

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

ARTHUR AND THE SIN OF PRIDE: AN INTERPRETATION OF
THE CHARACTER AND CAREER OF ARTHUR IN THE ALLITERATIVE
MORTE ARTHURE

by

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CHAPTER I

The alliterative Morte Arthure is preserved in a manuscript in the library of Lincoln Cathedral, in the hand of Robert of Thornton, "who penned a great part of it",¹ and signed it "R. Thornton dictus qui scripsit sit benedictus. Amen."² In the Preface to the Early English Text Society's 1865 edition of the poem, Rev. George C. Perry states that "the date of Archdeacon Thornton and his connection with Lincoln Cathedral can be ascertained pretty accurately, as among the archives of the Cathedral there is preserved an instrument or deed of considerable importance, attested by him as Archdeacon, which bears date 1439".³ The Thornton manuscript contains the only known copy of the poem.

J. L. N. O'Loughlin believes that although only one copy of the alliterative Morte Arthure has survived, the poem "must once have enjoyed a considerable circulation."⁴ O'Loughlin's conclusion results from his opinion that the Morte Arthure poet's description of the giant of Mont St. Michel influenced that of Nebuchadnezzar in Purity, as well as the fact that there is what O'Loughlin considers "unmistakable evidence that the prophecies in the Awntyrs

of Arthur . . . are based on the alliterative Morte."⁵

O'Loughlin's suggestion that the Morte Arthure originally existed in more than one manuscript is supported by the comparison made by E. V. Gordon and E. Vinaver of the Caxton and Winchester versions of Malory's Morte Darthur with the Thornton Morte Arthure. The Morte Arthure has long been recognized as the source of Malory's story of Arthur's campaign against Lucius,⁶ and the Thornton text has been accepted as the version that Malory used. Gordon and Vinaver observe, however, that "there are in Malory's text many passages . . . unparalleled in the poem and yet undoubtedly having their basis in an alliterative text."⁷

Tania Vorontzoff's study of the two versions of Malory and the Thornton Morte Arthure leads her to the same conclusion. In an article entitled "Malory's Story of Arthur's Roman Campaign"⁸ she states that both Caxton and Winchester contain readings that cannot be explained by the influence of the existing Morte Arthure. Vorontzoff's evidence, as well as that of Gordon and Vinaver, includes numerous comparisons that seem to prove that the text of Morte Arthure used by Malory differed from the tradition

preserved in the Thornton MS in that it kept lines lost in the Thornton MS, and also used certain passages in different contexts, "indicating extensive textual changes in one tradition or the other, or perhaps in both."⁹

William Matthews, however, rejects the possibility that Malory used another alliterative text of the Morte Arthure. In The Ill-Framed Knight: A Skeptical Inquiry into the Identity of Sir Thomas Malory¹⁰ Matthews argues that it is wrong to assume that Malory's deviations from the Thornton MS result from his following another text. He points out that alliteration is to be found throughout Malory's work, even in places where he is translating from the French. Matthews concludes that Malory's deviations from the Thornton MS could be his own inventions, resulting from his facility in alliteration.

Matthews is correct in his judgment that the extensive emending of the alliterative Morte Arthure on the basis of Malory's prosing of it is "an unjustifiable procedure"¹¹, but his argument against the possibility that Malory worked from another text of the poem is not impressive. Matthews considers the deduction that Malory used a text of the Morte Arthure very different from that which appears in the Thornton MS to be "unnecessary"¹².

At no point, however, does Matthews produce any evidence to prove that such a deduction is incorrect.

