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THE DOMESTICATION OF *MERLIN* IN MALORY'S *MORTE DARTHUR*

RICHARD FEHRENBACHER

Sir Thomas Malory wrote in a time of immense dynastic instability; the *Morte Darthur* was probably completed in early 1470, during the most turbulent period of the Wars of the Roses. No doubt this regnal instability had its effect on Malory; Vinaver even suggested that “it is doubtful whether the book would have been written had it not been for the events of 1454-1485” (110). How these events influenced Malory and his work has been a question of some critical concern; Vinaver assumed they inspired a sort of cultural nostalgia in Malory, who “naturally enough fell back on remembrances of the past and tried to find in them a picture of glory and prosperity, as well as the causes which had led to the decay of the great kingdom of Arthur” (110). Others have seen the *Morte Darthur* as a political allegory of late fifteenth-century England and offered their speculations on Malory’s political bias as interpretive keys to the *Morte Darthur*.¹ I would like to offer a reading of the first book of the *Morte Darthur*, the *Tale of King Arthur*, that, while skirting the dangers of forcing associations between the fictional characters of the *Morte* and the political players of fifteenth-century England, does, however, foreground the vital importance of the Arthurian legend to the houses of York and Lancaster, as well as the importance of their dynastic squabbles to the *Morte Darthur*. I would suggest that in the *Tale of King Arthur*, Malory attempts to legitimize Arthur’s reign by rewriting his enigmatic source, the Old French prose *Merlin*, just as the houses of York and Lancaster attempted to rewrite the compromised texts of English dynastic and legendary history in order to legitimize theirs. Thus both projects are palimpsests—histories written over previous histories. And these projects, also like palimpsests, oftentimes do not quite manage to erase the underlying texts—texts whose earlier, infuriatingly contradictory accounts manage to bleed through in most unsettling ways, causing both projects ultimately to fail. In this paper, I intend to examine how the regnal genealogies constructed by the warring houses of late medieval England and the legendary history rewritten by Thomas Malory both fail to furnish the legitimizing power they are called upon to provide, and thus reveal a deep cultural anxiety concerning not just

the genealogical projects of the English royal house, but the use of history as a legitimating device.

In fifteenth-century England, it became increasingly difficult for the king to claim unquestioned genealogical right to the throne. Partly this was a function of the convoluted dynastic history of England itself: riven by invasions, civil squabbles, and depositions, the island's history gave rise to a regency whose genealogies were often confused and dubious mare's nests of contending claims. These complications intensified after the Lancastrian usurpation of 1399, when the inheritance of the Plantagenet regency became a site of contention between the cadet branches of Lancaster and York. As R. A. Griffiths has noted:

the dynastic stability, strength and cohesion of the house of Lancaster were a matter of permanent concern to many after 1399 . . . the Lancastrian succession to the English and French throne was acutely vulnerable throughout almost the entire life of the dynasty.(15-16)²

This instability was due in no small part to the Lancastrian's inferior claim to the throne, since "in the last resort, the legitimacy of [the] monarchy, as distinct from its *de facto* existence, could rest only on the unimpeachable claims of hereditary right" (Allan 171). Thus the Lancastrians, having deposed the king, were constrained to produce a plausible genealogy articulating their right by descent to the throne; as none was at hand, they improvised. Through a remarkable rewriting of dynastic history, the Lancastrians reached back over 100 years to claim that Edmund, Earl of Lancaster, and not Edward I, had truly been the firstborn son of Henry III. But because Edmund had been born a hunchback—he was to become known as Edmund Crouchback—Henry III callously awarded the throne to the younger brother.³ Since John of Gaunt was married to Edmund Crouchback's senior descendant, Blanche of Lancaster, this revisionist genealogy unsurprisingly placed Henry IV in direct line of succession to the crown—but only by making the disconcerting claim that the three Edwards and Richard II, rulers of England from 1272-1399, had in fact been pretenders. Fantastic as it was, the claim was also remarkably long-lived; it was reiterated as late as Henry VI's reign in John Capgrave's *Book of the Illustrious Henries*. And like the Lancastrians, the Yorkists also put forth a dubious genealogical claim to the throne; after members of Parliament reacted uneasily to Richard of York's claims to kingship in October, 1460, he presented them with an elaborate pedigree demonstrating that Yorkist

royal descent could be traced to Lionel, Duke of Clarence and Edward III's third son, through the marriage of Richard, Earl of Cambridge and Anne Mortimer.

