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'What are the tensions between knighthood and kingship?' – Arthur's Dual Status as a Knight and a King

The characterisation of King Arthur varies considerably across the English, medieval Arthurian tradition. This is unsurprising: Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote *Historia Regum Britanniae*,[1] in which Arthur is a legendary king of Britain, around four hundred years before Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur*.[2] Political and cultural expectations of a king change in decades, let alone centuries. A constant across the tradition is Arthur's dual status as a knight and a king. He has to be both: Kennedy notes that Arthur is logically a knight because he heads the office of knighthood within his kingdom.[3] What varies, due to the chronological gap between works, is the tension this duality causes. This essay will consider the tensions Arthur's duality causes in three Arthurian works: Geoffrey's *Historia*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (henceforth *AMA*),[4] and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. The tensions are most apparent when Arthur is involved in combat. Therefore, this essay will consider how Arthur is represented and referred to in combat, particularly in his fight against the giant of Mont Saint-Michel, an episode shared by the three works.

Arthur's duality as knight and king is further complicated by the medieval political concept of 'The King's Two Bodies' that was pervasive through the mid-to-late Middle Ages and the Reformation. The theory is extensively explored and summarised by Kantorowicz:

[1] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Chatham: W & J Mackay Ltd., 1975). [Note: further page references in main essay are to this edition.]
[2] Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Inc., 2004). [Note: further page references in main essay are to this edition.]
[3] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), p. 21.
[4] *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. Larry D. Benson, revised by Edward E. Foster (Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1994). [Note: further page and line references in main essay are to this edition.]

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> 'The king is a twinned being, human and divine, just like the God-man, although the king is two-natured and geminate by grace only and within Time.. the terrestrial king *is* not, he *becomes* a twin personality through his anointment and consecration'.[5]

This concept provides divine justification for hereditary succession: kings are temporary vessels of an enduring, immortal kingship that outlasts their physical bodies and is assimilated by their heirs on accession. What this theory highlights is that the role of king is a public role: this divine kingship is imbued by the public acts of anointment and consecration. Privately, as the head of his knightly order and a mortal man, Arthur is a knight. Publically, as the semi-divine vessel of the body politic, Arthur is a king. Tensions between Arthur's knighthood and kingship are tensions between these private and public identities.

In Geoffrey's *Historia*, however, there is little tension caused by Arthur's dual identity: Arthur is a warrior-king, whose status as both knight and king is public and celebrated. Indeed, Geoffrey does not engage with Arthur's private identity. On the matter of Guinevere's adultery, a source of private tension between Arthur and Lancelot in *Morte Darthur*, he 'prefers to say nothing' (233). This is typical of *Historia*'s genre: there are elements of romance – Geoffrey alludes to the 'standard of sophistication' Arthur's court has achieved (205) – but it is a chronicle and, as Moll discusses, chronicles are primarily concerned with public events such as military actions.[6] Arthur's comfortable duality reflects the values of *Historia*'s initial readership:

[5] Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 49.
[6] Richard J. Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 14.

Knight notes that Geoffrey's work, written in Latin in the 12th century, was popular with the Norman aristocracy and that Geoffrey's Arthur is a model of kingship that represents 'Quasi-Norman values'.[7]

Historia's Arthur is a 6th century feudal king who asserts his rule through his own martial prowess. In the context of this martial, feudal Europe the difference between a knight and king was, as Keen notes, 'a difference essentially of degree'.[8] Therefore, Geoffrey legitimises Arthur's position at the head of this feudal hierarchy by having him perform feats in combat that surpass even Malory's idealised Lancelot: 'calling upon God as he did so.. he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men with his sword Caliburn' (194). As Arthur proves capable of this by invoking the power of God, Geoffrey is suggesting that this central, violent role in battle is appropriate for a king.

In *Historia*, Arthur engages in two episodes of single combat: one public, against Frollo the ruler of Gaul, and one private, against the giant of Mont Saint-Michel. The duel with Frollo, through 'whichever was victorious should take the kingdom of the other' (200), is significant because it does not feature in *AMA* or *Morte Darthur*. This is unsurprising: *AMA* and *Morte Darthur* are late medieval works and the advice literature of that period, Lexton notes, advised temperance in war to kings because they were 'too vital to lose' in warfare or single combat.[9] In the 12th century, and certainly the 6th century setting of *Historia*'s Arthur, it was more acceptable. Knight notes that William challenged Harold to single combat to decide the fate of England before the Norman Conquest, but Harold declined.[10] Frollo is evidently a worthy opponent for Arthur to face publically: despite Arthur previously dispatching four hundred and seventy men

[7] Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society* (Hampshire: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 40.
[8] Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (Yale University Press, 1984), p. 73.
[9] Ruth Lexton, 'Kingship in Malory's Morte Darthur', in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Vol. 110, No. 2* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 196.
[10] Knight, *Literature and Society*, p. 55.