The Morte Arthure is a product of the alliterative revival, which occurred in the West Midlands and the North of England. O'Loughlin explains that although the use of alliterative forms as a vehicle for narrative goes back to the great days of Anglo-Saxon poetry, "as late as the end of the twelfth century, the dominance of French models and fashions so discouraged the use of alliterative verse that it went out of fashion completely in the South and most of the Midlands."¹³ In regions remote from London and less susceptible to French influences, however, the four-beat line with three or more alliterating words continued to enjoy popularity, but with "a public which could not or would not pay for the recording of these longish poems on parchment."¹⁴ O'Loughlin notes the presence of a gap in the written tradition between the years 1200 and 1350. After 1350, however, "when things specifically English regained favour and . . . the poets of the West Midlands and the North found patrons who could afford to pay for copies of their effusions",¹⁵ the alliterative tradition experienced a revival, and the Morte Arthure

is considered to be one of the masterpieces of this revival.

O'Loughlin considers the alliterative Morte Arthure a romance, and he observes that the poem's "Arthurian connexions are clearly with Geoffrey of Monmouth and . . . with a text of Wace closely related to that which Layamon used."¹⁶

John Finlayson agrees that the poem's source is a chronicle in the tradition which derives from Geoffrey of Monmouth, but he suggests that it is incorrect to term the work a romance. Finlayson calls the Morte Arthure "an isolated work"¹⁷, and he observes that although the poem is frequently treated as if it were a romance, "it is, in fact, a rare example of a mode of poetry which had been replaced by the romance."¹⁸ Finlayson considers the Morte Arthure's sentiments to be "almost purely heroic"¹⁹, and he mentions the Old French chanson de geste, the Chanson de Roland, as a work that is comparable to the English poem in spirit.

Attempts to fix a date for the poem's composition have resulted in much controversy, and a precise dating for the Morte Arthure has not been arrived at. O'Loughlin

suggests 1360 and says that "the latest possible date for its composition is set by the handwriting and watermarks as 1430-40. Sources which the poet must have used - the Voeux du Paon (c. 1310), Somer Soneday (c. 1327) - fix the earliest limits."²⁰ Eagleson's study of the costume described in the poem establishes about 1360 as the date of composition, in O'Loughlin's opinion. He considers this date to be in "accord with the spirit of the work and its echoes of English expansionism at the time of the Treaty of Brétigny (1360)."²¹ There is little doubt in O'Loughlin's mind that figures and events in contemporary English history stirred the poet's imagination.

More recently, however, John Finlayson has cast doubt on the suggestion that the Morte Arthure was directly influenced by contemporary history. Finlayson does not deny that certain events in Edward III's reign influenced the Morte Arthure poet, but he considers the influence to have been "peripheral":²²

Such an influence could come from any number of sources, the most probable being a romanticized record or records of those events, such as we have in the Chandos Herald's Life of the Black Prince (c. 1385). In the absence of verifiable large-scale borrowing of detailed incident from Edward's reign it is impossible to make any more positive assertion.²³

Finlayson concludes that the poem was composed later than 1365, but he admits that this view "cannot be proved."²⁴

Larry Benson complicates still further the issue concerning the Morte Arthure's date of composition by suggesting "a much later date, around the year 1400."²⁵ Benson's argument is based on what he considers to be the Morte Arthure poet's interest in northern Italy, and his "fairly accurate understanding of the political situation in northern Italy."²⁶ Although Benson admits that "alliteration rather than a desire for accuracy"²⁷ probably accounts for the poet's choice of place names, he points out that all of the cities that are listed in the poem as owing allegiance to the powerful "Sire of Milan" (l. 3134) were in fact controlled by the Duke of Milan at the end of the fourteenth century. Benson feels that the poem's English allusions support the same date as the Italian references. He argues that "the presence of the Montagues in Modred's army . . . indicates a date of composition after Richard was deposed in 1399 and after the attempted rebellion by Montague and the other great lords in 1400."²⁸

The language used in the poem provides no evidence to

facilitate an accurate dating,²⁹ and the Morte Arthure student must be content with the conclusion that the poem was composed sometime between 1360 and 1400.