But the genealogists of Lancaster and York did not limit themselves to rewriting the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They also inscribed themselves into British legendary history, and especially into the line of King Arthur.⁴ As Allan has pointed out, "such material was to form the core of a significant body of propaganda in the years after 1461" (172). Appeals to Arthurian origins were made with great enthusiasm and ingenuity, particularly by the Yorkists and especially by Edward IV. For example, Edward claimed descent from Arthur by tracing a notably convoluted genealogy running from his paternal grandmother's father, Roger Mortimer, to the 1230 marriage of Ralph de Mortimer to Gwladys Duy, daughter of Llewellyn ap Iorwoeth, and thence to the hazy figure of Rhodri Mawr, descendant of the even hazier King Cadwalader, who was, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, the last unfortunate British king before the Saxon conquest of England. Edward, an opportunist if one ever breathed, exploited this tenuous Welsh connection to Cadwalader and Arthur for all it was worth, commissioning a prodigious number of genealogies and prophecies that not only emphasized his Arthurian origins, but explicitly associated the Lancastrians with those original usurpers of Arthur's British throne, the Saxons. And though Lancastrian appeals to Arthurian ancestry were not as intricately articulated as the Yorkists', Henry IV nevertheless claimed his usurpation fulfilled Merlin's prophecies of the return of Cadwalader's line, and Henry VI and his uncles commissioned genealogies tracing Lancastrian origins back to such ancient worthies as Noah, Brutus, and Odin—but especially Arthur.⁵

Of course, such attempts to legitimize one's line by rewriting history were not uncommon in medieval Europe. Indeed, as R. Howard Bloch has demonstrated, they were practically mandated, since the logic of primogeniture, and thus of noble legitimation, judged the validity of both genealogical and epistemological claims through appeals to an authorizing origin and the ability to trace a line of descent to that origin (64-127). Thus the medieval nobility constructed genealogies and histories that ensured—or at least attempted to ensure—the ability of those in power (or aspiring to power) to justify their claims.

However, genealogy is a two-sided coin; as such thinkers as Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Foucault have pointed out, there exists a less stable side to genealogies, one that lurks within their essentialist claims and possesses a powerful potential for deconstructing them. According to

Nietzsche, although genealogies attempt to present themselves as natural progressions springing from pristine origins, “each genealogical account itself embodies its own interests and manifests its own will to power” (Nehemas 105). In other words, although genealogies attempt to operate as though they are disinterested, objective appeals to essential origins, they are neither disinterested nor objective, and their origins are never essential. Every genealogy—indeed even the *concept* of genealogy as a legitimating method—is the work of someone’s specific interests and values, a purposeful and contingent choice of inclusion and exclusion. Thus a genealogist’s work is to demystify these choices, revealing that it is:

not just difficult but actually impossible to determine the family to which an individual belongs without assumptions dictated by our conventions, purposes, and values—for example, by the principle that in some social groups paternal descent determines, through primogeniture, the order of inheritance among male heirs. (Nehemas 101)

Subversive genealogists are aided in their quest by the unstable moments that haunt genealogies themselves, by the narrative inconsistencies that call into question a work’s attempts to portray itself as authoritative and transcendental. Since, as Judith Shklar has pointed out, “Genealogies are rarely accurate. Their most usual purpose is, after all, to discover eminent ancestors, and a sense of veracity is not likely to inhibit such an enterprise” (130), these moments occur in genealogies with alarming frequency, often leading them to “self-deconstruct.” Thus, “Inquiries into the beginnings of regimes may lead to a god who engendered a royal house, but they can, and often do, uncover fratricides and worse” (Shklar 129). As we shall see, the histories of Lancaster and York, as well as Malory’s text, are thwarted in their attempts to legitimize themselves by just such subversive moments—in this case, by earlier, alternative histories that they cannot quite write away, that will not quite erase.