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single-handedly, Geoffrey states that 'It was not easy to foretell which would win' (201) this duel, and it is Frollo who initially gains the upper hand.

Arthur's later confrontation with the giant in *Historia* is quite different. As Geoffrey's Arthur is accepted as a knight and a king simultaneously, little justification is necessary for Arthur choosing to face the giant alone: 'Being a man of such outstanding courage, he had no need to lead a whole army against monsters' (214). Indeed, his regal identity is emphasised; having thus far referred to Arthur mostly by first name, including during his fight with Frollo, Geoffrey refers to Arthur as 'The King' during the giant fight (215-16). Riddy considers the giant to be one of the counterparts to Arthur in *Historia*, along with Uther and Mordred, representing an amoral manifestation of Arthur's imperial desire.[11] While the giant is 'inhuman' (215), this overstates the significance of the encounter in *Historia*. The giant is not a martial equal as Frollo was, which is made clear by Geoffrey's choice of metaphor: 'as the boar hurls itself at the huntsman.. so the giant rushed against the King's sword' (216). Arthur defeats the giant so comfortably that he 'laughed with relief' (216). Arthur orders a chapel built on the mount after the fight (216), but Geoffrey attaches no religious significance to the fight itself; it appears to simply a side 'aventure' for Arthur in *Historia*.

Arthur's dual identity is more complicated in *AMA*. The date of its composition is estimated to be circa 1400,[12] meaning there had been some two hundred and fifty years of political development since Geoffrey wrote *Historia*. Fries notes that the narrative content of *AMA* is 'indisputably Galfridian',[13] in the sense that Arthur is a central heroic king, rather than the cuckolded background figure of French romance.

[11] Felicity Riddy, 'Contextualizing Le Morte Darthur', in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), p. 62.
[12] *King Arthur's Death*, ed. Larry D. Benson, p. 4.
[13] Maureen Fries, 'The Poem in the Tradition of Arthurian Literature, in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. Karl Heinz Göller (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1981), p. 34.

However, the issues caused by his attempts to be both a knight and a king reflects the political values of the late Middle Ages.

AMA does not narrate Arthur's early wars and his personal martial feats in those wars as *Historia* does, but rather lists the territories Arthur has already won 'with his sword keen' (132: 47). His past prowess as a warrior-king is instead highlighted by the most common way he is referred to in the poem: 'That comlich conqueror' (133: 71), or a variant thereof. In contrast to Geoffrey's consistent description of Arthur as simply 'Arthur', *AMA*'s Arthur is referred to in a variety of ways. Indeed, Markus notes that the multitude of terms used to refer to Arthur is the most striking lexical aspect of *AMA*.[14] In part this is typical of the genre – an alliterative poet has to be imaginative with lexis – but the various ways of referring to Arthur also reflect his shifting identity in the poem. The close proximity of knighthood and kingship is established by the Roman senator's description of Arthur: 'The knighliest creature.. / Of king or of conqueror crowned in erthe' (148: 534-5).

Despite this proximity, it is clear that *AMA*'s Arthur cannot be a knight and a king at the same time as *Historia*'s is. This becomes apparent through his single combat with the giant. This Arthur does not confront Frollo first, as there is no justification for a king to risk his kingdom in single combat in the late Middle Ages. *AMA*'s Arthur, Lexton notes, can only prove his prowess in single combat against enemies who are 'inhuman or morally bankrupt'.[15] Incorporating 'The King's Two Bodies' theory that became increasingly popular through the Middle Ages, it is only appropriate for Arthur, as a semi-divine king, to confront enemies in single combat who are in some way against God. In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Frollo is a worthy opponent who is not morally bankrupt.

[14] Manfred Markus, 'The Language and Style: The Paradox of Heroic Poetry', in *A Reassessment*, p. 58.
[15] Lexton, 'Kingship', p. 195.