The alliterative Morte Arthure comprises 4346 lines in the alliterative long line, of which 4321 are devoted to an account of Arthur's wars against Lucius Iberius, Emperor of Rome, his recall to Britain by the news of Modred's treachery, and his last fight and death. The first twenty-five lines serve as an introduction to the narrative of Arthur's career, and do not mention him by name. The poet first invokes God's grace to "schelde us ffro schamesdede"³⁰ (l. 3) and to "gouerne us here" (l. 4), "that we may kayre til hys courte, the kyngdome of hevyne" (l. 6). He prays that his words "nothyre voyde be ne vayne" (l. 10), but "plesande and profitabile to the popule that theme hers" (l. 11). These introductory lines to the alliterative Morte Arthure are religious in tone and conventional in form; they have been described as a "'minstrel' prologue".³¹ In spite of their stylized nature, however, these lines include a word that poses a serious problem of interpretation - "awke" in line 13.

"Awke" seems to be at variance in meaning with the lines that follow it:

3e that liste has to lyth, or luffes for to here,
 Off elders of alde tyme, and of their awke dedys,
 How they were lele in their lawe, and louede God
 Almyghty,
 Herkynes me heyndly and holdys 3ow style,
 And I salle telle 3ow a tale, that trewe es and
 nobyllle,
 Off the ryëalle renkys of the Rownde Table,
 That chefe ware of cheualrye and cheftans nobylle,
 Bathe ware in thire werkes and wyse mene of armes,
 Doughty in their doyns, and dredde ay schame,
 Kynde mene and courtays, and couthe of courte thewes.

(11. 12-21)

The usual meaning of "awke" is "perverse, wrong".³² In his 1915 edition of the Morte Arthure Erik Björkman interprets it to mean "out of the way, odd, strange",³³ but William Matthews sees this as an attempt to eliminate difficulties in interpretation, and to make the poem's introduction appear consistent in its high regard for the knights of the Round Table. There is no other recorded use of "awke" with the meaning suggested by Björkman. Both the Middle English Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary suggest "strange, rare, marvellous" as a meaning for "awke", but both provide this occurrence in the Morte Arthure as their only illustration. Relying on the usual meaning of the word, Matthews thinks that

"the effect of 'awke' in this crucial position could only have been to impose some measure of ambiguity upon all the splendour and heroic victories that follow."³⁴

Although Matthews possibly places too much reliance on this one word, his view that Arthur's career is tarnished by it deserves consideration. Especially is this so because the king's dream of Fortune and the philosophers' interpretation of the dream bear out this judgment.

Two-thirds of the way through the alliterative Morte Arthure, when Arthur has reached the highest point in his career and is about to be crowned Emperor of Rome, he has a dream which he describes to his philosophers for their interpretation. In the dream, Dame Fortune, a "duches dereworthily dyghte" (l. 3251), crowns him (l. 3353), presents him with orb (l. 3354) and sword (l. 3358), and seats him in a silver chair (l. 3266) in the topmost position of her jewel-studded wheel (ll. 3382-90). Within an hour, however, Fortune's countenance changes, and Arthur is flung from the wheel, his "qwarters . . . qwaste" (l. 3389) and his "chyne . . . chopped in sondire" (l. 3390). The philosophers whose interpretation he

seeks explain that the dream is an indication that he will "fersely falle with-in fyve wynters" (l. 3402), and accuse him of being guilty of the sin of pride:

Thow has schedde myche blode, and schalkes distroyede,
Sakeles, in cirquytrie,³⁵ in sere kyngis landis.