Indeed, one of the biggest problems facing Yorkist and Lancastrian genealogists was that their rewritings were too obviously compromised—too obviously interested rewritings of history—and their productions were often met with skepticism. For example, the Lancastrian claim of Edmund Crouchback’s undoing has been deemed “preposterous”—apparently it fooled nobody. Even Adam of Usk offers evidence of its problems (30-31), and, according to John Hardyng, it was rejected not only by a commission of lawyers and clerics but also Henry IV’s own

supporters.⁶ In October 1460 Richard of York's claim fared no better—after presenting an elaborate pedigree demonstrating his superior claim to the throne, Richard “got no encouragement” (Jacobs 521) from members of Parliament. According to the *Brut*, when he “clamed the crown as his propre enheritance & right, & kast forth in writing his title & also how he was rightful heyr” there “was moche to doo” (530). Thus, as J. R. Lander has pointed out, “the claim of the house of York was not as clear as . . . history mesmerizes us into believing” (60).

And it was not just dynastic history that was under suspicion at this time: the Yorkist and Lancastrian appeals to legendary history, to Arthurian origins, were made to an audience increasingly skeptical about the very existence of a historical Arthur. Although Polydore Vergil's early sixteenth-century *Anglica Historia* is generally credited with debunking Geoffrey's *Historia* and thus Arthur's historicity, skepticism regarding Geoffrey's treatment of British history had in fact flourished almost from its composition. Writing less than a century after the *Historia*'s creation, Giraldus Cambrensis repudiated the fantastic elements of Geoffrey's text.⁷ Harsher criticism was levelled by William of Newburgh, a contemporary of Giraldus, in his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*. In the fourteenth century, Ranulph Higden, author of the immensely popular *Polychronicon*, also found fault with Geoffrey's account of Arthur's reign, judging only two Arthurian events to be historically viable: the twelve battles fought by Arthur in England and the discovery of Arthur and Guinevere's graves at Glastonbury (V:vi). And even Caxton, in his prologue to the *Morte Darthur*, takes a guarded approach to Arthur's historicity:

dyvers men holde oppynyon that there was no suche Arthur
and that alle suche bookes as been maad of hym ben but fayned
and fables, bycause that somme cronycles make of hym no
mencyon ne remembre hym noothyng, ne of his knyghtes.
(I:cxliv)

Though Caxton gives a qualified affirmation of Arthur's historicity, since “in dyvers places of Englund many remembraunces ben yet of hym and shall remayne perpetually, and also of his knyghtes” (I:cxliv), clearly, at the time of the *Morte Darthur*'s writing, “as in Higden's time, there must have existed two schools of thought about Arthur” (Housman 216).

But although “Malory wrote at a time when it was no longer possible simply to accept [Arthur's historicity] without question” (Riddy 32), in

the *Tale of King Arthur* he tirelessly attempts to historicize Arthur and legitimize his precarious claim to the throne. However, like the stories of York and Lancaster, Malory's is an unstable text—written over but never quite erasing earlier texts whose subversive counternarratives reveal inconsistencies and subversive moments that thwart his story's claims to legitimacy. It is now time to turn from the political concerns of the fifteenth century to Malory's text; to examine how Malory attempts and fails to create an unproblematic account of Arthurian origins by rewriting the subversive moments inherent in his source, the Old French prose *Merlin*.

