

## LE ROI ARTHU N'EST PAS MORTE

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Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* has captured the imaginations of its readers for six hundred years. The romance and idealism of the story will never cease to enthrall us, because the story tells of Camelot, the world where everything is perfect, kings are brave, knights are loyal, and magic fights on the side of the good. Even though the ending of the *Morte* is tragic, we continue to read and love the story, because although the fall of Camelot is the destruction of the perfect kingdom, we can hope that it may return; for Arthur, men say, is not dead. The enchanter Merlin also lives, and when the world truly needs them, they will come back to set all to rights. We read the *Morte* time and again because we want a perfect world, and Malory offers us the hope of that. Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* appeals to its readers, both medieval and modern, because although the fall of Camelot is the fall of the ideal kingdom, since it is said that Merlin and Arthur will return, we may hope that it will rise again.

Since the day it was first published on Caxton's press, the *Morte* has appealed to its readers. Men in Malory's day lived at the end of medieval era, when knights were fast disappearing, and things like printing presses were new and exciting; but still they dreamed of perfection, as men will always dream. The middle ages, with their stone castles and jousting tournaments, were crumbling into a different and frightening age. W. E. Mead, scholar and professor of English, tells us in his 1897 essay that "...in such an age, men who saw the troubled state of their own time... may well have dreamed of the olden days when the institutions which were rapidly going to decay had been vigorous with a new life (Parins 366)." The Renaissance was coming, with its "rebirth" of ancient knowledge, but its effects were still dim, and in the time between ages, people looked to the old tales for reassurance. Then, as now, and as always,

mankind hoped against hope that they could still build the ideal world, and they turned to Malory for an idea of what that world could be.

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* unquestionably embodies this perfect society which we long for. Camelot is the perfect kingdom, where the ruler is benevolent and brave, the knights are devout, adventurous and full of chivalry, and magic still abounds. Arthur ap Uther is a perfect example of the ideal king. His goodness, bravery, and wisdom inspire the loyalty of his subjects and the respect of his enemies. Muriel Whitaker, author and critic, tells us that "the good king is one who overcomes evil, establishes peace, and enjoys the allegiance of his subjects (Whitaker 24)." Arthur works throughout his life to do all of these things, beginning at his coronation when he swears "to be a true king, to stand forth with justice (Malory i.7)." Here is no politician king sitting on his guarded throne and ordering brave men to their deaths; here is no selfish barbarian murdering his allies on a whim; here is the high king of Britain, bringing peace and honor to his people with his own blood.

Arthur's knights recognize his bravery and admire him for it. When he risks his life in adventure, they say that it is "merry to be under such a chieftain (Malory i.25);" they love him because he is a king they can look up to and imitate. His own virtue attracts the flower of knighthood to his Round Table. Merlin recognizes Arthur's worth as well, and admonishes King Pellinore that "this knight is a man of more worship than thou wotest of (Malroy i.24)." Merlin recognizes, and assures that everyone else of importance recognizes, that Arthur is the ideal king, fit to rule the ideal kingdom.

The elements of religion and magic are another main influence on the fabric of Camelot. The characters in the *Morte* devoutly worship the Christian god, but magic - both evil and good -

nonetheless plays a part in their lives. Andrew Lang, noted Homeric scholar, says that "...about Merlin and Morgan le Fay, and the ladies of the Lake... there is a mist of enchantment (Parins 297)." Merlin's influence is vital to the creation of Camelot; he guides Arthur's creation of the Round Table, and he prophesies several times, providing vital information for the King. He aids Arthur in gaining Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake, and warns him of the evil of Morgan le Fay. Morgan's evil is cunning, never openly defying the King. She works in areas that are out of Arthur's notice, aiding his enemies - as when she takes Alisander to her castle and heals his wounds (Malory xx.37) - and working against his person subtly, as when she attempts to have him killed by stealing the scabbard of Excalibur. Since she never comes out and openly defies Arthur, he cannot bring his knights and manpower to bear on her. Thus, Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake are essential to Camelot in halting Morgan's doings. Arthur and his Knights welcome both magic and Christianity as tools in the fight against evil; Andrew Lang tells us that "Malory is throughout on the side of goodness (Parins 293)." The inhabitants of Camelot welcome the supernatural in their struggle to hold the Kingdom of Summer as a fortress against the evil loose in the world. There is a seamless connection between magic and humanity in Malory's *Morte* that appeals to the reader; we love to lose ourselves in a world where magic is real, and essential to the fabric of the universe. The workings of the supernatural are integral to the structure of Arthur's kingdom; without magic, Camelot would not be the perfect world it is.

Camelot, however perfect, was not bound to last. The last five books of the *Morte* lay the groundwork for the destruction of the kingdom, telling of how Guenivere's adultery is revealed, and how Lancelot is banished from the Round Table after rescuing her from death at the stake. Larry D. Benson, Arthurian scholar, tells us that Lancelot's "...banishment from England...

marks the moment when the fellowship of the Round Table is broken forever...” With the departure of Lancelot, and the subsequent war between him and King Arthur, we see that Camelot cannot last. The pride of men is such that they are not yet able to achieve a perfect world and keep it. A dream was realized in Camelot, but in their pride, humans prove unable to maintain it. The characters mainly responsible for this realize their faults and repent before the end. Gawaine, mortally wounded on the battlefield, tells King Arthur “...my death-day has come, and all is through mine own hastiness and willfulness...” (Malory xxi.2) Guenivere, too, repents her part in the war; “Through... [Lancelot] and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knights in the world...” (Malory xxi.9) Six years later, Lancelot repents his pride at the Guenivere’s graveside, telling the priest he weeps “...when I remember me how by my default, mine orgule and my pride, that they were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living Christian people...” (Malory xxi.11) Mr. Benson points out that indeed, “Arthur alone remains... blameless. (Benson 283)” Arthur is the only human involved with the Round Table who does not die; he is taken to the isle of Avalon, where he will be healed by the Ladies of the Lake until such time as the world is ready for him again. “Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place. And men say that he shall come again and he shall win the Holy Cross... And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus*. [Here lies Arthur, once and future king.] (Malory xxi.7)”

So it is that with the fall of Camelot we see “fall of an ideal society, the collapse of a dream... (Lumiansky 233).” The perfect king is no more, the brave knights have fallen, and magic has left this earth. We have not lost all hope, though, for while Arthur and Merlin have left the world, they – and Camelot – are not lost to us forever. The inscription on Arthur’s legendary tomb says he will be king again, and Merlin is imprisoned, not dead. We read the *Morte* because it reminds us that although the perfect world is beyond our reach for now, when the world needs it most, Camelot will come again.

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