(ll. 3398-99)

Critics of the Morte Arthure have dealt with the problem of Arthur's guilt in various ways. J. L. N. O'Loughlin chooses to de-emphasize the philosophers' judgment, as well as the events that prompt that judgment. In his article, "The English Alliterative Romances" O'Loughlin describes the Morte Arthure as the portrayal of "the rise of a noble, valiant king, and his fall brought about by the Aristotelian hamartia of his begetting of Modred."³⁶

O'Loughlin's view represents an aspect of one of the traditional accounts of the decay and destruction of Arthur and his Round Table,³⁷ but it is not an accurate evaluation of the tragedy as it is narrated in the alliterative Morte Arthure because it is not based on textual evidence provided by that poem. In the three instances in which the circumstances surrounding Modred's origins are mentioned, no reference is made to the possibility

that Arthur's incestuous begetting of Modred is the cause of the king's downfall. Arthur refers to Modred as "me sybb, my syster sone" (l. 645) and Gawain later calls him a "fals fosterede foode" (l. 3776). William Matthews, in The Tragedy of Arthur, suggests that another remark of Gawain's - "of sich engendure full littyll joye happyns" (l. 3743) - shows that the poet was aware of the story of Arthur's incest, but there is no evidence to suggest that the Morte Arthure poet attributed the king's fall to this sin. Apart from these three short references, no mention is made in the Morte Arthure of events relating to Modred's conception and birth, and as Matthews has observed, "nothing is made of the matter in the poem."³⁸

John Finlayson's interpretation agrees with O'Loughlin's in its view of Arthur in the first part of the poem as a noble, honourable ruler, "the champion of Christianity against Evil, epic hero and redeemer of his people,"³⁹ but it differs in that Finlayson finds fault, not with Arthur's incest, but with the wilful nature of his wars in the latter part of the poem. Finlayson considers Arthur's sin to be a wrong action, the shift of his wars from just to unjust, and he sees this change as a reason

for Arthur's final tragedy.

Another treatment of Arthur's sinfulness is presented by William Matthews in The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthure, a work that has been described by Valerie Krishna as "the most important recent study of the Morte Arthure."⁴⁰ Matthews believes that the Morte Arthure's vision of Arthur is paralleled by medieval attitudes towards Alexander the Great.⁴¹ Matthews sees the Arthur of the alliterative poem as an Alexander figure, admirable, though sinful, and he believes that the poet's portrayal of his hero is ambivalent from the very beginning. Matthews advances the argument that Arthur's program from the outset is "one of conquest, subjugation, and expropriation,"⁴² i.e., that all of his wars are unjust. He perceives a mounting though gradual progression in Arthur's covetousness, and it is his belief that the king's subsequent cruelty is foreshadowed as early as line 13, with the use of "awke". Matthews does not grant Arthur one moment of unblemished kingship.

My argument synthesizes certain aspects of Finlayson's and Matthews' interpretations, and contributes an analysis, based on textual evidence, of the increase of Arthur's

pride, from its subtle beginnings to its more obvious and blatant manifestations. I agree with Finlayson that Arthur is portrayed positively in the early lines of the poem, and that a change in the quality and manner of his campaigns does indeed take place. I do not, however, accept Finlayson's description of Arthur's transgression as an external action. With Matthews, I see the king's sin as a corruption of character that betrays itself gradually, but I do not entirely agree with Matthews' evaluation of Arthur's character as ambivalent in the first part of the Morte Arthure. In an effort to provide a contemporary context for Arthur's culpability, my discussion opens with a definition, in medieval terms, of the sin the philosophers accuse him of committing - pride.

CHAPTER II

The philosophers' judgment of Arthur - "Thow has schedde myche blode, and schalkes distroyede,/Sakeles, in cirquytrie, in sere kyngis landis" (ll. 3398-99) - is central to a correct understanding of the alliterative Morte Arthure. In the estimation of the philosophers, Arthur has caused the shedding of innocent blood and the destruction of human life not through thoughtlessness, expediency, or even cruelty, but through pride. An accurate perception of the incidents that lead up to this verdict may be facilitated by first examining the sin of pride and medieval attitudes towards it, as well as the connection that medieval thought made between pride and fortune.

The concept of sin in general and pride in particular predates Christianity and derives, according to Morton Bloomfield, from "a vast and complicated history which gathers ideas and traditions from practically all the important races of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds."¹ Bloomfield believes that these ideas and traditions became crystallized in the Hellenistic Age, and he sees the sins as a product of Hellenism.