As Elizabeth Pochoda has pointed out, in the *Tale of King Arthur* Malory "goes to great lengths to establish the authenticity of Arthur's claim to the throne" (78). Since the *Merlin* presents Arthur's lineage and thus his right to rule as conflicted and ambiguous, Malory's assertion of Arthur's dynastic legitimacy required considerable alteration of his source. As Thomas Wright has noted, one of these alterations concerns Uther Pendragon's attitude toward his part in Arthur's conception. For example, in the *Morte Darthur* Uther Pendragon, on his deathbed, publicly acknowledges Arthur as his son; however, in the *Merlin's* deathbed scene, Merlin *whispers* to Uther "je te di aue tes fius Artus sera chies de ton regne apries toi par la viertu de Jesucrist," and Uther responds, "Merlins, priies li pour Dieu que il prit a Jhesucrist por moi" (I:131). As Wright notes, "the barons who witness this exchange do not overhear Merlin's remarks, and they are unaware that Arthur is Merlin's son" (23). Malory also stresses Arthur's genealogical rights by rewriting Igraine's announcement of her pregnancy to Uther. After hearing her account of Arthur's conception, Uther acknowledges both his own trickery and Arthur as son: "That is trouthe, said the kyng, as ye say, for it was I myself that cam in the lykenesse. And therfor desmay you not, for I am fader to the child" (I:10). In the *Merlin's* account, Uther admits nothing.

Such changes to the *Merlin* go a long way toward establishing Arthur's legitimate descent, but I would like to suggest that Malory most powerfully expresses his need to make Arthur's lineage a matter of absolute certainty through his treatment of Merlin. In the *Merlin*, Merlin is a mysterious, ambiguous, and untrustworthy presence; in the *Tale of King Arthur*, Malory attempts to exorcise his shadowy origins, dubious authority, and questionable motivations.

One of Malory's signature moves with his French sources is his rampant abridgement—his "reducing into English." So it is perhaps unsurprising that Malory's *Tale of King Arthur* omits the first 38 leaves

of the *Merlin*, 38 leaves that deal mainly with Merlin's origins, childhood, and life before his appearance at the court of Pendragon. Benson, for example, has suggested that Malory passed over this material because he was "interested in Arthur rather than Merlin" and "unsympathetic to the double plotting, the interweaving [entrelacement] that Merlin's presence requires" (60). But these seem unsatisfactory answers: though Malory typically avoids entrelacement, he is also prodigiously expert at unravelling his sources' interlaced plots and reformatting them as linear narratives. And though the *Tale of King Arthur* does focus on Arthur, it remains to be explained why this should be—particularly in a work that soon ushers his story to the wings.

I would suggest that Malory omits the early portions of the *Merlin* chronicling Merlin's past because they call into question his role as legitimator of Arthur's kingship—and thus the reliability of history and genealogy. For in both the *Merlin* and the *Morte Darthur* Merlin alone possesses the genealogical and historical knowledge necessary for dynastic legitimation. As R. Howard Bloch has noted, in the *Merlin* he is:

the guardian of genealogy; and his peregrinations around Great Britain are accompanied by a series of revelations concerning illusory paternal bonds . . . his perfect perception of lineal relations allows him to demystify false kinship and thus to undo the genealogical illusions induced by fornication, adultery and incest. (212)

This power is also granted him in the *Morte Darthur*. In an exemplary instance, the exasperated cowherd Aryes hauls his swashbuckling young son Torre before Arthur's court and requests Torre be made a knight because he:

woll nat laboure for nothyng that my wyff and I may do, but allwey he woll be shotyng, or castyng dertes, and glad for to se batayles and to beholde knyghtes. And allweyes day and nyght he desyryth of me to be made knyght. (I:100)