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Indeed, he is quite the opposite as he challenges Arthur because he 'grieved to see his people dying of hunger' (200).

However, Arthur does not choose to face the giant as king. As soon as Arthur hears of the giant having taken the Duchess of Brittany, who 'was [his] wifes cosin' (158: 864), he considers it a private matter and his subsequent identification in the poem as 'Sir Arthur' reflects this (158: 868). Rather than publically facing the giant alone to 'inspire his men' as he does in *Historia* (214), this Arthur hides his true purpose: 'For I will pass in pilgrimage.. / For to seeken a saint' (159: 896, 898). Arthur evidently chooses to not face the giant as king; he hides his regal identity to the old woman he meets on the mountainside, and identifies himself as a knight: 'I am comen fro the conqueror.. / As one of the hathelest of Arthure knightes' (162: 986-87). Despite this, he is referred to in the narrative as 'the king' for the entirety of the fight (164-67).

This creates a conflicted identity. Markus states that the impression the poet gives is that Arthur is losing his identity, with the various epithets 'seeming [no] more than situationally appropriate'.[16] It is not that Arthur is losing his identity; rather, there is a conflict between the identity Arthur has chosen, and the public one he is neglecting. Arthur has chosen to go abroad as a knight. Before leaving England, he passes his public role and responsibility as king to Mordred: '*I shall crown thee, knight*, king with my handes' (152: 678; emphasis added). This is symbolic, as Arthur is still the actual king, but it indicates that he has favoured his role as a knight.

Despite the identity he has chosen, it remains less acceptable for this Arthur to engage in a personal battle against the giant without justification. Because of this, the

[16] Markus, 'Language and Style', p. 59.

giant as a counterpart to Arthur both physically and spiritually is emphasised. Arthur's arming scene, a lengthy extension of *Historia*'s, emphasises the richness of his clothing 'with orfrayes full rich' (159: 902). This appears ostentatious for a king hoping to pass as a lesser knight, but it polarises him with the giant who is 'breekless' (164: 1048). Geoffrey does not emphasise the giant's religious crimes, but here Arthur's assault is justified on those grounds: 'Because that thou killed has these crismed childer' (164: 1065).

The battle is more challenging than *Historia*'s, akin to Arthur's fight with Frollo in Geoffrey's work, and Arthur deals specific, appropriate damage: as the giant is guilty of rape Arthur cuts '[his] genitals and jagged them in sonder' (166: 1123). Despite this, the fight is a problematic example of Arthur's identity crisis. Markus notes that Arthur is presented negatively as the fight shows that he values 'strength and power rather than religious humility'.[17] Indeed, Arthur confuses the qualities of a good knight with those of a good king throughout *AMA*. When Gawain dies, Arthur laments: 'Thou [Gawain] was worthy to be king.. / My wele and my worship.. / Was wonnen through Sir Gawain' (250: 3961-64). Arthur is wrong: Gawain's deeds were appropriate for a knight without a king's public responsibility. Arthur's neglect of his public role in order to emulate such deeds contributes to his downfall.

In *Morte Darthur*, the distinction between a knight and a king becomes even more pronounced. Arthur is still both a knight and a king; he is knighted and crowned on the same day (11). However, Malory makes the hierarchical distinction clearer. A nameless man knights Arthur: he is 'made knyghte of the best man that was there' (11). This is curious as Malory names dozens of lesser knights in *Morte Darthur*. However, Kennedy notes that Arthur cannot be anyone's 'son-in-chivalry';[18] in Malory's text knights show

[17] Ibid., 64.
[18] Beverly Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 33.

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incredible loyalty to the man who knights them: Lancelot to Arthur and Gareth to Lancelot, as examples. By ensuring Arthur owes allegiance to no knight, Malory keeps the hierarchical roles distinct.