Bloomfield explains that the Orphic mysteries were the first pagan religion to develop a sense of sin similar to that made familiar by Christianity. The Orphics regarded the soul as heavenly in nature, but held captive in an evil body. Orphism was preserved for classical antiquity by Pythagoras and his followers, and this Pythagorean school of thought exerted a substantial influence on Plato and other Greek thinkers.

Plato's theory of ideas provided a new solution to the problem of evil on a philosophical level: it was possible to understand the difference between evil which was matter and good which was pure idea by assuming the former evil because it was just a reflection of the latter, and therefore less real.

Aristotle approached the problem differently than Plato did: he analyzed good and evil and classified virtues and vices. As Bloomfield explains, Aristotle's ethical thought was based upon a belief in the primacy of desire, and he conceived of virtue as a mean and evil as an extreme.²

Aristotle's catalogue of virtues and vices in the Nichomachean and Eudemian Ethics includes neither humility

nor pride.³ Yet, the sin of hybris - presumption which leads to undue self-confidence and disregard for the gods - is a commonplace of Greek literature, and according to Bloomfield, this literary concept shows similarities to the Christian concept of pride.⁴

The fact that hybris was, indeed, a recurring concept in Greek literature is made clear by James Adams' analysis of the works of two Greek authors, Pindar and Aeschylus. Adams comments that to the poet Pindar

. . . sin is egotism, self-seeking . . . the over-stepping of the limits appointed for the individual in his relations both to his fellow-men and to the Gods. The duty of self-repression and the dangers of arrogance and pride are themes upon which the poet continually dilates.⁵

According to Adams, the tragedian Aeschylus considered sin to be "ὑβρις, . . . , overweening pride or insolence, showing itself outwardly in the attempt to encroach on the rights of others or the Gods. It is . . . a kind of disease or madness, which fastens on the soul of the sinner, confounding his intelligence so that he can no longer distinguish between right and wrong."⁶

The Latins, according to the Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, used the word superbia often in their literature, meaning by it excessive self-esteem:

"... excessive élévation de l'âme et ... grandeur immodérée."⁷ Superbia was a vice, but not a serious one: "Il désigne, selon l'étymologie, surabondance ou surcroît."⁸ After the concept superbia had been systematically defined and firmly fixed in the Catholic theological system, however, it acquired a meaning similar to that attributed to the Greek hybris. The fact that there is a resemblance between the two concepts is made clear by the Dictionnaire's explanation that in Catholic thought, the singular malice of pride is that it constitutes rebellion against God.⁹

The definition of superbia given by St. Augustine (d. 430) was undoubtedly influential in establishing this meaning for the term. In the De Civitate Dei Augustine writes:

Quid est autem superbia nisi perversae celsitudinis appetitus? Perversa enim est celsitudo, deserto eo cui debet animus inhaerere principium, sibi quodam modo fieri atque esse principium. Hoc fit cum sibi nimis placet. Sibi vero ita placet cum ab illo bono inmutabili deficit quod ei magis placere debuit quam ipse sibi.

[Moreover, what is pride but a craving for perverse elevation? For it is perverse elevation to forsake the ground in which the mind ought to be rooted, and to become and be, in a sense, grounded in oneself. This happens when a man is too well pleased with himself, and such a one is thus pleased when he falls away from

that unchangeable good with which he ought rather to have been pleased than with himself.]¹⁰

Similar to St. Augustine's interpretation of superbia is that of St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). In the Summa Theologica St. Thomas designates superbia as the vice that opposes humilitas: "Humilitas proprie respicit subjectionem ad Deum . . . Unde e contrario superbia proprie respicit defectum hujus subjectionis." [Now humility properly refers to the subjection of man to God . . . Hence pride refers to the lack of this subjection.]¹¹

In commenting on Ecclesiasticus X. 14: "Initium superbiae hominis apostare a Deo" St. Thomas writes:

Apostare a Deo dicitur esse superbiae humanae initium, non quasi aliquod aliud peccatum a superbia existens, sed quia est prima superbia pars. Dictum est enim quod superbia principaliter respicit subjectionem divinam quam contemnit: ex consequenti autem contemnit subjici creaturae propter Deum.