It is Merlin who reveals Torre's true lineage: "he ys com of good kynrede as ony on lyve, and of kynges bloode," for "thys poore man aryes the cowherde ys nat his fadir, or he ys no sybbe to hym; for kyng Pellynore ys hys fadir" (I:100). Not only does Merlin reveal the lineage of such bit players as Torre, more importantly, appeals are constantly made to his perfect knowledge of Arthur's lineage. Merlin "offers himself as the

authority on Arthur's rights" (Wright 26) not only revealing to Arthur his own lineage, "for kynge Uther was thy fadir and begate the on Igrayne" (I:44), but also Arthur's fatal paternity of Mordred. Most important of all, however, is the role Merlin plays in defending Arthur's claims from his rivals. For example, when rebellious kings besiege Arthur at Caerleon, it is Merlin who assures them of Arthur's lineage and legitimacy:

"Syres," said Merlyn, "I shalle telle yow the cause, for he is kynge Uther Pendragons sone borne in wedlok, goten on Igrayne, the dukes wyf of Tyntagail."

"Thenne is he a bastard," they said al.

"Nay," said Merlyn, "after the deth of the duke more than thre houres was Arthure begoten, and thirtene dayes after kyng Uther wedded Igrayne, and therfor I preve hym he is no bastard. And, who saith nay, he shal be kyng and overcome alle his enemyes, and or he deye he shalle be long kynge of all Englund and have under his obeysaunce Walys, Yrland, and Scotland, and moo reames than I will now reherce." (I:17-18)

At a time when legitimation by lineage was problematic and even genealogical claims to the crown were contested, Malory must have viewed Merlin's perfect knowledge of lineage and the past as an invaluable asset, as precisely the sort of unimpeachable foundation that could be appealed to for true legitimation.

However, he could only do this by excising the early leaves of the *Merlin*. For in them lies the revelation that, for all his knowledge, Merlin remains:

the figure of paradox—the prophet who is everywhere, yet nowhere. Representative of Satan, recuperated by God, he retains the knowledge imparted by both. A fatherless being without discernible origin, his conception having occurred without his mother's awareness, he is at the same time the protector of paternity . . . [and] also like Hermes—the god of clever speech, the wise child, flatterer, and liar. . . (Bloch 2-3)

For example, by ignoring the early leaves of the *Merlin*, Malory avoids detailing the unsettling circumstances of Merlin's birth, a birth planned by agitated devils after Christ's Harrowing of Hell:

Mais comment porriens nous avoir un homme qui parlast a

iaus et lour desist nos sens et nos proueches et nos affaires, si que nous avons pooir de [savoir] toutes choses faites, dites et alees? Et se nous aviemes cel houme qui de che eust pooir, et il suest ces choses dire et raconter, et il fust avec les autres hommes en terre, si nous porroit bien aidier et ensegnier comme li prophete qui avec nous estoient, que nous cuidiens que ja ne deust avenir. (I:3)

Here it is revealed that Merlin's knowledge of history—and thus of genealogy—is a satanic gift given by demons with the intention of beguiling the Lord's people. As Bloch points out, in the *Merlin* this vision of Merlin's historical expertise is never quite redeemed; prophecy may be God's, but history "is the Devil's terrain" (Bloch 214), and Merlin admits as much: "Je sai les choses dites, faites et alees, et . . . je le tieng par nature d'anemi" (I:94). And even though God redeems Merlin "par la repentance de la mere et par la boine repentance de confession qui il sot qui en son cuer estoit" (I:19), Merlin retains his satanic knowledge. And more importantly, we also learn that he possesses the ability to employ it when he will, for God's or Satan's purposes:

Par ceste raison sot cil les choses qui estoient dites et faites et alees de par l'anemi, et le seurplus que il sot des choses a venir vaut nostre sires qui il seust contre les autres choses qui il savoit pour endroit de la soie partie. Ore si se tourt a la quele que il vaurra; et si il veult il puet rendre au dyable son droit et a nostre signour le sien. (I:19)

" . . . Et si il veult il puet rendre au dyable son droit et a nostre signour le sien." In the *Merlin*, Merlin is no unimpeachable source of knowledge; though his wisdom exceeds that of men, one never knows for what purpose it is being mobilized. God's gift of free will makes Merlin, and thus his renderings of history and lineage, always suspect, and appeals to them for legitimation always problematic.

