husband consults with her as an equal partner, and although at first the relationship between her and Lancelot is platonic, she is skilled at manoeuvring him: one is told that "[She] loved Lancelot for his bravery, for his courtesy, for his fame, and for his lack of cleverness. She did not as yet want to change him ... She did not yet love him enough to be cruel to him. Her affection was warmly self-contained, the quality of love with which a woman can be kind, and friendly, and very wise - too wise to instruct him openly" [53].

50. "Steinbeck's Quest for Magnanimity (As Part of the Quest for John Steinbeck)" (*The Steinbeck Quarterly* 10 (1977) 80.

51. *The Acts*, Appendix 437.

52. *The Acts*, Appendix 366.

53. *The Acts* 251.

Arthur too is shown to be mature and wise - so much so that the reckless young ruler of the first four books is unrecognisable. Nevertheless, his first concern is still for the fellowship of knights he has gathered around him, and it is he who laments the decay of a once respected fighting-force: "I see the noblest fellowship in the world crumbling - eroding like a wind-blown dune. In the hard dark days I prayed and worked and fought for peace. Now I have it and peace is too difficult'" [54].

The chief protagonists of the drama of the *Morte Darthur* are not the only ones to be examined. The character of Lancelot's nephew, Lyonel is also strongly drawn in this section, as is that of Kay. This serves to diffuse the attention from Lancelot; nevertheless, it is clear that he is the hero of the piece, if only by virtue of the profound effect he has on the above two characters. Lyonel, a foppish young knight of the new school, who has never experienced combat and who is cynical of noble ideals, is commissioned to go questing with his auspicious uncle, and it is in describing their adventures together that Steinbeck is at his most subtle. At first, as Lyonel questions Lancelot, the latter comes across as austere, priggish and rigidly idealistic. Not only is he established as the best knight of the Round Table, he is also an expert on the appropriate rules of conduct in love and war - or so it seems. It is in retrospect that his courtly devotion to Guinevere, carefully explained to Lyonel as an exemplar of chaste and

54. The Acts 249-50.

inspirational love, becomes not only quaint, but poignant. Although Lancelot is apparently inviolable at first, when Lyonel asks whether he is content with his status as the most perfect knight, he strikes on a raw spot: "A black rage shook Sir Lancelot ... Lyonel felt the wind of his death blow on his cheek. ... Then, in one man he saw a combat more savage than ever he had seen between two, saw wounds given and received and a heart riven to bursting. And he saw victory, too, the death of rage..." [55]. Steinbeck does not articulate the exact source of the conflict in Lancelot, but the overall emphasis is clear: the flawless knight has hidden pain, anger and shame which no amount of correct knightly behaviour can alleviate. Paradoxically enough, it is witnessing his uncle's frailty as he struggles for peace of mind that converts Lyonel from covert sneering to wholehearted admiration of gallantry.

Sir Lyonel ... knew that he had seen greatness beyond reason and courage that made words seem craven and peace that must be earned with agony.... [He] knew that this sleeping knight would charge to his known defeat with neither hesitation nor despair and finally would accept his death with courtesy and grace as though it were a prize. And suddenly Sir Lyonel knew why Lancelot would gallop down the centuries ... gathering men's heart's on his lance head like tilting rings [56].

The respect and love with which Lyonel now regards Lancelot sets the pattern for the rest of the chapter, and the great knight is now presented with undiluted romanticism. In his dealings with Sir Kay one sees the gentle and compassionate side of Lancelot: it is concern for his unhappy comrade, whose

55. The Acts 264.

56. The Acts 265.

courage is ebbing, that prompts him to exchange armour with Kay and to sally forth disguised as the seneschal. However, it is not long before he is recognised, and as his fame spreads, his sense of separation from his fellows becomes acute: "So many lives were about, and all with friends and enemies, that Sir Lancelot felt alone and lonely in his heart, darkened and chilled also, and no stars shone in him" [57]. As his stature grows, Steinbeck emphasises the humanity of his hero, and the apparently perfect knight who set out on his quest is presented as increasingly vulnerable, regardless of his string of victories. The discrepancy between the public image and the private man becomes most ironic when Lancelot returns to the adulation of the court a bewildered and desolate human being, to discover that he has been transformed into a symbolic paragon: "There is a seat of worth beyond the reach of envy whose occupant ceases to be a man and becomes the receptacle of the wishful longings of the world, a seat most often reserved for the dead, from whom neither reprisal nor reward may be expected, but at this time Sir Lancelot was its unchallenged tenant" [58].