[To fall away from God is said to be the beginning of human pride, not because it exists as a sin distinct from pride, but because it is the first part of pride. For it has been said above that pride scorns subjection to God, and consequently it scorns to be subject to a creature for God's sake.]¹²

In view of the opinions of these and other theologians, therefore, in the Middle Ages pride meant a rebellion or falling away from God, the unchangeable good.

One aspect of early Christian practice that is helpful in gaining an understanding of medieval attitudes towards the sin of pride is the habit of drawing up lists of vices. Morton Bloomfield has pointed out that in antiquity the "ubiquitous belief in the power of the name"¹³ and the conviction that the correct name gave the possessor power over the thing being named resulted in the practice of compiling lists of sins. The habit carried over into early Christianity, and a consideration of two lists of sins, the Cassianic and the Gregorian, yields some interesting insights into the position and importance of pride in early medieval thought.

John Cassian (d.c. 435), whom Bloomfield describes as the father of the concept of the capital sins in the west, placed pride, superbia, last in his list of the sins. In Book V of the Collationes he discusses the sins in the order: gula, luxuria, avaritia, ira, tristitia, acedia, vana gloria, superbia. The fact that superbia is listed last does not, however, mean that it is least in importance. Cassian is the first theologian to use the image of a tree and its roots in connection with the cardinal sins. Pride is the source or beginning of all

other sins, and is therefore listed last, at the bottom or root of the tree, as it were. Bloomfield points out that the origin of this concept is found in the Vulgate, Ecclesiasticus X. 15: "Quoniam initium peccati est superbia. Qui tenuerit illam adimplebitur maledictis, et subvertet eum in finem." [Pride is the beginning of sin. He who holds to it shall be filled with evil, and it shall overcome him in the end.] He thinks that although Cassian gives more emphasis in his analysis to the dangers of the monastic vices - gula, luxuria and acedia - than he does to superbia, he probably regarded superbia as the chief sin of all.

A century and a half later Gregory the Great (d. 604) changed the order of the sins by putting vana gloria at the beginning, and luxuria at the end. He added invidia, merged tristitia and acedia, and kept superbia separate, as the source of all the others. Vana gloria and superbia were later combined, and the list became: superbia, ira, invidia, avaritia, acedia, gula, luxuria. Bloomfield explains that in the Moralia Gregory uses a verse from the Book of Job to justify the pre-eminence he gives to superbia, although he was also "aware of the statement in

Ecclesiasticus X. 15 that pride is the root of all sin. Gregory pictures the seven sins as springing from the poisonous root of pride and attacking us as an army."¹⁴ According to Bloomfield, the Gregorian list of sins was the most influential in the West, Dante, Chaucer and Gower using some variant of it.

As Bloomfield shows, the concept of avaritia as the root of all evil also has a Biblical origin - I Timothy vi. 10: "Radix enim omnium malorum est cupiditas: quam appetentes erraverunt a fide, et inseruerunt se doloribus multis." [For avarice is the root of all evils, and some in their covetousness have strayed from the faith and have involved themselves in many sorrows.] Gregory's emphasis on pride rather than avarice is explained as something "one might expect from a man who as pope called himself 'the servant of the servants of God!'"¹⁵ Bloomfield goes on to say, however, that "the preoccupation with pride was more than merely personal, for it captured the medieval mind for a long time. In the later Middle Ages avarice gained increasing emphasis as the cause of all sin, but it did not replace pride officially because by that time the Sins had official status."¹⁶ This change