The 38 leaves of the *Merlin* that Malory omits also contain an account of Merlin's appearance at the court of the Briton king Vortigern. Vortigern, obsessively attempting to construct a tower that inevitably collapses each time it nears completion, is directed by Merlin to excavate its foundation; in a pool beneath the foundation are discovered two small dragons, a red one and a white one. They fight endlessly, and this incessant violence destabilizes the tower's foundation. When Vortigern asks the significance of these dragons, Merlin responds: "Li rous dragons

senefie toi, et li blans senefie le fieus Constant” (I:59), from whom Vortigern has unrightfully withheld the throne. Merlin also prophesizes the vengeance of Constance’s line:

Li autres ki estoit blans senefie l’yretage as enfans qui s’en sont
fui por toi. Et chou que il se combatirent si longuement senefie
lour terre que tu as tenue si lonc tans. Et chou que tu veis que
li blans arst le rous senefie que li enfant t’arderont. (I:60)

The struggling dragons upon which Vortigern would build his tower, and thus his claim to the kingship, recall not only the feud he harbors with the sons of Constance, but also the unstable foundations and incessant dynastic infighting that characterize English history: from the wars of Briton and Saxon to the Wars of the Roses, the British monarchy—and the lineage and history it would call upon to legitimize itself—is always centered on an unstable foundation that itself undermines any attempts to employ it as a legitimating instance.

And during the reign of Edward IV, these warring dragons would have held another, more specific, significance, since Edward employed them in genealogical propaganda asserting his right to rule. This use is derived not from the *Merlin*, but rather from the dragon’s appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, during which Merlin asserts that the white dragon “stands for the Saxons whom you have invited over. The red dragon represents the people of Britain, who will be overrun by the White One” (171). Merlin also prophesizes that the red dragon, and thus the British line, will in time reinvest the English throne. Edward IV, seizing yet another opportunity, again traded on his Welsh ancestry by fashioning a genealogy casting himself as the heir to Cadwalader’s throne and the Lancastrians as the usurping Saxons, according to Anglo “the clearest possible exposition of the idea that Edward IV was the returning hero of the Trojan line; he was the British messiah; he was the Red Dragon” (23-24). Had Malory included this incident in the *Tale of King Arthur* it would not only have destabilized his foundationalist project through its vision of a compromised British history; it would also have highlighted the easy and unwarranted appropriation of historical origins by the warring houses of York and Lancaster.

Malory’s domestication of Merlin not is not limited to erasing his unsavory past. As Thomas Wright has noted:

Malory’s treatment of Merlin is by no means a mere copy of

earlier traditions; it marks the start of a new version of the legend. In his opening subdivision Malory portrays Merlin [as] . . . the agent through whom God's will and grace are expressed. . . . (23)

In the *Tale of King Arthur*, the crafty Merlin of free choice who will “rendre au dyable son droit et a nostre signour le sien,” becomes the unequivocal mouthpiece of God's will. Malory's treatment of Merlin attempts to ground him as that transcendental touchstone—sanctioned by God—by which one can indeed determine true from false, right from wrong, good from bad, the noble from the common, the king from the pretender. According to Wright:

this characterization of Merlin as the spokesman of God is a singular innovation in the Arthurian legend. . . . Malory thus projects Arthur's reign itself as a destiny ordained by God and established through Merlin. (26-27)