It is Lancelot's encounters with the powers of evil that make this section more sombre than the previous one. Four witches kidnap him, another tries to murder him, and various knights attempt to trick and betray him. While this is a faithful following of the incidents provided by Malory, the issues of

57. The Acts 334-5.

58. The Acts 342.

violence, loyalty, power, deception and hatred are raised in this chapter, as if to pave the way for the tragedy that lies ahead. Steinbeck offers thought-provoking psychological insight into the darker regions of human behaviour; when Morgan Le Fay tempts Lancelot with the gift of power brought about by the black arts of magic, he responds: "...wizards and witches are children, living in a world they made without the leavening of pity or the mathematics of organization. And what could be more frightening than a child with total power? A spear and sword are terrible, God knows. That is why the knight who carries them is first taught pity, justice, mercy, and only last - force.... my ladies, you are crippled, vengeful children with power" [59]. This is not only a comment on the misuse of power, but an interesting side-light on the question of violence. Steinbeck does not seek to find a solution to the use of force, but underlines the paradox of chivalry: that those who are skilled in combat are those who ought to exercise the most compassion alongside their martial skills. Lancelot himself finds this tension problematic: "He went to his rest ... confused and weary. He could not fight with anger against men he loved, and he loved too many. But when the trumpet blew, he could kill anyone or anything. He did not wish to wonder about that" [60]. This disparity between love and violence is one of the unresolved problems of chivalry which is explored at length in Fraser's *America and the Patterns of*

59. The Acts 289-90.

60. The Acts 302.

61. See Chapters 2, 9 and 10.

Chivalry [61].

The social awareness implicit in this concern with the meanings of violence is apparent throughout this section. A notable example is the juxtaposition of Lancelot's interviews with first the four witches and then the respectable, yet equally bloodthirsty abbess of a convent. The latter is almost as morally corrupt as the witches; she supervises the repair of the abbey's gibbet, and gloats over a forthcoming tournament: "'Such a goodly company and proper military bearing. Last Tuesday fifty knights were slain. With your world-renowned arm in it, the next should be even better'" [62]. All five women have been perverted by their need to exercise power and control over the lives of others. This is one example of the many parables that Steinbeck incorporates into the work.

However, this section is perhaps too dark when compared with the original in Malory, where Lancelot is young and idealistic and the chivalry of Arthur's reign fresh and eager. There is a sense of tarnishing in Steinbeck's section, and the second generation of young knights are already alienated from the values of Christian knighthood: a situation that prevails before the search for the Holy Grail in Malory and in *The Once and Future King*. Bearing in mind that Steinbeck is only a quarter of the way through the *Morte Darthur*, it is surely too soon to present the cynicism of decay. Nevertheless, the sense of potential disintegration into chaos is inherent in the legend, and Steinbeck's transmission of a growing sense of

62. *The Acts* 302-3.

doom, while premature, is in keeping with the Arthurian tradition.

Possibly the most significant passage in this section for its presentiment of tragedy is the encounter between Lancelot and the ineffective enchantress, who casts a spell to ensnare his love. The knight gazes into her eyes and sees himself riding in a cart and his queen tied to the stake for treason, and chides the girl for the weakness of her spell, which is in reality to prove to be an accurate foretelling of his fate. The ironic foreshadowing of tragedy and suffering that lies ahead points in the direction that Steinbeck, sadly enough, did not follow.