As a young king, Malory's Arthur fights a civil war to secure his rule against rebellious barons and lesser kings. Arthur's personal prowess when suppressing this rebellion is celebrated, and he is referred to as a knight when in combat: 'ever Sir Arthur was in the formest prees' (13). However, eventually his desire for combat in this war literally masks his identity as king: 'Kynge Arthure was so blody that by hys shylde there might no man know hym' (24). Knight states that the motif of incognito battle in *Morte Darthur* demonstrates the 'limits of public honour.. that imposed structure of control';[19] in this instance, Arthur's role as king is threatened by his private desire for war as a knight. Merlin warns him of this: 'Hast thou nat done inow? […] hit is time to sey 'Who!' for God ys wroth with the' (26). Evidently the expectations of a king's conduct in war in the 15th century are quite different to the 12th: whereas *Historia*'s Arthur receives God's blessing in slaughtering enemies, Malory's angers God by doing so. Merlin functions as a mouthpiece for late medieval didactic literature that, Lexton notes, advised kings to show 'restraint (temperance), mercy (justice), and wisdom (prudence) in war'.[20]

In *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's expedition to confront Lucius is not the catalyst for his fall as it is in *Historia* or *AMA*: Malory allows his Arthur to grow decades older. As a result, Malory has to adjust the significance of the giant encounter again. He makes it more acceptable for Arthur to fight the giant than in *AMA*. Rather than privately choosing to face the giant after hearing about it, he is directly asked: 'as thou arte oure ryghtwos

[19] Knight, *Literature and Society*, p. 118.
[20] Lexton, 'Kingship', p. 196.

Kynge.. revenge us as a noble conquerroure sholde' (121). Malory embellishes the threat to Arthur; the giant has taken the Duchess of Brittany again, but the woman Arthur meets on the mountainside informs him that this giant covets Guinevere: 'for Arthurs wyff he lodgys hym here' (123). This is significant because it makes Malory's giant a direct threat to Arthur's sovereignty. Coupled with the religious crimes that mirror *AMA*'s and this giant's demonic appearance – 'never devil in helle more horrybler made' (123) – it becomes appropriate, even necessary, that it is Arthur who defeats him. Kennedy notes that in the religious view of knighthood of the late Middle Ages, it is the king who does justice 'as the vassal of God'.[21]

In *Morte Darthur*, the roles of a knight and a king, so closely entwined in *Historia*, become increasingly disparate as Arthur ages. This becomes apparent when Gareth, hoping to prove himself as a martial knight, requests to be dubbed by Lancelot and not Arthur: 'for of hym I woll be made knyght, and ellys of none' (180-81). Lancelot himself acknowledges the separation of the roles: he is a king, a feudal lesser to Arthur, but has chosen a life as 'Sir Lancelot' in order to function as a knight. In *Morte Darthur*, Arthur's downfall again comes as he favours his private identity over his public duty. He goes to war with Lancelot not for Guinevere, or for his realm, but because Gawain, his nephew, demands it to avenge their family: 'I requyre you, my lorde and kynge, dresse you unto the warres' (659). Arthur proves useless on the battlefield: he challenges Lancelot to single combat (660), but is easily unhorsed by Sir Bors (663). While his prowess as a young man was celebrated, it is evident that by this stage of *Morte Darthur* the king's place is no longer in the press of battle. As in *AMA*, Arthur's neglect of his public duty at home to fight a war abroad driven by private desire is a catalyst for his downfall as king.

[21] Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 23.

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It is clear that the tensions between knighthood and kingship were greater in the late Middle Ages than the 12th century. Arthur's pursuit of a foreign war is the catalyst for Mordred's betrayal in *Historia*, but this is likely because Geoffrey had to return Arthur to Britain somehow; he presents Arthur as an actual historical figure, and allowing Arthur to continue his imperialist expansion would contradict records in real chronicles too greatly. In *AMA* and *Morte Darthur*, it is the pursuit of foreign wars that favour his identity as knight over his public duty as king that contribute to Arthur's fall. It is acceptable for *Historia*'s Arthur to face the giant of Mont Saint-Michel as a knightly 'aventure' but troubling in *AMA*, where the fight serves to highlight Arthur's confused identity. In order to allow his Arthur to rule for decades longer unpunished for facing the giant alone, Malory is forced to make it a fight Arthur is duty-bound to take as a semi-divine king. Kennedy notes that in both romance and didactic literature of the late Middle Ages, knighthood was considered a necessary prerequisite for kingship.[22] This is why *AMA*'s Arthur is referred to as 'conqueror', and Malory's is celebrated for his martial prowess as a young king. However, it is clear that once Arthur's reign is established, his public duties as king are supposed to override his desire for combat as a knight, and that those duties pass to others. Arthur's neglect of the separation of these roles proves a deciding factor in the failure of his rule.

[22] Kennedy, *Knighthood*, p. 21.

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