Though this attempt to domesticate Merlin ultimately fails, at least in the early part of the *Tale of King Arthur* he plays precisely the role Wright describes. As in the *Merlin*, he adjudicates truth in matters of genealogy and history, but here he bears an unimpeachable cultural and epistemological authority not available to him in his French sources. For example, in the *Morte Darthur*, Merlin's historical knowledge is unimpeachable; in fact, Merlin *is* the source of history. This is revealed to us after the rebellion of the kings, when Merlin returns to Northumberland to visit his master Bloyse:

and ther he told how Arthure and the two kynges had spedde at the grete batayle, and how hyt was endyd, and tolde the namys of every kynge and knyght of worship that was there. And so Bloyse wrote the batayle worde by worde as Merlion tolde hym, how hit began and by whom, and in lyke wyse how hit was ended and who had the worst. And all the batayles that were done in Arthurs dayes, Merlion dud hys mayster Bloyse wryte them. (I:37-38)

Merlin, then, is not only the source for Arthur's genealogy, but the source of the true history of Arthur himself. Again, this is a radical rewriting of the *Merlin*, where this episode takes a much different tone. For in the *Merlin* the truth value of history, particularly as recounted by Merlin, is regarded as dubious at best. In the *Merlin*, Blaise is aware of

Merlin's tenuous allegiance to truth, suspicious of his renderings of history, and wary of trickery. Before he will write down Merlin's accounts, he begs Merlin not to deceive him: "Je ferai volentiers le liver, mais je te conjure el nom del pere et le fil . . . que tu ne me puisses dechevoir ni engingnier" (I:31).

In Malory's *Tale of King Arthur*, however, the truth of Merlin's narratives must not be doubted, for the veracity of Malory's own work ultimately depends upon the truth of Merlin's retellings. Thus Malory's book is, in fact, a descendant of Merlin's, and its own legitimacy, like Arthur's or the Lancastrian's, can only be determined by a genealogical appeal to pristine origins. In Malory, these origins must not be questioned.

However, Malory's attempt to create a world of unproblematic genealogical legitimation in the *Tale of King Arthur* is inevitably compromised by subversive elements. Not the least of these is Merlin's discrediting and eventual disappearance. For even though Merlin is granted perfect knowledge of lineage, not everyone believes him. For example, after Uther's death and in spite of his defense of Arthur's claim, "many wenden to have ben kyng" (I:12). Even after Arthur successfully removes the sword from the stone, "ther were many lordes wroth, and saide it was grete shame unto them all and the reame to be overgovernyd with a boye of no hyghe blood borne" (I:15). This dissension culminates at Arthur's coronation when the barons, led by King Lot, refuse his gifts and threaten to depose him, for "they had no joye to recyve no yeftes of a berdles boye that was come of lowe blood" (I:17).

Merlin is called upon to certify Arthur's lineage, and though he convinces the commons of Arthur's legitimacy, he fails to sway the rebellious faction of kings: "Some of the kynges had merveryl of Merlyns wordes and demed well that it should be as he said, and som of hem lough hym to scorne, as kyng Lot, and mo other called hym a wytche" (I:18). Lot in particular is intractable, refusing to acknowledge Merlin's authority in matters of genealogy and implying that his knowledge is mere trickery. He scorns Merlin's powers: "Be we wel avysed to be aferd of a dremereder?" (I:18) and implies that Merlin is an impostor: "Thys faytour with hys propehcy hat moked me" (I:19). King Lot's refusal to accept Merlin's authority leads to a vicious war—in the absence of a legitimating foundation, the only way Arthur's reign can be validated. Thus begins a savage cycle repeated in the *Arthur and Lucius*.

A more troubling instance of Merlin's failure to act as an agent of god occurs when, in an attempt to forestall Arthur's prophesized death by Mordred, he advises the king to exile all British children born on

Mayday. The ship they sail on founders, and all the children save Mordred drown. Due to this:

many lordys and barownes of thys realme were displeased for hir chyldren were so loste; and many putte the wyght on Merlion more than o[n] Arthure. So what for drede and for love, they helde their peace. (I:56)