Lancelot's transition from highminded worship of the queen for form's sake to anguished desire is skilfully (and soberingly) presented. It is no doubt no coincidence that the first shock of passion comes after the knight's brush with the love-struck witch who tries first to enchant and then to slay him. Steinbeck highlights the irony of the situation by having Lancelot realise the enormity of his love for the queen as the king confides in him that Merlin's prognostications of gloom about Guinevere have been proved false [63]. The treatment afforded the lovers here is more intense and human than White's version of the love that springs up between the unhappy pair, and the scene where their passion is mutually recognised is more adult than the touchingly sweet exchanges between the young lovers in White. They are clearly presented by Steinbeck

63. The Acts 347.

as tortured by sheer physical desire that brings not solace, but a sense of desperation. When they finally embrace, it is "as though a trap had sprung" [64] from which they tear themselves loose, and the encounter ends with Lancelot's bitter tears. (There is a moving biographical coda to the writing of this particular piece: Steinbeck's widow discovered it only after his death, and realised that he had transformed the details of their first meeting into the first love-scene between Lancelot and Guinevere [65].)

The question of why Steinbeck abandoned the project invites speculation; it is also tempting to try to gauge what direction he might have chosen for the rest of the work, had he finished it. (It is a tribute to the author's capabilities that this, the richest of his chapters, is the most patently unrevised: a treacherous knight whom Lancelot clubbed to death in the course of one adventure later arrives at court to tell of his defeat!) Part of the reason for his abandonment of the project lay in the physical circumstances of other pressing commitments and illness. Nevertheless, it is clear that Steinbeck realised that the latter parts of Malory were beyond translation: towards the end of his period of working with the *Morte Darthur* he wrote to Vinaver:

How to capture this greatness? Who could improve or change Launcelot's 'For I take recorde of God, in you I have had myn erthly joy-' There it is. It can't be changed or moved. Or Launcelot's brother Ector di Maris- 'Thou were the curtest^(sic) knight that ever bare shield!... and thou were the truest lover of a

64. *The Acts* 349.

65. Benson 860.

synful man that ever loved woman-' Good God, who could make that more moving? This is great poetry, passionate and epic and with also the stab of heartbreak. Can you see the problem? Do you know any answer? [66].

It is possible that this very appreciation of Malory's greatness prevented Steinbeck from continuing with what he had originally intended to be a modern-day version of the *Morte Darthur*. Pascal Covici posits the theory that Steinbeck's dream of a worthy version of Malory became his Grail Quest: that which was yearned for, yet could not be achieved [67]. Certainly there is a sense that Steinbeck, like Arthur, ultimately failed in the struggle wholly to translate his vision into concrete terms.

66. Benson 857.

67. Covici 79.

EPILOGUE

Comparisons may be odious, but in a project such as this they are both inevitable and irresistible. Of the two novels, **The Once and Future King** is much the finer work: to begin with, most of it is polished and thoughtfully set out. It interweaves a variety of literary genres together to form a satisfying and balanced totality, and its structure, while complex, is carefully planned. White perhaps communicates his objectives too overtly: there is little sense of mystery in his novel.

The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights, on the other hand, is a rough fragment that was published on the strength of the stature of its author. Structurally it is truncated, and the text lacks density. Thus in the final analysis, one can speak only in terms of the potential one sees, rather than the achievement. In the light of Steinbeck's literary achievements, this could possibly have been a very compelling and powerful piece of work. Part of the charm of **The Acts** is that the author leaves his treatment of the legend open to the imagination (even if by force of circumstances) whereas White forces closure and even supplies his own version of the popular legend concerning Arthur's return, thus forestalling imaginative speculation on the part of the reader.

Perhaps more striking than the differences between the two novels are the similarities: two authors almost opposite in

style and temperament, one writing in America and the other in Britain, separated by thirty years and a world war, nevertheless both create nostalgic and idealistic versions of the Arthurian saga. Both take pains to communicate the tragedy of the legend, and both focus on Lancelot as their personal hero. More than this, they send us back with renewed delight to the master-work itself, and are a tribute to the spell-binding force of the **Morte Darthur**, and the power of its myth.

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