Thus the destabilizing forces of Merlin's demonic birth that Malory so assiduously represses make their way to the surface of the text, forcing Malory to abandon Merlin as legitimator. Malory's abandonment of Merlin creeps into the tale gradually; foreshadowed by the rebellious kings besieging Caerleon, who call Merlin a "wytch" and a "dreme-reader," the suspicion that Merlin's knowledge is not entirely sanctioned by heaven is highlighted in a curious episode that occurs at the end of the story of Torre and Pellinor. Here two knights, one coming from Camelot, the other going there and planning to assassinate Arthur with "the grettist poyson that ever ye herde speke off" (I :118) stop to chat. The assassin reveals his plan, and is warned by the other knight to beware "of Merlion, for he knowith all thynges by the devylles craftte" (I:118). The knights part, and we never hear of the plot again. But the incident does introduce doubts about the provenance of Merlin's knowledge, a provenance Malory had repressed up to this point.

However, both of these unsettling judgments of Merlin's paternity come from agents opposed to the Round Table and Arthur's regency. Passing them off as sour grapes would be easy enough, were it not for Merlin's final episode, in which he is buried alive by his "lady" who "was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son, and she cowde not be skyfte of hym by no meane" (I:126). Here the voice that proclaims Merlin's devilish origin is authorial, and is emblematic of Malory's final rejection of Merlin's, and thus any sublunar authority's, claims to perfect knowledge of history and genealogy. By the *Tale of King Arthur's* end, Merlin is imprisoned and Arthur and the knights of the Round Table must find their own ways to determine legitimacy—a task that will consume them throughout the remainder of the *Morte Darthur*.

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, Schofield (75-123). The most enthusiastic Lancastrian reading is probably Aurner's "Sir Thomas Malory—Historian?." Though disagreeing with Aurner's more speculative assertions, most Malory scholars agree that the *Morte Darthur* displays a Lancastrian bias. For examples, see Chambers, Kennedy, and Matthews (105-21). The rare case for a Yorkist bias is made in Griffith.

² Indeed, John H. Fisher has recently suggested that the political situation was so treacherous that the Lancastrians consciously formulated a language policy "intended to engage the support of Parliament and the English citizenry for a questionable usurpation of the throne" (1170). Part of this policy was a valorization of English poetry, a deification of Chaucer, and the projects of such poets as Hoccleve and Lydgate, whose *Troy Book* has been seen as part of a political and genealogical project: "As European monarchs (including England's Henry II and the future Henry V) knew, the Trojan myth provided above all a typology of monarchical legitimacy: as empire descended from the Trojans, so too monarchy enjoyed a genealogical authority" (Patterson 161-62).

³ See, for example, Adam of Usk, "Quodam die, in concilio per dictos doctores habito, per quosdam fuit tactum quod, jure sanguinis ex persona Edmundi comitis Lancastrie, asserentes ipsum Edmundum regis Henrici tercii primogenitum esse, sed ipsius geniture ordine, propter ipsius fatuitatem, excluso, Edwardo suo fratre, se juniore, in huius locum translato, sibi regni successionem directa linea debere compediri" (30), as well as Hardyng (353-54). For a recent discussion of Henry's genealogical claim, see Strohm (77-78).

⁴ On the legitimating power of Arthurian origins in late medieval England, see Eckhardt and MacDougall.

⁵ On Yorkist and Lancastrian genealogies, see Eckhardt (115-16), Anglo (21), and Allan (176).

⁶ According to Hardyng, the lords consulted other chronicles against the Lancastrian forgery, and "proued well be all theire cronycles, that the kinge Edwarde wase the older brother, and the seide Edmonde the yonger brother, and not croukebacked nother maymed, but the semeliest person of Engelonde except his brother Edwarde. Wherefore that Chronycle whiche kynge Henry so put furthe was adnulled and reproued" (353). On contemporary skepticism regarding the claim, see Strohm.

⁷ "Huius autem corpus, quod quasi phantasticum in fine et tanquam per spiritus ad longinqua translatum, neque morti obnoxium confinxerant, his nostris diebus apud Glastoniam . . . est inventum" vii. 126.

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